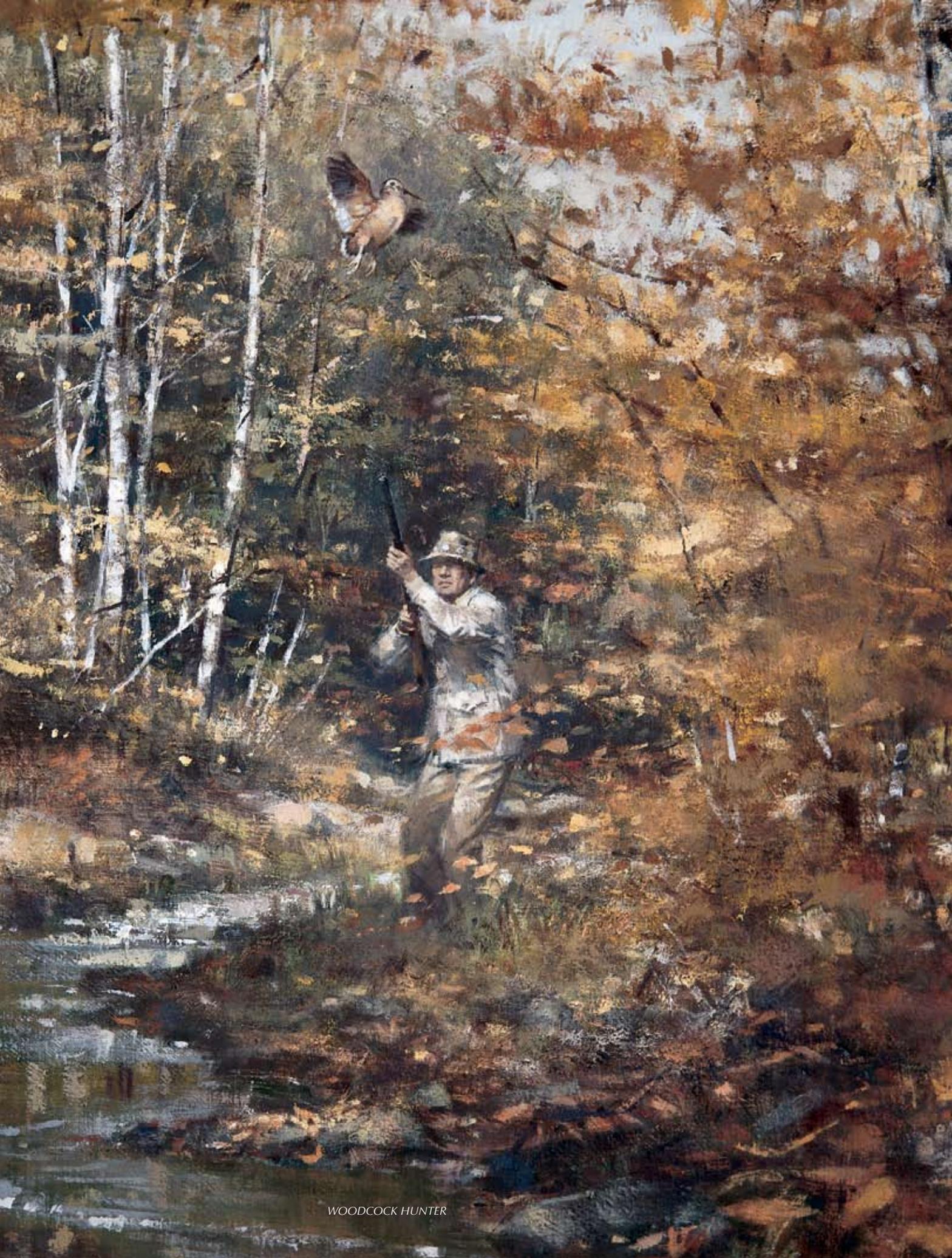


# CONVERT

*He was younger then and only had eyes for the quick and flashy grouse.  
And then along came the little birds with bulging eyes,  
long beaks and upside-down brains.*

*By Ron Ellis • Paintings by Robert K. Abbett*



**W**e were so taken with bird hunting back when we first discovered it that we suspected magic must somehow be involved to weave such an enchantment. It was especially so when the three of us, good friends and longtime hunting partners, took a week to travel north out of Kentucky and Ohio to follow our young dogs through storied grouse cover “up in Michigan.”

