

COVEY RISE[®]





TRADITION AND THE WEBB FARM

At play in the North Carolina quail fields.

BY TOM KEER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHIP LAUGHTON

I pulled to the side of the road near the J. Robert Gordon Sandhills Field Trial Ground, rolled down the windows, and enjoyed the sweet, warm breeze blowing through my truck. The calendar said it was deep into winter and yet I had the windows down. Fancy that. I wasn't lost; heck, I've never been lost in my life. Misguided, yes, misdirected, absolutely, but lost? Never. Wherever I am I am, and on this sunny, blue-bird day I looked out at some 60,000 acres of longleaf pines, love grass, and bobwhite quail courses. Many famous dogs ran here, and up-and-coming pups will run here—it's ingrained in the fabric of the Sandhills. Birds, bird dogs, and bird hunters—it's been this way for a long, long time.

I wasn't lost, I'd just overshot my destination—John Webb Road in Ellerbe, North Carolina, the location of The Webb Farm. Ellerbe is near Rockingham, due east of the Pee Dee River and west of Pinehurst. It's an area that Sir Walter Raleigh liked because it helped him popularize tobacco. Here, between the Piedmont and the Atlantic coast, there is a mixture of just enough red clay and sand to make everything grow, from peaches to millet. At The Webb Farm, folks' attention is squarely on the Sandhills trinity of land, quail, and bird dogs.

GETTING READY FOR ACTION

(BELOW:) Stay in comfort at The Webb Farm.



Webb is a student of tradition, but is open to experimentation and innovation.



Land, quail, and
bird dogs—that
perfectly sums up
The Webb Farm.



The land is of primary interest, for good habitat begets good everything, from deer and rabbits to turkey, ducks, and quail. And without the quail, there aren't opportunities for seasoned bird dogs. Land, quail, and bird dogs—that perfectly sums up The Webb Farm.

When it comes to land, Bill Webb's family has farmed it since 1905. Farming and cultivating outstanding quail habitat are of critical importance to all here. Webb is a student of tradition, but is open to experimentation and innovation. He begins farming at the conclusion of hunting season, and burning is his first step. Depending on the year, Webb will burn different parts of the farm, and those selected areas are based on a master plan. That which doesn't get burned gets cut, groomed, or left alone. You'll see Webb riding a tractor, sometimes with a brush hog, on afternoons and on weekends, getting it done so the spring rains can start new growth.

Ride a bird buggy through the 1,300 acres and you'll see lots of longleaf pines and bicolor lespedeza. In the 1950s, North Carolina used to give out bicolor plants to anyone who wanted to put 'em in the ground. Bicolor is to quail what ice cream is to a child. Some of the bicolor on the farm is descended from those original plantings.

In lower areas near water, you'll find good expanses of switch cane, another quail favorite. The switch cane is seasonally frequented by migratory woodcock and it's a cause for good humor when one of those timberdoodles flushes. In the

fields rimmed by oaks, sweet gum, hickory, and sycamores are Johnson, wire, switch, and love grasses. Add gently rolling hills, several ponds, and small streams, and some "baccar barns" (tobacco barns) and you'll understand why bird hunting has been popular for more than a century. As a matter of fact, starting in the late 1800s to about World War II, the Sandhills boasted almost as many quail plantations as Georgia does today.

The idea for a quail-hunting lodge came easily to Bill Webb because there were bird hunters on both sides of his family. Bill's momma was from Ashe County in the mountains, which meant she was a grouse hunter. Momma had a number of dogs, with her favorite being a little tricolor setter. Bill's daddy's family was raised on the farm, which meant they were quail hunters. Back then they'd run through the farm in an inline four-banger Willys Jeep. There'd be dog boxes in the back, and they'd rotate pointers and setters throughout the day. Lunch would be some hoop cheese, Vienna sausages, crackers, and sardines washed down with tea or Coke. An interesting family fact is that Bill's momma bought his daddy a bird dog as a gift on their first wedding anniversary. She also gave him a shotgun. (Call it a shotgun anniversary!)

Bill Webb loves dogs, and he loves to work with lots of dif-

OUTWARDLY MOBILE

(ABOVE:) Hunters heading out in a bird buggy.



Bill Webb loves dogs, and he loves to work with lots of different breeds. He's a pointer man.

