



CHURCH in the WILDWOOD

*For devout grouse hunting disciples,
this little hunting camp in the heart
of Minnesota's north woods has long
been an annual pilgrimage.*

Story & Photography by Mike Gaddis



Here's a Minnesota morning on my mind. It was a dawning in the mellowing middle of October, and I stood on the fringe of an oak ridge, rusty and red, upon its plunge to a chaste-white stand of aspen, shingled with gold, before that, too, surrendered to a blood-red thicket of sumac. The moment was cold and still, my breath clouding the air, before me a broad, rolling expanse of painted midwestern farmland. The fields a medley of timid green, straw, orange and umber . . . here and there wandering veins of ginger, sentinels of bottle-green spruce . . . shivering beneath the glint of a heavy frost. Only now, the first rays of the sun stretching across the tops of the trees, to touch in pale yellow fingertips the icy-blue sprawl of the land. As opposite, across a milky blue sky, the sleepy globe of a Hunter's Moon lapsed slowly for bed.

I had not come here casually.

At my feet was a small stone cairn, bone-gray and hoary with lichen. At its head, the stoic trunk of a grand old tree, the valleys of its ashen bark mustard-yellow with fungus, its roots carpeted with moss, Irish-green. To the tree was affixed more than a dozen dog collars, some recently new, some mottled with mold, others rotting, blackened and old. About the little shrine, twenty-some dogs were buried, relinquished reluctantly to eternity. Crème of the grouse woods, best of the best, dogs that were the equal of their quarry.

Lilly, white and ticked, a lady setter who belonged to one but gave the largest of her heart to another; to no one else would she ever allow her all. And when she gave her all . . . she was phenomenal, legendary for her ability to mark sight or sound the departure of a bird up wild, to follow, point and bring it before the gun. She died at eleven, the one sacrificing to the other half her ashes. To scatter here, and elsewhere, about the coverts they most loved. Teseko's Claire, a shorthair named for a mountain in British Columbia; for she was solid as the hills. Buzz, tri-colored setter male, slain at the threshold of his prime by an infection in his heart sac, incredibly gifted on game for the time he had. Tref and Patches. Reilly. A treasury of others, endeared by brilliance, immortal by memory.

The dogs of then, the dogs of now. Breath and soul of a little cover bird church in the wildwood called Little Moran.

Upon the legacy of the lost, the paradigm of the present resounds. The measure for great dogs still, that live and breathe. Dogs yet to be enshrined. We had been privileged to three of them two days before. Scout and Jack, English setter males. Drummer, setter female. It is an article of the covenant you may count on. Should you favor setters, here rests your touchstone. I and Matt Gindorff, owner and principal consultant of The Sporting Traveler, were on the guns, the dogs cast under the able

auspices of Kevin Sheppard and Steve Grossman.

We had seen each dog individually. All were outstanding. Though of the two males, which was supreme? Scout on-his-toes, youthful and proud, almost wholly white. Slashing, suave. Jack, so validly veteran, white, chestnut, and ticked, a slight glitch in his lick from an old cover-war wound. Sage, sly. Around the convivial congress of the dinner table, we had argued and wagered the match.

Witness, now, the morning they ran. It is born flawlessly clear, the sun bathing the autumn-clad ridges with fresh light, the air stinging crisp and spanking clean. First brace, first cover of the day, the dogs scratching and whining to be free. Your heart in your head, your soul on your sleeve. Here is October, here at last, nowhere on God's Earth you'd rather be. For all-else in the Kingdom, Here-and-To Come, though you have known and loved and considered its entirety, there are guns and grouse and dogs.

"My Lord," Matt said, to no one in particular.

The dogs are staged and trembling. Shells chambered, guns breeched.





Steve Grossman, left, and Matt Gindorff parallel Shiloh, fore, and Jack on a woodcock point at Little Moran in Minnesota's North Woods. Opposite: Gindorff and Grossman share a restful moment with Jack.

