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A Little Slice of Heaven

Professional game management is essential to creating your private sporting paradise.

by Tom Keer



Conservation easements and professional stream-management projects help protect the fishery—and fishing—on the Upper Provo River where it flows through Victory Ranch.

A FEW YEARS AGO, MY WIFE surprised me with a copy of *Partridge Shortenin'*, by Gorham "Grampa Grouse" Cross. In 1949, Grampa Grouse printed only 100 copies for his friends, thereby making an original copy about as scarce as hen's teeth. Two subsequent printings have added 600 additional copies to the sporting world for a grand tally of 700 editions. Thanks to my wife, I have one of them in my collection.

I was in awe of the outstanding shooting chronicled in the chapter "All Full at Noon," which tells the story of three men shooting a limit of four grouse each by noon. Cross estimates that about 10 percent of flushed birds are killed, so at that rate it means for every bird killed he saw ten more, for every limit reached he saw 40 birds, and for a three-man limit their shooting party caught at least a fleeting glimpse 120. Today, any grouse hunter who sees 20 birds in a day has hit a magical benchmark. The same is true of bobwhite quail down South, trout in the Rockies, waterfowl in the Central Flyway, and so on. These days, it seems that finding game takes far more time than actually hunting it.

The lack of quality hunting or fishing opportunities is a leading factor in why die-hard sportsmen take matters into their own hands. Whether purchasing a 25-acre farm or a 250,000-acre ranch, the ultimate goal is to capture their own little slice of heaven—and perhaps re-create an experience that resembles Gorham Cross's.

If you bought a South Georgia quail plantation you'd want it to have sandy soil, rolling hills, open fields, and rocky streams. You'd likely include a variety of food and cover crops, highlighted by Egyptian wheat, milo, wiregrass, lovegrass, broom sedge, Johnson grass, and bicolor lespedeza. The hardwood bottoms should have an equally diverse mix with oaks, loblolly pines, slash pines, sweet gum, long-leaf pines, and hickories—tupelo and cypress where the ground stays

wet. If that veritable quail cornucopia exists then grab your dogs, boys, and get after 'em. Alas, few landowners are so fortunate, which is why it's often best to call on a professional land manager.

Even Mother Nature needs a helping hand on occasion, and that's why property owners think of Shannon Skelton as their right hand man. Shannon owns a company called CFI Global (www.cfglobal.com), which specializes in turning average sporting properties into spectacular ones.

"A survey of sportsmen shows that most agree their property could use a little improvement," said Skelton. "Some folks are content to simply stock their river once a year or put out some birds at the start of hunting season. What that means is for whatever reason, the quality of the property has degraded over time. Other folks look for a sustainable resource. We re-engineer a river to support fish, just as we engineer the land to support birds or game."

When it comes to rivers, that means reviewing water quality, testing acidity,

surveying entomology, and recording oxygen levels. At that point, an infrastructure will be created to manage recruitment and fish counts, hydrological variables, insect life and reproduction, and spawning habitat. The process may require heavy machinery and take up to a year before it comes to fruition, but in the end landowners may be astonished by the improvements they can enjoy. Instead of an artificial experience, the rivers becomes a naturally restored waterway. The goal of habitat-improvement organizations is to improve water or land quality for the long haul. The abundant fish and game are a natural byproduct.

If you ask a room of fishermen and hunters to describe their ideal terrain you're likely to get a room full of different answers. Some want big numbers of birds in every covey rise. Others want fewer elk or deer but with larger racks. And some trout fishermen will want big fish while others prefer a dry-fly experience. With a little planning and some hard work, the odds of improving your property are very good to excellent. The



Castle Mountain Farm is found in the beautiful, rolling hills of Virginia's Rappahannock County.

grouse bonanzas that Gorham Cross experienced took place just outside of Boston through south-central New Hampshire. And while their effects are unlikely to be reversed today, the chances of improving your own slice of heaven are very good indeed.

About the Author

■ Tom Keer is a nationally known writer whose essays and articles have appeared in a variety of sporting and general interest magazines. He is a Contributing Editor to Fly, Rod and Reel and a regular contributor to over a dozen magazine titles and has published over six-hundred works in national and local magazines, newspapers, and on the web.

Keer lives in Wellfleet, Massachusetts with his wife, two children, and two English setters. More information is available at his website.



The Upper Provo River at Victory Ranch Club.

Living In Virginia's Hunt Country



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