



# *Ready to Go Again*

**A new dog shows promise and  
helps heal a saddened heart.**

**BY DAVE BOOKS \* ILLUSTRATIONS BY BOB WHITE**

While my veterinarian friend, Steve, studied my 13-year-old Lab's X-rays, I studied Steve's face, looking for a sign of hope. I didn't see one. When he finally spoke, his words hit me like a sledgehammer. "Jenny's riddled with tumors, almost certainly cancer. I'm sorry, Dave." A few weeks earlier, a swelling had appeared under her neck, and a trip to the vet seemed in order. Steve prescribed pills to bring it down. But as the days passed, the swelling grew worse, expanding to her face. Her breathing grew more labored. Something was clearly wrong.

So, in the dead of last winter, I cradled Jenny's head, trying hard not to tear up but not succeeding, while Steve put her peacefully to sleep—a brave, good-hearted black Lab with whom I had shared more than a decade of my life.

There's only one way to fix the hole in your heart left by the loss of a faithful hunting partner. A few months later I pulled into the driveway of South Dakota's Tall Grass Kennels, the back of my truck rigged out with puppy chow, a travel crate, and dog toys. I left with eight-week-old Bailey, a British Lab of mostly Irish ancestry—dogs with names like Lochmuir Bonnie and Turramurra Teal. On the long trip home, during those respites when Bailey slept (she'd already been upgraded to the truck cab), I daydreamed of red grouse and pheasant shoots on Irish estates where gentlemen in tweeds and Wellies shoot classic side-by-sides at driven birds. I imagined Bailey's distant cousins sweeping in after the guns had done their job to ply the time-honored trade of "picking up," the Irish term for retrieving downed birds.

Bailey will never see a driven grouse shoot, but she'll have something even better: a steady diet of duck-blind sunrises, good old American mallards, backwater teal, cornfield pheasants, and grassland grouse.

Now three-fourths grown, Bailey is not yet a finished gun dog, but she's showing promise. Her first opening day has come and gone, and this year's season has flown south too quickly. There will be another hunt or two for tail-end Charlies before closing day, but more to bid a bittersweet goodbye to another year's Grand Passage than to fill the freezer. So, for Bailey and me, it's time to stoke the wood stove, gaze out the window as a north wind whips swirling snow through leafless tree branches, and reflect on the season's events.

Opening day in early October found me and my hunting partner, Joe, trekking through predawn darkness to a pond on a federal waterfowl production area that holds the same attraction for mallards



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and pintails that a patch of ripe huckleberries holds for bears. With fog blanketing the water, we set out two dozen mallard decoys. Before long, ducks began to return in small bunches, the sound of swishing wings announcing their presence before we could see them. Bailey whined softly, straining to see through the curtain of fog.

Shortly after legal shooting time, ducks appeared over the decoys. Joe and I each fired once, cart-wheeling two birds from a flock of about eight. Bailey retrieved one of the birds, while Joe's two-year-old Lab,

Sedge, retrieved the other. A quick inspection confirmed our suspicion: pintails. Early in the season, most pintails in eastern Montana still wear eclipse plumage, making them hard to identify in poor light. Five minutes into the season, we each had the one pintail allowed in the daily bag in the Central Flyway.

We toasted Bailey's first retrieve with hot coffee from my thermos and pondered our dilemma. The rest of the morning would be an exercise in duck identification. We settled into the shoreline reeds to await better shooting light.

Several flocks of ducks came and went while we vacillated. "Mallards, I think," one of us would announce.

"Are you sure?"

"Nope."

Finally the sun climbed above the horizon, melting the frost, scattering the mist, and suffusing the eastern sky with copper and pink. A flock of mallards circled twice and then committed to the blocks. Our salvo brought down two drakes. A short time later, a squadron of blue-winged teal flitted through the decoys; we gave them a two-gun salute, but they continued on their way. Bailey gave me a confused look. I consoled her with a dog biscuit. "Sorry, girl, but you'll get used to it." Before long a small bunch of brownish ducks, long, slender necks outstretched, swept in from the east. We held our fire, suspecting more pintails. Bailey trembled with excitement but didn't break. All those summer training sessions were paying duck-blind dividends.

