

CORPUS CHRISTI CALLER-TIMES

Outdoors

OF BIRD DOGS & *best buddies*



OUTDOORS
DAVID SIKES

Lately I've enriched my sense of the bitter and the sweet of dog ownership.

No, my little red dachshund is doing fine. This is not about him.

Much of my touching insight comes from a narrow group of friends and acquaintances whose primary hunting companions are bird dogs. My newfound awareness reaches beyond the tenderness and joy that routinely enhances these powerful personal relationships.

One friend recently lost a quirky canine companion of 10 years. He took it hard, but now mostly speaks fondly of good times with the retriever he adopted when it was 3. The ephemeral tears were private, but he's quick to share the lingering emotions of his loss.

Thankfully a black lab puppy now sits in Nellie's spot, eager to lick Rob's salt-stained cheeks.

Some of you may guess that Rob is Rob Sawyer, author of "A Hundred Years of Texas Waterfowl Hunting." I've written about him before, along with Nellie, his loyal but stubborn Chesapeake Bay retriever.

Rob is the first to admit Nellie was not a master water dog in the classic sense. But she was a determined one, who saw no reason to return without a bird in mouth, even if it wasn't the one she was after. And Nellie never wasted energy on the come-back.

She hunted with Rob almost until the end. I was privileged to witness a couple of wingshoots during those waning years.

Nellie at 13 took to the field nearly blind and completely deaf. Painful arthritis hindered her gait.

But she could still feel the shock of Rob's muzzle blasts. And her nose worked fine, I guess. If a bird fell in the decoys, Nellie might get it and return slowly to Rob's awaiting praise. Her retrieving prowess, though at times impressive, never defined the deep bond Rob and Nellie shared.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF TODD J STEELE
Randy Gerson doesn't like thinking about life without Rebel. But he knows this will be their final duck season to hunt together.



Outdoors calendar

COASTAL ISSUES FORUM

The Coastal Bend Bays Foundation has scheduled its next **Coastal Issues Forum** for 5:30 p.m. Monday in Room 106 of the Del Mar Center for Economic Development, 3209 South Staples St. Invited speakers include CBBF Conservation and Environmental Award winners Donna Shaver, Carolyn Rose and Larry McKinney, who are scheduled to share their work to build awareness, appreciation and stewardship for the region's natural resources. Online: www.baysfoundation.org. Call 882-3439.

PARROT TALK

The South Texas Botanical Gardens & Nature Center, 8545 S. Staples St., has scheduled an ongoing, interactive entertainment event for 1:30 p.m. each Friday, Saturday and Sunday in the Tropical Garden behind the Bromeliad House. This 40-minute segment includes a 20-minute educational demonstration with a trainer and parrot followed by 20 minutes of interaction, questions and photo opportunities. This program is included in general admission and does not require

reservations. The Botanical Gardens is open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily except Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Call 361-852-2100, www.stxbot.org.

WILDLIFE IN FOCUS EXHIBIT AT BOTANICAL GARDENS

Award-winning photographs from the 2015 Wildlife in Focus photo competition from South Texas ranches will be displayed through Sept. 30, 2017, along the Mary Hope Brenneke Nature Trail at the South Texas Botanical Gardens & Nature Center, 8545 S. Staples St. The 150 photos include birds, mammals, invertebrates, reptiles/amphibians and more. Access to the exhibition is included with general admission, and may be viewed from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily, except Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Call 361-852-2100. Online: www.stxbot.org. Contact Wildlife in Focus at 361-881-9316, or online: www.wildlifeinfocus.org.

FREE ENTRY TO PINS

Active duty military personnel and family members qualify for year-round free entry, as



RACHEL DENNY CLOW/CALLER-TIMES
Alana Pacheco, 8, plays with her puppies, Rosco and Pepe, in the surf near Bob Hall Pier.

do any U.S. citizen with a permanent disability. A lifetime park pass for seniors (62 and older) costs \$10. And fourth-grade students are eligible for a free pass through the Every Kid in a Park Program. Online: www.nps.gov.

EAT YOUR WEEDS

The South Texas Botanical Gardens & Nature Center, 8545 S. Staples St., has scheduled a

event called Eat Your Weeds — Winter Foraging Workshop from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Jan. 14 taught by native plant expert Mark “Merriwether” Vorderbruggen, author of “Idiots Guide: Foraging.” The course will provide insight into how to safely and ethically collect local wild plants for food, medicine, while providing perspective on many overlooked, common, native plants. Be prepared to eat some weeds. This course is open to anyone 12 and older. Fee is \$35 for members; \$40 for nonmembers. Call 361-852-2100. Online: www.nps.gov.

BIRDS OF SOUTH TEXAS COURSE

The South Texas Botanical Gardens & Nature Center, 8545 S. Staples St., has scheduled a course called Introduction to Birds of South Texas, a one-day class led by acclaimed birder and author Gene Blacklock, for Jan. 24. A classroom portion of the course is from 9-11:30 a.m. with a field trip to follow from 1-5 p.m. Blacklock will cover the basics of species identification for winter birds in South Texas. Fee is \$45 for members; \$60 for nonmembers. Prepaid registration is required by Jan. 21. Curriculum questions: 361-558-1829.

