



Ken Walker of Richmond and Specter in front of the Blandfield Plantation manor house

Story and photos by King Montgomery

Back in Time Blandfield Plantation

A visit to Blandfield Plantation in Essex County just north of Tappahannock is like stepping into the past. The stately manor house, a graceful brick edifice dating to 1769, is a Virginia Historical Landmark that underwent a major restoration in the 1980s, returning it to its former glory. The house sits on 3,500 beautiful acres of tidal marshes, rolling meadows, hedgerows, farmland and pine forests along the Rappahannock River. As part of the original land grant by the king of England to Major Robert Beverly in the 1680s, it remained in the Beverly family for nine generations until it was purchased by the Wheat family of Richmond in 1983. The Wheats have since devoted themselves to bringing the house and the land back to something better than ever.

Today the restored mansion and landscaped grounds are being prepared and



(Photo by Hay Hardy)

readied for hosting weddings and other special events. Across the property, a hunting lodge by the river has welcomed waterfowl hunters for decades, and now stands ready to receive upland hunters and special events guests for overnight stays.

Blandfield has long been a waterfowler's destination. The prime waterfowl

habitat of the tidal marshes and numerous large ponds throughout the property provide some of the finest hunting along the Atlantic flyway. The synergy of great habitat, plus sound land and game management practices, provides duck and goose hunters an experience not soon forgotten.



The author draws down on a quail while Dave Pomfret follows the flight of the rest of the covey. Ken Walker waits to the left. (Photo by Hay Hardy)



National Field Champion and Field Champion Daisy. “Not all of the dogs are field champions,” says Pomfret, who personally approves every upland dog at Blandfield. “However, they do need to look as if they could be. What good is a 3,500-acre plantation if you’re only hunting 300 acres? Half the fun is getting out into the different types of ground, and we’re going to show you about four to five miles of it on each hunt.” (Photo by Hay Hardy)

A Southern quail plantation

The upland bird program at Blandfield will open this fall, and bookings are available now. The quail hunts are set in the traditions of the South’s premier quail-hunting plantations. Hundreds of Blandfield’s natural acres are enhanced to maintain quality quail habitat that supports dozens of coveys year round.

A typical hunt is limited to a single group of no more than six guns, which hunt the grounds and occupy the lodge exclusively. After arriving at the lodge, guests meet the guides and settle into their rooms. Once assembled, the party sets out in a highly specialized bird buggy, a professionally modified Kawasaki Trans ATV that is equipped to transport hunters, dogs and equipment over the grounds with ease and comfort. The first stop is the sporting clays range for a warm-up round of clay birds and a review of safety practices. During the hunt, guides rotate dogs in the field, and shooting is restricted to covey rises only. Shooters are rotated two at a time. Each hunting party is usually placed in front of

The lodge

Blandfield Lodge, a 5,000-square-foot structure overlooking the tidal Rappahannock River and attendant marshes, is patterned on the 1870s Coast Guard Station of Parramore Island on Virginia’s Eastern Shore where the Wheat family hunted and fished for many years. The lodge combines simple elegance with a natural rusticity. The great room, flanked

by an adjoining game room and bar, is the main gathering place. Meals are served in a comfortable dining room thoughtfully detached from the main lodge through a breezeway.

The view from the lodge’s watchtower is impressive: The Rappahannock River flows slowly by the tidal creeks and guts that lace verdant marshes where waterfowl and shore birds are abundant.

15 to 20 coveys whether it is a morning or afternoon hunt.

After the hunt, guests retire to the lodge for aperitifs accompanying discussions of the day's events. Appetizers and drinks are served before a roaring fire, followed by a delicious gourmet dinner with fine wines and fellowship.

The next dawn brings a tasty breakfast followed by another full-service hunt, stopping only briefly for coffee and pastries afield. Guests then enjoy lunch back at the lodge, while the staff processes the day's harvest before an early afternoon departure.

The Hunt

Richmonder Ken Walker and I joined Blandfield's upland manager Dave Pomfret and assistant manager Darin Strickland for a short afternoon hunt. Dave and Darin loaded four handsome bird dogs into our bird buggy. But these weren't just any hunting dogs, and Dave Pomfret is no ordinary hunting guide.

