

Bobwhite Bonanza
by Ben O. Williams

It's early morning and the sky is bright over Oklahoma. I'm meeting a good friend at Selman Ranch, a private lodge, to photograph him and his dogs hunting.

But there are times the land yields much more than just a place to hunt, and the Selman Ranch is just that. Its scenic beauty is wrapped in a fascinating history as the Cimarron River and Buffalo Creek have, over the millennia, carved out a landscape unique to the surrounding country.

The land was steeped in history long before Salt Springs became a ghost town; bison, indigenous peoples, settlers, and cowboys camped there, along the Cimarron River. And the river's hospitability is still reflected in the eyes of the folks involved with the ranch today. It's a photographer's inspiration, a historian's dream, and a wildlife paradise.

After leaving the ranch, the plan is to hunt Oklahoma's public lands. For years, Oklahoma has been a leader in developing lands for hunting. In general terms, they are Wildlife Management Areas (WMA's) owned, licensed, leased, or under the general management of the Wildlife Division. Most areas are large, single blocks ranging in size from 2,000 to 30,000 acres. These areas are managed with many species of wildlife in mind and have many physical features, such as watershed lakes, riparian zones, watering places, and windmill sites. Food plots, cover, controlled grazing, burning, tree and shrub planting, and other habitat-enhancement programs beneficial to wildlife are ongoing. Hunting them is a pleasure.

Buck and I spent four days hunting six different WMA's, and not a single day were we inundated with bird hunters. Now I'm sure there are times when some areas are overwhelmed with hunters, but the fact is, that's not always the norm. Timing when to hunt public lands is important and should be part of the planning process. This can be achieved by studying the activities of hunters, seasonal timing, holidays, distances traveled from population centers, fluctuations in bird numbers, and other small details.

I saw no evidence of anyone hunting while we rode along the gravel road that cut through the large WMA. On one side, a half-mile of food plots and ragweed strips snaked up a gradual incline, following the fingers of woody ravines.

"Buck, look!" I said. "That's the best-looking quail cover I've seen here so far. It has all the elements for quail to

feed and roost, and hardwood ravines for the birds to loaf during the day."

Buck slowed down, looking at the cover. "Should I pull off?"

"No, let's go farther," I answered. "There's a big building not far ahead with a white pickup truck parked in front. I believe it's a workstation. Let's see if anyone is around."

A man working on a John Deere tractor turned toward us as Buck pulled up alongside the pickup. Embroidered on his blue coveralls was a white patch that read, "Wildlife Technician." I stepped out of the hunting rig, walked over to the tractor, introduced myself, and he did the same.

I opened the conversation by complimenting him on how well the area was managed for quail. Then I asked if anyone had recently hunted the food plots we just drove by.

"I haven't seen anyone hunting for a couple of days," he said. "There are birds there, but the food plots are so visible from the main road, it's hunted more often than other areas. But you sure are welcome to hunt it."

"Do you have any other suggestions?" I inquired.

"Let me get a map," he replied. He unfolded it on the hood, drawing a large circle away from the main road. Then he explained, "In this area, a couple of deer hunters reported seeing several coveys of bobwhite last weekend." Laughing, he said, "I remember one of them saying the birds scared the heck out of him when they flushed. As far as I know, no one has hunted birds in the area we burned over a year ago. I'd work the grassy and weedy draws first, and if you don't find them there," he made another circle, "hunt the adjacent hillsides planted with hardwood trees."

"What is the best way to get there?" I asked.

Pointing with the pencil, he instructed us, saying, "Go back down the road and take the first right. Both sides are private land for a half-mile. Not far after the WMA boundary sign there's a pull-off. I'd start there and hunt the right side of the road to the lake, and then work the other side back up. That's the area where those guys hunted deer. It may not look as good as the food plots, but there's a lot of good cover and it's full of ragweed."

"Thanks," I said, "we'll give it a try."

We saw no evidence anyone had used the pull-off area. I glanced at my watch - it was after one o'clock. Then I looked out the front window.

