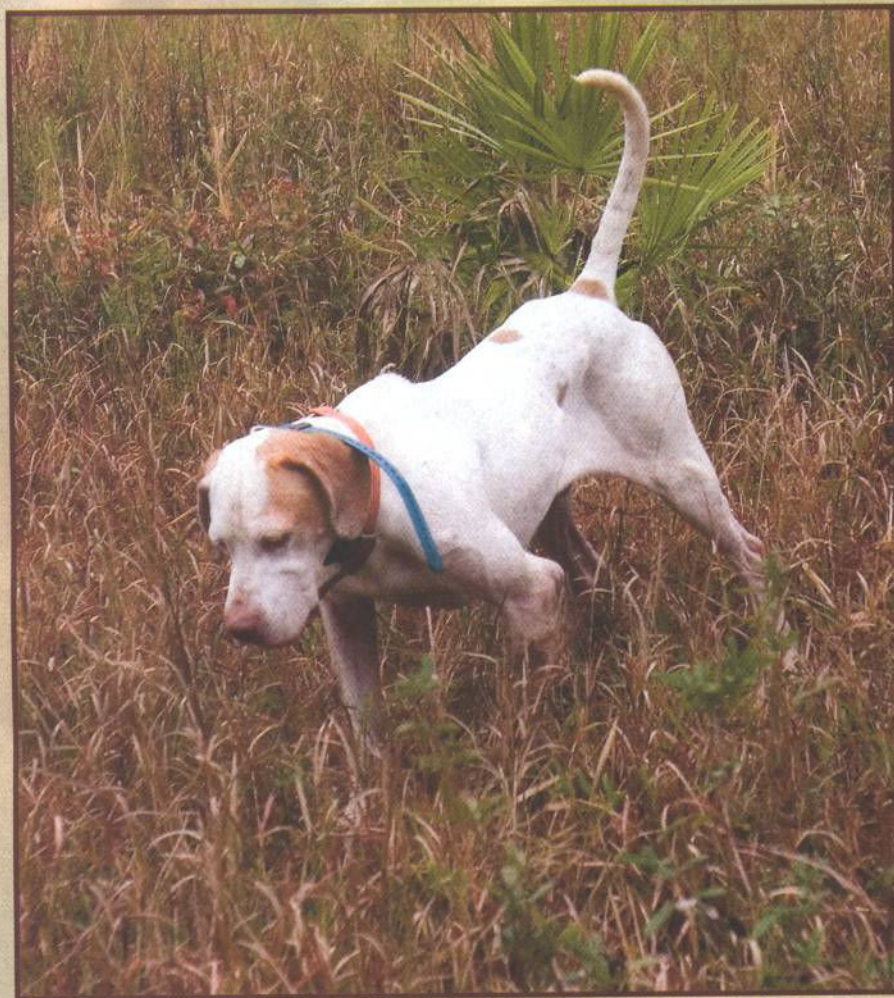


Despite all the development and population pressures, almost every resident species of game animal hunted in Florida thrives today.

The turkey population, for example, has exploded since state biologists began "trans-locating" Osceola turkeys and restoring habitat where they'd disappeared. Hogs are a pestilence, and some species, specifically deer and alligators, are even doing a little too well population-wise (deer suffer from population imbalances), and will be subject to more aggressive culling programs. But one all-important species has responded very poorly to the sundry ways we've altered or destroyed Florida wilderness, the northern bobwhite quail (*Colinus virginianus*).

Quail are an ecological barometer for Florida's beleaguered piney up-

lands. And they remain the emblem of hunting in the South, even though their populations have declined precipitously over the past 30 years. Indeed, so much depends upon that little gallinaeous bird that, early in January, the Gilchrist Club invited *Florida Sportsman* to spend a couple days hunting and discussing Florida quail conservation strategies with top officials of the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission. We joined Commissioner (FWC) Dan Meehan, Commission Chairman Rodney Barreto, FWC Executive Director Ken Haddad, Assistant Executive Director Vic Heller, Colonel Julie Jones, Director of FWC's Division



A staunch point reveals good breeding, long training hours and a strong bond between dog and trainer. It's desire and a partnership fulfilled.

So much depends on this little gamebird.

of Law Enforcement, and Nick Wiley, Director of FWC's Division of Hunting and Game Management.

