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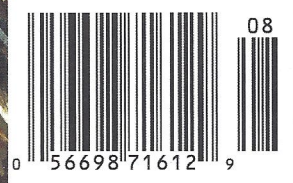
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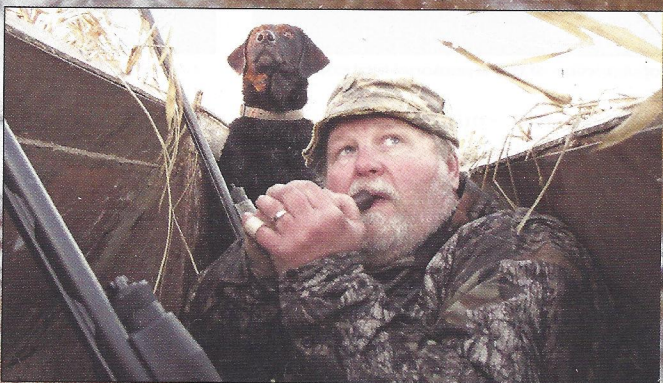
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House Of Dreams



A Lifetime Of Waterfowling Memories Under One Roof

By John Gordon

Pat Pitt's residence in Olive Branch, Miss., seems normal to the eye—a modest home set back from the road and reached by a pine-lined driveway. There are many others like it in the area, but a closer examination will show you the treasures that reside inside. Pat is a waterfowl hunter, one of the most accomplished of his generation. He started as a young man and the fire inside grew, and he has watched the sun rise over decoy spreads around the world. His drive to hunt is more than most, and he works hard to be able to follow the dreams of his youth. He also continues to put in many hours preserving the memories of his hunts in a unique collection of mounted birds, photos and memorabilia. This is the story of a man and what he calls "a hobby that got out of hand."

A young Pat Pitt and dog Jake (left). Pitt (above) with Ace in a more recent photo.

SNOW GEESE ILLUSTRATION COURTESY PENNINGTON ARMS

House Of Dreams



The north wall well illustrates the incredible variety of a portion of Pitt's personal bird collection.

Pitt grew up in Chattanooga, Tenn., hunting the rivers in the area as a young man and discovering those magic moments that make every hunter leave a warm bed in hopes that a duck or goose might fly into range. Pitt later moved to Memphis to attend what was then Memphis State University. The change of venue gave him a new area to explore—the Delta of the Mississippi River, one of the best duck-hunting destinations in the country. The young hunter probed the backwaters of Arkansas, Tennessee and Mississippi with some success, but his efforts were all trial and error.

His life was then changed forever by pure chance. “The girl that lived next door to my apartment was engaged to be married and her fiancé had an uncle who was heavily into hunting waterfowl,” Pitt recalls. “She knew that I had a passion for this as well and suggested we meet. She gave me the address to his place in midtown Memphis and I just went up to the door and knocked. Dr. William ‘Chubby’ Andrews, a prominent general surgeon, answered.”

A fast friendship followed, and the pair began a practice of hunting together. In addition to hunting, Dr. Andrews had a love of taxidermy and was naturally gifted at it since he possessed the skilled hands of a surgeon.

Pat actually purchased his first mount—a bufflehead drake that cost him \$10, but the bird was poor quality in comparison to the mounts he had seen in the Andrews’ household. Pat expressed a great desire to learn the art, and he was soon creating his own mounts next to Dr. Andrews in the surgeon’s basement. His first efforts were not the best, he admits, but he kept at it. His skills continued to improve with time, and now his mounts hang in the collections of other hunters around the country.

Storied Lineage

Dr. Andrews had a storied lineage in the waterfowl community. He was related to one of the founding members of the Beaver Dam Hunting Club, founded at Beaver Dam Lake in Tunica, Miss., in 1882. The young doctor befriended the famous hunter and writer Nash Buckingham there and spent many days in the boats and blinds with him until Buckingham’s death in 1970. Dr. Andrews wrote a book about it titled “Nash Buckingham, Beaver Dam and Other Hunting Tales,” which is a valued collector’s item today.

