

# GROUSE & WOODCOCK in



Story and Photos by King Montgomery

October in Downeast Maine is a magical time of the year and certainly the most beautiful, not just for the stunning fall colors of fall, but also for the excellent upland bird hunting that accompanies the rich tapestry of color. By Oct. 20 or so, landlock salmon and brook trout season ends and the smallmouth bass fishing just about stops too. Now it's time for the wild ruffed grouse and the migratory American woodcock to take the scene as the waders and fishing rods slowly give way to the shotgun, blaze orange and bird dogs.

More than 80 percent of Maine is covered with trees and the part of Maine centered on the village of Grand Lake Stream (GLS), about 90 minutes northeast of Bangor, probably exceeds 95 percent. Weatherby's at GLS has been catering to sports for over a century and the list of luminaries who have fished and hunted here reads like a who's who. "Buffalo" Bob Smith of Howdy Doody fame, baseball greats Ted Williams and Stan "The Man" Musial, Joe Brooks, Curt Gowdy, A. J. McClane, and generals Jimmy Doolittle and Matthew B. Ridgeway, as well as many others, traveled here to get away from it all.

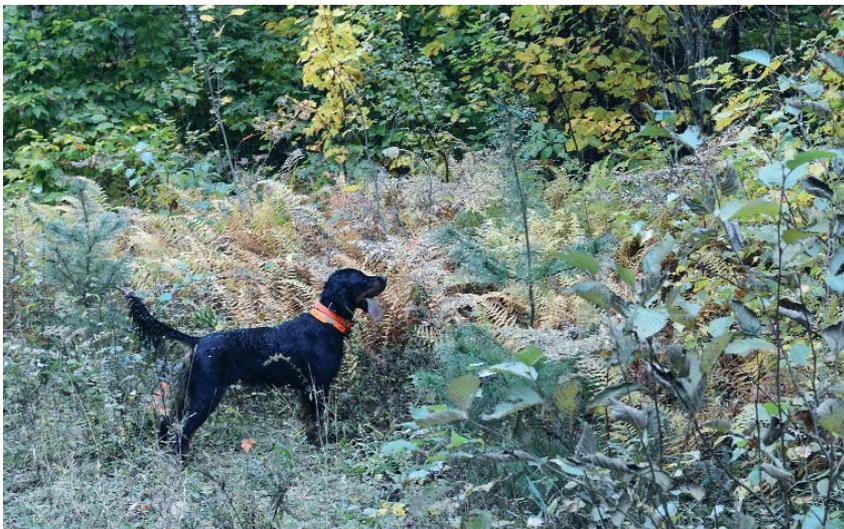
## The Land is for the Birds

Weatherby's Lodge is right in the middle of more than one million acres of prime grouse and woodcock habitat, much of which has good access since it is crisscrossed by hundreds of miles of old logging roads. Weatherby's registered Maine guides—all Maine's fishing, hunting, and recreational guides are tested by the state and registered—have access to some private lands as well.

Opportunities abound for hunting over pointing or flushing dogs, and coverts can range from pretty easy terrain to near impossible, with everything in between. I asked my friend Dennis LaBare, author of the book "Tagawahanen: The Landlock Salmon of Grand Lake Stream" and an avid upland hunter who owned a home on nearby Big Lake and has coursed these woods every year for over three decades with his Ryman-style setters, to describe his considerable bird hunting experiences in this beautiful part of Maine.

He waxed eloquent. "Grouse and woodcock gunning in down east Maine is the stuff of dreams. Situated on the Atlantic Flyway, migratory woodcock become restless in late September and began their flights south, with the peak of movement occurring from around the 10th to the 20th of October. During these times, the gunner can have extraordinary flush numbers of dozens in a day. For the pointing dog enthusiast with a younger, developing dog, sometimes your pooch can be steadied to nice performance in a single day. Classic coverts abound, from damp, mysterious alder bottoms to hardwood ridges to old stonewalls on abandoned farms. It's all waiting for you in Washington County, Maine's upland gunner's paradise. Weatherby's at Grand Lake Stream offers a superb base of operations in the midst of this kingdom of grouse and woodcock. Steeped in more than a century of traditional gunning, there is no better place to enjoy a day of fine sport, and end it by a blazing fire with your favorite libation and a hearty meal."

LaBare also is quick to point out that grouse numbers vary year to year, driven largely by winter conditions and spring nesting weather. In a good year, grouse can rival woodcock in abundance. Woodcock counts vary some too, but for the most part, timberdoodles will outnumber Old Ruff in just about any given season.





### Good Hunting & Good People (Dogs, too)

Another friend, Frank Lepore, a Rhode Island uplander partial to Gordon setters, used to hunt a different New England lodge each year until he settled on Weatherby's under owner/head guide Jeff McEvoy, a native Mainer. After five years of annual visits, Lepore talked his way into a post-retirement position during season at the lodge as manager/maitre d'/sommelier/beermeister extraordinaire. And yes, his Gordon setter Lexe and shotgun accompanied him. He now lives in southern Maine, is a registered Maine guide and guides bird hunters at Weatherby's in season.

