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THE GOOD LIFE FOR MEN

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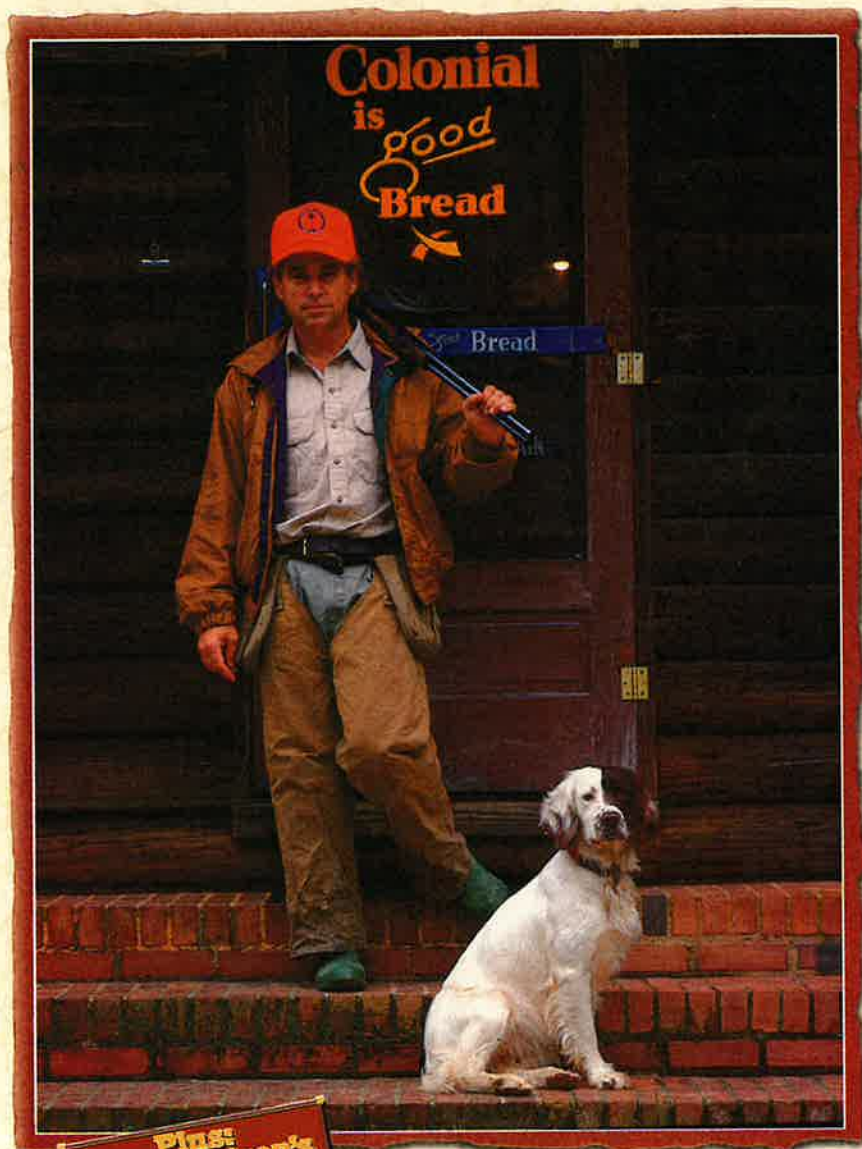
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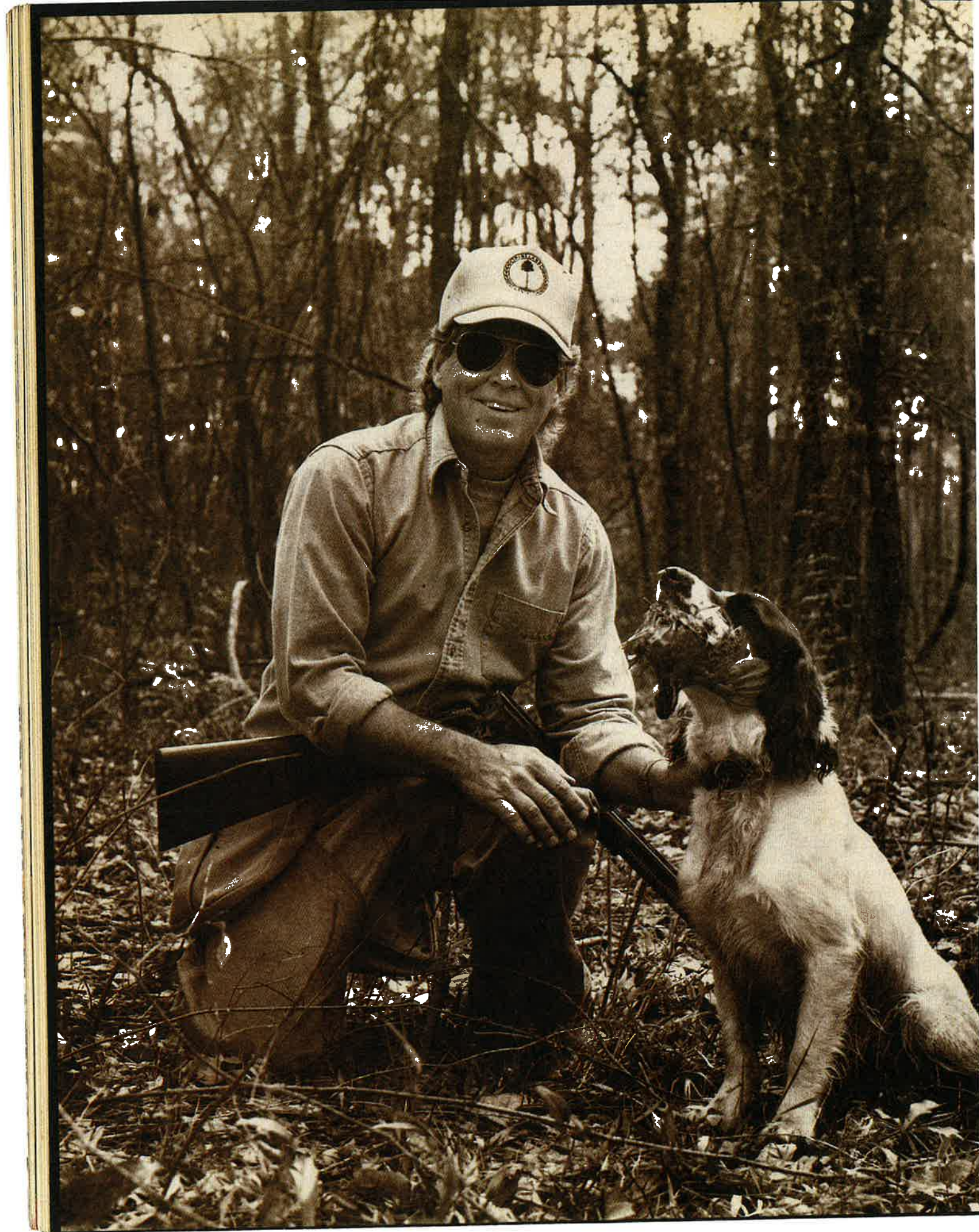
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**Quail Hunting with Jimmy Buffett**