The cover beckoning so beautifully before us, The Three Ditches, a haven of hazel and gray dogwood, sweet Sicily, beechnut, and bush cranberry. A terse whistle and the dogs are off. Searching, reaching, to the gripping, tension-strung clang of the bells. The woods are a wash of color, the setters painted boldly upon them, in merry strokes of white. Their brilliance waxes theatrical, a command performance from the

instant they're sent to the moment they're up.

Uncanny, how Scout slices the cover, though so patently forward, how he can take the merest whiff of scent and in questioning circles corroborate it so smoothly to its essence and make a bird. How Jack plays off him to the thump of his own drum, sweeping the fringes, nailing the limb finds.

"Ha-ha?" Steve asks Jack if he's really sure.

Hell yes, he says, read my hips.

"Grouse!"

In front of the old dog's stoven and steady stand, a bird goes out. Hard and low, flat away, through the trees. The usual glimpse. Forgetting the cover, Matt swings and pulls. The little twenty-eight barks and in a happy moment of surprise, maybe the bird has fallen. Seconds later, Jack places the splended, gray-phase truth of it into hand. Another grouse, another triumph.

All the while, Scout's beeper blares from the hill. Hurry. We're up, and his uplifting stand grants a bird of my own.

There's a woodcock or two between, a couple out strong, another that came in on the red-eye, under that big, bloated moon, too groggy to fly.

Drum-thunder! Departing wings. Scout's to the task. Minutes

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later, road and stick, road and stick, and he has him. *Whoom, whoom.* Matt and I don't.

It's Jack now, over here. Hardly afterwards, Scout again ... there! Beep here, beep where, as we leap-frog find-to-find. Taking the nearest, scurrying to the farthest. Both dogs inspired. A rare, fine pair. Read the beepers. Road and stop, road and stop ... point. Pinned. At times the two dogs close, to a divided stand – a point and back – the morning sun streaming in through the bright golden daze of the popple, the dogs shining alabaster under its touch, as around swell the rusty-red hills.

Twelve grouse and nine woodcock, the flush count for the morning. A pleasure of them pointed.

Well off the beaten path, The Little Moran Hunt Club is a quaint and happy little cover.

Fountains of both hope and harmony bubble here. A mood as mellow as late October apples and as expectant as the abrupt hush of a setter's bell. Little Moran is a grouse hunter's camp, not an endorsed simile, but the smoke from the altar – in true northwoods tradition. Unpretentious as leaf mold, honest as highbush cranberry.

Before I made the pilgrimage, a grouse hunter once remarked to me, "If you seek the wellsprings of your faith, you go to a chapel. If you wish the affirmation of your religion, you go to Little Moran."

High praise, but I could begin to believe.

We'd lunched that day with Scout and Jack about a small, green knoll aside the dark waters of the Crow Wing River. The several parties of us. Guides and guests. An amicable little occasion. Trading the morning's glories.

Before, Act Two. Matinee, in the Hub Cap Cover. Rock and Lilly, the puppies, a waltz with woodcock. Anything goes. *Bird! ... Bird! Whoom ... Whoom.* Just fun, feathers, frolic and friends. But now the drama would darken. The Devil's Triangle, a tangle of hazel so god-awful

clotted you had to slug through, hope for daylight, light a match between. A bird or two, but Satan wanted your soul.

I remembered Steve's saw about mean, gnarly places. "You want to fall down. You *try* to fall down. But it's so damn thick, you can't. So, there it is."

Finally, sunshine again. Act Three. The Hayfield Cover. An amicable wander of popple, hazel, and scarlet-stemmed dogwood, along the trace of an alfalfa field.

Scout for an encore, with Drummer, the distaff lead, sturdy little grouse-woods type tri, ballerina through the woods. How they turn the birds. Drummer normally Jack's partner; they dance so well. Lookout, Jack. So does Scout. Gable and Astaire. Point ... back. *Bird!* And again. Comes to earth the third woodcock, my limit bird. Kevin collects two more.

"Who is this Scout fellow, anyhow?" Jack wants to know.

Curtain Call. Lounging about the edge of the green hayfield, we salute the cast, celebrate the reverberating wonders of the hunt. Around us, the soft light of the setting sun melts the aspen leaves, butters the full moon climbing through the white trunks of the aspen trees, softens the diamond glint of the Evening Star. Just ahead of night, in the magic but melancholy netherworld of twilight, wood ducks traded to roost, bound for some backwoods pothole. The echo of their exodus, plaintive and lonely. Stillness. The day is spun, the play now done.

