

The Old Hemlock Letter

Volume XX Issue II

www.OLDHEMLOCK.ORG

Winter 2025



The Old Hemlock Foundation, Preserving and Promoting the Legacy of Geoge Bird Evans and Kay Evans



"The charm of gunning over dogs is the charm of dreams, the things we hope will happen, a continuum of things that did. We share this wonderment with our gun dogs."

George Bird Evans Living with Gun Dogs 1992

Updates From The Old Hemlock Line

Hall Carter

Looking into the whelping box at a pile of squirming puppies, I wonder about what each life will become. Will that one look more like mom, Daicey, or dad, Redd? Or maybe more of the grandparents' traits will appear from Karma, October Boy, Moxie, or Tip? How dark will each's ticking come to be at a year old? Each has the potential to be a great gun dog, but which ones will really excel? Which ones will have that hard-to-describe knack for getting birds pointed in a way that always seems to provide the best chance for the gunner?

On November 20, 2024, Old Hemlock Daicey whelped a litter sired by Jim and Kathy Cron's Old Hemlock October Redd that resulted in fourteen all white little beings that would quickly morph into orange belton puppies. Nine females and five males. Daicey is from Glenn and Jenna Jonsson's "Maine 14" litter whelped on Christmas Eve 2021 that resulted from breeding Old Hemlock Moxie to Firelight KM Tip, which was the last successful Old Hemlock breeding prior to this one.

The best part about Old Hemlock puppies is placing them with owners who will provide updates and photos as each dog develops so I can answer some of those questions I am always thinking about. The puppies will be a perfect age to go into their first season next fall to start learning the ropes, and I can't wait to hear reports from all the new owners. Going forward, I am hopeful that we will be able to get one more litter from Redd by pairing him with Lejay and Helen Ann Graffious's Old Hemlock Sweet Birch, and there are also plans in the works to breed Bruce Barlow's Old Hemlock Redbud.

Finally, thank you to Glenn Jonsson for reviving the Old Hemlock Letter, continuing the tradition originally set in motion twenty-five years ago by Mike McDonald, and then skillfully carried on by Bruce Buckley. In *Troubles with Bird Dogs*, George and Kay wrote that "Humans seek immortality in bloodines, even in bird dog bloodlines. It is pleasant to hope that when Kay and I are no longer gunning, Old Hemlock setters will keep our ideals alive." I know their ideals are alive because I think of George and Kay daily as many of you likely do, and their approach to gunning, and life in general, has certainly had an effect on many of us. We are extremely fortunate to have his writings to remind us of those ideals, and I sincerely hope that George and Kay would be proud of the Old Hemlock setters today.





“Kay and I are rich in autumns, so many we can’t count the gold. With the color in the leaves the memories come back – sugar maples on the silent verge of flame against hemlocks black-green the smell of things replete, the mountains roaring in the night.”

George Bird Evans, An Affair with Grouse 1982

The Old Hemlock Letter – A History

by Michael McDonald

From its humble beginnings, The Old Hemlock Letter has become a staple of communication for the Old Hemlock Family – its primary readership. Both The ‘Letter and The ‘Family are, in no small part, fall-out from the first Old Hemlock Reunion – the brain child of Bob Rose, Roger Brown and others following the death of George Bird Evans. As the founders of an exclusive bloodline of English Setters and in the collaboration of numerous books and articles, George and his wife Kay left a legacy unmatched by other outdoor writers who may have had similar intentions. These few sentences fail to grasp the deep admiration and emotions we share for the Evanses and the life they showed us is still possible in this age of rapid progression when so many traditions go unexperienced. With their passing came the fear of losing our connection with a lifestyle we had come to treasure. A reunion of those appointed to carry-on the bloodline, and Old Hemlock legacy, with OH Setter owners, seemed an appropriate way to keep the candle burning and connect us with those of like minds. Skillful organizers got to work and the first Old Hemlock Reunion was held in March 1999 - thus The Old Hemlock Family was christened...which brings us back to creation of The Old Hemlock Letter.

That first “Gathering of the Clan” (– Larry Catlett, Pointing Dog Journal) brought together Family members who were familiar with each other yet had likely never met. There was an immediate connection between individuals from all walks of life and in the midst of “sea of setters.” We shared memories of George and fawned over Kay, who was pleased with the effort and kind words of remembrance. Roger Brown, George’s chosen guardian of the bloodline, got to watch setters working the bird fields - critical information for making breeding selections. The roots of The Old Hemlock Foundation also grew in keeping with George and

Kay’s wishes for care and maintenance of the Old Hemlock house, his writing and works of art. Each year now, The ‘Family members renew acquaintances while sharing dog stories and inspecting eyes, ears and tail sets and comparing feeding and training programs.

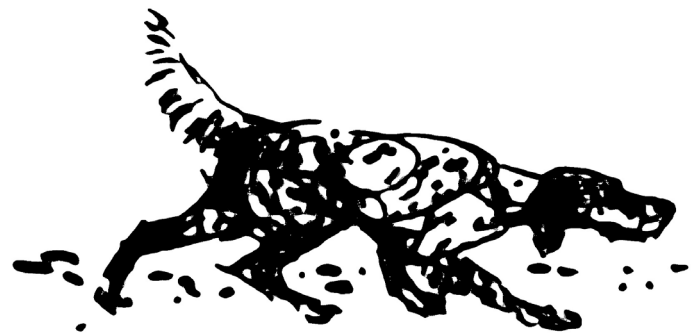
As I watched all this, it came to mind that we needed to maintain this connection with more reunions and better communication. Many groups use newsletters for staying in touch and passing on information. I suggested a newsletter to Roger and Bob at that first reunion and their response was, “when can you have the first issue out”! Not what I expected but should have seen coming. Now what was I going to do? With no experience in such things I referred to my collection of various “newsletters” and conferred with others as to what they wanted to see. Only then did I scratch out my first draft – it was simple, to-the-point and easy to print and mail. To date there have been over 40 issues of The ‘Letter under two editors. The title was first suggested by Jeff and Kendra Kauffman and began as a quarterly publication but was later pared down to twice a year. Article submissions were solicited from Family members with the pleasant discovery of significant writing talents among our numbers. Hunt stories, litter news, dog training experiences, and “troubles” were all shared and disseminated in The ‘Letter. I received articles in various forms from rumpled yellow legal stock, to professional stationary and eventually word documents attached to emails – all were welcome and included in the next published issue. I had very little to do in the way of corrections, editing or clarifications. I can’t say the first few issues were much to look at from the perspective of layout; in fact I often refer to Vol. 1 Issue 1 as the Old Hemlock fish wrapper! With time, I learned a lot and received helpful suggestions for improvements from readers and for which I will be eternally grateful.



