

BLACK RAPIDS

Woodcock

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Chasing 'timberdoodles' along the Miramichi

Ted Williams never knew the kind of pressure I was facing that cool October afternoon. Not in all of his times at bat could he have felt the awesome responsibility I'd been saddled with that fateful fall day. This was not a matter of winning a big-league pennant or capturing some prized batting title. It was much more important than that. I had dropped six woodcock in a row, and I had two more to go to take my limit.

The opportunity for number seven availed itself on the edge of a small clearing, as SSM ad sales rep Jeremy Hatch's five-year-old shorthair, Sage, nailed a point between two earthen berms. Fighting toward her through a tangle of maple whips, I

knew that this was do or die. I had never shot seven woodcock in one day, let alone seven straight. I stopped, recomposed myself and took a deep breath. I looked left and right. Then one more cautious step, and the bird was up . . . and outta there.

Two shots later, all I had to show for my efforts was a pair of empty hulls and a horribly fractured popple tree. "The Splendid Splinter" would have been proud.

"Well, we knew you couldn't hit them all," said guide Jerry Sturgeon. Jerry was nothing if not diplomatic.

Jeremy was less sympathetic. "That shot was wide open. What happened?"

I tried evading the question as well as the woodcock had

evaded my shots, but in the end simply chalked it up to a major-league choke. Thankfully, in New Brunswick, chances for redemption are never far away.

Mention woodcock to an upland hunter, and odds are his mind will drift to the Northeast—specifically New England and the Canadian Maritimes. After all, this is the northern terminus of the birds' annual spring trek and the place to catch the long-billed migrants as they begin their return flights south. Factor in spectacular fall colors, vast huntable tracts, and the fact that woodcock cohabitate with ruffed grouse, and you have a recipe for a hunting experience like no other.

Being a native New Englander, I'm a "timberdoodle" fan from way back, which is why my eyes lit up when I passed the Westervelt Sporting Lodges booth at last year's Safari Club International Convention. I had known Westervelt for its first-class Alabama quail operation, but now I saw the company advertising upland hunts at Miramichi Black Rapids Lodge, in New Brunswick.

Westervelt Manager Kevin McKinstry was virtually gushing about the property. "What initially attracted us to Black Rapids was the world-class salmon fishing [on the Miramichi River]," he said, "but when we got up there and were talking to the lodge owner, George Curtis, he mentioned the great woodcock



hunting. When he said that they were getting 30 flushes on an average day, I had to ask him again, because I wasn't sure I'd heard him right."

Westervelt ended up buying the lodge from Curtis in 2005, and the company is just beginning to develop the hunting program. "With all of the woodcock as well as the grouse, wingshooting was an obvious add-on to the business," Kevin said. "Black Rapids already had great salmon fishing; now we're building up the bird hunting aspect."

When I asked about room to roam, Kevin said things were wide open. Guides hunt a combination of "crown," or government, land and private properties they have permission to access. "It's really not a matter of acreage," he said. "It's more like when you get into the truck each morning, the guide will ask, 'So, how far do you want to drive today?' It's pretty much unlimited."

I needed no more convincing.

Black Rapids' wingshooting season runs from October 1 through mid-November—the first two weeks offering "cast & blast" opportunities for salmon and upland birds. Unfortunately, this past



Scenes from Black Rapids: Guide Jerry Sturgeon with his setter, Duke (above); lodge manager Katherine Hughes with her first woodcock (next page top); and (from left) Jeremy Hatch, Mollie and the author with a day's bag of timberdoodles (next page bottom).

fall Jeremy and I were unable to leave our homes in Maine until October 15, the final day of salmon fishing on the Miramichi. The last leg of our drive took us along the river, and we saw several anglers getting in their final casts of the season. We promised ourselves that should we return, we'd be sure to wet a line.

Our travel day was a Sunday—when there is no hunting in New Brunswick—and we pulled into camp with just enough time to unpack before dinner. Our quarters were in one of two spacious log cabins, both of which had been recently refurbished. We were surprised that although the lodge can handle six Guns, there was only one other couple in camp—a husband and wife who were there for the salmon fishing finale. *All the more birds for us . . .*

The following morning we met guide Jerry Sturgeon, who also happens to be the local game warden. He was an affable and accommodating gent, and when we asked if we could run our own dogs, he was happy to oblige. We jumped in Jeremy's truck and drove six miles to the town of Blackville, where we bought our licenses and permits.

In another 15 minutes we were at

the first covert, and five minutes after that Jeremy's 1½-year-old shorthair, Mollie, was working a small floodplain that had grown up in alders and grass. We had walked less than 50 yards down the path that snaked through the covert when Mollie's bell stopped and her beeper started. Jeremy jumped off of the trail, and as he disappeared into the alders I heard the twittering of wings and a quick shot. And just like that we had the first woodcock of the trip.

The scenario was repeated five minutes later, and then five minutes after that. Jerry looked at me and shrugged. "Do you think you're going to get a shot today?"

"At this rate I'm not sure," I said.

But a short time later Mollie crossed onto my side of the path and slid into a point beside a small spruce tree. I strode in confidently, angling in front, and as I neared the dog, I heard a flurry of wings and spied a brown blur rocketing up through green branches. I was shooting a 16-bore Francotte that Chris Batha had fit to me, and I swept the barrels through the tree and erased the woodcock just as it was towering. Let the games begin.

