

Gentleman Bob in Georgia

at Rio Piedra Plantation

Story by John Shtogren
Photos courtesy of Rio Piedra Plantation

I cracked the truck window as I turned into the sandy drive flanked by loblollies. The scent of pine and woodsmoke gave me a remembrance-of-things-past moment, of grouse hunting with my father in Michigan. But that was a long time ago and far away: This evening I was deep in the Old South and pulling into Rio Piedra Plantation, a quail hunting lodge.

Quail Capital of the World

A plantation belt stretches a hundred

miles from South Georgia to North Florida, from Albany down to Tallahassee. About a hundred plantations, mostly private, cover 300,000 acres. In the late 1880s, wealthy Northerners came down in private railcars to winter in and around Thomasville. The Yankees bought up many of the decaying plantations and began to manage them for quail hunting. The intense attention to quail continues today—burning the understory to improve nesting cover, dispersing tons of grain each week and adding birds to the native stock.

Yankee money and Southern gentility combined to preserve a gracious sporting culture in southwest Georgia. Quail were called Gentleman Bob, and gentleman hunters rode on horseback or on high-seated mule-drawn wagons, high up to watch the pointers ranging ahead in the piney woods. Today, Thursday evenings on some private plantations, the first night of a quail hunting weekend for owners and guests, continue to be black-tie affairs.

Rio Piedra Plantation's 6,000 acres straddle the Flint River. It benefits



Hunters in classic Georgia quail country-- piney woods, wiregrass and broomsedge



Mister Bill is ready for the covey rise.



English cockers both flush and retrieve.



from being at the epicenter of the plantation belt. Bobwhite quail migrate as far as 35 miles in response to an instinctive drive for genetic diversity. The coveys on Rio Piedra are constantly enriched by migrant quail from surrounding plantations.

Bill and Annie Atchison, owners and gracious hosts of Rio Piedra, are a contemporary fusion of Yankee money and Southern gentility. Originally from a small town in Michigan, they spent 30 years in Atlanta. In 2000 they left corporate life and built the main lodge on the Flint River. For a decade their goal has been to provide not just superb quail hunting, but an experience reflecting a more genteel era. As Bill Atchison explains, “We want to provide a sporting experience that feels like the ‘50s—the 1950s or the 1850s.”

I arrived at Rio Piedra just in time to unpack and catch the end of the cocktail hour. In the great room, fatwood and oak burned in the ceiling-high stone fireplace. Hors d’oeuvres were on the sideboard, game sausage and a buttery pâté. The Atchisons moved easily among their 18 guests, making sure the wine was right and all was as it should be. They have the *mi casa, su casa* gift of the very best of hosts.

Dinner was worthy a many-starred restaurant—a fresh garden salad followed by Gulf Coast Grouper Imperial with lumps of crabmeat and Lemon Beurre Blanc over Low Country rice followed by fresh-made key lime pie. Afterwards, there was port and brandy to be enjoyed by a blazing fire out on the terrace, and Mayorga cigars were there for the asking. The fire, the brandy, the stars overhead—in Southwest Georgia the other world seemed far away.

A Gentleman’s Hunt

Breakfast was served at a eight, a very civilized hour. Juice and coffee were on the sideboard long before dawn for early risers. Eggs were made to order and the rest could be as Southern as desired—scratch biscuits with sausage gravy, slab bacon and country ham and, of course, grits with



Rio Piedra offers fine dining in the main lodge. Lunch is often *al fresco* on the deck overlooking the Flint River.

red-eye gravy. The morning sun was burning off the last of the night mist in the pines while the hunters finished their last cup of coffee.

At 9 o'clock specially equipped Jeep Wranglers circled up in the front drive—dog boxes in back with a high seat, gun scabbards over the grill, modern versions of the old mule-drawn wagons. Hunters were introduced to their guides and headed out to one of the 21 sections of the plantation. They would be far enough apart so no party would see another, or likely hear a shot other than their own.

In the morning I hunted with Annie Atchison and guide Matt Bennett. Bennett, like all the Rio Piedra guides, has years of experience working bird dogs in the piney woods. We shook hands all around and I became “Mister John,” and Annie Atchison was, as always, “Miss Annie.” Throughout the day Bennett answered questions with “Yes, sir” and “No, sir” just as he was brought up to do. I soon found myself doing the same.

After a 15-minute drive down a sandy lane, we stopped and Bennett released three dogs, two pointers and an



English cocker. The dogs attended to personal business while we reviewed safety rules. Guns would remain open until ready to shoot; Miss Annie would only take birds breaking to the right; I would cover the left; we would not shoot at low birds for the dogs' safety or birds flushing back toward us. Bennett added, "And don't shoot the Jeep – it's a long walk home."