As years passed, The 'Letter got better and the comments from The Family grew more positive. Kay, in particular, was very encouraging in her critique and favorable comments. She also gave me permission to use sketches from George's books to highlight articles and I tried to match them to the material subject whenever possible. At first I used a local commercial printer but later was able to save money by printing them at work (with permission) as long as I supplied the paper. I used buff colored paper in keeping with George's choice for his books but regrettably his brown ink was not an option. Roger agreed to open each issue with a letter relating news and information on breeding, litter progress and Reunion plans. I closed with an Editor's Note detailing plans for improvements, requests for participation and new submissions - I knew there were (and still are) stories out there to be shared. The response could be overwhelming but other times, not so much. We had a group of very dependable writers who never seemed to run out of interesting topics, tales of mishaps, and celebration victories from the field. Occasionally someone had a new gun purchase to expound upon or suggestions for home veterinarian care. Everything focused on the setters, upland gunning and Old Hemlock visits or similar news. Naturally, The 'Letter became the source of information on upcoming Reunions and reports - focusing on puppy developments and planned breeding. On a somber note, I included notifications and recognition for dogs that had passed under the title "In the hearts of their masters" - a nod to one of my favorite GBE chapters from The Bird Dog Book - "Where to bury a Dog" by Ben Hur Lapman (lest we forget.)

It was my sincere pleasure to edit The Old Hemlock Letter for thirteen years and I thank everyone who helped me along the way with articles and suggestion but mostly for their patience. At several Reunions someone passed the hat to help defray costs associated with printing and mailing. While I appreciated the gesture, and used discretion in squeezing every dime, I never felt clean about it. Finally, I had to insist, with all gratitude, that I preferred to make it my contribution to Old Hemlock which had given so much to me. Even the most heartfelt endeavors run their course and need to be revitalized with new ideas and new blood. And so it was for me with The Old Hemlock Letter. I was unskilled in the technical aspects of computer software and its many uses and we needed to upgrade our pub-

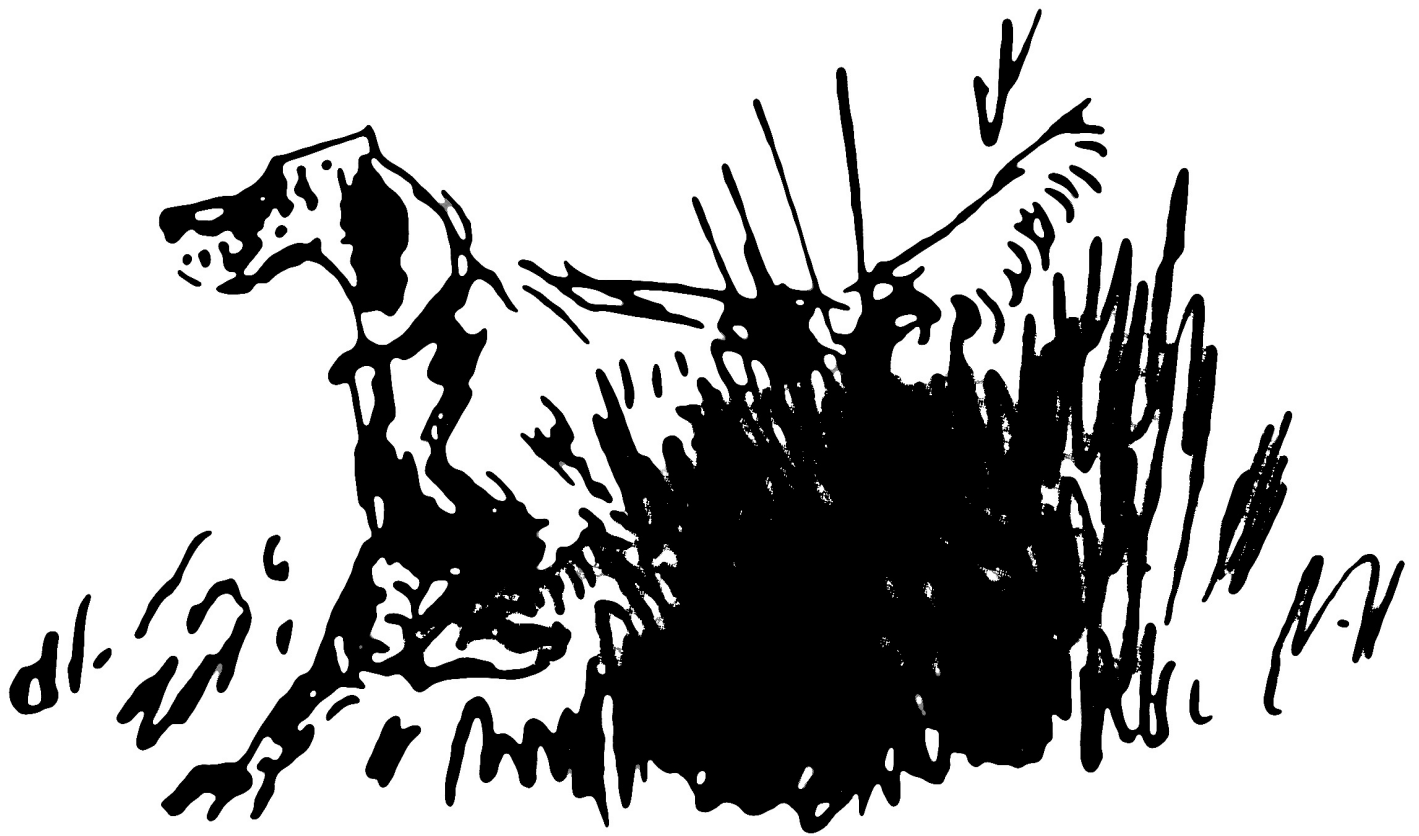
lication, layout and content. My initial attempts fell far short of success; in fact some errors were, in my eyes, unforgivable. I began to make inquiries as to who might want to take over and continue The 'Letter in my stead. Offers were not forthcoming and eventually I ran out of ideas and felt it necessary to resign as editor. Fortunately, Bruce Buckley stepped up and The Old Hemlock Letter was continued. It could not have been in better hands. The improvements he initiated were immediate and just what was needed. He secured assistance from others to share the burden, and brought the publication to a professional level - far more than just a newsletter.



