## IRGINIA ILDLIFE

**FOUR DOLLARS** 





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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



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.

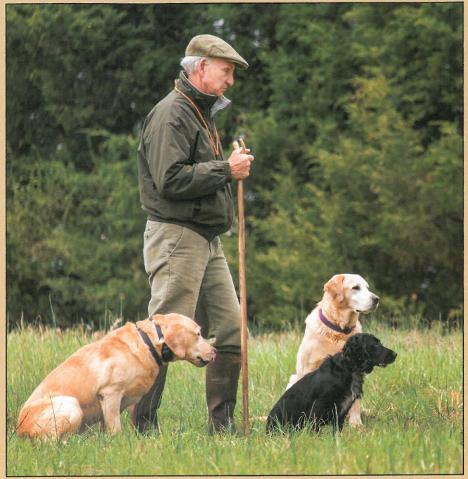
Nationally recognized field trialer Dave Pomfret, who spends his life training and trialing pointing dogs around the country, resides in both North Dakota and Virginia. He understands the appeal of flushing dogs like an English cocker spaniel. "They have become the go-to dog for retrieving quail on many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

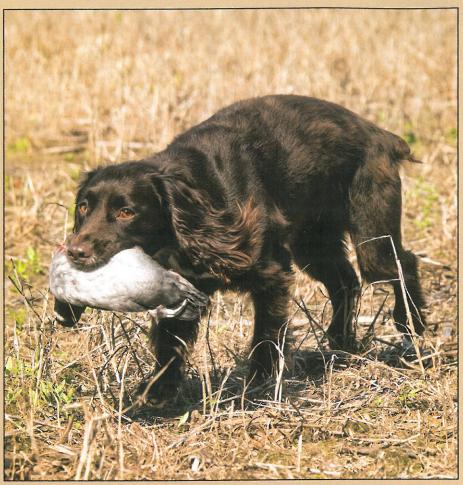
"I was smitten," said McGagh. "Her zest for life, seemingly perpetual grin, and her never-ending enthusiasm had hooked

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

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 Cumber-

land Plantation here in New Kent County.

Standing still, the tall, slender Texan and

the almost-knee-high English cocker may

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

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

Travel 1,039 miles northwest of New

brush and Poindexter busted through it.

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 look like an odd couple, but when hunting 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.glencoekennels.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



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