

A PASSION

... for good dogs, fine guns, and the King.

BY ART WHEATON

A grouse hunter for over 42 years, Vincent J. Guglielmo, “Vinny,” penned meticulous notes in five hunting diaries. Each daily record captured dog work, hunting conditions, covers, points, flushes, and each bird brought to bag.

Vinny stated, “It’s no secret that grouse dogs, like good baseball hitters, improve by seeing a lot of pitches. There’s no substitute for putting bird dogs in grouse cover, as it will not only sort out those with the brains and a good nose, but will provide the essential experience for them to keep their distance from such a wary bird. Vinny further noted, “This must be done through correct and careful breeding; otherwise the consistencies with having great bird dogs would be left entirely to chance. You cannot expect to develop better grouse dogs if they have not been able to find and handle a lot of birds”.

Having had a hand in working with approximately 900 dogs, 29 of his own, he said, “Only eight proved to be real good grouse dogs with the ability to handle a running bird.” It takes not only those aforementioned characteristics, but a lot of hard work and repetition to develop capable dogs.

With so many years training and hunting dogs in thick and difficult covers, he wondered, about 10 years ago, how many more years his body, both mentally and physically, and his covers would hold up, as the bird count in his diary grew. With the loss

of close hunting buddies, the challenge became even greater—most times this journey is now alone. Never in a million years did he think it possible to reach 1,000, but then he thought, “Just maybe.”

For 2 ½ hours the morning of November 7, 2018, he hunted Chenango Valley Marsh, his five-year-old, orange and white, English setter. The dog pointed two woodcock, one grouse, and a lost a pheasant. By noon, his friend, Fred

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Vitti, of Howard Beach, New York, arrived and put down his own orange and white setter, Chenango Valley Biscuit, who pointed a couple woodcock and worked a grouse for 40 yards in thick cover along a creek bottom, finally coming up solid on a point. Fred moved in, pushing the bird to the edge where it flushed into the open. Vinny’s Perazzi MX 28 came up quickly, and he took one shot from the bottom barrel. A big mature gray phase male grouse fell to the shot—later weighing 23 ounces. The open choke proved again optimum under 25 yards.

He then hung the green Remington 28-gauge STS-8 on a sapling, a tradition learned from his friend, Richard A. “Dick” Baldwin, who had it passed down from his grandfather and father Cliff (both Dick and Cliff were career Remington Arms Co. Inc men). Then, turning home, number 999 was in his mind. It was not correct.

Vinny was a law enforcement officer infected with grouse fever with influence from Foster’s New England Grouse Shooting. He left the Garden State for the covers of Chenango County, New York and began training and kenneling bird dogs, English setters, methodically documenting his daily fall hunts beginning in 1977. A student of accurate records—much in the vein of Foster’s 1934 & 1935 detailed report on the 28 gauge (Double Gun Journal Index & Reader 1997 to 2005)—his detailed private hunting logs reflect his careful attention.

He scored his highest shooting average in 1998, which was 67 percent of the birds at which he pulled the trigger. His best season was finding 4.1 birds per hour in 1994-95. He totaled 69 grouse that season versus his pal Dick Baldwin’s 31. His next best was 57. Those aforementioned best years were next shadowed by 2006-07 with 3.6 grouse per hour. Interestingly 1994-95 was followed by a wet spring, and all grouse hunters experienced low grouse numbers. The poorest year was 1990-91 with 1.6 per hour with a total kill of only

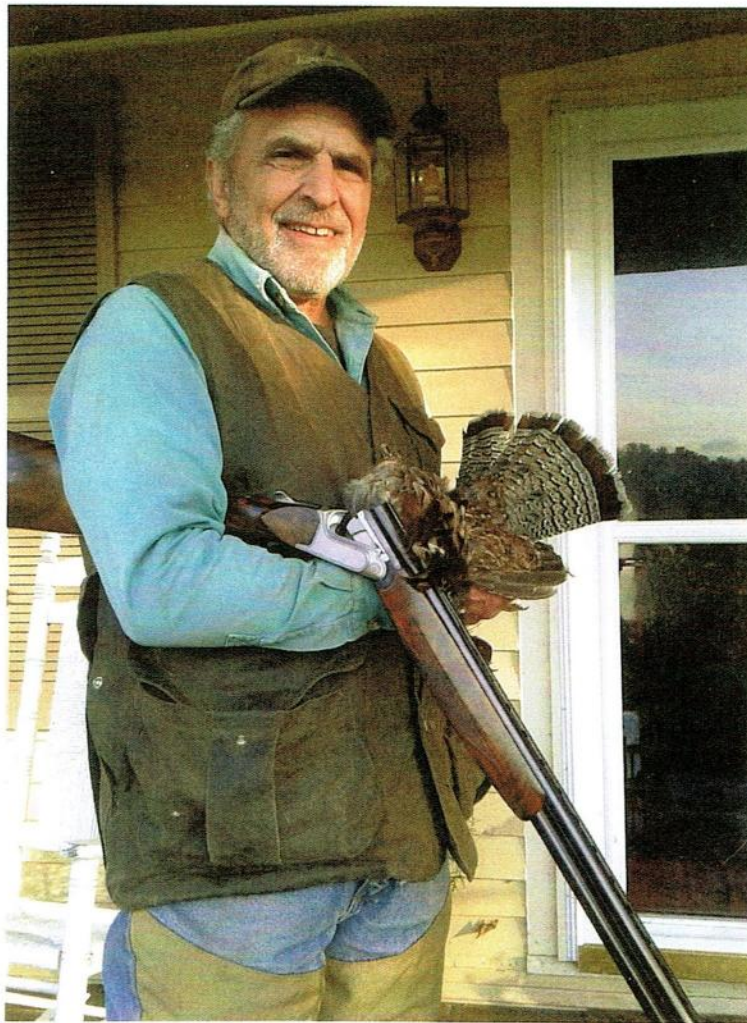
nine. His hunting diary chronicles every daily grouse hunting success or lack thereof: compiling 17 bird limits (four birds), 48 days where he bagged three birds, and three doubles in 1,670 days afield at this writing.

