

commands in the afternoon, in preparation for the graduation field test that John and I had agreed on: a released-bird hunt in late September at the farm, with chukar partridge and quail.

On graduation day, John, wearing a faded blue polo shirt and jeans tucked into his rubber boots, planted a couple birds around the orchard grounds. "Reilly knows the quail," he told me, "but wait till she sees the chukar. Shoot when they get up. Shoot quick. But just go ahead and shoot. They get up quick and flare-not like a grouse. We don't want these birds to get away, if we can help it." Better for us to shoot them than to offer them up as fare for coyotes or foxes, was the message.

I knocked down quail on each of Reilly's first three points. Steady. No gain. No creep. Staunch, with a high, rigid tail. A wood-stiff pointer point. She half retrieved these birds, too, picking them up with a soft mouth, but not bringing the birds to hand when called. John said we'd work on that next year. For now, he said, it was important that she was pointing so well and didn't chew up the birds.

"If you want her to retrieve, we'll work on that." I told him that'd be fine, if the training fit the dog's disposition.

Then came the chukar. Reilly found the first of these birds by a stone wall, but it flared away and John missed with a shot from his 20-gauge. We

marked it, and I hitched on Reilly's lead and led her down toward the bird. She pointed it a second time, though not completely stylishly, as the bird was wind-washed and not so full of scent. She crept toward it a bit, or tried to as I held her; her tail was not at full mast. I tried and missed the shot, and that bird flew directly to the pond on the property.

Reilly, against my commands to "whoa," ran down to the pond and established point facing the stone fence at the water's edge. When John and I got there, no bird was in sight. He released the dog, and she leapt at the stone wall, digging at it, whining and barking. Did the bird drown? Or did it burrow into the gaps in the stones? I came forward to "whoa" her. Told her to be easy. John followed, said the bird clearly was under the grass or had taken up residence in the rock wall. We never found it. It never came out.

"Cagey birds," John said. "Just like grouse. You can hit one and it'll disappear." Reilly was jumpy after that, so we staked her and brought out Tabasco and one of the other setters to find the second chukar, though to no avail. And then graduation was over.

Reilly had done well on the birds. I just wanted to get this year old doggie back into my life. I said my good-byes to John and called Reilly to the cab of my truck. She jumped into the passenger's seat, panting and drooling. It was as if she hadn't

missed a beat from the day back in July when I dropped her off. I told John I'd stay in touch through the hunting season and asked him to let me know how Bo did. Then I gave him a picture of him and Reilly I had taken in the orchard, held in a heavy silver Orvis wing-shooting frame. He was touched. He told me it would go up in his house.

John thanked me and handed me my last invoice for the September training and the birds used in Reilly's training. I told him that I couldn't express my thanks strongly enough for letting me tag along on all those morning walks and training sessions in the orchard. In the subdued way of hunters, we nodded to each other, and I drove off toward home in North Bennington, where C waited to welcome Reilly and me.

It was September 21, and grouse season had already opened that year in Vermont. Reilly had been at the farm for about two and a half months. She smelled of cedar chips and dirt and something dead she had rolled in that week. I was ready to make her my dog again. C said she would give Reilly a bath. And I thought about getting the dog in the woods in search of wild grouse and woodcock.