Sitting by my side as I type this, is Old Hemlock Seth - a gift from the Old Hemlock Foundation and The 'Family for my work on The 'Letter. I was also given a print of the only setter painting George ever did. It hangs prominently in my gun room and I admire it daily. Each represents a level of recognition I did not anticipate let alone feel worthy of. Like challenges we face with every new puppy, Seth certainly presented his "troubles." Fortunately, I had The Family with whom to seek counsel and advice resulting in a fine example of selective breeding formulated by George and continued by Roger, and now Hall Carter. Sweet in nature and dynamic in the field, Seth communicates with his eyes more than any setter I've known. Most of the time I can interpret his meaning and when I can't it only demonstrates a level of intelligence beyond my own, and that's just fine.

I was very pleased to learn that The Old Hemlock Letter was being revitalized. Again, it could not be in better hands than Glenn Jonsson's. As with many other aspects of our Old Hemlock legacy, a torch is passed – assuring that what George and Kay started will be shared with future generations and not lost to Time. Let's give Glenn our support and encouragement by submitting articles and suggestions. He'll need your help as he assumes this challenge and keeps communication flowing for The Old Hemlock Family.





“My dreams comprise an odyssey in which I endlessly search for coverts that may hold grouse”

George Bird Evans, Grouse and Woodcock in the Blackwater/Canaan 1997

The Great Houdini

By Kandice Tuttle

We typically spend much of the Fall at our cabin in Rangeley Maine, using it as home base for daily grouse and woodcock hunts with Breeze and Fallon. Friday, October 29 found us at one of our favorite coverts about 45 minutes from the cabin. It was brilliantly sunny and most of the upper foliage had dropped. It was warm enough for comfort for me yet cool enough for the boys.

We always run the boys with Dogtra Training/Beeper collars set to point mode so the beeper is quiet until one of the boys goes on point. Fallon and Breeze were hunting ahead of us as we walked up the dirt road when Fallon stopped to the left of the road on a nice point. As we approached, the grouse went up, flew across the road and I shot, dropping the bird. The grouse fell into the ditch that ran along the right side of the road and Fallon was there to make the retrieve. What I did not realize was that while I hit the bird, I did not kill it. When the bird hit the bottom of the steep ditch it happened to be at the mouth of a 16" culvert that went under the road.

As Fallon tried to grab the bird, the bird began escaping into the culvert. But Fallon wasn't giving up and after three attempts he had worked his way deeper into the culvert in pursuit of his grouse. Now I'm getting scared. We were hollering for him to come. We couldn't see him and we couldn't hear him. Then I heard his beeper go off from under the middle of the road.

He wasn't moving! My heart sank as I had visions of Fallon permanently wedged under the middle of the road. Bob went to the exit end of the culvert to assess the situation. The grouse emerged covered in blood from the non fatal head shot and missing a few tail feathers from Fallon trying to grab him. Bob caught the bird and dispatched it. Now how to get Fallon out...

Because the sun was low, there was enough light entering the culvert so Bob could see it reflecting off Fallon's eyes. But the exit end of the culvert was half filled with gravel giving it only a 10" clearance. With silent prayers, after what seemed like an eternity, Fallon scratched his way out of the exit. Bob presented the grouse to him and he took a sniff and lick and headed off to find another. He seemed nonplussed by the whole experience but Bob and I were both left really rattled.

That evening while enjoying grouse dinner we reflected on the day and counted our blessings that things turned out the way they did, also thankful it had not been Breeze's bird because there's no way that big handsome boy would have been able to crawl through that culvert. I saved the remaining tail feathers from that grouse and have them displayed in my empty 28 gauge shell.

Casey's Last Grouse

By Richard C Baylor

Another beautiful trip to Northern Wisconsin and Palmquist Farm. This time without my life long hunting and fishing partner of some 50 years, Paul Hall, after Time had asked that great West Virginian to take it a bit easier on himself—and at the age of 75, this time he listened. Paul and I had traveled from Ohio to Iowa, Kansas, South Dakota, North Dakota, the state up north, West Virginia, and recently Wisconsin to bird hunt over my dogs; but when we started together in Ohio in 1966, we hunted over his English Setter, Casey.

I carried on and went alone in '15 and '16, back to the farm in Wisconsin. We enjoyed glorious Octobers both years with sunny brisk days, and we averaged 10 grouse flushed to get one taken over a point, and about 10 miles walked per grouse in my vest! I'm hunting with Old Hemlock Casey, my Best Dog Ever, and the sire to my OH Covey, a wonderful brace of English Setters. As much as I love to hunt with each dog individually, following this brace is an amazing performance of genetics—like watching one of GBE's stories play out before one's eyes. (Thanks Roger Brown and Jim Recktenwald for picking me for Casey)

Hunting alone, without Paul, those two years was a bit worrisome to me when I was deep in the woods. I had GPS, compass and maps that we had made countless notes upon and my beautiful setters- but still alone. We had always hunted together, knew where we each were and what each other would do.

