

# Hunting with the Braque du Bourbonnais

by Ed Mitchell

**W**hat do you call a hard-charging pointing dog that is tractable, easily trained, makes a happy household companion and retrieves with as much inborn enthusiasm as the best Labrador?

Almost unobtainable is one thing you have to call this dog. Its proper name is Braque du Bourbonnais.

With just a couple dozen examples in the country, the breed cannot have much in the way of reputation in the U.S. yet. The little female we would hunt in the foothill country of southwest Idaho one long day last November had only to live up to the claims of her owner.

Had the owner been someone other than Lon Kuck, the big game manager for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and well-known for the accuracy of his statements, I would have been acutely skeptical. One European breed after another has come to the rugged canyon country of Idaho, promising to do it all. Most have disappointed us.

We're still looking for the one that goes all day in mostly vertical habitat; is not stumped by the varied behaviors of the pheasant, partridge, grouse and quail that a dog may meet in a single foray; doesn't make you want a 2 by 4 training aid; and is nice about the whole thing.

Granting that it is tricky to judge from one day spent with one young dog in her first hunting season, let me cautiously suggest we may be onto something with the Bourbonnais.

Bessy (Phantom's Belle La Bete) had already shown herself to be eager, willing to dive into whatever tough stuff river and canyon bottoms offer, and remarkably under control

for such a young dog. When I downed my second California quail of the day, she could not have seen the bird go down in the basalt boulders across the small canyon. It had whirred out of the willows above her head in the creekbottom, gained altitude over her back and offered me a Mach II left-to-right shot. (This ungentlemanly behavior is typical of quail in this part of the world. Classic bobwhite style is devoutly to be desired among pointing dog fans but we don't have enough of the eastern species to set an example in deportment for the California types.)

The bird fluttered down in the same kind of rocky jumble that had cost me his cousin the day before, despite 45 minutes of retrieving effort by a middle-aged writer and a many-seasoned Brittany. I didn't expect any excited young dog to root a wounded quail from under whatever bus-sized boulder it had chosen for its final resting place. But Kuck called Bessy out of the scent-filled willow thicket and quickly hand signalled her to the area. With a couple more hand signals, to which she showed strict attention, Kuck put her into the exact spot I indicated. In about one minute of intense searching, she found the scent and the bird, then retrieved it to Kuck's hand.

I could have asked no better performance from any experienced retrieving dog I have ever shot over. She had already run down the first quail I wingtipped with a too snappy snapshot but that bird streaked away in plain sight, a test any enthusiastic dog might pass.

The morning on a large Fish and Game Wildlife Management Area along the Payette River had not provided the opportunity to watch or photograph Bessy's pointing style. Hawks and hunters had cleaned out the innocent game farm pheasants that would have allowed her to show her form. Southern Idaho's wild population came up short of expectations last fall so we chose the WMA as a higher percentage bet for birds.

The dearth of ringnecks tested Bessy's desire and stamina sternly; she hunted wholeheartedly through cattail jungles and rank grasses for more than two hours without any sign of discouragement at scenting only a couple of old tracks. No hunter could have reasonably asked for more determination or, for that matter, style. She moved fast with head high until catching a whiff of whatever required closer checking, then made thorough use of her talented nose. She demonstrated no inclination to leave her master's control.

If she suffered any disadvantage, it was on account of her relatively short build. Slugging through high, tangled grass was sometimes an obvious effort, but she seemed to lose none of her enthusiasm.

Kuck recalled hunting earlier in the fall on a North Dakota ranch where he and Bessy saw hundreds of pheasants each day. Her hard-charging birdiness and retrieving ability made the trip a delight, but he admitted there is some work still to be done on her pointing style.

The Bourbonnais may typically need more maturity than some other breeds before pointing performance reaches its peak, according to



*Bessy is eager to please and is easy to control.*

Beth Cepil, the breed's chief U.S. advocate.

Cepil and her husband Ron own Phantom Kennels at New Tripoli, Pennsylvania. The Cepils run what appears to be the only Braque du Bourbonnais breeding program in the country at present.

Cepil said she plans to go slowly with the breed, not "overpopularizing" it for the moment. She said she wants to hear more from the owners of puppies she has sold before expanding her breeding and importing program. Phantom Kennels has so far produced three litters. She noted that she is importing only from "working" lines but her goal is to maintain both working ability and conformation. "I want it all" in this breed, she said.