At Springhill Plantation,  
Thomasville, Georgia









# Everything in the Woods Wants to Eat a Quail

**(Including Me)**

By Jimmy Buffett

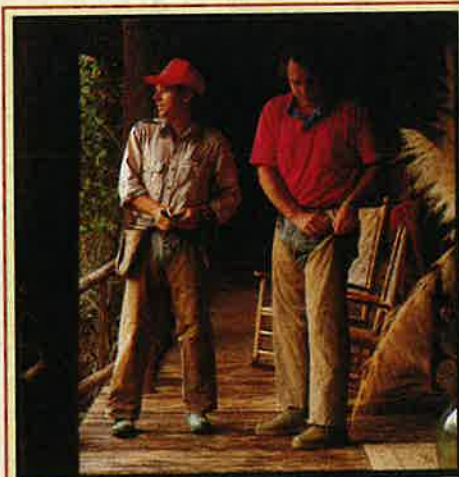
Photographs by Jean Pagliuso

**I**T IS VERY QUIET HERE ON Springhill Plantation, the piece of South Georgia where I have found sanctuary these last few years. Some friends from Nashville had been down here visiting for the weekend, but they're gone now, off to the airport and headed for home with plenty of quail to eat and stories to tell. All of our garrulous good-byes at the end of the driveway have given way to silence, the kind of silence that can be found only—or so it seems to me—in these pine woods that I have grown to love.