"Buck," I said, "there are times when things just look right. And this is one of them. We can walk this country, and the cover is ideal for big-running dogs. I'm going to

put Perk, Winston, and Pat down. We can go slowly, and it gives us an opportunity to watch the dogs work all the cover."

The first find was in the burned-over area; the whole covey flushed to the wooded stands on the hill. After hunting singles, Buck and I worked the dogs back and forth between the two covers and each time found a new covey feeding in one of the lower draws below the hill. I have no idea how many singles the dogs pointed in the wooded stands, but I do remember the number of empty shells in my pocket was much greater than the birds in my vest.

Some time after four o'clock, we crossed the border into western Kansas. I awoke early the next morning, having agreed to hunt with an old acquaintance I met up with at the motel the previous evening. I felt it was another good opportunity to photograph a new area, other folks, and pointing dogs on public lands. The photo session took most of the day, but I did manage to get away later that afternoon to hunt on my own with a couple of my dogs. The next two days, Buck and I hunted together, but I chose not to return to the same area I had hunted the day before. Sometimes a place is so enchanting it calls for the silence of just one hunter.

Going north, we traveled over the long bridge. Looking down, I visualized what a raptor might see hunting the lovely surroundings. Now my thoughts returned to what I had overlooked while hunting this area. It took a little time to realize the scope and rhythm of this lovely county, and as I settled into the seat, I envisioned water rushing down the corridor, a new beginning with the coming of spring.

The snow was gone and the weather changed for the better in north-central Kansas, but the stop here was shorter than I had originally planned. After the first day, the reports I received confirmed the bobwhite population was excellent. On the last morning, Buck and I stopped at a wonderful, large wildlife area not far from the Nebraska line. I put down two different sets of dogs for a half-hour each, and both groups found a covey of bobwhites. Back in the pickup, I was reminded that we were only a long day's drive from home.

I was next in line to pay for gas when the cashier asked me, "Where have you been, Ben? I haven't seen you for while."

"Kansas and Oklahoma, hunting bobwhite quail, Paul," I answered.

"That's a long ways, how long have been gone?"

"Three weeks to the day. And the mileage odometer reads 3,930 miles," I said.

"I sure would like to hunt bobwhite sometime, but I'll bet the land's all locked, and you have to know somebody to get on," he said inquisitively.

"Not really, I hunted mostly public lands, and there's a lot of acres to chose from," I explained to the young, enthusiastic cashier.

"Which state was the best?" Paul asked.

"This year, both were good, but next year may be different."

I paid for the gas. "Next year," the cashier said, smiling, "I think I'll go."

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Wild Northern Bobwhite Quail Hunting:
The Selman Ranch, Oklahoma

If you're looking for high-quality, hassle-free, wild-bird hunting in the heart of Oklahoma's best bobwhite country, the Selman Ranch is the place to go. And there's plenty of room for your dog to roam, too! This is not a hunting preserve but a working ranch that covers over 14,000 acres of well-managed bobwhite habitat. Not only is it a quail-hunting paradise, it's also a place of scenic beauty that is wrapped in a fascinating history due to the Cimarron River and Buffalo Creek

Sue Selman, owner and manager of the ranch, offers daily rates that are extremely reasonable for the kind of hunting available. This is a wonderful place to take your canine buddy to hunt wild birds. Sue is extremely helpful in placing her guests in outstanding bird country on the ranch. A guide is also available if you so choose. A modest bunkhouse is available with cooking facilities, or arrangements can be made to have meals cooked for you. Season hunting dates coincide with Oklahoma regulations.

For more information call Sue Selman at 580-256-2006; or write for a brochure to The Selman Ranch; RT 2 P.O. Box 43; Buffalo, OK 73834.

Also available from Sue is a wonderful book about the history of the ranch: Buffalo Creek Chronicles, Diary of a Cattle Ranch on the Southern Plains is by Gary Lantz and Don House, with Reflection on Ranch Life by Sue Selman.