The October woods that season were perfect. The canopy formed by the hardwoods bordering the pines and tamaracks was quilted with intense colors, the light passing through them so pure and perfect we

believed it must surely flow from a holy source.

We hunted for two days with a guide in that grand bird country and found a good many grouse. We killed only a few since most of the birds flushed from clear-cuts so dense we had to thread our guns through a spidery-maze of branches just to be prepared to imagine a shot, much less actually take one.

We reached the best spots by traveling nameless sand tracks that carried us deeper into the country. Along these roads we explored some low ground, looking for birds in places where shadows spilled out of the swamps and mixed nervously with the splashy, vibrant colors of the uplands. Edge cover, holy ground for sure, a place where grouse could be found.



While searching for grouse we unexpectedly discovered woodcock. They were clustered together in great numbers along tiny streams that threaded through patches of twisted alders, their exposed roots clumped up on ground that was mossy and soft and mostly open beneath a low canopy. Much later we learned we had stumbled upon a classic “flight of woodcock,” or a “fall of woodcock,” a description that seems more magical, more precise and wonderful, when attempting to describe the mysterious comings and goings of this magnificent little bird.

But we were younger then and only had eyes for the quick, flashy grouse. The little tawny-colored migrants with the upside-down brains, their secret ways and mystical charms still foreign to us, had yet to become an obsession.

While my strongest affections were still showered on the grouse, Lady, my orange-and-white Brittany with the smiling eyes, preferred the diminutive woodcock, from the very first time she found one hunkered in that strange scent cloud

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out in front of her pink nose. After discovering them she'd nearly wiggle her stubby tail out of its socket when one was near, while grouse just made her pull a routine point, the tail twitching a bit, the scent imparting no particular emotion to her motion.

On the third day we hunted without a guide. It was late in the afternoon when we pulled the Volkswagen van off one of those disappearing sand tracks and headed into a piece of cover that was so birdy we could almost smell the grouse. With high expectations and an eye on the lengthening shadows,

I followed Lady through that perfect thicket, without so much as a flush, and came out into an overgrown meadow on the opposite side.

At the far end of the open ground we passed quietly through a long-abandoned homesite bordered by a windbreak of weathered pines. Just beyond stood a small grove of hardwoods, the ground sloping slightly upward toward its center. The light that fell out of those trees was made up of columns of pale, dusty yellow filtered through an intense quiet, and the earth was soft there, with a clear, cold-water seep murmuring nearby.

The air was thick with the promise of birds.

Lady hit scent and danced her careful dance to show me birds were near. She twisted her butt about and drifted nearly stiff-legged with the scent, until just inside the grove, she pointed – an intense, low-to-the-ground point on the downhill side of a large rock.

Not wanting to spoil the moment, I moved quietly to her; no unnecessary sounds, no yelling of “Point!” to my companions. I was alone with my dog, partners in a perfect stillness, as I walked straight into the cover past her point, my eyes raised to a single opening in the trees.

The woodcock flushed from under Lady's nose and

spiraled straight up through an autumnal canopy of many colors that were as memorable as those that danced through the stained-glass windows and spilled onto the stone floors of the cathedral where I attended mass as a child.

There was the familiar

motion of the twenty-gauge, and at the shot, russet feathers drifted against the evening sky. It was as close to the perfect bird-hunting experience as I had ever imagined – the place, the point, the shot – as the intoxicating scent of spent powder, mixed with Hoppes No. 9, swirled back ahead of the returning dog, like incense in the October quiet.

Lady dropped the bird close to me (a rarity). I picked it up and brushed the leaves and twigs from its feathers, and then held it in both hands. I marveled at the woodcock's markings and subtle colors – the solid body of taupe mixed with reddish hues, dark brown, black and delicate washes of blue – before placing it in my coat. Then I broke open the gun, took a great whiff of the spent shell and lit a cigar, all the while searching for an appropriate comparison for what I was feeling.

In the end, with the sun sliding down the horizon and the cigar smoke drifting to the heavens, I decided that it felt just like religion, but without the guilt that so often accompanied the experience in my youth. Being in the spirit of things, I offered thanks, called the dog and went in search of more woodcock.

A fresh convert knows no limit to his fervor. 🐾



BRITTANYS AND WOODCOCK