The FWC is a member agency in the Southeastern Association of Wildlife Agencies (Haddad is the association's president), which developed the first-ever landscape-scale habitat restoration and population recovery plan for northern bobwhites. Called the Northern

Better Days for Bobwhites?

By TERRY GIBSON,
Assistant Editor



Major quail habitat restorations are underway across the South. Most every desirable plant and animal benefits, from slough grass to skinks to turkeys and whitetail deer. Shown here is a bobwhite quail in healthy, sparse palmetto cover.

Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, it is supported by Quail Unlimited, private land managers, research stations, state land managers and biologists, university professors and concerned hunters. The explicit goal of NBCI is to return quail populations to levels found throughout the South, including Florida, circa 1980. That's a lofty goal, and we convened at the Gilchrist Club, a

private hunt club on 23,000 acres in Gilchrist County, because the club's ongoing restoration may serve as a model for restoration efforts elsewhere, both on public and private lands.

Dog trainer/handler Randy Ransom guided Commissioner Meehan, Commissioner Barreto and me on the first hunt. We were shooting released birds;

otherwise it was a genuine southern quail hunt, complete with beautiful, thinned quail courses and fine dog work from English setters, pointers and one stellar pointing chocolate lab. And the birds flew fast for released birds, rising with that sublime roar that makes your heart take an extra thunk, wings whistling through the sibilant pines as you swing the barrel and squeeze.

