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BENEATH THE LONGLEAF PINES

Tradition is renewed and aesthetic celebrated at Rio Piedra.

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ENERGY AT REST

A single feather at rest among the needles of a grass-stage longleaf. Nestled in the protected bud, a few centuries of potential shade lies dormant, awaiting its time to rise.

On an early December morning, a longleaf pine seed spirals to the ground unnoticed. Mist off the Flint River sifts through waist-high wiregrass, lending substance to empty spaces. The scene is a softened melody of golds and browns and silver greens, all hushed in the fledgling day, a parochial palette befitting the cathedral silence. It's a crinkled carpet of a forest floor and a bristle of a canopy, a phalanx of sentinel trunks at attention ... and then somewhere in the muffled moments, the lonesome call of a bobwhite quail, cutting the morning stillness without ambiguity.

In the ensuing days, the footfalls of a whitetail doe may force that seed down through layers of pine straw and duff. With time and gravity and a dollop of luck, the seed will contact mineral soil, finding pay dirt. It will prove itself a germ of promise nestling into fertile ground. The longleaf seed is a resolute being, despite its humble beginnings; with atomic deliberation, it will plunge a threadlike root deep into the south Georgia clay and lay claim to a piece of the landscape.

Over the seasons, fires will riot the understory, blackening the forest floor and scalding the outer needles of the embryonic pine, which will burn in sacrifice to protect the bud. Over those same seasons, the young tree's perseverance will go largely uncelebrated as it establishes origins of lasting value. A generation of grasses and dogs and hunters and quail may come to pass before that seedling, fixed firmly in its place,

rears heavenward with stockpiled vigor. It will soar from scorched ground like the mythical phoenix, rising up toward the canopy with incredible speed to take its place among the giants. Enshrouded at last in a legacy of species, the young pine will put on wood, casting lengthening shadows over a red clay country that has known its kind since time immemorial, a place that has, despite itself, endured.

A similar tableau has played and repeated for millennia, describing and defining Georgia's Red Hills in a succession of landscape and species. At the time of the American Revolution, the longleaf/wiregrass ecosystem covered nearly 90 million acres of the Southern coastal plain, sprawling from Virginia to Florida and west to Texas. The wildlife encompassed therein must have been staggering; consider the entire Southeast in a rolling swath of quail, deer, and turkey habitat, with barely a hunter's footprint to be found. But as progress is wont to do, use and misuse managed to reduce the acreage left in longleaf pine by a staggering 97 percent, leaving us today with only between 3 and 6 million acres in scattered tracts. These remnant parcels and their associated communities are the living treasures of the Old South.

Around the turn of the 20th Century, Northern lumber companies, having cut their way through local timber stocks, began to move southward into the longleaf forests. The virgin, old-growth pines afforded superior logs that were dense and

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

Bill Atchison in his role as dauntless ferry captain, with Ellie the cocker as his navigator. At Rio Piedra, hunters access quail fields that lie in the flats across the Flint River from the lodge, and the brief ferry ride lends a certain mystique to the hunting that lies just ahead.



straight. As the cutting inched deeper inland, the railroads followed, exchanging a wealth of lumber for a stream of labor, back and forth to the Northern tier. The availability of newly timbered land made way for rough agriculture as well, as farmers from the coast occupied inland Georgia with patchwork subsistence farms.

By the 1920s, timbering within the longleaf ecosystem had resulted in a devastation of species on a scale similar to that seen in the contemporary Amazon. Nonetheless, in south Georgia there arose an incidental positive: broken tracts of forest interlaced with hodgepodge farms had in fact concentrated and nourished local quail populations. On these broken pieces beneath the residual longleafs, wild coveys bloomed and divided, much to the delight of the Yankee sportsmen who'd coincidentally encountered a similar potential in the rolling hills around Thomasville.

Riding the rail line to its southern terminus from Cleveland and New York, early industrialists found fresh air and winter reprieve in the Red Hills, as well as an under-tapped resource in the native quail. With disposable income and a desire to establish significant hunting opportunities in perpetuity, the first of the hunting plantations were established, collected loosely in what is now known as the “plantation belt.” Pebble Hill, Chinquapin, Longpine, Sinkola . . . the hallowed names persist in lands that have been handed down through generations. The plantation culture, the bobwhite quail, and the timeless elegance of pointing dogs

and double guns might well be the symbiotic salvation of the longleaf pine ecosystem, wherein all four thrive; it's no doubt the love for the aforementioned elements that has kept what remains of their Southern range intact.