But gentle on my mind, here in the promise of this new morning, on the hillside, by the little cairn.

They would rest here one day, I thought, Scout, Drummer, and Jack.

From passionate root-stock rose this modest place of the heart, and its premise has never wavered. Steve Grossman was but a sophomore in high school, when he and his Grandpa sat down and designed a wildlife plan for the ancestral farm. The old man knew the boy loved the farm. He had been raised up on it, wild and outdoors. Had taped a twenty-gauge pump across the handles of his mini-bike to ride out hunting. Chasing grouse. The old man knew the boy hoped some

day to ... so ... the plan. "For if and when ..." the old man had said.

Life swept the boy on, but never away. A little English setter gyp taught him pheasants. "It lived in me forever," he recalls. Others taught him grouse. There were human mentors as well, Bob West at Purina, Jim Marti at Burnt Creek Setters, who had bought Jet Train, from the Fruchey Ghost Train line, George Newton at The Dakota Hunt Club. George let the boy train some dogs; word got around he was turning out some pretty decent ones.

So Jim Marti sent him a couple to see if he could handle setters. I was a kid about twenty," Steve remembers, "figured I could train anything. Not the case, I found." But what he did find was a life-long affinity for setters.

Along then another love intervened. In college, he met a home-state girl from Thief River Falls, near Agazziz Wildlife Refuge, where as a boy again he had hunted geese with his Grandpa. Had fallen so in love with geese, he cried at the very sound of them, every evening when at the end of the hunt they had to leave for home.

"When I found Gayle was from Thief Falls," Steve admits, "that's about all else it took to fall in love with her too."

Twenty-five years in union now, two fine sons to boot, Steve and Gayle Grossman have built Little Moran, together, into the harbor of the heart an ardent fraternity of grouse-hunting clients revere as Mecca. Because in 1984 Steve's dream arched. "If and when ..." had come. He and Gayle moved back, assumed management of the family farm, adding a hundred-twenty acres to the original two-hundred, including a small stream called Little Moran. And out came the plan he and his Grandpa had done.

"We were newly married," Gayle remembers, of the beginnings, "a lot happy, a little scared.

"Steve wanted a hunt club. The only thing on the farm we had suitable to make into a lodge was a chicken-house. Josh, our oldest, was a year old at the time, a babe in arms. And here Steve was, shoveling chicken manure to make way for a hunting lodge, and from the dust and the stench he smiles up at us, and says ... 'Isn't this great?'"

Shortly afterward, Jim Marti sent Steve “Shiner,” another little setter gyp. “Just a little orange and white ragamuffin,” a family dog the kids pulled on the sled, who turned to be a veritable cracker-jack on grouse. In 1986 Steve and Shiner started taking a few club members hunting, and from there evolved what has become one of the premier setter, gun-dog kennels in the nation, and a guided grouse-hunting operation that has earned a long-standing cadre of clients so devout and loyal that Steve has never advertised but once. In the beginning, in this magazine we’re proud to say.

Today, Steve Grossman is a fortyish man of moderate build and midwestern stoicism, who complains of not having enough butt to hold his chaps up, whose locus of life in practice and appearance intersects somewhere between Robert DeNiro and Walter Matthau. His passion for dogs and cover birds burns like a peat fire, hot and fierce beneath the loam, surfacing in flaming pockets of exuberance at a great find, the escape of a wily old cockbird, the promise of a good brood year.

Gayle’s warm, indigenously cordial, pragmatic, attractive – kind of a melt between the schoolmarm on Little House On the Prairie and a midwestern high school homecoming queen. She manages the Club while Steve’s in the woods, keeps the guests happy, juggles ‘ten things from Sunday’. A grand cook, especially creative with game, she’s the imaginative force behind the great dinners at The Granary, the Club-site restaurant.