Pat never had a chance to meet Nash but he has hunted some of the same spots at Beaver Dam with Chubby using Nash’s famous shotgun, Bo



Pat and his sons—below flying woodie.

Whoop II. “We even shot the last case of shells given to Nash by Winchester owner John Olin,” Pat said, smiling at the memory.

Pat always admired one mount in Andrews’ collection more than others—a striking black-and-white goose. He asked the doctor what it was, and he replied that it was an emperor goose from Alaska. Then and there, Pat started saving money to head north. His first trip came in 1979. “My wife Gail and I headed up to Anchorage and I left her there with my Chesapeake, Jake. I then went to Cold Bay figuring I would return in two days with my goose. The weather turned horrible and I was stuck there for a week.”

Pat still hunts as many days as he can each year, and his collection has grown to more than 850 specimens kept in an old carriage house located next door to his residence. Carriage houses originally were built to house horse-drawn carriages and associated tack. Pat converted his into a trophy room, really a trophy house, as the number of mounts grew. “When we bought the house I originally thought we would use it for a guest area,” he explained. “Then I had a vision of turning it into display space for my mounts. My wife wasn’t crazy about the idea at first but I persuaded her to let me have it.”



Pitt's Remington—"worn out" after 24 years.

Walk Through Time

Walking into this waterfowling dream house is a breathtaking experience, one hard to adequately describe with pictures, let alone words. I explored the house with Pat, marveling not at just the mounts but at all of the photos and memorabilia placed on walls and floors. Old shotgun shell boxes, shells, books on waterfowl and even a boat are part of the scene. His favorite shell boxes are the Remington Peters line featuring a flying mallard on the outside. He uses the same logo for the L'Anguille Lounge, his duck club in northeast Arkansas. He has every Peters box with the exception of 10 gauge. "I know where one is; I just have to ask the owner for it," Pat said. "Hopefully he will let me have it without a fight."

There are so many things to see in Pat's collection that I had to make a decision to focus on just a few, to find the stories behind them and tell them here. My goal was to coax Pat to narrow down the stories to a few of his favorites. But as we viewed the collection, the memories kept filling Pat's mind and he discussed many mounts at length.

We started in the main house where only three mounts are kept. A spectacled eider resided in a glass case in the living room, with a plaque that read, "The Holy Grail" on the inside. Pat



Emperor geese taken in 1979 in Cold Bay, Alaska, preceded being weathered-in for a week.

explained his fondness for this piece of the collection. "Spectacled eiders live in one of the most remote locations in the world. Their home is the Bering Sea, made famous now by the 'Deadliest Catch' television show but not well known outside of Alaska in 1983 when I went there to take this bird. That hunt was 95 percent just getting there, a real adventure to a place where decisions cannot be made lightly and danger is always present. This drake completed my North American collection, so that adds something to him as well."

Pat has a love for the black duck, and the next mount we talked about was a black duck drake that his son Stephen shot in Arkansas many years ago when he was a young teenager. "This is Stephen's first black duck, a species that I have valued over all others through the years. It is special because of who shot it, not because it is rare or exotic," Pat said. There was another black duck drake hanging on the wall on the other side of the room, a band hanging on its leg. This was Pat's first banded black, a neat memory for any hunter. That was not important to him though when he gazed upon it. "I shot that duck with a buddy of mine who later died in a helicopter crash in Vietnam. That is what I see in that bird, not a band," he said.

Many other banded ducks and geese

were scattered throughout the collection. One was a white-fronted goose more commonly called a specklebelly that was taken in Texas. It turned out that this goose was banded in the Arctic and it inspired Pat to write a letter to the man who banded the birds to find out more about the area. "Those were the days long before the Internet, when you actually had to contact people with letters and hope for a response," Pat explained. "I did receive a reply and it led to hunting connections in that part of the world that I never could have cultivated otherwise. Now, technology has made it so much easier to communicate." Pat continued, "I have always been lucky in making the right connections that have made my travels possible. I am just an average guy who saved his vacation time and money to make this happen. It also has helped a great deal to have a wife that has supported me along the way." Pat also added that being in the right place at the right time has been crucial in his adventures.