Always within earshot, until now –but my setter bells calmed me and gave me a feeling of confidence, even comfort. It was good to be hunting with a companion again.

In October 2017, along with new hunting partner James Murphy and my brace of OH Casey and OH Covey, we're making our way deep into the woods, to one of my best coverts I named Casey's Ridge. The previous season, a local guide had told me of this place over dinner and Woodford Double Oaked. In the woods the next day, James and I had thought we couldn't get there due to high water throughout the "flowage" that covered the old two track logging road with several feet of water. So, we had turned North to stay on high ground, following an edge of popple that eventually led us to a "Ridge".

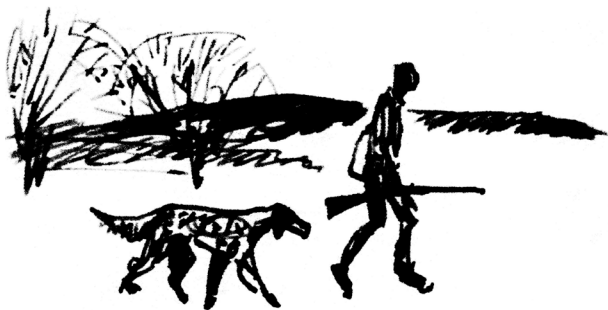
That Ridge meandered about a mile through the woods and some 15 flushes later, James takes a low right crossing shot from Casey's point, his 28 ga swung and connected for his first ever Grouse. What was expected to be a barren year for grouse, turned out to be a treasure trove as we walked further than most folks and found an abundance of birds, both Woodcock and Grouse.

Today, a year later in October '18, it was drier, overcast, and about 38 degrees. James and I had driven to the pull off that morning after breakfast, only to find another truck parked there, in MY covert! So, we headed to another spot we knew and then came back to hunt Casey's Ridge later that morning. The truck we saw earlier was gone, and I figured they didn't make the almost 4 mile walk to the Ridge. They had not.

Casey's bell went silent. The woods were quiet, just a breeze gently lifting the Hemlock sapling branches to my left. Covey had worked off my right towards James and I couldn't hear his bell either. I stood there, my eyes searching the woods ahead—we were at the base of Casey's Ridge. Where it rose up from the forest floor, there was a thicket of popple and winterberry, and there was Casey standing with his head outstretched and his tail rigid, slightly angled upwards. I readied my 16 ga to where the stock was just beneath my shoulder. Then,



that sound – beating wings - and I see a grouse go out from Casey's right, then another right behind it, weaving through several trees. No Shot-and just then another grouse goes out to Casey's left. I raise my gun, swinging as I move -and find the bird over my barrels. The grouse folded at the shot, as I hear another one, then another, both flush to Casey's left and again they fly where no shot exists. Casey was now on the retrieve and found our grouse, bringing it to me; a large, beautiful Grey Phase male. Casey had been working to my right but had slowed and walked that scent into those birds. They had held for him until I took one too many steps. Five grouse-almost like the previous year in almost the same spot, but some 30 yards from where seven grouse that Casey pointed and had flushed upon my approach, where I found one bird over my gun as well. He had held point on them some 5 minutes as I worked through thick cover to get to him.



One Grouse was all we needed and after appropriate congratulations to each other, Casey and I headed off to locate James and Covey. Once we found each other, we all headed back the old logging road, barely two depressions in the forest floor now. Casey kept hunting and found two more birds to point for me on the way out. To end the week with three beautiful grouse over my best dog ever, was a fitting culmination to a wonderful week in the woods. GPS says he ran over 22 miles that afternoon and I know my legs were done when I got to the truck. Covey was done as well as he walked the last 2 miles out at my side, while “old” dog Casey just kept hunting, Best Dog Ever.

Those would be Casey's last Ruffed Grouse. We traveled on that month, without James, to hunt Sharpies and Prairie Chickens in South Dakota; then Sharpies, Pheasants and Huns in Montana over the next three weeks, arriving home in Ohio by Thanksgiving.

Two weeks later, after a well-deserved rest at home,⁴ I guided a pheasant hunt at our preserve using Casey

and Covey. After about three hours in the field, I saw Casey sit down while on point. He had never done anything like that - ever. We don't know what happened or when, but he was now carrying his left rear leg and would not put any weight on it. I carried him to the truck and headed home.

My Vet saw him the next morning and he checked everything that I had –Stifle, reflexes and manipulating his rear hips and spine. His left rear leg had a slower proprioception reflex response than his right foot, although both feet had slower than normal reflexes. Something in the lumbar region of his spine wasn't right. And during all this, Casey just carried on – no sign of pain, no complaint. But listening to his heart, we now heard a new murmur in his Mitral valve. Ohio State Veterinary Medical Center doctors from Cardio, Neuro and Orthopedic surgeons tested, including an MRI, confirmed what we had surmised. Three herniated disks and Grade 2 Mitral valve murmur. Casey was only about 9 years old then, but lived until Cancer got the best of him in February of '24, at about 14 and one-half. We were blessed to have had him in our lives. Casey was the 9th great grandson of OH Ruff, coming through OH Briar, OH Manton and then OH True, and some very nice female setters too!

When your best companion, that very best dog ever, can't walk with you into the field or woods anymore -- how does one look into his eyes and leave him home? I would take his son Covey, another great companion and hunting dog and then imagine - both of them - that wonderful brace hunting again. PS...October '19-- Covey pointed 14 pheasants today, 11 were taken and retrieved—and so we go on, watching the beauty of the Old Hemlock Line continuing through Time.