As the morning wore on, the fog dissipated, revealing a line of golden cottonwoods marking the course of the Milk River half a mile distant. Around 10 o'clock, a large flock of mallards worked the spread, gave in to temptation, and back-pedaled toward the water. Emerald heads gleamed in the sun. We dropped two birds into the decoys and sailed another to the far edge of the pond. After Sedge and Bailey had rounded up the easy marks, Joe sent Sedge for the third bird while I held Bailey back. The greenhead dove as Sedge closed in, but he trapped it in the shallow water and swam proudly back, parading past Bailey as if to say, "That's how it's done, rookie."

We poured more coffee from the thermos and sat back to enjoy the beauty of the day. Another flock of teal, flashing low and fast over

the spread, interrupted our reverie. This time we spilled two from the bunch, along with our coffee. As the sun rose higher in the sky, the flights began to peter out. We scratched one wigeon from a flock that dropped down from the heavens and circled at the edge of shotgun range a half-dozen times. Then, as quickly as it had begun, the action ceased, leaving us to wonder if it had all been just a dream. But a bagful of ducks and two excited Labradors indicated otherwise.

Later in the season, there would be windless days marked by empty skies, and foul-weather days filled with wing beats. There would be memorable shots and inexplicable shooting slumps, and spectacular retrieves interspersed with lapses in retriever decorum. There would be good luck and bad in all kinds of weather—the lot of waterfowlers everywhere.

One frigid November morning, I waded a river channel to set up for mallards off a brushy island. As I stumbled in the dark, a beaver-cut willow sapling poked through my waders just above the knee. The trip back across the waist-deep channel at the end of the day left me with a boot full of icy water and a dilemma. Would it be better to take off my waders and empty them before setting out for the truck half a mile away? Or should I just slosh along as fast as possible and hope for the best? I was getting colder by the minute, and the thought of struggling out of my waders did not appeal. So I began the grueling slog. Darkness fell, my foot grew numb, and thoughts of hypothermia flitted through my mind. At the truck, I stripped off waders and wet clothes with cold-stiffened hands, fumbled the key into the ignition, and heard the engine roar to life.

Bailey, smelling of river water and her coat stiff with ice, took it all in stride, sneezing and burrowing into her blankets on the passenger seat. We made the half-hour trip back to town with the truck heater running full blast. The next day I bought new waders, good ones made of material tough enough to withstand flying shrapnel. On another foggy morning on the river, I heard loud splashing coming from upstream. As the mysterious sounds grew louder, the tension heightened. A deer? Another hunter? The Loch Ness monster? Bailey had her hackles up, and I had a firm grip on her collar. Three river otters suddenly emerged from the fog and porpoised through the decoys, chirping messages to one another in a language known only to others of their kind. I don't remember if I shot a duck that day, but the otters remain etched in my memory.

On the morning after Thanksgiving, Bailey and I took Jenny's ashes to the river. Jenny had been put to sleep

the previous January, and January in Montana is no time for burying a dog. Cremation seemed the best option, so Jenny's remains went down the road to a pet crematory called All Paws Great and Small. Her ashes had resided in their tin box on my reloading bench for the better part of a year, and now it was time for a final farewell.

I'd kept the ashes all those months because I wanted to spread them during the duck season, at a place on the river where Jenny and I had shared some memorable hunts. Setting out my two dozen mallard decoys—18 on the river side of a willow-covered point that tapers to a sandbar and the rest in the shallow backwater—I thought about the time I winged a greenhead that made it to the middle of the river. The temperature that December morning had been close to zero with a strong north wind spitting snow. Jenny fought the dark current for what seemed like an eternity to bring the bird in, and when she reached shore well downriver, her eyes were nearly frozen shut. After I held my hand over them to thaw the ice, she rolled in the snow, ready to go again.

A hen mallard quacked downstream, snapping me out of my reverie. Bailey shivered with excitement and leaned hard against my leg. "Let's hope I shoot better today, Bail."

When I took the tin box from my shooting bag, a check of my watch showed five minutes until legal time. Duck wings suddenly hissed overhead, and a dozen mallards hovered briefly over the decoys before seeing us standing at the water's edge. I scattered Jenny's ashes in the wind, and the purling river gathered them in. It had already been a good season, and the rising dawn held promise for a new day. 🐾

