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 Photos Courtesy of Author

HOUNDSMEN AND BLACK WATER BEARS



Chris Douglas, Carolina All Out TV

The morning sun is just breaking through the treetops, shooting rays on my face. It's cold for a North Carolina fall morning, and the sun's warmth is a preamble for how hot it's about to get. An earlier check of the game cams confirmed there's a good bear in this block. I am posted in a specific spot; one picked by Doug Temple, the lead houndsman. He doesn't talk much, but when he does, it's in a low, southern grumble that's the law for that moment. He drives away to take the lead while whoever's left scrambles to a position along the long dirt road to form a line the bears are not to cross.

I can feel the fever building. To the uninformed, it appears to be pure chaos: guns emerge from every truck, and there's the unmistakable sound of steel while shells are racked into each chamber. Dogs left in truck boxes in reserve are no less tuned in, and whimpers turn to howls.

This scene has been played out time and again for generations, but it never gets old. It's orchestrated by the one man who knows the bear so well it's been said he could be one. That man is the ultimate houndsman; a man who runs these swamps like his family has for four generations. That man is Pasquotank, North Carolina's Doug Temple.

When newcomers find themselves immersed in the action for a single hunt, I believe they will instantly develop a love for the dogs and the sport. You can't help but be drawn into the sounds and smells of the swamp and the thrill of the chase. To leave the dirt road and dive into the black water swamp, you feel as if you are entering a different world. These dogs and men literally put their lives and that of their dogs in pursuit of tradition. It's a combination of human instinct, tradition and pride. It's what they live for.

THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP

The 113,000-acre refuge has allowed deer hunting since 1979 and bear hunting since 2006. The majority of the wildlands are found in Virginia, but a reasonably-sized portion sweeps south into North Carolina. At one time, this landmass was covered by the sea, emerging from its depths after the last ice age.

Folklore tells us that the black waters contain healing powers. It has been said that passing ships would make an intentional stop to stock up on its natural medicine waters. The water is high in natural acids leached from the detritus of the cypress, gum and juniper trees. The science behind it shows us that the high acid content inhibits the growth of bacteria

This column is dedicated to the system that supports the public hunting of public wildlife for all fair chase sportsmen, and the stories and trophies that are the result. Theodore Roosevelt strongly believed that self-reliance and pursuing the strenuous activities of hunting and wilderness exploration was the best way to keep man connected to nature. We score trophies, but every hunt is to some extent a way of measuring ourselves.

and was used not only for medicine but to help inhibit spoilage on a ship's short journey.

The swamp's reputation is that of an impenetrable, bug-infested wasteland—except to the locals who grew to appreciate its beauty and the boundless wildlife it held to help sustain them. On this trip, I walk a mere pittance, constantly forced to my knees, deep in mud, tangled in vines and thorns that pull off clothing and cut my skin. Without a machete, it is almost impossible to make headway. As I claw and curse my way through it, it seems that nothing could survive here. When one stops for a moment and allows the silence to return, it comes back to life with the sounds of birds, squirrels and other signs of wildlife underfoot.

Historical accounts tell of people taking refuge from whatever bad deed society claimed on them and counting on the swamp's reputation to discourage pursuit. Let's not forget the times when the Underground Railroad, formed by large colonies of free blacks coming to the aid of runaway slaves, found sanctuary in the swamp's impenetrable depths. Eventually some would emerge to assimilate into communities, finding work in local lumber operations in exchange for silence about their whereabouts.

THE TEMPLE FAMILY TREE

The Temple family history of running hounds goes back at least four generations—to the '20s and '30s. Originally, the Temples scratched a living from the soil by farming 15,000 acres of soybeans and corn. They supplemented their food stocks with wild meat harvested in the swamp. In the case of the Temples, it was usually swamp bear.

In the beginning, a team of one hound per man was all that was needed. Having too many dogs was simply too many mouths to feed. Although hunting was more for subsistence than sport in that era, as time progressed and the need to supplement food with wild game became more of a bonus, the love for running hounds became as much a part of them as the family name. Today Doug Temple and his son Wade have a dog breeding program where they take the best their pack has to offer to work towards the perfect hound dog.

THE HOUNDSMAN LIFESTYLE

Doug Temple's father was a second-generation farmer until the mid-70s when the family started into logging. Around the mid-90s they gave up farming altogether for logging full time. Today the Temples privately own about 2,000 acres, some of which borders the Great Dismal Swamp that they utilize for logging and hunting.

Even as the years are creeping up on Doug, this quiet, modest man wears the scratches from thorns and brush on his face and hands as a badge of honor; evidence that he is still in the game and the patriarch of the family.



ABOVE: Bear claw marks on the tree. Bears are known to bite and scratch trees in territorial behavior.