This tale of scarcity and wonder, this aesthetic of genteel Southern sporting tradition, is not lost on Bill Atchison. Bill's, too, were humble beginnings rich with promise. Having left behind rural Michigan to ascend through a career with the Coca-Cola Company, Bill and his wife Annie went south from their home in Atlanta, at the suggestion of an acquaintance, to look at a parcel that had come up for sale. Bill is the first to admit that he had no intention of buying a business or a commercial hunting operation. To the contrary, he, like the Yankees of the early 20th Century, had been captivated by the Red Hills and the storied plantation belt. During his years with Coca-Cola, Bill and Annie had hunted quail in the company of other sportsmen and equally avid conservationists throughout the region, and had grown to love the quail culture nestled in among those piney woods. The montage of longleafs and the resurrection of the forest opened up something in Bill's soul and imagination; Bill and Annie bought that sliver of forest for sale along the Flint River in Camilla, and in so doing, also acquired the faltering and mismanaged hunting preserve that had been operating there. Metaphorically, what the Atchisons found in that red clay bottomland was their contact with fertile soil, and a retirement from Coca-Cola gave way to

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a rebirth of purpose. After a few years laying down roots, Bill and Annie leaned into the purpose of resurrecting an entrenched and refined regional sporting culture on a pine-strewn wedge of hunting ground along the Flint River. Under the watchful gaze of the longleafs, their vision took flight. Today, they perpetuate the halcyon days of Southern quail with the full aesthetic intact, giving hunters the world over a place and an experience known as Rio Piedra Plantation.

A NEW SHERIFF IN TOWN

On a misty December morning, Bill Atchison shuttles me and a small group of hunters across the Flint River, and leads us deeper into his sliver of that residual longleaf forest. The mists and the silences abound, and somewhere in the mix, the longleaf seeds are no doubt falling, though the morning's focus is on matters slightly more evident. With a box full of whining bird dogs and a brace of double guns assembled, we the hunters are here for quail. As the hunting Jeep stops and the world re-collects itself, a bobwhite whistles and injects purpose into a December morning.

With two pointers down and an English cocker at heel, we set out into the morning. Rio Piedra has grown in the years since Bill and Annie first purchased a piece of the Red Hills, and now encompasses nearly 6,000 acres of prime quail habitat. But radiating out in every direction from the forest where Bill and I walk is that fabled plantation belt and the largest remaining contiguous—or near-contiguous—tract of longleaf forest to be found. Covering a wide swath of south Georgia and north Florida, the plantation belt now describes a network of nearly 100 private plantations owned and managed foremost for wild bobwhite quail hunting. These properties are enjoyed by owners and guests on a highly restricted basis, as they have been for generations. Scarcity of birds and habitat—and the incredible resource demands involved in perpetuating both—cultivate an inherent exclusivity. Very few folks can hunt the elegant Georgia longleafs for hard-flushing wild bobs, in the genteel image of presidents and nobles, movie stars and magnates.

Certainly, put-and-take preserves make quail hunting available to the general public, but the Old World charm and elegance of the iconic plantation hunt is often missing, as is the opportunity

to see honest-to-goodness wild birds in their native range. Rio Piedra's geography, however, makes for a unique opportunity. Bill and Annie instituted a land management plan under the advisory of Tall Timbers Research Station, and introduced a protocol of seasonal burning, harvesting, and planting parallel to that encountered on the adjacent private properties. The demands of commercial hunting necessitate supplemental stocks of introduced quail, but the unbroken cover and prevalence of wild birds on contiguous properties foster the potential for wild birds to sift into Rio Piedra hunting courses unimpeded. Quail, ignorant of manmade boundaries, see ground as ground and cover as cover, and Rio hunters are therefore in a position to encounter birds that are the true natives of the Old South. That Rio Piedra makes the elegance and tradition of Southern quail accessible to all is a testament to Bill and Annie's inherent generosity, as well as their love for this place and its history.

As Bill explains all this, the lead pointer casts right and slams to a halt, whip-tail high and straight with his brace-mate honoring, and I'm suddenly aware that the mosaic unfurling is one both iconic and available, as timeless as the towering pines. As the cocker dives in and the covey rises, threading among the trunks, it could be President Eisenhower or Nash Buckingham on the left-hand flank rather than publisher John Thames, who drops two birds neatly with his McKay Brown 20, making it all look easy.