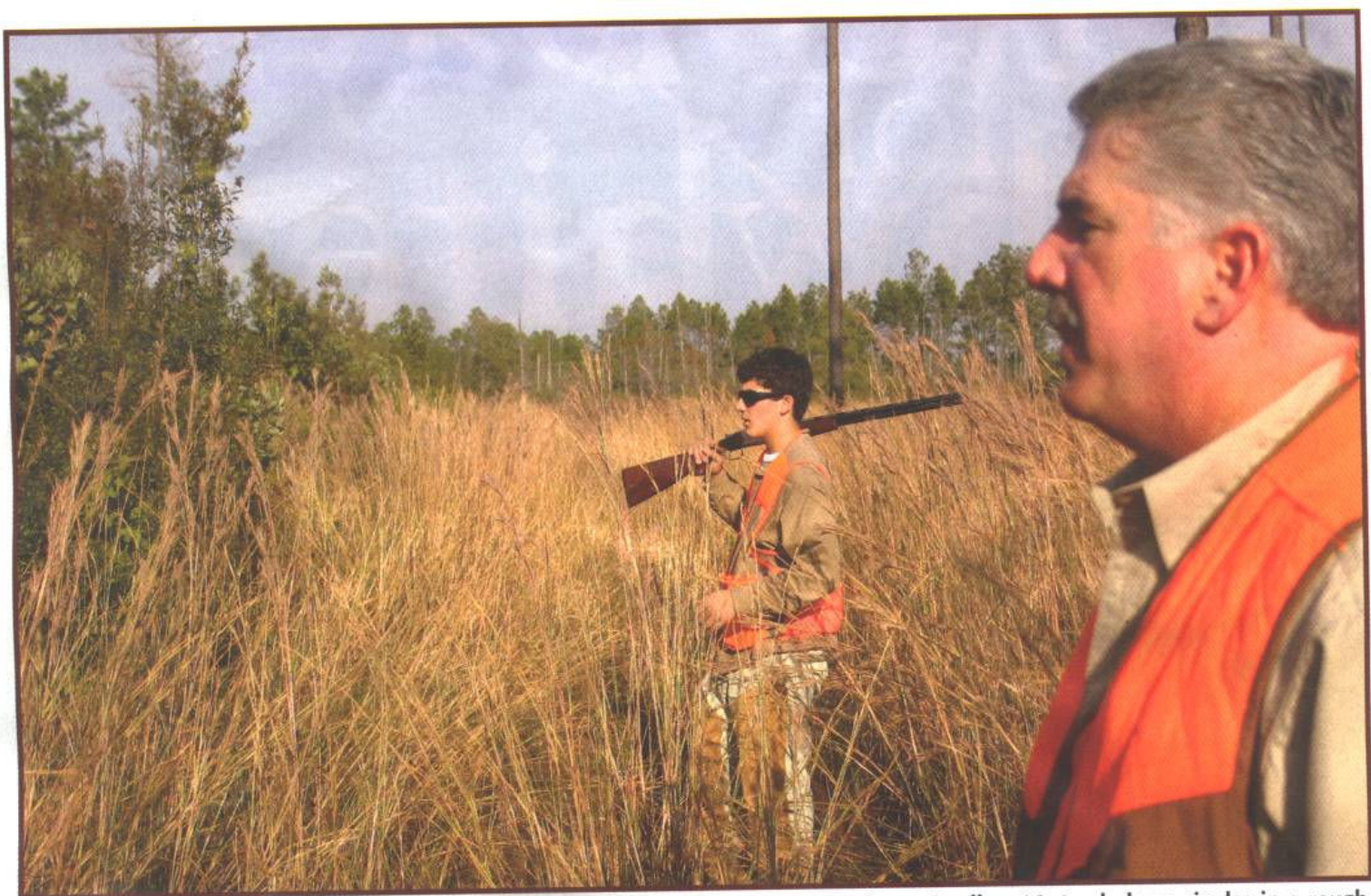


Photo by Vance McCullough

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Chairman Rodney Barreto and son, Bradley, 16, track down singles in a rough. The FWC wants to ensure that "boy and his bird dog" scenes survive a century of habitat degradation.

One of the first topics of conversation was released birds and preserve hunting. We all felt a little sheepish about it, even though the proud European bird hunting traditions have thrived for centuries because of the practice, where for the most part they release exotic gamebirds, like the ringneck pheasant, too boot. Perhaps that sheepish feeling is because shooting domestic birds in the confines of a preserve runs contrary to the American pioneer spirit. It is probably also partly due to a sense of guilt that stems from our past conservation failures. But it is clear that hunting released quail has enabled the bird-hunting traditions of the American South to survive the wild birds' decline, and that it will be impossible for the traditions to survive without preserve hunting.

Toward dusk, both parties of hunters reconvened on the main road, and Commissioner Meehan framed the issue succinctly.

"Released bird hunting has allowed us to carry on the dog breeding and training traditions, and it allows us to introduce new hunters to the sport in a safe setting where there's plenty of action to kindle enthusiasm," Meehan said, pointing at 16-year-old Bradley Barreto. Papa Rodney nodded, appre-

ciatively, and asked his son, "Would you rather flats fish in the Keys or do this?"

"I'd way rather hunt quail," volunteered the heretofore reserved young sportsman, enthusiastically.

At dinner, we dug into a gourmet quail salad, and into the topic of habitat restoration. Commissioner Meehan is chairman of the Gilchrist Club, and he explained that essentially the club side of the operation is partially subsidized by pine tree farming (although the wood market is presently in the dumpster). Fortunately, quail habitat restoration and tree farming can complement each other. In fact, this is an intrinsic part of the enterprise's silviculture. As membership increases and as corporate entertaining is developed, Gilchrist property managers are increasingly able to take parcels out of intensive silviculture, and aggressively restore the upland flora to a natural balance. But by selectively thinning pine trees, significant habitat improvements are made while farming succeeds.

"We invite you to make this place a great laboratory for the successes that we can take to other private land owners," Meehan told Nick Wiley and Ken Haddad. Wiley explained that one step already under way toward meeting NBCI's population restoration goals is

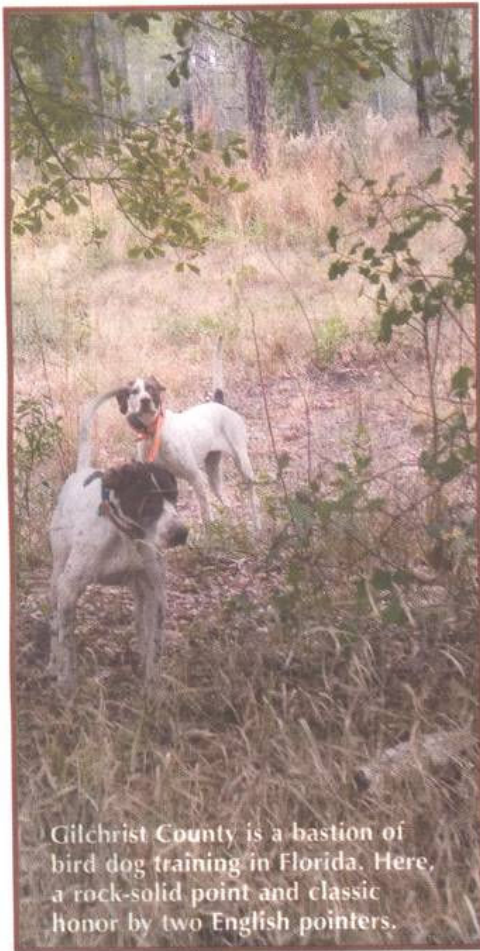
the implementation of similar silvicultural philosophies on public lands managed by the Florida Division of Forestry.

