

Bird Dogs *and* Cracklins

WOODCOCK HUNTING IN LOUISIANA

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY SHANE BEVEL



I knew I was in for something different not long after I walked through the back door at Felipe and Annelies Martinez's historic home. After I had enjoyed a fine dinner with the entire family, Felipe took a thoughtful look at my footwear and asked, "Hmmm, are *those* your hunting boots?"

I was wearing the heavy-duty leather boots that had already carried me just fine across the plains of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas so far that season. "Yeah, they are," I replied, as I wondered what I had gotten myself into.

"Well, you'll get soaked. Annelies has a pair that will fit; you'll be just fine."

That night I had nightmares of walking miles in rubber knee boots. The sweating, the lack of support, and the feeling of rough terrain all seemed so unnecessary; my leather boots were waterproof! But the next day when we got to the first patch of land near the Catherine Sugar Plantation (Annelies is a descendant of the original landowners) it all became clear to me.

Pulling a dog trailer behind Felipe's truck, we drove sideways more than we did straight, slipped more than we steered, and finally slid off into a drainage ditch along the edge of a field. In between all that, we did a little hunting.

I nearly flooded the loaned boots twice and saw my first woodcock ever as I stood calf-deep in a drainage so heavy with cover I couldn't have swung a stagecoach gun, much less my 12-gauge over-and-under. I watched, helplessly tangled, as a bird lifted off the small patch of reasonably dry forest floor and floated across the road into the next patch of cover.

This particular hunt actually started when I first met Felipe in 2005 while covering hurricanes Katrina and Rita for a newspaper published in the northern end of the state. The paper I was working for rented the back half of the Martinez house in Plaquemine, Louisiana, and somewhere between four and eight journalists packed in each night, after filing stories and photos of the worst dis-

aster we had ever seen.

Occasionally we would sit in the massive kitchen and sip scotch with Felipe, surrounded by German shorthaired pointers. Each of the dogs lay peacefully around the perimeter of the kitchen, where at night Felipe would chain them to the baseboards made from ancient bald cypress wood harvested from an old building on the Catherine plantation. (He has since built kennels for his younger dogs, but the favorites have kept their places around the kitchen table.)

After eight years of living in the Deep South, I was no stranger to the swampy terrain of Louisiana, but I never imagined that I would be bird hunting in cover this heavy. Growing up in Texas and hunting the cedar breaks for quail, I'm used to quick shooting, but there was no fighting the vines just to shoulder a gun, and certainly no thoughts of how to cross a flooded forest without filling up a pair of rubber boots. Just weeks before I had been hunting in a Kansas wheat-stubble field. To say the terrain change was a shock to the system would be an understatement.

Those odd-looking little woodcock don't flush with the fury of a covey of quail or carry the weight of a cock pheasant, but they certainly have a way of finding every branch, bramble, and vine to put between themselves and the end of even the finest double gun. After several flushes during a day of hunting on and around the Catherine plantation, my poor shooting had yielded no birds.

The next morning, after stopping off at a local Highway 190 gas station and grocery for some cracklins and Boudain balls, Felipe and I headed west and made our way to the Sherburne WMA in St. Martin's Parish where the Louisiana Woodcock RGS Chapter maintains 128 acres of prime woodcock habitat. The young forest is broken into smaller blocks by fire roads (closed to vehicles, of course). There are open fields that run parallel to the forest.

Once off the roads, the dogs were swallowed by woods. Every once in a while we glimpsed white streaks in the thickets, but it was



the sound of their beeper collars that let us know they hadn't disappeared entirely. A few times I had problems keeping up with the dogs. Luckily Brownie, my English setter, was smart enough to adjust his range and check back on a regular basis.

Felipe has his own line of GSPs (www.raisingcaneshorthairs.com) raised on local woodcock. He seems to use the Texas quail season as a mere warm-up for the main event with the long-beaked masters of the woods. When his Roscoe and Gypsy hit the ground at Sherburne it was obvious they were in their comfort zone. We were only a few minutes into the woods when the dogs locked up. And shortly thereafter we got a good look at our first of more than a dozen flushes that afternoon. I won't pretend to understand the management tactics for a bird I have only hunted for two days, but whatever the Louisiana Woodcock RGS chapter members are doing, they are certainly doing it right.

As we walked through the woods, the soft ground underfoot flexed and gave way to the boot. It didn't take much effort to imagine how easily a woodcock could feed on such terrain. The one bird I was able to see on the ground blended into the cover as if he were painted there by the most talented of artists. The impromptu bayous, created by the latest storms, spread through the cover like fingers of smoke through the woods. They were sometimes shallow and other times deep. But *every time* they were the color of chocolate milk covered with the brown dead leaves of winter.

As we moved through the forest, Felipe explained the finer points of woodcock hunting: how to look for splash, how to read the cover, and how to keep your hat on your head.

We talked about guns. And as Felipe showed off his A.H. Fox Sterlingworth, my ultra-light Turkish 12-gauge began to feel as awkward and as big as I felt myself as I made my way through the tight cover that choked uneven ground.

As the afternoon and the birds came and went, my setter Brownie, much more accustomed to ranging big and quartering across a line of hunters, finally figured out the crisscrossing pattern of the GSPs and eventually locked up solid on point under a cluster of young trees. I quickly reached for my camera as Felipe approached from the other side. After making a few photos, I walked in on the quivering, muddy mess of hair and brambles that was my dog, flushed the bird, and, after emptying both barrels, watched it float free and clear over the top of a small tree and settle down on a dry spot in the damp cold of the Louisiana bayou.

Back at the truck, we called the dogs and snacked on the rest of the Boudain balls. After much begging by the dogs, Felipe eventually shared the last bits of cracklin with them.

We were all tired and worn, with a wide assortment of scrapes and bruises. But without a doubt Brownie and I will be back next winter with a fresh set of chaps and a pair of nice tall boots. ■



SHANE BEVEL lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with his wife Frances and two English setters. After a decade of working as a staffer for daily newspapers in Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, and Virginia he now pursues commercial work and national level editorial work. Shane grew up hunting quail in West Texas but, inspired by his love of travel and new places, has now expanded his pursuits to include game birds from northern Minnesota to southern Louisiana and all points in between. For more of his photography, visit www.shanebevel.com.