Like some grouse hunters, the perfect gun has been elusive. His quest finally ended when he settled, in recent years, on a Perazzi MX 28 and a Perazzi MX 20, after experiments with a Beretta over and under 12-gauge, a Bernadelli 20, Parker 20, Charles Daly 16, Prussian Sauer 20, and a Remington Special field 20. His success has been mostly with that fine creation of Daniel Perazzi. He will admit that the exhibition, woodstocked 28—a gun he bought years ago from the “Good Doctor,” Ken Waite Jr. who had it personally built by Mr. Perazzi—kept him from wanting to subject it to the briar patches. Then reality set in when he recognized opportunities were diminishing year after year and that his heirs might just sell it anyway. It became a regular companion. Admittedly Vinny prefers a single sighting plane over the side by side. Ammunition of choice is the fine Remington STS target load with hard shot in size 8.

Originally a St. John’s University history major changed to criminal justice, he retains great interest in the history of field trial champions, in “period” artwork, or paintings, prints, old arms, and ammunition posters and calendars. He is a collector and has tremendous appreciation for early artists like Edmund Osthaus, A. B. Frost, William Harden Foster, and others. His walls are graced with 12 magnificent A.

B. Frost 1895 shooting prints, six National Field Trial champions by Osthaus, and an Indian head shot by storied Remington professional shooter Tom Frye.

As a dog breeder and handler, Vinny’s dogs today have Grouse Ridge, Smoke Rise Buck, and Bozeann’s Whisky River bloodlines. While trial dogs, his keen, experienced eye



picks out and breeds sensible dogs that are easily trainable. His experience over the years suggests an intelligent bird dog can be taught anything as they learn quickly, and a person can get more out of a bird dog with love and compassion than by being heavy handed. He said, “Finding the perfect grouse dog is like searching for the Holy Grail—a lot of trial and error and much heartache.” And for all those 42-plus years and different dogs, precise diaries call out a statis-

tic for the 2018-19 season: a total of 101 undisputed points on grouse of the 276 flushed, from three different dogs, all setters, resulted in 12 birds bagged over points—validating the fact that it is not easy to kill grouse over bird dogs. So often one gets to a bird that flushes wild without getting a shot. That is the supreme challenge of why we do what we do, because

the ruffed grouse has spent his life avoiding predators and is an educated quarry—the wise and crafty “King” of the uplands.

It was 39 degrees and cloudy on November 8, 2018 when he struck out alone with a young English setter named Cassie. A few coverts yielded nothing except one point on a woodcock which he did not shoot. Nearing noon, he elected to try a small cover about 6 miles from home, a good chance to work along the edge of a hayfield, a place he had moved birds before.

Immediately Cassie began working a running bird, then went on point, and he moved quickly to the end of the cover where he saw the bird on the ground. They saw each other, but the “stare down” didn’t last. At the flush, he touched off with the

bottom barrel—a miss—quickly followed by the upper. The bird fell at the edge of the field. A search of the high goldenrod failed to produce the bird. Cassie came up, got birdy, passed him about 30 feet further down the cover, and went on point right at the edge of a beaver pond. Closing in on the dog, he noted the water rippling. The bird was face down in the water trying to “swim” away. The young setter, having never retrieved before, saw the bird and dove in the water, going un-

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der, then coming up, and swimming behind the grouse. She finally caught the bird, went onto a little island, and dropped it. He then stepped over a small section of water planting his size 10 Danner boots on the island, picked it up, and proceeded to hang the fired Remington STS 20 onto a sapling, a little headstone in memory of such a noble bird. His 1,000th grouse.

Pausing, it seemed for just an instant there was a lightning-like flash of light while he stood there savoring the moment. A stirring, vivid thought of times past crossed his mind—his dear and close grouse hunting friends, now departed: Dick Baldwin, Dave Hurley, and Richard Johns. He thought, “They were not here to share it all.” That

day, it was bittersweet; he carried Dave’s Perazzi MX 20. Dave had passed away in September, just weeks before from a debilitating illness. Many of those great times, like a slide show, crossed his mind. All those laughs from jokes told over again, the great stories, gun trading, planning, and great times in the covers were gone, forever. He would have given it all up for them to be with him. In that moment, maybe that light was a message from “The Better Hunting Land” (Dick’s poem crafted in 1994) beyond the clouds, where a private little celebration was in progress, a signal, that, they surely knew.

Once home, Vinny made his diary entries and took a photo oppor-

tunity. He began counting again the birds recorded earlier that season in Michigan. His memory had settled on four, but the actual number was five, meaning that the aforementioned number 999 grouse was really number 1,000.

It had never been a contest or a quest from the beginning, but it was just a passion and love for this great bird, the dog work, being with great friends, and the wonderful experiences each fall. That day, the whole experience seemed sweeter knowing it happened with his friend, Fred, yet he could not escape a sadness felt for those lost friends who had boarded that “Silver Eagle.” 🐾