After they left I took a long horseback ride over the grass roads and down to the low bottom where the dogs like to wallow in the cool mud. The black mushrooms will be sprouting there soon. My landlady, Sally Sullivan, showed me the spot when I first rented the place, and I found out that those mushrooms are as good as any morel I have eaten in France. On the way back to the house I let the dogs run out far in front of me, and they flushed two coveys of birds, like kids chasing each other in a game of hide-and-seek.

The dogs didn't come back to me until I reached the tiny dogwood tree and the wooden cross with the faded blue collar draped over it that marks the grave of Spring, my prized springer spaniel. I traveled all the way to Scotland to pick him up from the Bracken Bank Kennels as a pup, and he had a great heart. One time he chased a crippled bird into the underbrush, both of us searching frantically for it with no luck. Just as I was about to give up, Spring dashed off in the opposite direction till he reached a gopher hole, then plunged down so far that only his wagging tail was visible. I immediately dropped my gun and ran after him, hoping I wouldn't pull him from the hole with a diamondback rattlesnake attached to his nose. As I grabbed for his hind legs, he backed out of the hole and there was the crippled bird, tucked softly in his mouth. Some quail hunters say that dogs mean as much to them as their

**The author in the woods with his dog Summer, his Browning .28, and dinner**



## **Good Friends**

Guy de la Valdene taught me most of what I know about quail hunting. He grew up handling dogs and targeting game birds while I was still gigging flounders and catching blue crabs with a chicken neck and a piece of string in the Gulf. Now, Guy and I hunt together several times a year.

—JIMMY BUFFETT

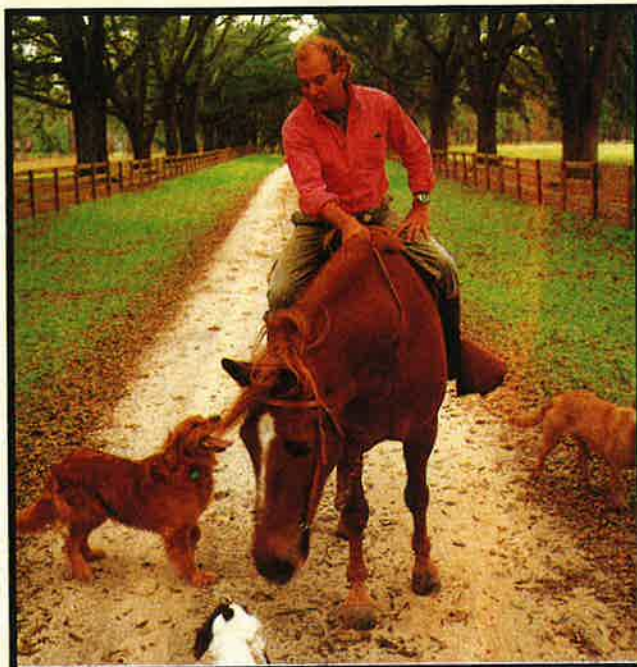




**Buffett, his  
dogs, and the  
father-son  
hunting team  
of Clark and  
Bill Akers  
from  
Nashville**







wives and children. Crazy as those words look on the page as I write them, sometimes when I visit Spring's grave I begin to understand what they mean.

After my ride I put my horse out to pasture, then came back to the house and sat on the porch with the dogs plopped all around me. I strummed my National steel guitar until I heard the distant rumbling of thunder and went inside to check the Weather Channel. Tomorrow would be perfect. I roasted my two birds from the day's hunt and ate in the silence of the empty kitchen with a glass of red wine. By the time I'd finished entering the details of the day into my journal, I was ready to turn in. It was shortly before 9:00 P.M. In the old days, I would just have been thinking about going out for the evening at this hour. Now all I wanted to do was get up early and hunt quail again. Watching a covey go up has become as thrilling as hearing the roar of twenty thousand fans at the end of a concert or being launched from the deck of an aircraft carrier in an F-14.