“For fifty-six seasons I've gunned the most difficult quarry of them all, and I do it still”

George Bird Evans, An Affair with Grouse 1982

Old Hemlock Foundation Update

LeJay Graffious

First, I want to commend Glenn for his initiative in reviving the Old Hemlock Newsletter, continuing the legacy of Mike McDonald and Bruce Buckley. Both faced challenges in obtaining articles, and the success of the newsletter relies heavily on the support and contributions of the Old Hemlock Family members.

We continue to offer two open public tours each year. Interestingly, we often have more visitors from outside the region than from the local area. When West Virginians do visit, they frequently express surprise that they hadn't heard about this "hidden gem" before. We tend to provide more private, intimate tours than public ones. Many of our visitors are readers of George's works and have spoken with him or Kay over the phone. We truly enjoy hearing how GBE's words have touched their lives.

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Totals
Visitors	338	204	461	246	307	1556
Volunteers	73	73	204	105	43	498
Dogs	32	20	20	42	44	158

In 2020, we ceased having AmeriCorps members work at Old Hemlock, but I have maintained a strong connection with the group since then. For instance, I was invited to be the keynote speaker at the opening statewide conference last year, where I shared the story of George and Kay and how AmeriCorps helped build the museum side of the foundation. Additionally, last summer, an AmeriCorps member spent the day with me cleaning furniture and replacing the Cambric dust cover fabrics. A team led by past Old Hemlock Foundation (OHF) AmeriCorps member Jamie Billman used museum-quality materials and techniques to clean all the books on display.

OHF has a strong relationship with the WVU Center for Community Engagement. During four of the past five years, I have worked with School of Media Capstone students. These seniors act as a public relations agency, with OHF as their client. They produce various projects, including press releases, radio spots, informational videos, and more. They also organize one major public event. One group utilized the WVU Blue Ballroom, where we set up a display of George's art and had speakers discuss the foundation. A history professor did an excellent job putting George's work in a West Virginia historical perspective. I enjoy interacting with these young adults, sharing the legacy of Old Hemlock, and gaining their fresh ideas.

Through the WVU Center for Community Engagement, many college students assist with tasks such as spring clean-up, litter pickup, trail work, and cleaning George's sketches from his journals for projects like the newsletter. As you know, we have quite a collection of Evans' work in the WVU History Archives, spanning sixteen lateral feet on their archive shelves. We also maintain a media presence on their webpage. While all of George's journals are published, his handwriting can be difficult to read, especially for younger folks who may not be familiar with cursive. To make the journals more accessible, the university initially hired a retired employee to transcribe them into printed format. Unfortunately, this person has since passed away. Brandon Hall has generously volunteered his time to continue this project. Kudos to Brandon for his dedication. We look forward to their release at WVU West Virginia & Regional History Center.

George's work continues to resonate with readers. Special thanks to Jake Smith of Pointing Dog Journal (PDJ) for reprinting selections in the magazine. I welcome any of your favorite 1500 to 2000-word passages as suggestions for reprints. Additionally, we've had articles featured in a Maryland travel magazine and a Virginia publication. The Upland Project published Upland Shooting Life as an Audible book with great success, introducing George Bird Evans to a new generation of readers. Several young visitors mentioned discovering GBE through this medium. We now plan to publish *An Affair with Grouse* as an audiobook.

Another connection forged with younger readers was through The Bird Dog Society. They organized an all-day seminar titled "Troubles with Bird Dogs," focusing on field first aid for bird dogs here at Old Hemlock. The day featured two local veterinarians and presenters with field experience. Our own Old Hemlock Family member, Richard Baylor, presented on how to stock a first aid kit. Another presenter was Nick Adair, who runs a YouTube channel called Gun Dog It Yourself. He produced two podcasts about Old Hemlock—check them out! These connections helped to foster new readers.

My strategy for promoting George Bird Evans and the Old Hemlock Foundation is akin to fishing: if you never cast the line, you will never catch anything. So, I take every opportunity to share the life and times of George, his writings, his philosophy of hunting, his partnership with Kay, and the works of the OHF. I was invited, along with Laurel and Birch, to participate in a film about Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge and nearby places to visit. We were filmed hunting in the valley and banding a woodcock. The video includes a GBE sketch of a woodcock. Check it out by searching "Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge with Peter Schriemer." My long-term stays in Canaan Valley during woodcock season provide many opportunities to share George's legacy with hunters and meet new readers.

We continue to provide scholarships for local area medical students and Bruceton School attendance area students pursuing undergraduate degrees. I want to thank those who have donated, enhancing the scholarships we can offer.

As for the physical plant at OHF, we have made two major improvements. First, we upgraded the HVAC system to control humidity, create a stable year-round temperature, and include a UV system to eliminate molds, mildew, bacteria, and viruses in the air. I was pleasantly surprised by the difference it has made in the house. We still plan to increase energy efficiency without detracting

from the residence's charm.

The second major improvement on the grounds was creating 40 acres of early succession habitat. When George purchased Old Hemlock in 1939, it was a working farm until the mid-1950s when the fields were planted with non-native Red Pine, White Pine, and Norway Spruce. In addition to allowing it to regenerate naturally, I have planted pollinator plants. We have teamed with the WV Branch of the American Chestnut Foundation to start a nursery of pure American Chestnut trees to reintroduce them to the Appalachian Mountains—an endeavor I find very interesting. We also collaborate with The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy and Central Appalachian Spruce Restoration Initiative to establish native Red Spruce groves on Old Hemlock. The main purpose of the habitat restoration was to establish native plants to foster woodcock and grouse habitat. I am still looking for my first sighting of these birds. Our work has been visited by the WVU Wildlife Department's Advanced Fisheries and Wildlife Management classes.

I also want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the other directors and the many members of the Old Hemlock Family who have supported various endeavors to promote and preserve the legacy of George Bird Evans and his wife, Kay. Your dedication and contributions are invaluable. As always, our doors are open to the Old Hemlock Family to visit and share in the magic of Old Hemlock.