In a corner of the room stood a glass case with a mallard pair dead mount hanging on a strap. Behind the ducks was an old single-shot shotgun and black-and-white photos. A closer look also revealed a patch signifying the 82nd Airborne Division from World

House Of Dreams



A Ross snow and blue, all banded, came from Texas and Arkansas.

War II. Pat's father was a paratrooper with the 82nd, the Army's first airborne division transferred from infantry on August 15, 1942. Pat referred to this as his "Memory Case," a special tribute to his father, who went into Normandy the night before the invasion. He survived that epic day but later lost his life in Korea, a career soldier. An incredible coincidence is that Pat's stepfather was a pilot with the 325th Airborne group that flew as part of the 82nd and was also used by the 101st Airborne Division. He piloted an aircraft into Normandy on the day preceding the battle, so the two men were both part of American history.

Hunter's Best Friend

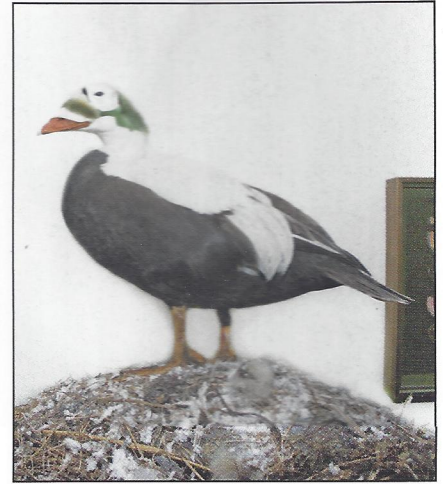
When you look at all the photos adorning the walls, there is a common theme among the shots of friends and

family; most of the photos also contain dogs. Retrievers have always been a part of the experience for Pat, and he showed me a photo of himself and a friend with his first Lab, Big John. "That dog came from Nilo Farms stock, given to me as a gift. I didn't know anything about training a dog and he didn't know anything about hunting, but we learned together," Pat recalled. "He was big and full of heart; he always found a way to get the birds back to us. What he lacked in formal training he certainly made up for in sense and pure desire."

A pair of Chesapeake Bay Retrievers followed, Jake and Koye, and then more Labs, Lucky, Clipper, and his current dog Ace. There were two other glass-cased mounts: one with a plaque proclaiming it to be "Koye's Finale" with the date and location of the hunt, and one similar as a tribute to Lucky.



Pitt's first banded black duck in a flushing pose.



Spectacled eider, Pitt's "Holy Grail" bird.

Pat can tell you what dog retrieved what duck or goose for much of the collection. He spoke of all of them fondly. "You can look at some of these mounts and think that is a nice mallard or a pintail or whatever, but they all mean more to me, especially ones that were retrieved by one of my dogs." We both agreed that it just isn't fair that a dog's life is so much shorter than a man's.

Greater Meanings

We continued to walk and talk together, viewing the collection and discussing this mount or that. We walked past a mallard/pintail cross that he and his son Patrick took in a pit blind owned by a friend who is now battling cancer. "Patrick and I both realized it was a hybrid at the same time; we had both mallards and pintails working at once. Once again, the mount has taken on a new meaning based on the location we shot it at. I look at it and think about my buddy and his struggle."

Pat then spied the first duck he and Dr. Andrews mounted together, a ruddy duck drake. Nothing fancy, but another important part of the collection and dear to Pat.

"Memories, good or bad, are carved in stone," Pat said standing on the first floor of the carriage house before we left. "What means more to me now than the bird itself is the experience and who I am with at the time. The memory is what matters in the end; it stays with you long after the shooting is over."

I think we can all relate to that. ✈