

six shooter is where the heart is

by Ramsey Russell photos by Jason Young & Ramsey Russell



a first deer at Six Shooter.

To anyone raised in rural Mississippi, understanding land valuation is intuitively learned, easily recognized. Land is worth what it is capable of producing. Whether it is bales of cotton, pounds of catfish, bushels of soybeans or corn, number and quality of deer, ducks, turkeys, or board feet of lumber—the math is really pretty simple. More is better.

Land productivity is tangible. It envelops you while walking through towering forests, or strains the scales at the skinning rack, or darkens the skies while scuttling for position over decoys. It can be lucrative, too, in the forms of sky-high lease rates, hefty resell values, or fat timber bids. But in the perfect context of land, there exists value that transcends purely material ideals. It manifests as an intimacy with the land that, steeped in tradition, yields a meaningful sense of place that resonates for generations.

During the late 60s and 70s, many last-remaining stands of native hardwoods were cleared from the floodplain to make way for soybeans. Soybeans are gold, it was often said. So potentially profitable that felled virgin timber slash was usually piled and burned in haste to plant more of them. Too many of these areas yielded only marginal soybean production. Only in the best years, which were rare, were profitable crops produced. It was usually too wet. The succinctly-descriptive, one-size-fits-all ubiquity used to sell property soon became “duck land.” Some really were, too.

July 4, 1996, was another scorching day in Mississippi when long-time friends and hunting buddies, Shelby Brantley, Carroll McCleod and Steve Davidson drove to northern Sunflower County to look at yet another property in their quest for a small duck hunting camp. Peering from the backseat of the realtor’s Cadillac as it rumbled along gravel roads, it was difficult to distinguish the land’s advantages from the many similar properties they had visited.

Build it and they will come may work well for baseball fields, they knew, but it rarely does for superior duck hunting property. Perceived only by the pea-sized brains of ducks and invisible to the human eye, there is something that denotes haunts favored by wintering wildfowl. They silently wondered where—and if—there existed among the withering soybean farm, cloaked in heat and dust, that magical “X.” If present, it would yield ducks in great number during winter.

“And then we drove up to Gritman Brake,” said Shelby Brantley. Walking to the water’s edge, the fecund scent of swamp hung heavily in the sultry air. Tightly shrouded in dense buttonbush, water lotus carpeted acres of tea-colored water. Across the brake, sunlight and duckweed shone among the dark shadows cast by ancient cypress trees and tupelo gums. Ducks. Envisioning swarms of circling, chattering ducks here was easy. It was palpable.

It was at that moment Shelby first thought, “this is it.” Many locals later confirmed, from college kids at Delta State to old-timers, lots of ducks during the winter months especially, they were told, where a board hangs between two trees. Six Shooter was then conceived.

For the current members Shelby Brantley, Carroll McCleod, Jason Young, Steve and John Davidson, the formation of Six Shooter breathed life into owning duck land in the north Mississippi Delta. It was only the beginning.

On the heels of the horrific ice storm of 1994 that ravaged the entire north Delta, treetops were broken

throughout the property. In describing an old home site located central to and overlooking the property, Jason Young said that it appeared as though the entire Yankee Army had pillaged and burned a Confederate home to the ground, leaving nothing but an ancient pecan grove as a memoir. Unkempt and overgrown, the site suffered from decades of neglect. Sensing the Southern pride emanating just beneath the surface, members developed a plan and turned their full attentions towards meticulously reclaiming, restoring and building.

From around the old home site, brush was cleared. Decades-old poison ivy vines that strangled magnificent pecans and oaks were removed. The pecan trees, they found, had been carefully hand-grafted by the German descendants that had built a magnificent home on that same hill nearly a century ago. In time, the hilltop became the site for an inviting lodge that overlooks the property and stylishly accommodates Six Shooter families and their many guests throughout the year.

The agricultural fields surrounding Gritman Brake were restored under the USDA’s Wetlands Reserve Program. During the following winters, crews of immigrant tree planters trekked across the muddy fields, swinging dibble bars. In their wake they left year-old switch-looking stems of planted Nuttall, cherrybark, water and willow oaks. Winter-barren agricultural fields soon ceded to a thick herbaceous sere that, in turn, gradually faded as the planted hardwood stock

took root and seized the rich Delta soil. A young hardwood forest emerged. So that winter water could be impounded and seasonally managed, low lying swags were surveyed, levees were built and water control structures were set. Strategically interspersed throughout the property were wildlife-beneficial openings, including a land-leveled parcel used to grow rice, a favored food source for waterfowl. These openings are still seasonally planted to provide sustenance for doves, ducks, and deer.