"It was Karma that we should find Old Hemlock and bring it back to life, with the Brieries to the east and the Mountain to our west, depending on where we stand and which direction we look."

George Bird Evans, *Grouse on the Mountain* 1994

Dreaming That Someday It Might Come Back

LeJay Graffious

George hunted Canaan Valley for the first time in 1958 with Walt Lesser over Ruff, Dixie, and Jeb. Walt said, “Neither of us had previously seen the high numbers of woodcock we encountered on that day.” George documented this hunt in the *Grouse & Woodcock in the Blackwater/Canaan* chapter entitled, “Day Six-22 October 1958.” Thus began a long love affair as he wrote, “I had experienced the peculiar charm of ‘cock gunning and the appeal of dog work on those lovely little birds in the strange land of Canaan.”

I have come to love my time in the Canaan hunting over an Old Hemlock setter. The joy of pushing through shoulder-high spirea or stooping under a coppice of hawthorns to spy an Old Hemlock setter on point never diminishes. The experience is enhanced when shared by others who feel the heritage of Evans. During the fall of 2019, Tom Bowman and I met in the valley to walk in the shadow of this legacy. To see OH Webley and OH Mountain Laurel work as a near identical brace and lock up on point was a thrill and mental Kodak moment. Thanks to the new technology of the cell phone, there was also a digital moment to be remembered and shared.

The only way to experience the magic of the valley off-trail in the Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge (CVNWR) is to be hunting. I hunted 17 days in the valley during the fall of 2019, but only carried my Beretta on five days for reasons forthcoming. The refuge has protected thousands of acres from development. The current management knows the value of creating young forest habitat essential for woodcock.

Ken Rosenberg of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and his team reported in the journal *Science* that the North American bird population has dropped by 29% since 1970. Studies show that woodcock populations have dropped at a rate of 1.1 percent per year over the last fifty years (1). George kept detailed records of his hunts. In the *Grouse & Woodcock* book’s last chapter, “Reverie,” George laments on the decreasing numbers of birds in the valley. My friend, Joe Riffenberger, who was a WV Department of Natural Resources biologist, banded the first woodcock in Canaan. He foresaw the pressure on the population if this treasure was revealed. He refused to enter the banding location when he submitted the records, only to record “near Red Creek.”

The CVNWR biologist, Dawn Washington, saw the need to protect the future of the woodcock in the valley. Of course all management decisions are data based. To this end, CVNWR became a member of the Eastern Woodcock Migration Research Cooperative (EWMRC) in 2019. The collaborative was formed to better understand the ecology of the American Woodcock (AMWO). Alexander Fish, Dr. Erik Blomberg, and Dr. Amber Roth at the Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Conservation Biology of The University of Maine are the chief researchers of the project. Working with partners in the breeding and wintering range, satellite transmitters are used to monitor both spring and fall migration. The mission is to determine:

- when woodcock initiate migration
- how long it takes individuals to complete migration
- survival during migration
- stopover sites where woodcock rest and refuel during migration (1).

When the Friends of the 500th (CVNWR was the 500th refuge in the United States), posted a plea in the spring of 2019 to raise funds to purchase GPS transmitters for the project, I alerted the other Old Hemlock Foundation directors. We agreed to fund one transmitter. In September, I was contacted by a retired CVNWR employee. She said that the project was in jeopardy because the bird bander from Maine could not come to trap, band, and install the transmitters. She asked if I was interested. I jumped at the chance. But as with any federal agency, many permits and licenses are needed to be obtained on a short timeline. Plus, I needed to travel to New York State to be trained in the installation of the GPS tags, and to be observed handling the birds and accurately recording critical data. One of the two training locations was Hemlock, NY! After this, I needed my federal banding permit to be amended to include woodcock. Once that was final, I needed a WV state permit to handle gamebirds, then to order specific sized mist nets and banding pliers. With everything in place and seven GPS transmitter in hand, all I needed was to trap seven woodcock.

The CVNWR banding project installed four GPS tags on local birds. Three methods were used to capture the woodcock. First, ten 12-meter mist nets were set in the crepuscular flight paths from the diurnal habitat on the forest edges to the open areas of nocturnal roosting. The second was to spotlight roosting birds and trap them with landing nets. The last technique was to use Old Hemlock Mountain Laurel to locate roosting birds and then catch them with landing nets. Thanks to Bob Rose for sharing a Michigan DNR published book by Andy Ammann, PhD of, *A Guide to Capturing and Banding American Woodcock Using Pointing Dogs*. Of the five AMWO captured, four were in mist nets and one was caught with a landing net. Four birds received GPS tags with a digital signature. The bander's assessment of the fifth captured bird was deemed to be in too poor of health to install a transmitter.



Three locations were determined by observing crepuscular flights, using spring singing male census data, and by means of field hunting experience in the area. Efforts on October 14 on Freeland Road and on October 15 on A-Frame Road produced no captured birds. Banding efforts occurred off Cortland Road on October 21, 23, 24, 29 and 30 with five woodcock processed.

When a woodcock was caught, the bird was banded with a 9-digit USGS registered band. The data associated with this number are the GPS Tag ID, bander ID, sex, age, mass, bill length, leg length, tarsus length, and wing cord. In addition, a secondary feather was plucked for DNA assessment.

During the first two years of the project, 280 transmitters were placed on AMWO on their breeding grounds both in the spring and fall. Most of the effort is overseen by the state's or province's game management agency except in West Virginia where only the Canaan Valley Wildlife Refuge is part of the eastern North America effort.

The four GPS tags placed provide a small sample of data but, when taken in total with the others, a more complete picture emerges. The Canaan Valley AMWO, nonetheless, provides interesting data on four individuals. The digital signature is uploaded to Movebank for Animal Tracking Data. Movebank is a free online infrastructure that helps researchers manage, share, analyze, and archive animal movement data. The Movebank project is hosted by the Max Planck Institute of Animal Behavior in coordination with the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, the Ohio State University, and the University of Konstanz, Germany (2).