Rio Piedra is classic quail country, a mix of tall pines and live oaks with an understory of broomsedge and wiregrass. We were still at the Jeep when Bennett said, "I believe Uno and Vad have found us some birds." Less than 50 yards away, the two pointers were frozen in place, facing each other 15 yards apart. Berger, the heeling cocker, eyed the pointers and whined with anticipation. His job would be to flush the birds and see to the retrieving. "No hurry, the birds will wait for us this morning," Bennett assured. Gentleman Bobs in Georgia behave the way they are supposed to behave—hold tight, flush fast and fly hard.

We eased forward, gun breeches open, Miss Annie on the right, me on the left with Bennett in between. Fifteen yards from the pointers, Bennett said, "It's time to load your guns and shoot some birds."

Berger flushed a 15-bird covey, some veering right, some left, and a few straight back at us. Miss Annie shot: I ducked. A puff of feathers burst as she caught a quail in the center of her 28-gauge's pattern. As the feathers floated in the still morning air, Bennett remarked, "Miss Annie, you have the first bird of the day. Mister John, you have seen your first Georgia snowstorm. Now let's see if Uno and Vad can find some singles."

We did find singles and many more coveys; over the next two hours, at least 50 birds took to the air. The dogs were poetry in motion, ranging wide with noses high and slowing to become statues with tails erect and forelegs cocked. I shot much better on singles. But often Gentleman Bob swerved to safety behind a pine tree just as



Another quail falls to Miss Annie's 28-gauge.

I shot, and pine bark, not feathers, filled the air. If pine trees were bobwhites, I would have limited out twice over.

When we headed in for lunch, Bennett had 20 birds in his game bag. I'd like to say, at least half the birds fell on my side rather than Miss Annie's, but I was brought up to tell the truth. Seven, maybe six, was a number I was happy with.

Lunch was *al fresco* on the terrace and appropriately Southern—barbecued ribs, Brunswick stew, coleslaw, potato salad, deviled eggs and sweet tea. The lunch talk was all about the abundance and strength of the birds. These were smart birds that flew fast and none too high, the best way to dodge hawks, owls and #8 shot.

I switched guns for the afternoon hunt, from my 12-gauge Browning over-under to a special 16-gauge Ranger side-by-side. My mother bought it for my father from the Sears catalogue about the time I was born. I took my first grouse with the Ranger in the early '60s, back when my hands were steady and my eyes were clear and bright

In the afternoon I hunted with Bill Atchison while Miss Annie attended to plantation business. The Ranger looked a bit modest next to Mister Bill's Caesar

Guerini, but I was sure Gentleman Bob wouldn't think the less of it. Bennett took us to an area where the broomsedge and wiregrass were considerably thicker than we'd seen in the morning. Late in the season, the birds often seek heavier cover for safety. Bennett released Bud, an English setter, along with Holly, a fresh pointer. "Pointers can be a little soft-footed. At times they'd rather skirt the heavy brush and try to pick up scent from the edges. The setter will bust right in." Dixie, a fresh cocker, filled out the trio.

We came up on a swale of extra-thick wiregrass, 15 yards wide by 30 yards long. It reminded me of pheasant cover back in Michigan. The grass was waist-high but the ground was clear beneath, allowing the quail to run freely. When Bud and Holly went on point at the far end of the swale, only the tips of their erect tails showed their location. Bennett sent Dixie in to flush.

Eight birds burst out on Mister Bill's side, and he took one bird and then another while others flushed as he was reloading. Dixie swung to my side and 15 or more birds flushed in all directions. I ignored the incoming birds and zeroed in on two going straight away, wing to wing. The Ranger barked twice and I caught the birds

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in overlapping patterns of #8s: the afternoon air looked like I'd blasted a feather pillow. "Mister John," I said to myself, "you've made yourself a real Georgia blizzard." I'm sure it was Mister Bill who added, "Well done, well done!" but it sounded to me like it came from far away and long ago.

Going Home Again

The Southern writer Thomas Wolfe lamented, "You can't go home again...back home to places in the country, back home to the old forms which once seemed everlasting...back home to the escapes of Time and Memory." If you go to Rio Piedra, you may find he was wrong. The old forms, the rites and rituals of hunting for Gentleman Bob are still there, just the way they were in the 1850s or 1950s.

If you go, you will discover why Rio Piedra is the only two-time winner of the Orvis-endorsed Wing Shooting Lodge of the Year. The award is based on the quality of the hunt, the cuisine and

accommodations, and the hospitality. It guarantees that fine dogs will find fast-flying quail, the dining will delight, and that Southern hospitality is not a thing of the past. Gentleman Bob will be calling at dusk, the veranda lights will be on, and Miss Annie and Mister Bill will be there to welcome you home.

For details see:
www.riopiedraplantation.com

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