

# THE CHRISTMAS GIFT

BY JIM MIZE

A grizzled old Brittany hobbled onto the gravel road in front of my truck. Just steps behind him, a hunter clambered across the ditch and waved, partly showing appreciation that I was looking out for his dog and partly a suggestion to stop.

I pulled over, always open for a chat with a bird hunter.

"Doing any good?" I asked, looking over the fellow's shoulder and down the hill into a clear-cut. I didn't expect a truthful answer, since coveys are generally guarded more closely than the youngest daughter. That the answer was truthful and emotional caused me to put it in park and turn off the engine.

"Got one," he said. "That's all I wanted really." His eyes were misting up, and I knew the beginning of a story when I heard it, so I just waited.

"Took the pup to the vet this week for his hips." Even with a white-haired dog, it was still "the pup" to his owner. Time stands still in memories, if not in real life.

"The vet says he's suffering, and there's not a lot he can do for him. Says I should put him down. But I've hunted too many times with that pup to just put him down. I had to give him one more."

He couldn't talk for a minute, so I waited. The Brittany had limped over to a sunny spot in the leaves and laid down. He'd probably have trouble getting up once he stiffened.

The fellow continued his story. "I worried that I might have trouble

finding a covey close by, one the pup could still hunt for in his shape. But ever since this patch of timber's been cut, a few birds have been here.

"Almost as soon as I let him out, he started acting birdy. If you hunt, you know what I'm talking about. Not only that, he looked younger. His nose and heart were pulling him through that clear-cut even if his legs wouldn't. When we got to the back corner, he pointed.

"The covey must have been busted up, because I flushed just one single bird. It sailed around a holly tree and I was afraid I'd lost it. But I picked it up again around the back side and tumbled it with one shot. The pup even brought it back to me." His voice trailed off as he repeated, "... even brought it back to me."

He needed to tell this story. It seemed part of the ritual, two bird hunters on a gravel road secluded in a national forest. This memory was larger than a single quail and an old bird dog. This gift encompassed us all.

"All I prayed for was one bird, and that's what I got," he said. He patted the side of my truck telling me the story was over. He waved as he turned and walked away.





PHOTOS BY JOEY FRAZIER

never been on enough birds to be a great dog, and she suffers from being owned by a fellow who lacks enough bird smarts to make her a great dog. None of that matters much when Skeet's on point, however, and my son is kicking up a bird.

Bird hunting is one of those areas where you should never judge yourself or your dog too harshly. Kids play basketball without being reminded they're not NBA material. Bird dogs deserve the same chance. Skeet hunted like the family pet she is, sometimes rusty, sometimes solid, never flashy. All that mattered on this bluebird day, however, was that she was my dog pointing birds for my son.

By the time we started looking for singles in the woods, age and lack of conditioning had curbed Skeet's rambunctiousness. In some ways, she hunted better slow, tiptoeing after running birds. Not knowing whether she was breaking point or checking up on runners, I teetered between over-handling and indecision. Finally, age and lack of conditioning had also curbed my rambunctiousness, and I just let the dog and the son hunt.

Coming around on the second bunch of birds, both had the routine down. Skeet

picked up the scent crossing the field, a light breeze had begun to sweep waves through the broomstraw. Stu approached from the uphill side and knew what to expect as he walked up the birds. His game bag began to have some weight, and being the only youngster in the field, his enthusiasm grew.

Bird hunters build libraries of memories, and you rarely need a card to check them out. Mostly, you just

That story haunts me even now, fifteen years and a couple of bird dogs later. The pain of what he had to do was bearable mostly because of what he had done for his pup on that last hunt. It seems to me that anything that takes age off, even temporarily, is a good thing, whether for dog or owner.

Skeet, my Brittany, hunts shorter loops with each passing year. Her muzzle is whitened,

and some mornings, she makes sure I'm coming her way before moving to greet me. I remember the old bird hunter and think maybe he was onto something. Maybe there's no greater gift to a bird dog than birds.

I have no clear-cut, however, where a covey always hangs out. I've tried short loops through old farms where we used to find birds. But Skeet's legs always fade before we find them, if they're still there.

So, as Christmas approached, I hatched a scheme to give my Brittany birds for Christmas. The local sportsman's club was glad to oblige, and I booked a double handful of birds and a field for the day after Christmas. To ice the deal, I took my son, Stu, home from college for the holidays, to be my shooter.



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The weather cooperated mostly, a bluebird day a touch on the warm side for an old dog running. Skeet bounded out of the truck expecting no more than a run in a field of broomstraw. The first birds surprised her, and she bumped them into flight. Stu dropped the last one up, and Skeet hunted the dead bird.

I could embellish the afternoon and the bird-hunting prowess of my Brittany, but I'd be lying. She's





have to ask. Or nudge them with a phrase or a landmark that jogs their memories. Driving past a field once with an older bird hunter reminded him of a setter he had owned.

“You know, there are two kinds of bird dogs, those who smell the ground and those who smell the wind. The last one’s better. I had a little female setter one time who was a winder. We were driving by this field with her in the pick-up bed and I saw her stiffen up like she was on point. So, I pulled over and dropped the tail gate. She trotted straight back up the road and locked up on a covey right where she smelled them the first time.”

Memories like that one are shared gifts, and we were creating a new one today.

Skeet started acting birdy in the middle of the field, zigzagging and

trying to pinpoint the smell that drove her. She sailed over into a patch of briars, and for a moment age released her.

After a couple hours, her lack of conditioning, too many years and the heat had taken their toll. We gave Skeet a breather before we went back to mop up the singles.

Resting on the tailgate afterwards, I thought about this Christmas gift. Skeet had more hunting today than an old dog could rightfully pack into a season. Stu saw the family pet in a new light, as if she had led a double life and he’d only just seen the second one. And I have the memory of them both.

Maybe that’s what the old hunter was doing all those years ago. He had stopped the hand of time long enough to capture a memory. He’d done what

he felt was right for his pup, and in turn, done what was right for himself.

This hunt wasn’t just for an old Brittany who needed a few more points or a young hunter who shot a handful of birds. This gift was about what was right for a pup, a young hunter and his dad. Somehow, this gift included an old hunter on a gravel road years ago with mist in his eyes as he told a stranger his story.

This gift encompassed us all.

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Jim Mize has recently completed an award-winning collection of outdoor stories for fly fishermen titled *A Creek Trickles Through It*. For more information on this and his other books, go to [www.acreektricklesthroughit.com](http://www.acreektricklesthroughit.com).