BELOW: Old photo of houndsman. The historic Temple family and crew showing off their best hounds (Provided by the Temple Family)





TOP: “Bungalow” as he prefers to be called, takes his role as “blocker” seriously. ABOVE: Patriarch Doug Temple takes five with his hounds. BELOW: Author Angelo Baio takes a bead at his treed black bear of a lifetime.



Doug’s son Wade is following his father’s footsteps—a chip off the ol’ block if I ever saw one. While I was in camp for two days, it wasn’t often that you’d see him standing still. If he was not helping coordinate the men on his father’s commands on a hunt, he was tending game cameras, running bait to feed sites or tending to his camp guests. Like his father, he isn’t much on idle chatter. But when he speaks, it’s obvious he’s a sincere man. He honors his family and the traditions of hunting with hounds. He’s a true southern gentleman.

The Temples’ version of a dog-breeding program was started by Wade’s grandfather, uncle and cousin John about 50 years ago. In the bear-hunting community, Plott hounds are technically considered the New World’s bear dog, yet they were first bred as Germany’s boar-hunting dog. They were brought to the new colony of North Carolina and found to have just the right scent-tracking skills and temperament to hunt bear. That versatility and toughness eventually had the breed named as the North Carolina state dog.

Wade explains that he has a mix of hound dogs—Plott, Bluetick, an American original, and the American English coonhound, a mix breed of hounds brought to the south from abroad. Each has a skill and personality that helps formulate a pack worthy to hunt bear. Wade likes his pack to have a variety of skills; some need to be good scent trackers while others need to be good at bay.

The dogs seem to be wild once loose, but in fact, they are tuned into the houndsman. They feed off each other’s tracking ability and communicate in a howl that can be identified by his master. A good houndsman can read his dog’s howl

individually, “just like your own kids’ voices,” Wade tells me. “They tell me what they see and smell, and I can tell them in my own voice what I see. If I get sight of a bear before they do, I can change my call and they’ll come to me and I can direct them to a bear.”

Wade likes to have at least four pups in training at any one time. “They need to start young and train all year long.” Good habits are formed, and exemplary traits are enhanced when the dogs learn from each other. Wade will train his pack in North Carolina in the off-season but will follow the bear-hunting seasons from Maine to Virginia whenever possible.

Maine and Virginia’s seasons are relatively short but come earlier in the year than North Carolina’s. Starting in Maine in September and working his way south with North Carolina’s split three-week season that starts in November and ends in December lengthens the whole hunting experience for his dogs. When a bear is taken during a hunt as opposed to being treed and released in the off-season, it is safer for the dogs and men. Wade also explains that the only reward for the dog is to finally get their mouth on the bear—and a dead bear is all the better. “They need to know there’s something in it for them.”

HOUNDSMAN/ CONSERVATIONIST, ONE IN THE SAME

“I help the farmers, by taking the bears before they can completely destroy cornfields,” Wade explains. Clearly this is a touchy subject as it is for almost any hunter. He tells me he is so disappointed to know that some folks just don’t accept that what he does is literally a service to the community and a testament to conservation. Hunting is necessary to keep

balance—balance between a world that needs the farmer's crop, the farmers who need an income, and the world that is better off having bears in it.

The balance of nature has been thrown off kilter by human intervention. Wade feels that he would rather continue his family legacy and take a bear in a hunt to help sustain a healthy bear population, which, in turn, works in concert with bear management practices. Wade also self-regulates his own bear take and manages the bears to the best of his ability. During the season, he will feed more than 4,000 pounds of shelled peanuts a week during the period crops are ready to be harvested. Bears, if not re-directed to his stand sites, would devastate locally grown wheat, soybeans and peanuts, indiscriminately causing serious problems to a farmer's livelihood. For a bear to get the same quantity of food he supplies in one isolated spot, a bear could devastate countless acres of farm fields and spoil even more. In many cases, bears will come into a field while the crop is topping out with a flower or bud that will produce a bean or seed and they nip it off before it matures, ruining the whole plant.

RELEASE THE HOUNDS

In the distance, the howls of the dogs are getting louder, making their way to my position. I think they are headed my way, but I'm not sure, until a pickup truck flies by, washing us back into the brush with a dust cloud as its tires hammer over a washboard dirt road. I can hear the CB radio blasting commands from within that sounds like another language that only "they" understand.

I'm standing on a two-track dirt road raised from the black waters on both sides simply to make way through the divide of the Great Dismal

Swamp and private land. The bear knows no boundary; one side is sanctuary and a chance to overpopulate to become a farmer's menace, and the other is a confrontation with a mass of teeth, fur and man. I was about as confused as the bear, frankly, with houndsman yelping at dogs their own unique sound of encouragement while the dogs communicate with a voice to which only their owners are attuned.

