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FOUR DOLLARS

A close-up photograph of a black and white English Cocker Spaniel dog. The dog has long, wavy ears and is looking directly at the camera with a calm expression. It is holding a colorful pheasant in its mouth, with its beak clamped on the bird's neck. The pheasant has vibrant feathers in shades of purple, red, and blue. The background is a soft, out-of-focus field of dry grass or reeds, suggesting a natural outdoor setting.

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Cover: Fourteen-year-old English cocker, Comet, retrieves a cock pheasant. © Bill Murden

Left: A golden-winged warbler brings food to its young in a well hidden nest. These migratory visitors only breed in areas like the Highland Wildlife Management Area near Monterey and are important birds to record for the Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas. © Bob Schamerhorn

Back Cover: A wiley gobbler takes off, running at the first sign of trouble. © Bob Schamerhorn

C O O C K E R S

AS BIRD DOGS



By Clarke C. Jones
Photos by Bill Murden

Until recently, I was never a big fan of the cocker spaniel as a hunting dog. For that, I blame my mother and Walt Disney. My first introduction to a cocker spaniel was that doe-eyed female, Lady, in the animated movie, *Lady and the Tramp*. So impressed with how adorable Lady looked, my mother bought two American cocker spaniels for my brother and me. You cannot imagine the ridicule we endured when our young buddies got a look at our two little frou-frous! After all, our friends had an assortment of strays and mixed-breed dogs that tagged along everywhere with us. Our new spaniels tried their best, but could barely keep up. Even more morti-

fying, my mother had named the petite pair Sugar and Spice. Picture calling for those two dogs in front of your childhood friends!

Forty years later, my opinion of cockers changed when I was introduced to the English cocker spaniel while participating as a picker-up during a simulated European-driven pheasant shoot on the Christmas Hill estate in Keene. A picker-up is a male or female dog handler who sends his or her dog to retrieve downed pheasants. All the pickers-up worked with trained Labrador retrievers. However, on one shoot Ken Penrose from the Tidewater area showed up with his little field-bred English cocker spaniel.

Accustomed to seeing 80- and 90-pound Labs crash through thick tangles of honeysuckle, brush, and briars to get to a downed pheasant, I admit I was both skeptical and curious as to what the little "almost a dog" (as someone referred to it) would do, working in heavy cover when retrieving a crippled cock pheasant. Surprisingly, thick cover was not a problem, nor was the dog intimidated by any wing-tipped birds that were not willing to be carried off to its handler. Ken's English cocker would just dive right under the growth to get the pheasant. It marked extremely well, and once it found a downed bird, raced back to Penrose carrying the pheasant in its mouth. To all appearances, its hind legs were barely touching the ground.

Traditionally, in Virginia and in much of the Southeast, bird hunters use either pointers or setters for quail hunting. However, a number of southern quail plantations have added a small addition to their kennel portfolio, letting pointers and setters find the birds while letting an English cocker flush and retrieve them.

Annie and Bill Atchison own Rio Piedra Plantation in Camilla, Georgia,

which is a three-time winner of the coveted “Orvis Wingshooting Lodge of the Year.” According to Annie, Rio Piedra began using cockers almost a decade ago for both flushing and retrieving quail. “The roles are that the pointers find the birds, the cockers flush on command, and then retrieve the successful shots,” she explained.

Dan O’Connor, who manages the George Hi Plantation in Garland, North Carolina, stated they have been using English cocker spaniels for four to five years to flush and retrieve quail. “We do four or five pheasant hunts a season and use cockers for all of them,” said O’Connor.

Nationally recognized field trialer Dave Pomfret, who spends his life training and trialing pointing dogs around the country, resides in both North Dakota and Virginia. He understands the appeal of flushing dogs like an English cocker spaniel. “They have become the go-to dog for retrieving quail on many southern plantations,” said Pomfret.

He suggested that if I wanted to speak with someone locally who has acquired a field-bred English cocker to contact Philip Innes from Richmond. “I believe Innes has Paul McGagh training his dog, Covey. McGagh is a person of some renown when it comes to training English cockers,” noted Pomfret.

Innes recollected, “My father-in-law would tell stories about Paul handling six English cockers with hand signals, sending them out three at a time to hunt, flush, and retrieve; then call the three back and then send the other three out to do the same.” He continued, “My wife fell in love with the breed and asked McGagh if we could purchase a puppy. We were very surprised Paul offered us the pick of the litter from his next litter.”