Wiley is an interesting and enthusiastic character. Born just across the Georgia state line north of Jacksonville, he's an avid hunter and a biologist. Therefore his speech is a combination of Cracker wit and wisdom, interrupted by scientific terminology. My first question was about predator control, and Wiley stated that predator management is not realistic or cost effective, except in certain situations where you are intensively managing exclusively for quail.

"If you're not doing everything else right, you're wasting your time trying to control predators. That's the gospel," he said.

Wiley talked about the importance of "thinning the canopy so that light can penetrate and encourage the early successional plants." And he hammered home the point that while disking, food plots and replacing exotic plants with native species such as wiregrass are important, the single most important tool in the box is a match.

"Everything suffers when fire is removed from the ecosystem," he said. "We call it our quail-plus focus, because good quail habitat management



Gilchrist County is a bastion of bird dog training in Florida. Here, a rock-solid point and classic honor by two English pointers.

has benefits for almost every native species in the woods. You'll find 40 to 48 species of birds on restored lands like you hunted today, versus 5 to 8 species on mismanaged or unmanaged lands, lands that are choked over by pines and palmettos and exotics."

Early successional plants are important to quail and other birds because the springtime blooms feed insects, the number one source of protein for chicks.

Wiley also explained that moisture is the biggest natural "confounding factor." Torrential rains and hurricanes aren't good for quail, as they can drown nests and impact the broods. But quail can nest more than once, so it's drought that is the bane of quail reproduction. Drought affects the viability of the eggs, as shells need moisture to stay firm. But more importantly, drought can spell starvation for chicks, because rains are needed to hatch the eggs of insects, which again are their primary source of protein.

So, we essentially know what is needed to restore wild quail populations. The scientists at Tall Timbers Research station, the quail and upland ecosystems premier think tank, have found that barring "confounding factors," it takes three



Training a bird dog to retrieve by hand takes many hard, but rewarding hours.

to five years to see response, to see what quail hunters saw in the good ol' days, if there are remnant coveys in the area. And, early experiments show promise in translocating bobwhites the way turkeys were "bussed" around the state so successfully. But there are significant economic and political hurdles ahead.

