



# *My Life* { WITH LABS }

*Four cherished retrievers mark the waypoints in  
the author's duck hunting journey*

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL FURTMAN

**T**he look on my Lab Bella's face seemed to say, "You don't mean he's duck hunting with us, do you?" The "he" in question was a Gordon setter named Riley, all decked out in camo neoprene. Riley belongs to my upland hunting partner Debbie. Shortly after I taught her to duck hunt, Debbie discovered that her setter would not stay out of the water. She also learned that he had a strong retrieving instinct, which we worked to develop. Now, on the second day of our hunt, Riley was about to get his first chance at retrieving a duck. As good a dog as Bella is, I was still a bit worried about how she'd share a blind.

When the mallards came in with the dawn, Debbie rose and shot. A fat greenhead fountained into the water. It was Riley's time. Debbie gave him a line, and the sleek dog plowed into the lake, grabbing a drake mallard as big as his head. In disbelief, Bella let out a bawling howl of pure outrage that would have made a coonhound proud. I laughed so hard my eyes watered, but assured her the next duck was hers. She did not look convinced.



Hunters know that our dogs share many of our traits. Pride. Joy. Affection. Confidence. And yes, annoyance. Who among us hasn't been given "the look" when we've botched a shot? To be honest, our retrievers give us more than we give them. We give kibble; they, devotion. When we are harsh, they quickly forgive us. They look up to us as providers of boats, decoys, and trips to the marsh. In return they give their all. They will hunt for us until they drop. And as we stand on the shore, decoys out, shooting time inching near, they are there as well, sitting at our side, drinking in every moment.



## Glory Days with Gypsy

**M**y mother said I teathed on a Labrador's ears. In the six decades since, I've had a half dozen Lab companions. Although I cherished both of my boyhood canine companions, Kim and later Snooks, the first Lab that was mine alone was Gypsy. She was aptly named. I had rescued her from the dog pound the day before she was to be destroyed. The price—\$5.25 for a dog license—didn't break my meager college student budget. A stray who had bounced from place to place her first year, she was tough, proud, and very much the alpha dog. She had to be, I guess, in order to survive, though perhaps her dominance was the reason no one had kept her.

It took determination to convince Gypsy who was boss—or at least a hunting partner of equal status. But once that task was done, the next 10 years were magic. If you could bottle dignity, her photo would be on the label.

Back then I had a canoe, a 4x4 vehicle, a fair duck gun, and a good dog. Gypsy and I were both young and learning the duck hunting game together. We hunted every place rumored to hold a duck. Haul decoys a mile into a distant beaver pond? Why not? Walk for miles along a creek jump-shooting mallards? Absolutely. Paddle way the heck out to that island



The author learned the duck hunting game with Gypsy, the first Lab he could truly call his own.



where the bluebills hang in the lee? Yep. That was our life.

Without Gypsy, I probably wouldn't have received my first invitation to hunt ducks in North Dakota. The only retriever for a party of eight men, she retrieved more ducks that week than many a dog does in a year. She made remarkable retrieves one after another. When we returned, her skill was as polished as a firehouse truck.

When Gypsy was 13, we made our last excursion to North Dakota. For an old dog, she'd held up astonishingly well, and

I believed that she could handle one more trip. The first night proved cold, and in the morning I broke ice to set decoys, which froze in place almost immediately. Still, some mallards came, and two stayed. Ice that would have barely slowed her just a couple of years ago nearly vanquished her, and hearing her labored breath, I anxiously tried to call her off. But that great dignity would not surrender. She finished the retrieves.

In the blind, she uncharacteristically leaned against me as we sat. I looked into her eyes and saw a thing there that I had never seen before: the pain of ambition outstripping ability. I knew then that she was doing what she loved most for the last time.

I stroked Gypsy while her head rested on my lap, her wet hips quivering with the exertion. I told her that I loved her and thanked her for all the joy she had given me. "You're a good girl," I said. She searched my eyes and said to me as plainly as if she had a voice that she loved me and was

glad that, despite the pain, she was with me to fetch my ducks. I got a lump in my throat as I hugged her.

A year later she was gone.

## Rascal's Rambling Journey

**F**or six months prior to her passing, Gypsy had to put up with a puppy named Rascal. In contrast to Gypsy's boldness and fierceness, Rascal was mild and reserved. It wasn't that I resented the difference, but I had gotten used to a certain amount of doggy swagger and performance. Rascal, despite costing "real" money, pretty much thought she could get by being sweet and affectionate, and doing some halfhearted retrieves now and then.

Funny how things work out. Rascal's mildness became an asset when, at a year and a half, she accompanied me on an epic journey. I'd received an assignment from a book publisher to follow the duck migration from the nesting grounds to the Gulf of Mexico. Rascal and I set out in my pickup truck and camper for a three-month expedition, and from Quill Lakes, Saskatchewan, to Bayou Lafourche, Louisiana, she was unflappable—meeting strangers and strange dogs, staying in unfamiliar places, and hunting unknown habitats. During the whole drive, her muzzle was on my right thigh. Bottles of affection would carry her photo.