The first tagged woodcock was an After Hatch-Year male captured on October 21, 2019. The satellite data was uploaded and available on October 23. The bird stayed within 0.25 miles of the capture location near Cortland Road until the transmitter went dark on October 31. The reason for loss of data is unknown, but speculations are that he was caught by a predator, taken by a hunter, or experienced transmitter failure.

That same night, the second woodcock was processed. The bird was tracked from October 23 until November 6 when data stopped transmitting. This was a Hatch-Year (HY) female. She moved mostly in a 0.5 by 1.5 mile area between the North Branch of the Blackwater River and the Appalachian Highway.

On October 22 a HY male was banded with a transmitter attached. His transmission became active on October 30. He spent most of his time in a small wooded drainage near a pond of High Meadow Drive (Latitude 34.0732918, Longitude -79.4441833). He made one flight east into Timberline and a few flights near the North Branch of the Blackwater River, always to return to the High Meadow Drive pond. On November 20 he began his migration flight south. At 20:01 on November 21 he was 300 miles south in South Carolina (Latitude 34.9739647, Longitude -81.5918427) due east of Spartanburg, SC. A Google Earth analysis of the habitat was forest land surrounding either a hay or pasture field. His daily transmissions were within a 0.25 mile radius; all locations were in the woods very near the open field. His data went dark on December 10, 2019 within feet of his first signal from South Carolina. The fourth bird was banded on October 23. This male was only banded and released with minimal data due to the poor condition of the bird. He was easily extracted from the net but showed signs of stress immediately. The bander wondered if the bird was carrying lead shot since it was hunting season.

The October 29 bird piqued the interest of Maine researchers. This young male hung out near the North Branch of the Blackwater River, west of the intersection of Cortland Road and Buckhorn Ridge Road. On November 12 his migration flight began. By the next day, he had flown 300 miles to just east of White Pine, TN. On November 14, flew 177 miles west to near Laguardo, TN where he stayed until November 20. November 21 saw him move northwest 100 miles to near Aurora, KY. A short 8 mile flight south soon followed for a five-day stay. Then he began to move south again; on November 28, he was 280 miles south near Pine Buff, AR. A few short lags to the south came next. On the 29th, he moved 40 miles south. The next day he was 10 miles farther south. On November 30, he had moved another 70 miles south into northern Louisiana where he stayed in a 0.34 mile diameter area (Latitude 32.4027023, Longitude -92.4638359) until the last transmission on December 24 with one 2.4 miles foray out and back. An analysis of this habitat dated April 16, 2018 on Google Earth made it appear to be a recent timber cut surrounded by pine plantations. He stayed mainly inside the new harvest zone near two drainage ditches which had a few trees remaining.

The American Woodcock is an umbrella species. The woodcock has an economic value to sportsmen and the hunting economy. Therefore, there is an interest to maintain the young forests and edges that this bird uses. A byproduct of developing the woodcock habitat provides valuable feeding areas for many other species of mammals and passerines.

As with any worthy project, it takes a community of individuals. The support of Ron Hollis, CVNWR Superintendent, was critical. Dawn Washington's leadership and organizational skills got the project moving and made it a reality. Fifteen non-staff volunteers logged 230 hours during the 12 days of effort supporting my capture and banding efforts. Funds for the \$1800 per transmitter cost came from gifts by the WV Highlands Conservancy, the Old Hemlock Foundation, Walt Lesser, and others. And we can see how this special place blends into the total fabric of the western hemisphere's natural world. Our plan is to continue this project in the spring when the timberdoodles return to the Land of Canaan.

In the back of my mind the Blackwater/Canaan is still a fantasy where spirits of Old Hemlock settlers-past feather-up at ghost woodcock and grouse. To go there is like finding the key to an enhanced room filled with rare treasures.

There is a longing and an ecstasy about this strange land. Longing for what has been taken from us – the birds and the solitude. There is ecstasy in dreaming that someday it might come back.

George Bird Evans *Grouse & Woodcock in the Blackwater/Canaan* 1997

- 1) Fish, A.C., E.J. Blomberg, and A.M. Roth. 2019. American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) migration ecology in the Eastern North America. Annual report by Eastern Woodcock Migratory Research Cooperative, The University of Maine, Orono, Maine, USA. Available at www.woodcockmigration.org.
- 2) Wikelski, M., and Kays, R. 2020. Movebank: archive, analysis and sharing of animal movement data. Hosted by the Max Planck Institute for Animal Behavior. www.movebank.org, accessed on January 19, 2020.

Epilogue:

I originally wrote this for an Old Hemlock Newsletter which never came to be. It serves to tell of my first involvement in American Woodcock Research in 2019. I continued working with refuge staff for the next three years doing fall banding with limited success. With the advancement of electronic tags, the principal researcher with the Eastern American Woodcock Cooperative found that spring banding was more successful. Audio playback of spring male displays at mist net traps lured the birds to the nets, rather than hoping to catch them in the fall moving from brushy feeding areas to open areas for night roosting. Now transmitters can be programmed to broadcast once a week in the spring, then shut down when the bird is on territory to save battery life, and then in the fall, kick back on to record migration.

In 2023, the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources secured a \$273,000 grant to study woodcock in WV. Being the only certified bird bander in WV qualified to install GPS transmitters, I was invited to help train WV biologists to trap, collect metrics, age, identify sex, and install transmitters. That year, the study expanded to include the refuge and a wildlife management area west of Morgantown, WV. We successfully installed 15 transmitters, but 9 ended up being defective. In 2024, the study expanded to four locations in WV, with 17 e-tags successfully transmitting data.