Pomfret, a nationally known and well respected field trial-dog trainer, is also a longtime upland hunting guide and former game-preserve owner. His experience in the kennels and on the fields spans decades,

and his award-winning dogs are truly a joy to hunt over. Daisy, an English Pointer, was the first of the dogs up in our hunt. She is the 2007 Pointer National Champion. Colonel is the 2005 and 2006 No. 1 Gun Dog of Year of the Vizsla Club of America (VCA). Mason, another Vizsla, is the 2005 VCA National Champion. And finally, Specter, an English Setter and another American Kennel Club Field Champion.

For me, a large part of the upland-hunting experience is in watching the dogs work the terrain in their search for birds. They display an attitude of single-mindedness and dedication in locating and retrieving birds that is infectious. Occasionally I was so mesmerized by these splendid animals that I was not as ready as I should have

been when a covey exploded from the ground toward the blue sky on whirring wings. I scared more quail that day than I actually shot!

Ken asked me if I'd like to use one of his guns and handed me a beautiful English 20-gauge sidelock side-by-side. We called them double-barreled shotguns when I learned to shoot as a kid, but this is a work of art—hand-crafted in London by master gunsmith Peter Chapman. Ken turned out to be a fine shot, a true sportsman, and an affable companion. With his gun I put enough birds in the game pouch for several fine meals.

The dogs worked under Dave's expert guidance—birds were found, points were honored, coveys rose, and some birds

The lodge is a comfortable, rustically elegant abode for hunters and other guests. It sits on a hill overlooking marshes and the Rappahannock River.

Blandfield's varied terrain includes freshwater marshes teeming with wildlife including waterfowl, shorebirds, and fish.





Ken Walker, foreground, and the author prepare for an explosive covey rise of bobwhite quail. (Photo by Hay Hardy)

fell, just as it's always been on Southern quail plantations for centuries. Our bobwhite quail is deservedly known as the prince of game birds. They are truly challenging in the field, and a culinary delight at home.

In Summary

Blandfield Plantation is a rare oasis for Virginia's wing-shooting heritage. In an age of overdevelopment, damaged habitat, and dwindling natural resources, its wide open, expansive fields are farmed for cultivation, conservation and sport. Ponds are flooded to provide stopovers and feeding grounds for migratory waterfowl, and natural areas are enhanced to support diverse wildlife.

The plantation manor house sits on a gentle hilltop and surveys the expansive property encompassing the river, the marshes, the fields and the forests just as it has for more than 240 years. The scenic lodge by the river has character and is extremely welcoming.

For many Virginians, Blandfield

Plantation's proximity to metro D.C., Hampton Roads and Richmond offers a true Southern plantation hunt in their backyard where, after a hunt, one can be home for dinner.

The waterfowl and quail hunting, although spectacular, remind me that a big part of hunting is about the people involved such as Ken Walker, Dave Pomfret, Darin Strickland, and the Wheat family who, along with waterfowl manager Bobby Swineford and farm manager Rex Bowen, have devoted themselves to preserving the history and conserving the land. Hunting is also about the remarkable dogs that work the fields and marshes, the heart-stopping flush of quail, the feel of a fine gun on the cheek, and the unique smell of gunpowder that evokes memories past and to come. Virginia has always deserved a fine Southern quail plantation, and we now have Blandfield Plantation.

For additional information on all aspects of the property and its services, see www.blandfieldplantation.com.


Quail hunts: Contact Dave Pomfret,

upland manager, at (540) 229-8045, dave@davepomfret.com.

Waterfowl hunts: SOLD OUT for 2008-2009. Waiting list only. For information on hunts for the 2009-2010 season, Contact Bobby Swineford, waterfowl manager, at (804) 731-3562.

Event Hosting/Weddings: Call Diana Adams at (804) 690-5736.

King Montgomery is a frequent contributor to *The Virginia Sportsman* and an avid fly angler and bird hunter. He is a board member of Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, Inc., a nonprofit group that teaches wounded and disabled veterans to tie flies and fly fish. See www.projecthealingwaters.com. Contact him at kingangler1@aol.com.



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