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**Mild-mannered Rascal proved to be the perfect companion on the author's epic waterfowling journey down the flyway.**

*Outside the blind Rascal sat enthralled, a black statue in the gloom. She was poised, confident, and had become a fine, fine friend.*

It was this trip that lit Rascal's waterfowling fire. Over the months she retrieved snow geese and mallards, blue-bills and teal. She broke ice in Manitoba and hunted prairie chickens in Nebraska. While her skills were not as sharp as they would someday become, I loved watching her blossom hunt after hunt.

Our last hunt of the trip was in a coastal marsh on a day so bitterly cold that my Cajun partner would not hunt, but simply dropped us off at a blind. Sunrise meant little behind the wind-ripped gray clouds, and the ducks flew so low their bellies scraped the reed tops. Outside the blind Rascal sat enthralled, a black statue in the gloom. She was poised, confident, and had become a fine, fine friend. And then I realized just how much I'd grown to love this young dog who had shared every mile of a duck hunter's dream.

Five years later we learned that Rascal was horribly dysplastic. The vet had said that her hips were so bad it was incredible she could walk, let alone hunt, which she had done with joy. I contacted the kennel I had gotten her from and the breeder said he owed me a pup when I was ready. After one last autumn with Rascal, I gave him a call.

## *The Wonders of Wigeon*

**D**ave was a professional field trialer who had paired his personal Lab with a stud belonging to a client—a millionaire from Barbados, as I recall. That dog had a bunch of letters and whatnot after his name, including a Canadian national championship, which made me leery rather than impressed. I'd heard that field-trial dogs were awfully high strung.

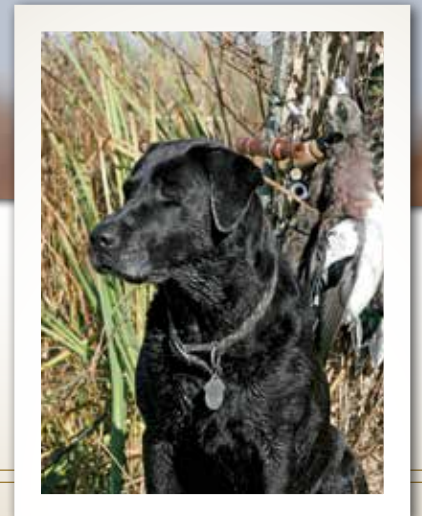
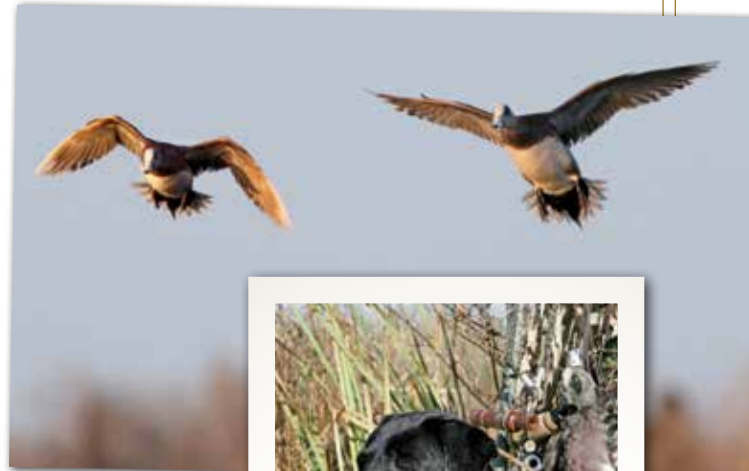
Because Dave felt so bad about Rascal, I was given pick of the litter. When we opened the kennel door and eight black bundles tumbled over its lip, I was panicked. How could I possibly pick?

After each had emptied its bladder, the pups began to race around. But quite suddenly, one with a blue collar stopped its play, trotted to us, and sat down. She looked me squarely in the eye. "I'll take that one," I told Dave.

"I would have too," he said.

Although I had been worried about Wigeon's field-trial background, my concerns proved to be unfounded. While training and hunting, she was a pure athlete, but in the truck, at home, or in a motel, she was as calm as Rascal. And this dog believed in herself. No retrieve was too far, no body of water too large. Look up "confidence" in the dictionary, and you'll see her likeness. She was the perfect dog for a guy born to hunt diving ducks . . . and dabblers that dive.