Call it happenstance, the stars in alignment, whatever, but everything seemed to come together that morning. The birds were in, Mollie was on fire and neither Jeremy nor I was able to miss. An hour after we'd started, we walked out of the covert having moved 25 woodcock, six of which we'd shot over rock-solid points. Jerry had accused us of being "downright picky" about the shots we were taking, but when we were seeing so many birds, who could blame us? Besides, three woodcock each would have been our limits in Maine, so we couldn't have been happier.

In New Brunswick you can take eight timberdoodles per day, so we drove up the road to a more "grousy"-looking covert and let Sage out of the box. Sage is an experienced campaigner, and she worked the grown-up cutover with medical precision, allowing Jeremy



to add two birds to his bag and me to add three.

At that point I suffered the miss mentioned earlier, and I immediately followed it up by whiffing the first grouse of the trip. I was glad to return to the truck to regroup.

With hot soup and sandwiches in our bellies, we drove 45 minutes to a patch of private ground along the Cains River—another salmon-fishing mecca. Jerry was the caretaker for this property, and behind the locked gate we found a series of groomed paths through the alders. We also found plenty of birds, including several grouse—one of which I missed twice as it flew across an open swamp.

We arrived at the day's final covert—a series of fields grown up in birch, popple and spruce—with Jeremy needing two woodcock to

fill his limit and me needing one. Mollie was the go-to girl, and she diligently worked the edges for 20 minutes before sticking a bird. When Jeremy missed it, he said he was done, and we decided to head out.

We were within sight of the truck when Jerry casually pointed to a nearby spruce thicket. "Why don't you put Mollie in there," he said. "I've found birds in this spot before." Jeremy whistled over the dog and sent her, and we were amazed to see her twist into a rigid point.

"No pressure, Ralph," Jeremy said. "This is only for your New Brunswick limit."

I gave him a sarcastic thanks and pushed into the evergreens. But before I had a chance to position myself, the bird launched—and my poke-and-hope shot sent it tumbling. It was a



proud moment as I picked up the warm woodcock and slipped it into my game pouch.

That night we celebrated at the lodge with George Curtis, who although he sold Black Rapids to Westervelt has stayed on to oversee the operation. George grew up fishing the Miramichi and has guided on the river for more than 30 years. His father, Roy, was inducted into the Atlantic Salmon Fishing Hall of Fame and was the personal guide of baseball legend Ted Williams for more than two decades. George regaled us with stories of salmon fishing past and present and described what it was like to meet and fish with “Mr. Baseball.” He spoke reverently about Williams’ conservation ethic and concern for the resource and mentioned that Williams even sold him 50 acres of waterfront property across the river when he was building Black Rapids.

The next morning we were scraping a heavy frost off of the windshield when Jerry arrived. “So, how far do you want to drive today?” he said. He offered to take us to some of his favorite coverts farther from town, and we jumped at the chance.

A highlight this day was that we were able to talk lodge manager Katherine Hughes into coming along. Katherine is a 20-something Alabama girl who was raised on quail, has hunted Africa and has worked for a big-game outfitter in the West. But when we learned that she’d never shot a woodcock, we insisted that she join us.

Jerry had brought his 11-year-old setter, Duke, so when we pulled into the first overgrown farmstead, Duke was given the nod. He worked the cover thoroughly, and in an hour and a half Jeremy and I each were able to shoot a couple of woodcock over solid points.

The second covert was a patch of woods between two fields—a perfect place to run my 2½-year-old wirehair, Gunnar. Through no fault of his own, Gunnar hadn’t seen

a lot of hunting action in his life, and I’d brought him to New Brunswick thinking, *What better place to get him into wild birds?* I wasn’t disappointed.

We ran Gunnar with Mollie for the next hour and were able to walk him in on some of the shorthair’s points and steady him. Eventually, I was working Gunnar near an old junk car when he locked up and allowed Jeremy to approach and flush the woodcock. That one exercise—and seeing the light bulb come on for the young dog—made my whole trip worthwhile.

We crated Gunnar and continued running Mollie, who soon went on point at the edge of a small clearing. Katherine, after much cajoling, had begun carrying Jeremy’s Franchi over/under, and when the woodcock flushed into the open, Katherine made a beautiful crossing shot. We weren’t able to get a rebel yell out of her, but her wide smile telegraphed her pleasure with the accomplishment.

The final covert of the afternoon proved the most productive, as Jeremy and I took four woodcock in 20 minutes. The daily total of 10 birds bagged and 30 flushes fell short of the previous day’s 13 birds and 50 flushes, but the new ground that had been broken for dogs as well as hunters more than made up for it.

Wednesday morning was our last in Canada, and Jeremy indulged me

by letting me run Gunnar. The first covert was literally a washout, as beavers had impounded a small stream and flooded the lowlands. We hunted the periphery, and Gunnar was able to point and relocate one skittish woodcock three times before Jeremy shot it.

In the second covert Gunnar came into his own, pointing and holding a half-dozen birds. In one instance he remained staunch after a woodcock flushed several feet to his side, and I was able to walk in and put up a second bird just in front of his nose. That kind of exposure is worth any price.

On the drive back to Maine, Jeremy and I agreed that the trip had been excellent. The number of bird encounters had been exceptional, and we marveled at how the young dogs had progressed as a result.

Of course our shooting success had tailed off after the first day, but we consoled ourselves knowing that no one is perfect. After all, even in his best season, Ted Williams *only* hit .407 . . .

Author’s Note: For more information on hunting at Miramichi Black Rapids Lodge, contact Westervelt Sporting Lodges, 800-281-7991; www.WesterveltLodges.com.

Ralph P. Stuart is Shooting Sportsman’s Editor in Chief.



Brisk days, great dogs—it doesn’t get better than this.



Photo courtesy of Westervelt Sporting Lodges