Like the Swiss pheasant we had enjoyed the second evening with Tom Word, sons David and Scott, and Sandy Williams, their friend from Cotton Plant, Mississippi, who has ownership in the Old Paul Rainey Place – shades of Tippah Farms, Er Shelley, Pioneer. Tom has been coming grouse hunting here, unflinchingly, for seventeen years.

“It’s the way I keep track of my age,” he says, “when I’ve been to Little Moran, I’m a year older . . . and a year younger.”

A kind thing, pulling your boots off of an evening after a grouse hunt, nothing more necessary than your hunting duds, and gathering with kin, new and old. Just

guides, Steve, Gayle and guests, there around that lovely-laden table, sharing grouse tales. Good wine, good cheer; and always, happy little vignettes about dogs.

“We had a black-and-white setter once named Double Fred,” Steve said, “cause you always had to call, Fred! FRED!”

The marvel of their tenacity. “Kate,” Kevin explains. “Two months ago she had a C-section, actually died on the table. They massaged her heart, brought her barely back. Now here she is, knocking grouse cover.”

The mystery of their mien. “An old grouse-hunting friend died,” Steve remarks, “I was to deliver his eulogy. He had a big, beautiful black-and-white setter dog. I took the dog with me, to the church. They said ‘they couldn’t let the dog into the church; it was extraordinary . . .’ and I said ‘Tom Duvall was no ordinary man.’”

“So we went in, me and the dog, took a pew near the front, while I waited to give my part of the eulogy. And others waited to give theirs.

“When all of a moment, the setter lifted his muzzle, offered the most mournful yowl I’ve ever heard. Raised the hair of everyone there, stopped the organist mid-key, brought tears to the whole congregation.”

There was the aura of all this – this passionate couple, a family farm a hundred years along, two more boys to carry on, a Club so comfortable as it should be, clients more like family, the rhyme and romance of setters – that anointed the hallowed little spot on the hillside where I stood this new morning . . . that made it honest.

But most of all, it had been Shiloh, Drummer and Jack, again, the evening before. Who had consecrated in final this small woodland totem of inspiration and incantations, who had peaked my yearning to stay, now that it was time to leave.

Just being so solidly and faithfully what they are.

Shiloh, hard-going, first-year dog, scratched and gouged face-to-chest, bruised and bloody as a bare-knuckles brawler – never flagging, pointing birds – juggernaut of courage and beauty.

Drummer and Jack. Loosed last brace of the day, into the Road Grader Cover, by a beaver pond, two minutes down and

fast to grouse. Bird! . . . and I had stopped it in the blue-green boughs of a spruce, side of the path, as it sped for freedom. Drummer had brought the completing wonder of it to hold in my hand.

Every bird more beautiful than the last.

Then the both of them, slamming-to-stop ahead, in the dimming minutes of day. Beepers beckoning. We thought they had pointed one last time in that tight corner. We had hurried there, to find them backing each other, true to the end. A promise for tomorrow, as upon the chilling air the fragrant breath of evergreen rose to mingle with the dank, musty spoor of the bog.

The dogs of then, I thought, the dogs of now.

As ever there would be, I hoped, and grouse, and men worthy of appreciating them. As long as there were these, there’d be a Little Moran, there’d be such a sacred place, and no matter where else we would live to be, always there would be a piece of us wanting our way back. 

IF YOU WANT TO GO

Had I to write this story in one word, it would be “genuine.” Checked and weathered with character, truthful to intent and integrity, humble and hospitable, Little Moran exudes the grouse and woodcock legacy. As its decades-loyal flock of clients will affirm. With, on average, only thirty-six days each season to hunt, prime-time openings are limited. But, like a lot of us aging hands, some of the original clients are booking a few less days. Now’s an excellent time to gain a niche.

The honesty of the grouse/woodcock covers at Little Moran is not for everyone. Not all devilish, but often trying. If your heart beats to the tune of the Drummer, go once and you’ll go again.

Bird numbers were pleasing. The flush-count Season Summary, just received for the 36-day, 2005 season, records an even 600 grouse and 901 woodcock, both up from ‘04.

Little Moran is just one of the “Destinations of Distinction” offered by Matt Gindorff and the equally genuine folks at The Sporting Traveler – 701-232-1965; www.thesportingtraveler.com.