### Hot Stuff

I'm not as wild a hot-sauce maniac as some of my friends, but I do believe that the right sauce is as important when it comes to cooking quail as the right dog and gun are when you're hunting them. Crystal is my favorite Louisiana hot sauce, and I always have some with me on the road. I also hardly ever travel without Pickapeppa, Matouk's (from Trinidad), and Ned's Own, which I get directly from friends at Crisfield in Silver Spring, Maryland.

—JIMMY BUFFETT

**Q**UAIL HUNTING in South Georgia is like basketball in North Carolina. It is religion.

You don't just pick it up. You have to study it, and the first thing you learn is that everything in the woods wants to eat a quail. You and I are right in there with the skunk, opossum, red and gray fox, cotton rat, raccoon, weasel, mink, bobcat, marsh hawk, and horned owl, not to mention a variety of snakes, barnyard animals, and sushi eaters who covet quail eggs. We all know a good meal when we smell one.

I have also learned that I prefer to walk in the woods, even though the traditional hunting down here is done on horseback. Thus I need a close-ranging dog. There is a lot of fuss made about dogs, their training especially; but I know that all I really need is a steady pointer and a retriever who will stay put when the birds flush. I also know that since the bobwhite quail has a life span of only about a year, management of quail habitat is crucial. That is why I have learned about sour gum, brown-top millet, and feeding patterns.

I know that I will never shoot more than I want to eat and that I am just an average shot. The size and caliber of my gun are important. I shoot an over-and-under Browning twenty-eight-gauge that I bought from a friend a few years back. The barrels are twenty-six inches. One is a cylinder choke and the other a modified choke. I keep several twenty-gauge guns in my rack for guests. I know that big artillery should be considered taboo, because it takes no skill to drop several birds in a covey with a twelve-gauge, short-barreled, five-shot automatic, and that firing at a quail with a

**Biff, a German shorthair, is Buffett's pointer (left). His golden retriever, Cheeseburger (above), is retired.**



small-bore shotgun also reduces crippling loss because you tend to make every shot count.

More important, I know that there are many more pleasures in quail hunting than just the shooting. There are plenty of hunters who fire a gun just often enough to keep their dogs in top form. For myself, sometimes the rise of the covey in the early-morning light is so beautiful that I stand frozen with my gun in my hand and watch (no doubt to the bewilderment of my dogs). Likewise, I have experienced mystical nights with the woods ablaze, standing in the smoke watching the controlled burns that begin the day after the season closes in late February.

Thanks to a five-foot rattler, I learned early about the importance of snake boots. And thanks to my friends, I have learned what may be the greatest thrill of all: offering a few days of the best quail hunting in the world to people you care about.

**H**UNTING WAS NOT a tradition in my family. I grew up on the northern edge of the Gulf of Mexico, fishing, crabbing, and sailing. The only hunting I did as a kid was taking a potshot at a squirrel once in a while with my neighbor's Daisy BB gun. My only contact with the woods was the occasional weekend outing with my Boy Scout troop, crowded into a pup tent with a dozen other khaki-clad kids, farting and telling ghost stories. I always missed the ocean.

With adolescence I joined a band to meet girls and wound up living out of a suitcase for nearly two decades. The only woodlands I saw in those years were from forty thousand feet. If I got a break, I usually went back to the flats of Key West to fish. Then something changed. I could feel myself throttling back. I was looking to catch my breath, and after some sage-hen and grouse shoots out in Montana with my sister and brother-in-law, and a few dove hunts with friends back in Alabama, the woods suddenly began to look very interesting. I took a hunting trip to France on an invitation

**Buffett shoots a Browning over-and-under .28 with twenty-six-inch barrels. One is a cylinder choke, the other a modified choke.**



#### Top Form

This is my new springer spaniel, Summer. With dogs like this you quickly learn that there are many more pleasures in quail hunting than just the shooting. Watching a good retriever find a bird in the thick brush and then come prancing toward you with that great look of dog confidence is equally as thrilling. I know hunters who fire a gun just often enough to keep their dogs in top form.