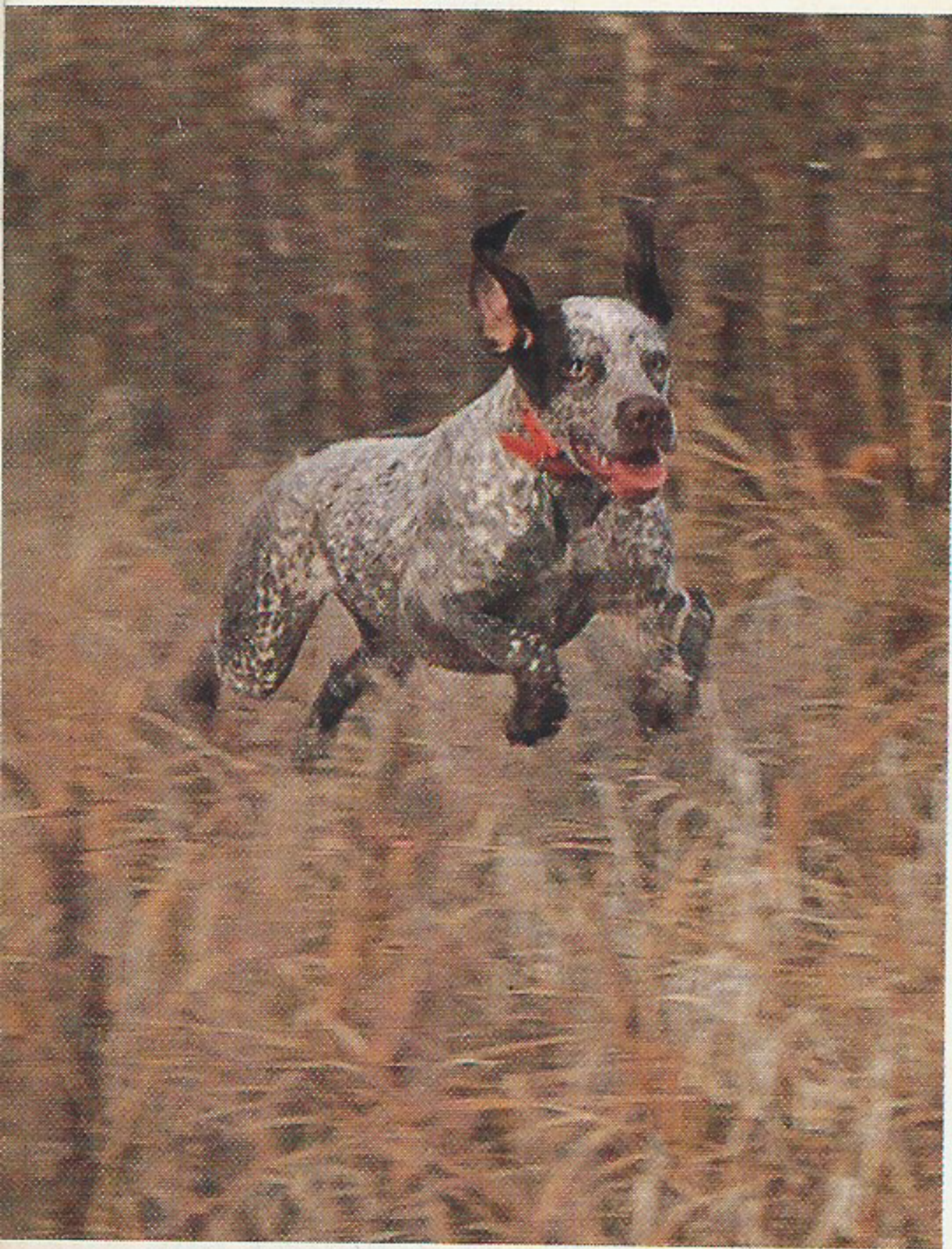
Cepil's and her clients' experience over the four years she has handled the Bourbonnais parallel Kuck's precisely. The dogs work close to the gun with great enthusiasm, are unusually tractable, retrieve instinctively from early puppyhood, are not "hyper" and are of a size and disposition to make them exceptional household companions. They accept training well and quickly, making them an excellent choice for amateur trainers, but they are best not subjected to the harder methods.

Breeders in the south central part of France, the main center for the Bourbonnais, have been careful about health, Cepil said. She added that no hip dysplasia has appeared in the breed.

Bessy is Kuck's first bird dog trainee and he admits it has been a "learning experience for both of us." He is hardly a first-timer to animal training, however, having bred and shown a long line of prize-winning bloodhounds. His wife keeps and trains a pair of pet pack mules. His previous experiences show in the calmly competent way he handles Bessy as well as in her performance. His opinion of his protege is so high that he is considering beginning his own Bourbonnais breeding program,



*Lonk Kuck and Bessy hunt heavy pheasant cover at Montour on the Payette River in southwest Idaho.*