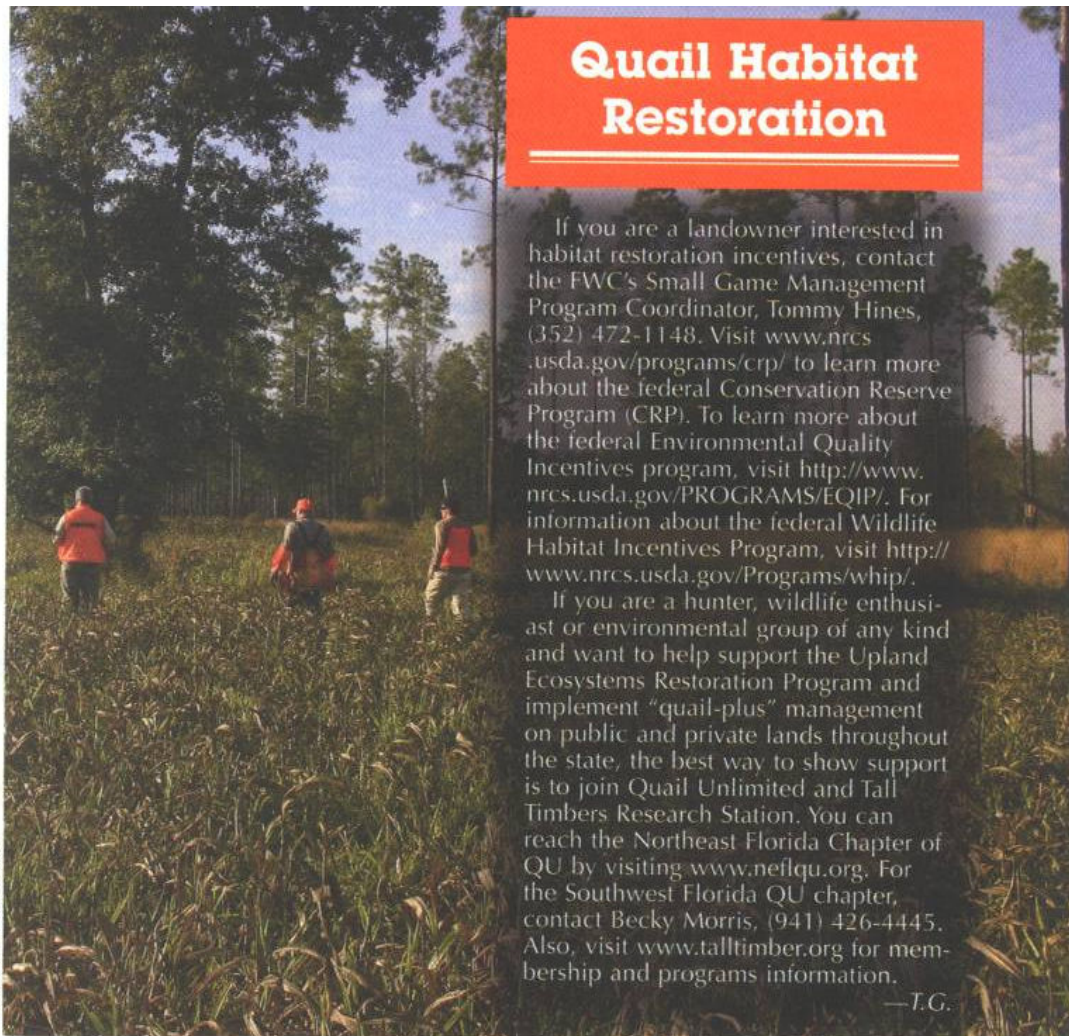
"If we don't take some actions quickly to emphasize upland habitat protection and enhancement, we're going to lose it," Vic Heller said to me, as we parted ways. "Fortunately, the commission is impatient, and we need them to be impatient with us."

Under the Upland Ecosystem Restoration Program umbrella, some federal and all state agencies, including the water management districts, the division of forestry, the state parks division, as well as local partners, are creating an interagency partnership to implement "quail-plus" management on government-owned lands.

The toughest sell is to private landowners. While it may seem at first unfair to give tax dollars to private land owners to improve their properties, keep the following in mind. First, no WMA can survive as an island. We need large, contiguous swaths of wilderness to maintain healthy wildlife populations. So we must create incentives for landowners to become better stewards of their own lands and discourage them through incentives from selling out to developers. As long-time Florida wildlife advocate Jack Moller often points out, lands such as the J.W. Corbett area in Palm Beach County will become a southeast version of Central Park unless tracts to the north and west are conserved.

Second, some of these incentives can be traded for public hunting opportunities on private lands. This type of agreement between government agencies and landowners is commonly used to create

Photo by Vance McCullough



Quail Habitat Restoration

If you are a landowner interested in habitat restoration incentives, contact the FWC's Small Game Management Program Coordinator, Tommy Hines, (352) 472-1148. Visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/crp/ to learn more about the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). To learn more about the federal Environmental Quality Incentives program, visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/PROGRAMS/EQIP/>. For information about the federal Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Programs/whip/>.

If you are a hunter, wildlife enthusiast or environmental group of any kind and want to help support the Upland Ecosystems Restoration Program and implement "quail-plus" management on public and private lands throughout the state, the best way to show support is to join Quail Unlimited and Tall Timbers Research Station. You can reach the Northeast Florida Chapter of QU by visiting www.neflqu.org. For the Southwest Florida QU chapter, contact Becky Morris, (941) 426-4445. Also, visit www.talltimber.org for membership and programs information.

—T.G.

