



# Gundogs

By Tom Davis

*At Wild Wing Lodge in Kentucky, you can get the old feeling back – and gun quail over some of the finest setters you'll ever see.*

There's rarely a dull moment when you hunt quail at Wild Wing Lodge – and there's never one when you hunt at Wild Wing with L.D. Fraizer. L.D. (the initials stand for Larry Donn) is the head guide at this little piece of quail-hunting heaven, tucked into the smoky hills and hollows of western Kentucky. Once he's had a chance to size you up and judge you worthy, you'd better be able to stand your ground – but I like to think I gave as good as I got.

“How long you been guidin', L.D.?”

I asked after pointer Buck and setter Suzy had gathered the harvest from their umpteenth covey find and lit out across the rolling sedgefields in search of number umpteen-plus-one.

“Eighteen years,” he said, not without pride.

“Well, I wouldn't worry too much if I were you,” I said. “Eventually you'll get the hang of it.”

“I keep hopin',” L.D. said, stumping off to look for the dogs. L.D.'s got a hitch in his giddy-up, though if he'd followed his

doctor's orders and stayed off his knee for a couple weeks after he got it scoped ("Too much footballin' and motorcrossin'," he explained), chances are he'd be gliding along like a Tennessee Walker. Trouble was, deer hunting was right around the corner, and L.D. had tree stands to put up.

Not that having a bum wheel has slowed him down much – not that anything would, or could. You get the feeling that no matter what L.D. does, he red-lines it: huntin', fishin', lovin', fightin', cussin' . . .

The good news, for guests of Wild Wing Lodge, is that he has the same uncompromising attitude about his job – and he holds the other guides to the same high standard. "Professionalism at all times" is his credo; if you want to incur L.D.'s wrath, show up for work with a day's growth of stubble and clothes that aren't spotlessly

clean or haven't been pressed so crisply that you could split kindling with the creases.

"It gets harder and harder to find qualified guides," he lamented during one of the brief interludes between covey finds. (At Wild Wing, a birdless stretch longer than ten minutes constitutes a severe drought.)

"So that would explain why they hired you," I deadpanned.

"The talent pool's a mite shallow," he agreed, grinning.

Having the L.D. "experience" is one of the many pleasures woven through a hunt at Wild Wing Lodge. Owners Ronnie Rich and Rhett Kermicle have created something very special, a place, a philosophy, and a dedication to time-honored values that replicates, as naturally and authentically as possible, the kind of soul-satisfying quail hunting that so many of us in the Midwest, the South and parts of the Eastern Seaboard grew up on – and remember with such fierce longing that it hurts.

Talking to these articulate, passionate sportsmen, you come away convinced that while Wild Wing may be a business – they offer deer and turkey hunting, pointing dog training, and the occasional started or trained dog in addition to quail hunting – they view themselves more as custodians than as entrepreneurs. They feel a keen sense of stewardship, a responsibility not only



to the land itself but to the preservation of a certain style, one that exalts an ambience, a graciousness and a generosity of spirit that, like the bobwhite quail itself, are fading from the scene – but, again, are for many of us bound so tightly with our memories that they can't be pulled apart.

The atmosphere at Wild Wing Lodge harks back to that era when small farms dotted the landscape and every corn patch held a covey; when knocking on a farmhouse door to ask permission to hunt was likelier than not to produce an invitation to step inside for coffee and cake; when a mess of birds for Sunday supper was a reasonable expectation for a Saturday spent afield. It seems almost mythical now, a fantasy spun from the mist of legends, but it was real. Some of us lived it; all who did remember.

Ronnie, Rhett, L.D. and the rest of the staff at Wild Wing Lodge surely do, which is why they understand that what they're purveying, ultimately, isn't fast shooting at hard-flying birds in pretty country, or the chance to hunt over some of the finest, best-trained dogs you'll ever see, or the comfortable barn-like lodge, or the mountains of down-home comfort food that come out of Donna's kitchen, or the service so personalized that four guns at a time is typically all they'll take. It's what all these attractions add up to, something far larger than the sum of its parts: the chance, as Hemingway might have put it, to get the old feeling back.

This is a dog column, however, which brings me back to Rhett Kermicle. A native of southern Illinois (which historically had wonderful quail hunting and as rich a bird dog "culture" as any region in America), he heads up the kennel side of the operation. Rhett tends to keep his own counsel and let Ronnie do most of the talking, but don't let that fool you. Thoughtful, analytical and perceptive, he's as astute a dog man as you'll ever meet, and one hell of a trainer – the best pointing dog trainer you've probably never heard

of, in my humble opinion. A member of the SportDOG Senior Pro Staff, some of Rhett's training tips can be found at [www.sportdogbrand.com](http://www.sportdogbrand.com).

And while Rhett runs both pointers and English setters at Wild Wing, he's a setter man first and foremost. The goal of his small but intensive breeding program, based on the old Commander bloodlines and built, in particular, around Ch. Commander's Casey Jones (a phenomenal dog that was a great favorite of another setter fancier you may have heard of, Mike Gaddis), is to produce longhairs with the brains, personality and style to satisfy the most discriminating bird hunter – and with the drive, desire and stamina to compete successfully at the highest levels of field-trial shooting dog competition.

"The first and most important thing we focused on," Rhett told me, "was bird-finding ability. I'm satisfied that we've got that in the line, so now we're breeding for more athleticism. We're getting there, but we still have a ways to go."

If the dogs I saw were any indication, he doesn't have to go very far. One morning I had the pleasure of hunting over Ripper and Queeny, two of his "brood" females, and they put on a clinic. They found bushels of birds, displayed eye-catching style both running and on point, backed each other as far as they could see, were perfectly steady to wing and shot, retrieved promptly and tenderly to hand . . . If they left any room for improvement, you'd have to be a lot shrewder judge of dog flesh than I am to detect it. It was about as close to a perfect exhibition of hunting, handling and bird-finding as I've ever witnessed.

One more thing: On the rare occasions Rhett spoke to them, he never raised his voice above a conversational tone. That alone should tell you all you need to know about what kind of trainer he is.

For more information about Wild Wing Lodge & Kennel, call 270-965-0026 or visit [www.wildwingkennel.com](http://www.wildwingkennel.com). 