“English is not a really fair description in my opinion. ‘Celtic cocker’ would be a more enlightened term,” said McGagh. When he was growing up in England, working cockers were at a very low point and he attributes the “comeback” of the cocker to a handful of Scots and Welshmen.

“The Scots, Jack Windle and Dennis Douglas; the Welshmen, Cyril and Alan Gwynn and Peter Jones; and the part-Danish/part-Englishman, Keith Erlandson, were steadfast cocker enthusiasts



John Lewis prepares to send his black, female cocker Millie to retrieve a downed pheasant during a simulated European-driven pheasant shoot at the Christmas Hill Estate in Keene. Previous page: Jumping for joy, Mike Allen’s Rosie eagerly charges after a downed bird.

when the mainstream gun dog world turned their noses up at the little dogs,” explained McGagh.

McGagh left England for a game-keeping job in Texas in 1984. Later, in 1991 while living in Goochland County, he began to hear about a resurgence of the breed in England. Mark Merhige, a friend of McGagh’s from Richmond, decided he would like to have one, so McGagh flew to England and bought two cockers, one for Merhige and one for himself that he named Lucy.

“I was smitten,” said McGagh. “Her zest for life, seemingly perpetual grin, and her never-ending enthusiasm had hooked me.”

Trainer John Lewis owned Labrador retrievers for years in England and now does the same at his Apsley Kennels in Sperryville. Lewis also trains English

cocker spaniels. He noted that, “English cockers have long been the working dog of choice of game-keepers. Their breeding has such strong working genes over many years that the pups copy their parents rather than requiring a lot of time-consuming training. Cockers can push through thick cover and are surprisingly good markers, so they are used for picking up on driven shoots.”

Lewis believes so much in the growing popularity of the English cocker that he recently purchased a field champion male English cocker from Great Britain to breed with his female champion. The puppies are expected to arrive any time now. At this writing two of Lewis’s pups were promised to buyers in January, a month before their whelp date.

Texas native John Poindexter owns the 30,000-acre Cibolo Creek Ranch south of Marfa, Texas, and hunts quail with his



Above: Rosie retrieves a bufflehead. Bottom right: Seven-year-old female Jordan is a veteran of many hunts. Field-bred cockers make wonderful family-friendly hunting companions.

two English cocker spaniels. I recently observed John and his friend Allen Foster, who also quail hunts with English cockers, and Chris Cobb on Poindexter’s Cumberland Plantation here in New Kent County. Standing still, the tall, slender Texan and the almost-knee-high English cocker may look like an odd couple, but when hunting together, they bond as a perfect match, each intuitively reading the actions of the other. Briars and thick tangles deterred neither as the cocker went under the heavy brush and Poindexter busted through it.

Travel 1,039 miles northwest of New Kent and you’ll meet Jordan Horak, a breeder and field trialer of English cockers in Fremont, Wisconsin. His English cocker spaniel, *Juggernaut Cool Breeze JH* aka “Breeze,” placed third in the 2015 National Cocker Championship. Horak believes the field-bred English cocker’s ability, size, and

adaptability from the field to the living room has increased its popularity.

“Their hunting prowess far surpasses their physical size... and they have a natural hunting pattern that generally keeps them well within gun range,” noted Horak.

Horak hunts grouse with his English cockers in Wisconsin. Poindexter uses his for quail hunting in west Texas and Virginia. Two bird hunters, hunting different birds but using the same breed of dog, agree that hunting with a dog that will both hunt and keep track of you makes the outing more enjoyable.

Many of my friends who have bird dogs not only want a good, biddable hunting dog but also one that adapts to time spent with the family. The majority of those interviewed for this article commented that a field-bred English cocker spaniel is a very affectionate, good-natured

dog that gets along with children and house guests. If you are looking for an enthusiastic hunting companion who works with you in the field, and then can switch gears to play with the kids at home, then a field-bred English cocker spaniel may be just the dog for you. ❧

Clarke C. Jones spends his spare time with his black Labrador retriever, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can visit Clarke and Luke on their website at www.clarkecjones.com.

RESOURCES

- ◆ Virginia Shooting Preserves
www.dgif.virginia.gov/hunting/shooting-preserves
- ◆ Apsley Kennels
www.apsleylabs.com
- ◆ Glencoe Farm & Kennels
www.glencoe Kennels.net/farm.html
- ◆ Juggernaut Spaniels
<http://juggernautspaniels.com/index.html>
- ◆ Rio Piedra Plantation
<http://riopiedraplantation.com/>
- ◆ George Hi Plantation
www.georgehi.com
- ◆ Cibolo Creek Resort
www.cibolocreekranch.com