A POETRY OF PURPOSE

A hunt at Rio Piedra is a hunt indeed, intentionally so. Miles are covered through bramble and brush, and the indelicate ethos of the "how many" query gets gently obscured by the overarching experience. Bill and Annie have established a world-class guide team and a string of exceptional pointers and setters, who are as native to the longleaf quail woods as any living beings. As we move deeper into the day, our guide Bo pushes steadily into the silent woodlands, allowing his dogs to open up. Their run is majestic, and Bo lets them work, keeping his cocker at heel and allowing the guns to follow casually. Perhaps nothing defines suspended animation as efficiently as a pointer slamming into a covey, a blur of white moving through the grass then braking all at once, belly to ground in an enduring posture. Rio dogs are gentlemanly of course, and the backing dog whips around to honor. Bo is smiling; we've been walking awhile and admiring the cover, discussing with Bill the history of this place and how he's worked to refine it. Dogs on point and a beaming guide give us focus and purpose, and Bo takes charge of the choreography. He calls his cocker tighter to heel, and moves the guns into place, urging them up beside the lead dog with breeches closed and muzzles pointed

THE POINT BEFORE THE STORM

Stylish dogs, hard-flushing, and the timeless romance of a classic Red Hills tableau.





COCKERS AT RIO PIEDRA

Rio Piedra has been a longstanding champion of the English cocker, dictating that each guide run a brace of pointers with a cocker to flush.



skyward. There comes a moment when guns stop advancing and all becomes remarkably still. It's a moment forever captive in oil and watercolor, a moment of unbridled anticipation, electric possibility. Then, with a gesture of release, Bo sends his flusher, and the world erupts in wings. A covey nearing 20 roars up and out like a swarm of angry bees, and the guns mount and try to dissect from the melee a single point of focus. Barrels cough sharply in report, sending a hail of #8 shot into the day. There in South Georgia, on a December morning at Rio Piedra, we've become part of a sporting tradition. In the shadow of pines, a cocker delivers to Bo a fallen quail, a handful of feathers, an emblem of this place.

There's a poetry of purpose, a legacy of sport, a tradition of elegance that thrives at Rio Piedra. At day's end we return to the lodge, pour neat bourbons, and clean guns on a leather-topped table. It's in these transitional moments that we recount the day's superlatives; great shots and great points, wildly easy birds that somehow evaded our intentions. Bill and Annie come out to celebrate our stories, which are suddenly theirs as well. Their cocker is there too, having worked the day afield, and is now enjoying some much-deserved pampering, availing herself of a belly scratch from anyone willing to indulge.

With the foreshortened winter days, evenings in south Georgia are given their due, and at Rio Piedra the flavors of the region are on display. Bill ensures that our

glasses stay full as Chef Dirk Flachsmeier parades a festival of treats across our plates: softshell crab and Gulf shrimp, assorted cheeses, seared yellowfin with wasabi and sesame, choice Angus filet, and Key lime pie. Feeling lordly with food and drink, we retire to the outdoor fireside, where cigars and port are proffered, and we sink ever deeper into the evening. Tomorrow promises more of the same: a long walk through lovely country with good friends. There will no doubt be hard points and radiant flushes, epic silences and lingering reflections, memories of timeless clarity etched into a December day. All these things lie in store, and a good chance of banana puddin' at lunch, if we ask Chef Dirk politely.

In repose, the day long spent, Rio Piedra is silent beneath the Georgia stars. The Flint River flows steadily towards the Gulf in a ribbon of clay-stained water. Somewhere in the darkness, a bobcat slinks through the wet bottoms, in search of something lonesome and tender. The winds off the coast will gently push the wiregrass and bluestem, making gentle undulations, and maybe, on this early December evening, a longleaf pine seed will spiral down, kicked loose by that breath of wind. In a timeless reenactment, it may find its way to mineral soil, and take its place in a legacy of species. With time and gravity and a dollop of luck, that longleaf seed may bear witness to centuries of quail and hunters and double guns, to a tradition both timely and timeless, a beating heart of the sporting South. Lord knows, at Rio Piedra Plantation, the potential for just such a future is unbounded. 

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