My hunting partner Shannon and I still talk about the 26-minute retrieve. We were hunting a large prairie lake when the wigeon came, but we managed to scratch only one. The duck splashed down far outside the decoys and immediately began to swim. I sent Wigeon, and as she drew near, the bird dived. We scanned the surface but could not see where—or if—it had come up. Wigeon, however, struck off hard to the southwest. Years of hunting divers had taught her that



**No retrieve was too far for Wigeon, whose relentless pursuit of waterfowl was a sight to behold.**



sometimes the ducks only periscope their bills above water for a breath, which she must have seen. She was not to be fooled.

About 10 minutes into the retrieve, Shannon grew worried. I assured him that she was fine, that her shoulders were well above water. After 15 minutes, when Wigeon was but a zigzagging black dot in the distance, he became adamant. "Dammit, Mike. I'm going to get the canoe. No duck is worth that dog!" And with that he trotted down the shore.

Twenty minutes into the retrieve, Wigeon turned back, without the duck. It was then that I spotted the bird heading our way, finally on the surface. I knew then the outcome.

As Shannon paddled out, I waved him off. With a final fury of speed, Wigeon outswam the duck. A few minutes later she bounded out of the water and gave me the duck, shook, and looked bright-eyed as if to say, "Now that was fun!"

**Wigeon's quiet confidence was matched only by her impressive duck hunting skills.**



Her impressive talents were put to good use, hunting diving ducks on Minnesota and Wisconsin lakes, mallards on the Missouri River, and canvasbacks on the prairie. She proved durable as well. When, at the age of nine she retrieved like a dog of five, I decided that I'd wait a year before getting the inevitable next dog. As it turned out, that was a mistake.

When we awoke one morning, we found that Wigeon could not use one rear leg. I rushed her to the vet, who asked us to leave her there for some tests. When he called later, he was downcast. "It's not good news, Mike. Her hip is broken, but it's not just that. It's broken because she has bone cancer. I'd guess she has about two weeks—two painful weeks—to live," he said.

Of course Mary Jo and I did what we had to do that same day, and exited the vet's office in shock and tears. For the first time in our marriage, we did not have a young dog at home to hug while we mourned the passing of an old one.

## Golden Years with Bella

**B**ella came to us a week after Wigeon's death. I found a reputable breeder, had my choice of two remaining females, and grabbed one. With only six months before hunting season, I needed a pup right away.

What followed has been an interesting journey. By far the smartest dog of any we've owned—and none of them were dim, mind you—Bella has intellect that she's used for both good and evil. She also has several quirks, the most annoying of which is sneaking up behind you and grabbing the hem of your jacket to give it a tug, like the dog in the old Coppertone suntan lotion ad grabbing the little girl's swimsuit. I believe that the other dogs prepared me for Bella, because any hunter with less experience and tolerance might have given her away. Besides, my standard is simple: I don't expect to have a perfect dog, only one whose faults don't outstrip my own. So far, the contest hasn't even been close.

There is no one word that can describe Bella, but my patience has been rewarded. When upland hunting, she points like a setter, retrieves like a Labrador, and delivers birds that, when plucked, have skin as unmarked as a supermarket chicken. In the marsh, Bella's skill very nearly equals



**The author's current Lab, Bella, has a good nose, soft mouth, and fine retrieving instincts.**

that of Wigeon, although it took two years before she gained the same confidence.

Her mettle was tested in a big way on the third day that Riley hunted with us. My hunting partners and I had been chatting about the lack of canvasbacks when the big birds appeared. They slipped over a rise to our west, barreled down the north shoreline, and seemed to be departing when they

Smart and occasionally mischievous, Bella is a fine hunting partner and loyal all-around companion.



swung in our direction. The tension mounted as they neared. Just as we all began to rise, the cans swung once again. At five yards farthest to the right, I had the only possible shot. I took it.

In hindsight, that might not have been a good idea. The drake had already turned, and striking his bony back barely brought him down. He was 75 yards out before he lit, and he was swimming already. Bella had a job to do, and I knew she could do it, but did she have the same faith in her own skills? Her confidence had wavered the day before. Maybe it was because she was put off that Riley was getting to retrieve, but to say she had a bad day would be improving the situation. Oh, she had fetched ducks, but with no zeal. And she had messed up badly on a couple that should have given her

the chance to outshine the young setter.

Not today. She plowed after that slope-headed duck, treaded water each time he dived, and finally went under with him to negotiate his surrender. When she reached shore, she shook with her prize still in her mouth, and then strutted back and forth in front of Riley. "And that," she seemed to be saying, "is how a Labrador does it. And we don't need bathing suits!"

Bella is now nine, and I am shocked by how quickly the years have passed. My life's passage has been marked by dogs. Gypsy was the dog of my youth. Rascal my friend down the flyway. Wigeon the Lab of my middle years. And Bella the sweetheart of senior citizenship. There will be at least one more dog, but who knows if there will be two? Duck hunting is very much a young person's game. And a young dog's, for that matter. But that won't stop Bella and me from enjoying however many glorious days we have left together in the marsh. ↻



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