Public Quail Hunting Opportunities

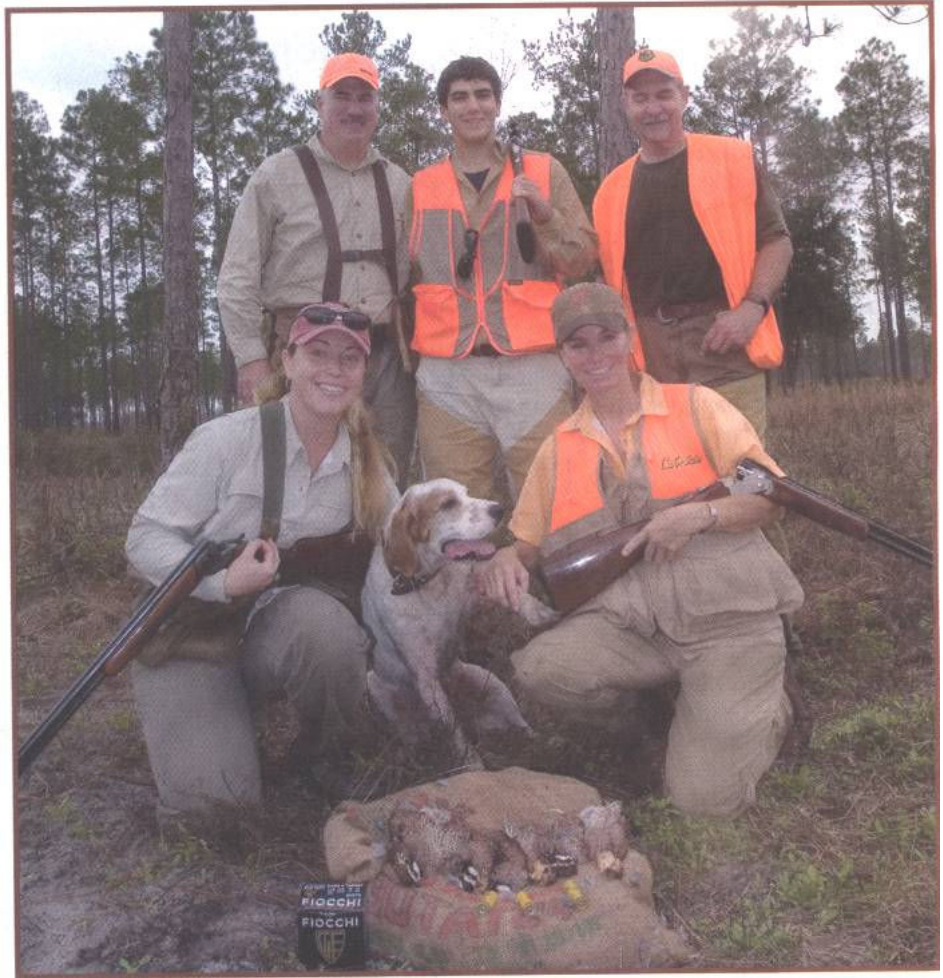
Top wild quail hunting opportunities on public lands include the Babcock/Web WMA in Charlotte County, the Blackwater WMA in Okaloosa and Santa Rosa counties, the Three Lakes WMA in Osceola County, the Triple N Ranch in Osceola County and Bull Creek WMA in Osceola County. For more information, visit www.myfwc.com.

FWC also offers special opportunity released bird hunts. The information is also available on the FWC website.

For membership information and corporate entertainment opportunities, contact Leiza Fitzgerald, the Gilchrist Club's Vice President of Membership Development, (727) 803-4030, or visit www.gilchristclub.com for more info.

For a list of quail preserves open to the public, visit <http://www.gamebirdhunts.com/us-hunting/Florida.asp>.

—T.G.



Tired but happy hunters and an English setter show off a full game bag at Gilchrist Club.

public hunting opportunities all over the American West. Mostly, they are special opportunity hunts drawn by lottery. But, South Dakota has passed legislation that protects private landowners who allow walk-in bird hunters on their property from liability.

Already, the state of Florida is offering private landowners incentives through the Florida Wildlife Legacy Initiative, and landowners can take advantage of federal funding opportunities through programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program and the Conservation Reserve and Wetland Reserve programs. Commissioner Richard Corbett, the most impatient of all the commissioners in terms of his insistence on recovering the bobwhite, told me that he's volunteered himself as the "political lightning rod" as western strategies in wildlife management and hunter access are bandied about in the Florida legislature.

"It's the passion for and devotion to our native bird that will enable us to clear the political and economic hurdles," he told me, after an hour of swapping stories over the phone about all the bird dogs we've loved before. "But every hunter and everyone who love Florida wildlife needs to get behind the Upland Ecosystem Restoration Program."