On page 7 of *The Upland Shooting Life*, “An Attitude Towards Game,” George reveals a philosophy regarding the killing of game that was certainly unorthodox among hunters: “If I could shoot a bird and still not hurt it, the way I can take a trout and release it, I doubt if I would kill another one.” In a way, my involvement with this woodcock research has resolved his desired internal conflict. Although capturing is no longer a fall activity and my setters are not involved, the Old Hemlocks still experience woodcock in the Valley. During the spring 2024, my setters assisted a master’s level student at the University of Maine locate woodcock nests for her research thesis.

I began a Northern Saw-whet Owl banding station at the refuge in 2022. What does this have to do with woodcock, you ask? The refuge provides us with a campsite for our RV with all amenities in prime game bird habitat. During the 2024 hunting season, Laurel and Birch hunted every day from opening day until November 14. After we step out of the camper door, if I do not heal them and hold to release, they are on point in less than two minutes. Additionally, I band migrating passerines on Dolly Sods from the third week of August until the first week of October. During this preseason activity, we find grouse nearly every day.

On page 10, George ends the chapter with, “If anyone can dig up something nice to say about me, I hope it will be, ‘He loved bird shooting, but more than that, he loved the bird.’” I share the same hope.

Highlights of EAWC Research with 800 Transmitters:

- **Expanding Range:** The woodcock range is expanding northward, benefiting from large timber cuts in Canada.
- **Migration Variability:**
 - Some birds never migrate out of home range.
 - Northern birds migrate farther, often hop-scotching over more southern birds. For example, a woodcock from the mountains of North Carolina may only move to the coast, while one from New Brunswick may fly to Louisiana. This pattern is common in other migrating birds.
 - Males migrate more rapidly than females.
 - Normal migration altitude is around 800 ft.
 - Most flights are below 3,000 ft, but some have been recorded at over a mile high.
 - Migration altitudes are higher in the spring due to less favorable prevailing winds at lower altitudes.
 - Migration movements are highly variable.
 - Two males captured in Florida at the same time and location migrated to vastly different areas: one to the MN/Ontario border, the other to Prince Edward Island, ending up 1,300 miles apart.
- **Itinerant Breeding in Females:**
 - Females may experience multiple nesting failures across different states. For instance, a female with failed nest in Alabama may nest again in West Virginia. If failure in WV she may continue to New England to nest again. One such female nested in Canaan and then in Wisconsin.
 - Only one in ten nesting attempts is successful.
- **Migration Timelines:**
 - The average woodcock begins fall migration around November 7, taking four weeks to travel 1,000 miles.
 - Stopovers usually last a single day.
 - The average migratory flight is 166 miles.
 - Spring migration is slower, averaging 6.5 weeks and requiring 9-10 flights.
- **Genetic Findings:** No genetic difference among any of the species within their habitat range.
- **Singing Ground Survey (SGS):**
 - SGS has been used extensively to develop conservation plans, direct management actions, and understand causes of decline.
 - GPS-tagged woodcock show 74% completing migration before the onset of SGS.
 - Younger birds are more likely to migrate during the SGS window.
 - Males sing at all points along the migration path, which can lead to double counting.
- **Individualistic Migration Strategies:** Woodcock have unique migration strategies rather than following group patterns.
- **Impressive Migration Feat:**
 - One male on his first migration flew 1,200 miles in just four days. On November 7, he flew 630 miles from the Michigan/Indiana state line, arriving in west-central Mississippi by 9 a.m. on November 8. Over the next three days, he flew another 250 miles to coastal Louisiana, then turned north for another 320 miles, settling in northern Mississippi by November 11.

Editor's Note

We're pleased to bring you this new edition of the Old Hemlock Letter after a brief hiatus. By way of introduction, my name is Glenn Jonsson, and I am currently owned by two Old Hemlock setters—OH Moxie and her daughter, OH Poppy. As Hall Carter mentioned earlier in this issue, my family and I raised the “Maine 14” litter, whelped in 2021.

My journey with Old Hemlock setters began with Flicka from Steve Hitsman's 2014 litter. Before that, immediately after college, my wife and I had Bayview setters—wonderful dogs in their own right—until that line was sadly lost in the early 2000s following the owner's passing. My introduction to George Bird Evans' writings came in the early '90s, thanks to my brother, Eric. He first pointed me to George's Pointing Dog Journal column, and soon after, I was captivated by Eric's growing collection of George's books. Like many of you, I found something electric in those writings—something that extended beyond time in the field. Unlike the typical “hook-and-bullet” or “how-to” stories of that era, George's reflections on his dogs, respect for the quarry, the sporting lifestyle, and even his home resonated deeply with me. I knew then that I wanted to build a life shaped by those same values. While I will never be a writer like George or possess his many immense talents, he became a sporting role model—one whose influence, I know, has been meaningful to many of us.

This shared connection, this “Old Hemlock Family,” is something rare and special. It's more than a community; it's a living legacy. As time moves forward, it's important that we continue to nurture it. That's why I am honored to take on the role of editor for this Letter, following in the footsteps of Mike McDonald and Bruce Buckley. While my writing may not be as strong as others, I am committed to keeping this tradition alive.

In this edition, you'll find updates from LeJay on happenings at Old Hemlock, as well as his tireless volunteer work with ornithology and woodcock banding in the Canaan Valley. Hall shares updates on the line, including his impressive litter of 14 (!) pups that are now nearly 15 weeks old. We also have Mike McDonald's story on the origins of this Letter, plus trip reports and in-season hunting stories from family members—stories I know will entertain you and leave you longing for next October.

Enjoy this edition, and thank you for being part of this remarkable community.

Glenn Jonsson

“The difference between mere killing and a glorious sport is the manner in which you do it – over thrilling dogs, in magnificent country and with a near-reverence for the game.”

George Bird Evans, The Upland Shooting Life 1971

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*Time is the Woodcock Moon coming up,
huge and orange, over the eastern ridge
as you walk out of covert with your dog
still questing the bosky damps for 'cock
he is unwilling to give up.*

George Bird Evans, *October Fever*, page 61