He has an unusual recipe for a side dish or first course to share with fellow bird hunters. He calls it Woodcock Innards in Champagne and Butter Sauce for two people. Take internal organs and stuff from six birds, 2 cloves garlic (minced), 1 stick butter, and ½ cup of dry (Brut) Champagne/sparkling wine. Heat butter in large skillet, sauté garlic, add champagne, reduce to half. Add innards and sauté for three to four minutes. Serve over thick slice of hot toast. I'll bet it's good over white rice or pasta too. The perfect accompanying beverage is the remainder of the sparkling wine, and more if needed! (The French, of course, have eaten woodcock entrails for centuries.)

Weatherby's is a Cabela's Outdoor Adventures lodge and McEvoy is an avid fly angler and hunter of birds, waterfowl, and big game such as deer, moose, and black bear. He can arrange and outfit all those hunts for guests. In the fall his English Springer Bridget and English cockers Molly and Curly Fry are very busy working birds in the numerous woodlands, barrens, and bottoms nearby.

Hunters may bring and use their own dogs or can procure a guide with or without dogs. At a minimum, I recommend hiring

McEvoy or one of his guides at least for the first day of a visit to get the lay of the land and the feel of the birds. Guests' dogs stay in the cabins with the person they own. Sumptuous, hearty, home-style meals are served three times a day in the dining room but most hunters opt to take a basket lunch to the field for the midday break. And take a Thermos of hot coffee to help cut the chill of a crisp and clear fall Maine morning.

The woods of Downeast Maine are interspersed with a large number of ponds, streams, and rivers. To the north the St. Croix River defines the border with New Brunswick, Canada. Sometimes Weatherby's guides use an iconic Grand Lake canoe to take sports to spots where access is possible only by water. These comfortable square-stern, 20-foot canoes with a 9.9-horsepower outboard are very comfortable and stable. They are a pleasure to ride in and when doing so you look around at all the wild and your mind wanders back to the days when the local Passamaquoddy Indians plied these waterways in their birch canoes and harvested the bounties of the land and water just as you hope to do.

Molly was very birdy—you really can't miss it—as hunting partner Frank Lepore and I split to either side of Jeff in the mixed cover along the small logging road. Molly's behavior snapped me back to reality because it's difficult to concentrate on hunting when surrounded by spectacular foliage framed by an azure sky that goes on forever.

Before I could slide the safety forward on the .20 Caesar Guerini Tempio Light, the woodcock flushed. I'd figured the bird would fly for the more open trail rather than into the dense, mature trees before us. It did and it was my shot so I did an ugly, somewhat balletic swivel in that direction, and my arthritic thumb couldn't get the perfectly good safety to disengage.



“Damn,” I hissed, just before the safety finally disengaged, and the Guerini barked. The timberdoodle crumpled at what I figured was about the limit of a fair, sporting range under the conditions. The Guerini Tempio Light and the Magnus Light are to me the perfect grouse/woodcock guns. Firmly into my eighth decade and with feet and legs that don’t work real well, carrying a light shotgun is critical. And I want it to swing steadily and quickly when brought to shoulder. The Guerini does that for me, and I can’t recommend them enough. (Surgery awaits the balky thumb, but it has to wait until after grouse and woodcock season, usually Oct. 1 – Nov. 15 for doodles, and Oct. 1 – Dec. 31 for ruffs. I’m sure you understand.)



You’re probably wondering why there is an upland bird hunting article in this Spring 2016 edition of *Virginia Sportsman*. It’s because you should call Weatherby’s Resort, Leen’s Lodge or one of the other fine Downeast sporting camps *now* to make reservations for the spring and summer fishing season and the fall/winter grouse and woodcock seasons.

King Montgomery has written for *Virginia Sportsman* since the first issue, and for its predecessor, *Virginia Outdoor Weekly*. He’s a freelance outdoors/travel writer and photographer, who is an avid fly angler and wingshooter. He recently moved from Virginia to the southern coast of Maine to pursue various finny and feathery wild game. Contact him at [kingangler1@aol.com](mailto:kingangler1@aol.com).

## Grand Lake Stream Information

*Weatherby’s* (Jeff McEvoy), 1-877-796-5558, [www.weatherbys.com](http://www.weatherbys.com). Full-service traditional Maine sporting lodge with all the amenities. Over a 100 years old and still going strong.

*Leen’s Lodge* (Charles Driza) [www.leenslodge.com](http://www.leenslodge.com), 1-800-995-3367. A long tradition of excellent service to anglers and hunters, and at a beautiful location on the lake.

*Grand Lake Stream Chamber of Commerce*, [www.grandlakestream.org](http://www.grandlakestream.org). Lists all the sporting camps, guides, and services in the village.

*Downeast Lakes Land Trust*, [www.downeastlakes.org](http://www.downeastlakes.org), 207-796-2100. Protects and improves lands and waters for the recreational use of the public.

*Maine Tourism*, [www.visitmaine.com](http://www.visitmaine.com). A very comprehensive website that lists outdoors activities throughout the Pine Tree State, including fishing and hunting in some detail.