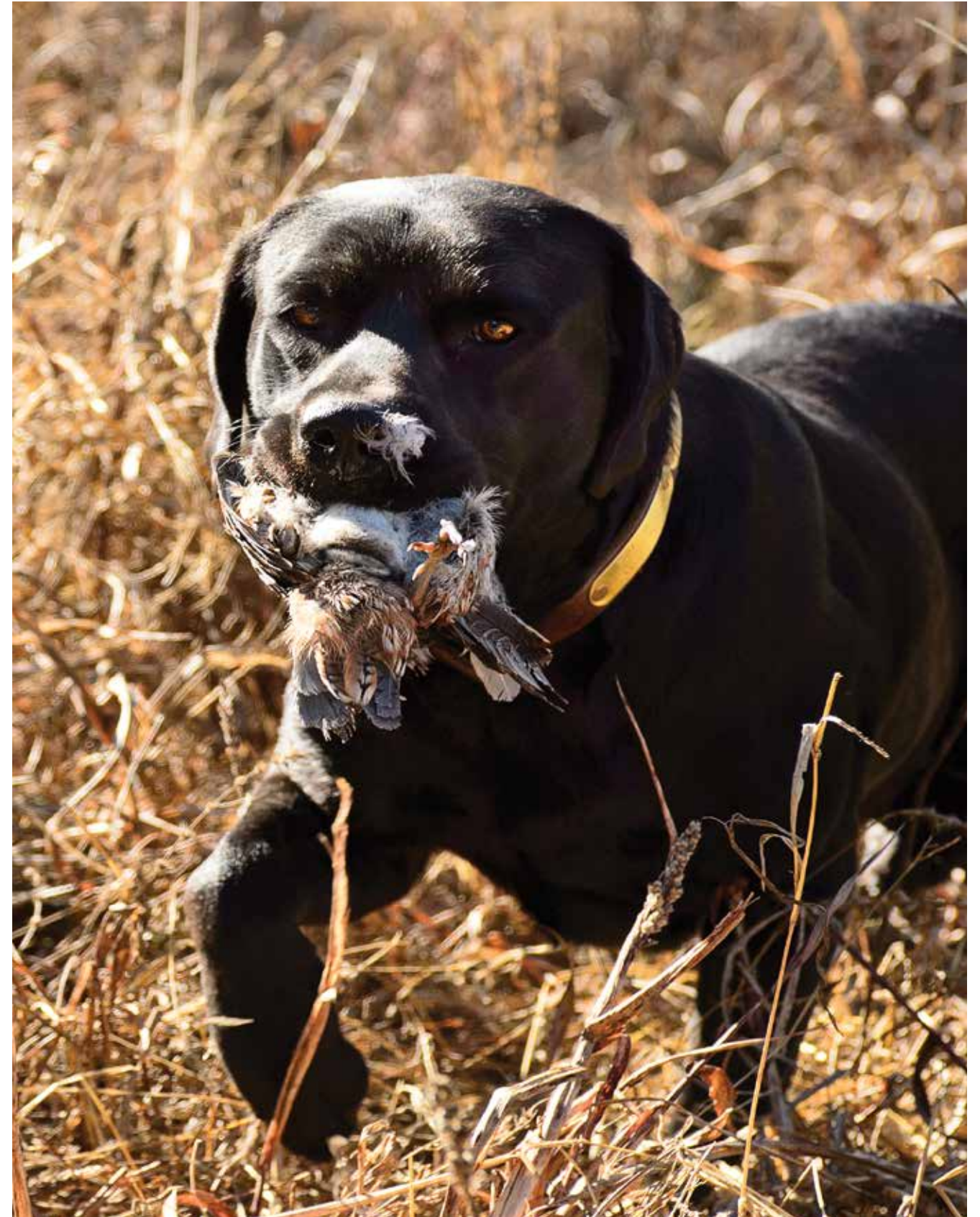
ferent breeds. You'll find pointers, setters, shorthairs, vizslas, springers, cockers, and Labs in the kennels. Webb loves all of his dogs. That said, he's a pointer man—always has been, always will be. Still, he can't resist a chance to see a good dog work, particularly if it's a dog different than the ones at the farm. Most of the time you'll see a brace or leash of dogs, with the pointing dogs being English pointers or setters. After the dogs lock up and honor you'll see a cocker, a springer, or one of Wade Meachum's Irish labs put the covey in the air. The flushing dogs will do the retrieving, as well.

There are a variety of places to stay at The Webb Farm. The first is in the comfortable, well-appointed 19th Century-style farmhouse that was completed in 2006 and expanded in 2010. There are two wings with eight bedrooms, each with a private bath. Leather couches are comfortably arranged around the stone fireplace in the great room, and a flat-screen television makes it easy to catch an after-hunt sporting event.

The dining area is adjacent to an open kitchen, and there is a wide front veranda with rocking chairs overlooking the fields of quail cover. Another option is the original Webb Farmhouse. Built in the early 1900s, it's a four-bedroom home with heart-pine floors and hand-hewn beams. An extra guest or a couple can stay in the Corn Crib, a small apartment converted from its original use of holding silage.

On the food and beverage side, hunters are in for a treat. Mrs. Debbie Webb, well known for her former restaurant called Steeples in Hamlet, NC, oversees a top-notch culinary staff. All meals are in keeping with Southeastern North Carolina cooking, with nearly all the ingredients, including spices, coming from the immediate area.

Breakfasts typically consist of eggs, biscuits, grits, homemade sausage or country ham, and pancakes or French toast. Lunches may be buttermilk fried chicken, corncakes, spare ribs, or fried





quail. Dinners range from grilled Hereford filets to chicken piccata, with garden greens, side salads, freshly baked bread, and sweet potatoes. All desserts are made from scratch, and when you finish with the peach cobbler cake, the mixed berry pie, or the crème brûlée, make sure to sample the outstanding home-made banana pudding. This is following a post-hunt open bar and selection of appetizers, of course.

My first hunt at The Webb Farm took place many years ago, and coincidentally it was on guide Kenny Rabb's first day. Kenny lived over on Pappy Rabb Road, and his family used to hunt with Bill's family. On that first day we explored the farm and set in motion a friendship that continued to Kenny's passing this year. Our friendship is simply on pause until my time concludes, and then it'll resume again. I do miss him, though not as much as The Webb Farm crew does.

As the warm breeze pushes through the grasses during my winter arrival last year, I think of Corey Ford, who traded in his frozen New England grouse coverts for the Carolina quail fields from November through the winter. It's sure a pleasant way to spend the season, but everyone down here already knows and agrees with that. They're reminded of it when they listen to the quiet whine of the bird buggy's engine, the sound of a beeper announcing a dog on point, and the clink of shells jostling around in a vest pocket. If one were old enough to remember, they'd say the farm looks like it did when Webb's momma and



daddy were runnin' dogs in the fields. They'd be right, y'all, 'cause after four generations of Webbs, things are pretty much the same, only a might bit better for lucky guests. 🦋

STEADY TO SHOT

(ABOVE:) Bill Webb and the author's daughter, Morgan.