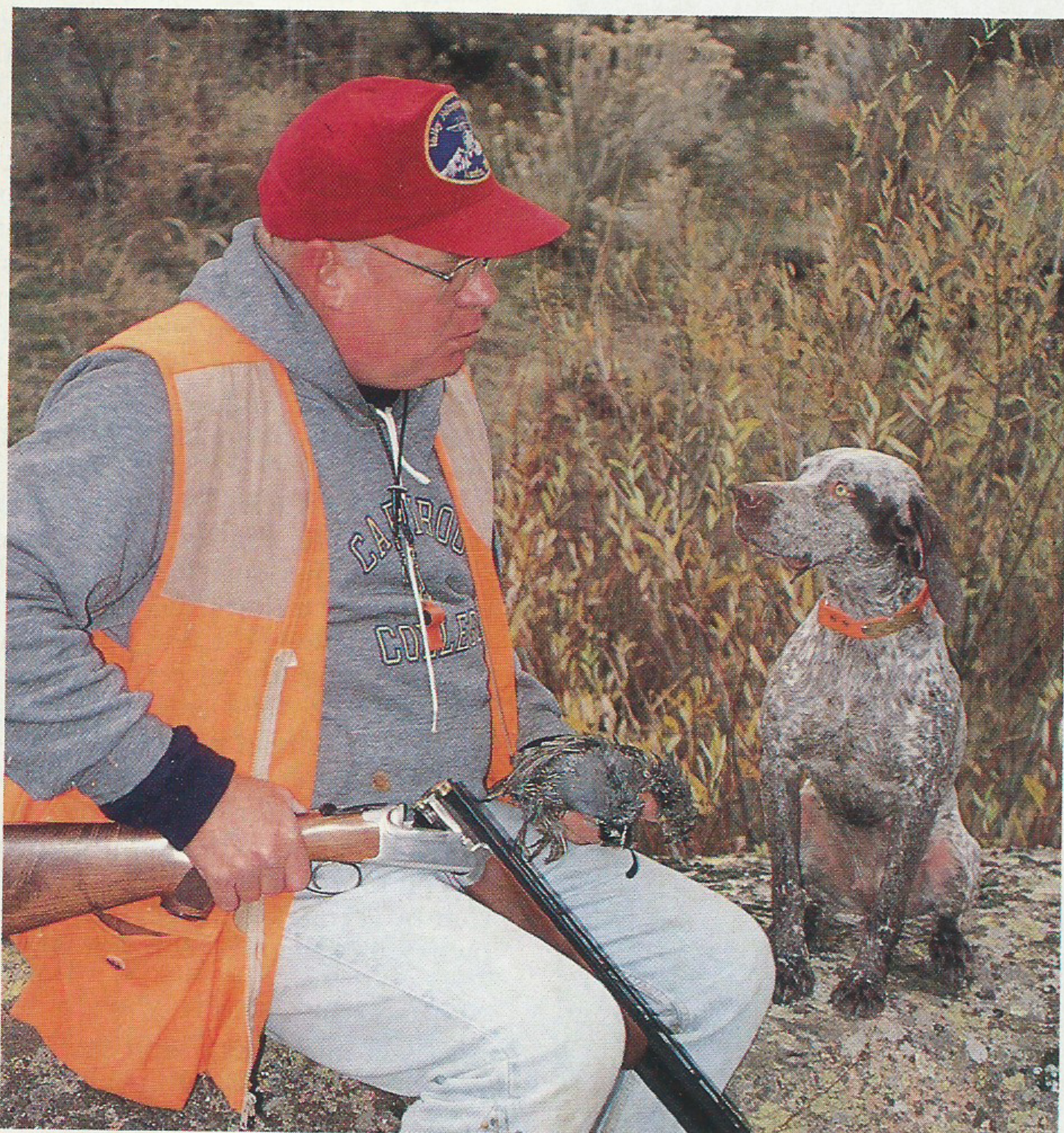
*Bessy isn't afraid of the heaviest cover and moves fast with her head up.*

*Lonn Kuck and Bessy after her first experience finding and retrieving quail.*



*Bessy retrieves a quail to hand.*

Photos by Sharon Watson.



recognizing the commitment that would require.

Kuck and Bessy display exuberant affection for one another, surely a crucial factor in Kuck's appreciation of the breed.

Why would a bird gunner think about a breed that's hard to find and not so different from, say, the well-proven Brittany? The rarity factor appeals to Kuck and Cepil and surely to others as well. The appeal of the Bourbonnais to a hunter who wants a capable canine companion comes from the dog's cheerful enthusiasm, easy disposition, birdiness, and dedication to retrieving.

Kuck, by the way, thought Bessy might be atypical for her unbidden attraction to water. Not being a waterfowler, he has had no chance to see how she might work in that environment. Cepil said an owner in Minnesota hunts geese successfully with his.

Having worked a 32-year-long parade of bums, stars and mediocrities from most of the retrieving breeds, as well as several pointing types, I can say I would spend my own money on a Braque du Bourbonnais. □