—JIMMY BUFFETT

from my friend Guy de la Valdene, who hunts as if he'd been born with a small-bore shotgun in his hands (which he was, more or less). Guy was raised in the world of sport shooting and fishing, and on that trip to Normandy he introduced me to bird shooting and working dogs—and, especially, game dinners—inspiring a passion I have been feeding ever since.

When we came home, Guy and I leased some land in central Florida near Gainesville. The shooting was not the best, but we would bag enough birds for dinner and take them back to camp on the Suwannee River, stuff them with fresh-shucked Cedar Key oysters, and roast them over an open fire.

How I got from there to Springhill had a lot to do with my first excuse for a hunting dog, a golden retriever named Cheeseburger. He was a gift from Buddy Owens, former insurance salesman and private detec-





**Traditionally  
quail are  
hunted on  
horseback in  
South Georgia,  
but Buffett  
prefers to  
walk**







### **Sacred Ground**

Spring was my prized springer spaniel. He was one of those dogs you get way too attached to—when they go, you grieve almost as if you had lost a child. In a way, I guess the passing of pets like Spring prepares us for the human losses we all must eventually face.

—JIMMY BUFFETT





tive, and present-day owner of B.O.'s, a fish wagon on the corner of Duval and Fleming in Key West. I am a sucker for any dog that looks me in the eye, and when the face of that puppy popped over the tailgate of Buddy's truck as I munched on a grouper sandwich, I couldn't resist. But when I took Cheeseburger to Tallahassee for his first hunt, at the end of the day Guy said simply, "The dog needs some work."

I took his advice. Cheeseburger was enrolled in Greg Oyer's dog school in Thomasville, Georgia, and when I went to check on his education, I fell in love with the area. I asked Guy to keep his eyes open for any place that might be coming up for lease in Thomas County. When the call came, I rented Springhill sight unseen.

That was five years ago, and now I am as at home in the woods of South Georgia as I am on the beaches of Florida or the Caribbean. Cheeseburger is retired from hunting now—he was hit by a car in front of my house in Key West. He had to have his legs pieced back together, but he's still happy, the fattest of a pack of hounds that also includes a German shorthair, a Chesapeake, a springer spaniel, and whatever puppies are based temporarily at the caretaker's house. There are also three horses, a couple of cats, a million gray squirrels, flocks of bright-red cardinals perched in the rose thickets, and quail. Lots of quail.

**T**HE DOGS WOKE ME sometime just before dawn. I opened the front door to a cold blast of air and a clear sky. The sun was beginning its creep through the pine trees, and the birds had broken in to song. I dressed warmly, grabbed a cup of tea, and went to the gun room for my chaps, game bag, and gun. Biff, my reliable pointer, and Summer, the new springer, were right on my tail. It is Summer's first season here, and she has done well for a young dog.

Outside, I headed beyond the pastures, thinking about how strange this place had seemed to me when I first arrived and how I now feel as if I know just about every inch of it by heart: where the coveys are, the layout of the fields, roads, ditches, and creeks. A thousand miles away from here, I can close my eyes and visualize my favorite spots.

**Spring is buried on the plantation near what Buffett calls his "thinking spot"**

Biff ran up ahead of me, crisscrossing a cornfield. Summer stayed at my side. A covey wild-flushed at the far end of the field. I signaled the dogs to move left and lost sight of Biff. Moments later I found her on

point near a small thicket of young pine. Summer stayed obediently at heel as I moved closer, checking the direction of the wind and the distant cover where the birds might fly once they got up. I ordered Summer to sit and walked alone the last few yards until I was even with Biff. I closed my gun and released the safety. My heart was racing.

"Check it out!" I called to Summer, and she sprang toward the thicket. In an instant the sound of fluttering wings filled the air. Quail went in all directions. Two flew directly over my head like kamikazes. I picked up a group flying parallel to the creek and fired twice. Two birds came down.

Those birds were my last of the season, and as I sat at the kitchen table putting the final entries into the hunting log, all I could think about was what needed to be done now that the season was over. There was the new planting to consider. There was clearing to be done along the northern end of the property. And soon the new dogs would be arriving from Scotland. Most important, I suddenly realized, there was another season to look forward to. ■



**The Akerses at day's end. Buffett learned the importance of snake boots (below) from a diamondback.**