Duck season is Six Shooter’s traditional heartbeat. Late November through January is a purposeful flurry of motion. Before sunrise, hunters gulp down coffee and don waders and warm clothing. Beyond the lodge and under starlit darkness awaits their destination in the brake. In boats laden with hunters and gear, a brief ride across open water, that on better mornings is wind-swept and choppy, precedes entering protective stands of timber into which ducks seek respite from the cold and safety among its shadows.

A narrow beam of spotlight penetrates the blackness, revealing the occasional glimpse of fluted water tupelo buttresses, an elephant head and a giant cypress long-hollowed with time. The timber gradually gets heavier and there, between two trees, hangs the board. The motor is silenced, and the boat glides to a stop. Welcome to the Board Hole.

Built several feet above water, the Board Hole is wrapped in gray weathered slabs of cypress salvaged from nearby. As hunters settle in and find comfortable vantage points, the black fades, and hues of sunrise streak the eastern sky. The quiet banter is light and congenial; in the duck hunter’s world, optimism springs eternal at daybreak. The staccato chattering of ducks is heard. Momentarily hushed, the hunters rally a chorus of mallard calls from within the blind’s shadows to enticingly chide the ducks overhead.

They circle above the treetops, too high. Their wings slice the air as deftly as skates on ice as they spiral lower. With another pass, they’re lower yet. The quieter calling, soft quacks and clucks, draw them nearer. From the downwind side, they crest the treetops and descend, like dice tossed from a tumbler,

into the decoys. The waiting guns erupt. The black retriever that has waited patiently below—Nellie, Maggie or Nip—springs into action with a splash, eager to recover the hunters’ rewards.

Throughout the morning the scene repeats at various intervals. Mallards and gadwalls, a few wigeons, in pairs or in groups, are hailed into the blocks; some

appear abruptly over the decoys, their entry unobserved until literally landing at the hunter’s feet. They interrupt engaging conversation about life, death or, usually, nothing at all. Cinnamon abruptly punctuates the air. The small camouflage stove is a holdover from when club children were much younger. Nothing warms the morning like fresh-baked cinnamon rolls,

dripping with melted icing. The ducks can wait for a minute.

The ride back to camp is quiet. The hunters, sated from a morning among friends, reflect the events that will be with them, if not fully remembered, for a long time.

Lunch and well-deserved naps follow perfectly. During the afternoons, some will perch in a blind, hunting for Big Toxy, club speak for mature bucks with large, chocolate-colored antlers.

Cessation of duck season in January marks a beginning, not an ending. There’s work to do and fun to be had. Next hunting season is right around the corner, and the clock’s hands



sunflowers



the Board Hole.



learning to shoot



growing up at Six Shooter.



elephant tree.



Six Shooter ducks.



the magic "X."

seem to spin twice as quickly at Six Shooter than elsewhere.

For principles, Six Shooter has been monumentally life changing in the relationships forged among families, friends and the land. Where duck season lasts for as many as 60 days, Six Shooter is a retreat where quality times are enjoyed throughout the entire year.

A few February weekends are spent hunting quail or rabbits. Time is also invested in pulling water off of the property's shallow water impoundments, so that mudflats may be cultivated for wild-moist soil vegetation or planted for seed-bearing grasses. The family crawfish boil on the lodge patio, overlooking the greening landscape, denotes spring's genesis. With luck and cooperative weather, sunflowers will soon be planted for the fall dove hunt. Deep bellowing on the brake signals a few late nights giggling fat, lemon-chinned bullfrogs.

Throughout the summer, duck blinds are brushed or moved. Wildlife food plots are planted, mowed and sprayed. After the work is completed, family baseball games or rounds of clay targets break out on the neatly trimmed lawn. Or little league teams may find respite from summer's

heat in the swimming pool. By August, final preparations begin in earnest as Labor Day and the annual dove hunt approaches. The Six Shooter Dove Hunt is the culmination of months-long work and planning; it's a proper celebration of the traditional hunting season opener, a tribute to the people with whom the sporting lifestyle experience is perfected. A barbeque lunch is enjoyed while socializing under the generous shade of ancient

pecan trees. Carroll McLeod blesses the hunt with heartfelt prayer before Jason Young leads the procession of hunters young and old to fields that, like friendships and families, were painstakingly cultivated by member's own hands.

While forest cover and habitat management have transformed the surrounding landscape, children have been born, Thanksgiving dinner has been shared, Santa has visited, the local church has been filled



Six Shooter sons play in the mud.



Shelby Brantley with banded duck.



Carroll McLeod blesses the hunt.

and shooting and duck calling lessons have been taught. Whether loading seed, brushing blinds, or reaching elbow deep into the water to retrieve trotlines, sons and daughters were alongside their fathers and mothers. They touched the land and transformed it into its present state. The land touched them, too. It is home. It's where they'll return from college or from careers with their own families. It is where they will celebrate holidays with family and friends and where they will continue the Six Shooter tradition. More is definitely better.