We are running a block, an area of swamp confirmed by game cameras to have a good bear on it. When we pulled up in our vehicles, the dogs caught the scent of bear before we even got out of the trucks. Eight to ten men gather around the huntmaster for a quick plan, and then tear down the dirt road to take up a position "like they stole it." When they stop, GPS collars are buckled onto the dogs, and they are cut loose. The dogs dive into the tangled thorn-infested swamp like bullets. The houndsman confirms his GPS. "It's on, brother."

They claim they can tell an individual dog and what it's doing by its howl. Within minutes, all hell breaks loose as the huntmaster claims he can tell from the dogs that a bear has been treed. He quickly confirms so with the GPS.

Shots are ringing out by the blockers, and men are yelling their own whoop commands at the dogs while trucks are flying down the dirt road sliding sideways to get a chance to release their dogs held in reserve. They call it controlled chaos, and in spite of this not being my first time, my temperature went from simmer to boil in a microsecond.

The houndsman I was closest to whips his truck up beside me while the dogs held in reserve are clawing to get out of the truck box and blasting howls in everyone's face, begging for action. I can



ABOVE: Young pup focused on making his master happy.
BELOW: Ole Smoke, the "Top Dog"



hardly hear myself think as the driver whizzes by and barks, "Gitcha gun, follow me." It's not a request; he's dead serious. If you falter and a dog or man is hurt, I'm not so sure you could ever live that down.

A boar is treed, and we have to get to the dogs as quickly as possible. Your heart is pounding in your ears so hard it almost drowns out the howls as you crawl, run or push your way under vines, water and thorn brush that's pulling your clothes and gun

off your back and ripping at your face and hands. You're almost like a dog yourself, face down and head to the sound.

If that isn't enough for a coronary, Chris Douglas of *Carolina All Out TV*, a seasoned hound-hunt veteran himself, is pulling up the rear and turns up the temp a bit when we pull up on the bear with a, "Whew, that's a nice one." All I could see is something bigger than two 55-gallon drums hanging 25-odd feet above our heads with dogs literally trying to climb the tree after it. As this

brute looms above our heads, the houndsman is right in the mix under the tree to make sure if the boar dives out and makes a break for it, his beloved dogs aren't crushed or torn apart. From the words of our houndsman, "I don't care who you are, how famous or how important; you don't tell me. I'm right in there under that tree. No one gets between me and my dogs."

I have what I know will do the job cleanly, a Merkel MHR16 in 6.5x55 with a crystal clear Meopta scope on 3x power that this bear's head fills up completely. As I pull the gun up, I recall a comment from the night before when I was having dinner with a father and son team from Maine who keep running dogs with the Temples' pack, "Take a head shot. It saves the dogs—and men."

It seemed like slow motion. One minute I'm tearing through brush, dogs are climbing trees, men are yelling... and then the slightest push of recoil. Frankly, I never heard the gun go off.

The bear rolls from the trunk of the tree and belly flops, arms stretched into the black water with a splash that literally rose 10 feet in the air, burying his head and half his body in thick, black mud. The dogs that aren't tied are on

him in a flash, getting their due. Among the back-slaps, high-fives, knuckles and everything else I can think as the group makes their way to us in the brush, all I can do is stare at the bear and the dogs.

When we finally dragged the bear back to the truck with a log winch, it took more than six men to get it in the truck. Later on the scales, it weighed in at 570 pounds. The meat is divided among the men; nothing was wasted.

In retrospect, this wasn't really my hunt; it was theirs. About three or four days later, I heard that one of Wade's prize dogs, 8-year-old Smoke, a dog who was right there with me the whole time leading the pack, died of kidney failure. Never a phone call or a note in text, Wade quietly posts it on Facebook for anyone who would have any interest, anyone who had hunted with ole Smoke.

R.I.P Smoke. The bluetick was my GPS before they came out. Was a truck-to-tree dog and fast. All you had to do was listen to him and know who was in front. Could take an 8-hr.-old track and trail faster than most dogs could run.

Thanks, Smoke. ■

NOTE FROM B&C'S BIG GAME RECORDS DEPARTMENT:

The use of dogs in conjunction with a hunt does not necessarily disqualify a trophy entry. The use of dogs has been a very important tradition and tool in wildlife management in certain areas, and for certain species. They are also very prized by their owners, often requiring a significant investment and countless hours of training. In terms of the Fair Chase requirements, you must have been present on the hunt when the hounds were released and IF electronic collars were used (which is nearly every hound hunt) the Club will request a narrative to accompany the entry to ensure the harvest was not because of the collars.



RIGHT: Author Angelo Baio (L) Wade Temple (M) and Doug Temple (R) with his bear.
BELOW: Author Angelo Baio with his 575-pound North Carolina black bear. His bear is also listed in this issue's Recently Accepted Trophies on page 81.