Sikes

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I believe Rob's eyes will forever twinkle when he speaks of Nellie's field foibles and successes. She was a friend in every sense.

Another Houston-area buddy has a golden retriever I wish I'd met 10 years ago. Rebel's stellar reputation continues to receive praise from discerning waterfowlers as the quickest retriever they ever saw. And what a nose.

Rebel is 14 now, with a face as gray as a cloudy day, but eyes still bright. The last time I walked up to the Thunderbird camp where Randy Gerson and Rebel sat together on the porch, the aging bird dog hurried to bury his head in my hands and rest his chin on my leg. He's still a puppy inside.

Rebel's hind legs are crooked now, though his will to retrieve hasn't wavered. He shall not be denied a fallen bird. Like Nellie, Rebel delivers ducks with the deliberate stride and pride of an old cowboy who still wears the jeans and boots of a younger man.

In the beginning, Randy wanted to bag a limit of birds before his shotgun barrel cooled, while a ready Rebel hastily chased after them all and splashed a quick return.

These days Randy is careful to take only easy shots. He wants to be sure no wounded ducks sail or paddle far, forcing Rebel to give chase. Because that he will. This precaution not only spares Rebel's pain but prolongs the pair's time afield.

“We simply enjoy being together now,” Randy tells me. “And Rebel is just happy I don't leave him at home.”

But the desire for youthful glory never fully fades from old hunters and old dogs.

Just weeks ago, Randy and Rebel sat beside younger hunters with much younger dogs at their heels. An errant shot crippled a passing teal. Rebel's alert gaze followed the bird's glide until it landed 100 yards from the blind.

The other hunters held their retrievers and decided the bird was lost. Randy said the word and sent Rebel splashing a path toward the fallen duck. As he approached the teal it disappeared below the water's surface, as desperate ducks often do.

The chase was on. Rebel covered about 400 yards crisscrossing that pond. But each time he neared the bird it would dive out of sight. Randy began to worry and tried to whistle Rebel in. Those big brown eyes shot a defiant glance toward the blind once or twice, but it was obvious Rebel was not going to heed the call.

Slowly, the duck became wearier than its 14-year-old pursuer. One final time, it dived. Rebel plunged his muzzle into the pond and surfaced with a soaked blue-wing securely in his maw.

A rousing cheer arose from across the pond.

“I've never been more proud in my life,” Randy said later. “I have no children, but I imagine this must be like watching my kid hit a game-winning home run or scoring a winning touchdown. I'll remember that one forever.”

Rebel pranced a champion's course to the blind, his head and tail held high. This was an old dog's victory lap, his end-zone dance, his “in your face” to doubters.

Old hounds may lose the spring in their step, but a bird dog never abandons the will to please.

Sometimes I watch Randy when he's watching Rebel. The affection he feels is palpable, but lately there's a trace of sorrow. Randy is philosophical about the parallel aging path they walk. Yes, facing the obvious signs of a dog's mortality makes men reflect on their own. But there also is an up-side.

Simpatico is the word Randy chooses to describe the evolution he's shared



Rebel's hind legs are crooked now, but he continues to chase ducks alongside Randy Gerson.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TODD J STEELE



Gilmore or Gilley only hunts ground squirrels and ghost crabs.

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with his longtime hunting companion.

This was most noticeable during an unfortunate period after Randy lost his job. The two spent lots of idle time together. Understandably, the circumstances were stressful for Randy, who is convinced Rebel sensed this and reacted in kind. Seeing his own depression reflected in Rebel's mood, Randy's glum turned into concern for his hunting buddy.

There was no point in them both sitting around the house feeling sorry for themselves. Besides, Randy figured they each could stand to lose a few pounds.

So Randy and Rebel began walking daily along Buffalo Bayou, where a concrete path is paved well above the water. Randy considered these walks a way to get Rebel into shape for the approaching duck season.

But in retrospect he believes it was Rebel who inspired the routine as a way of lifting his unemployed housemate out of a funk. It worked.

“He reads and mirrors my emotions,” Randy said. “When I notice my own depression rubbing off on Rebel, it forces me to start thinking outside of myself. That's what got us both out of the house to start walking. That's what I'll miss the most. Rebel is my family.”

Sometimes during those walks Rebel would stray down the levy slope and



Nellie was pushing 14 when she died, ending a decade of companionship.

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jump into the sluggish bayou. Randy calls to him, but Rebel ignores, occasionally looking up playfully. Randy calls to him again, but never in angry tones.

“He knows I won't come down there to get him,” Randy said, shooting a grin toward Rebel laying beside him on the porch. “We have an understanding and eventually he comes back if I stand there long enough.”

Randy sadly accepts Rebel won't always be there to come back and this is their final hunting season together. He tries not to dwell in that bittersweet reality.

Rebel is his second golden retriever. And like most bird hunters in Randy's



Randy Gerson and Rebel sit on front porch of the Thunderbird duck camp near Markham.

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CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Bull Frog Sunscreen

BULL FROG SUNSCREEN

Winter is no time to let down your guard against sun damage. Bull Frog high performance sunscreens makes a variety of products for different outdoor activities, from water sports and high-sweat terrestrial activities to insect repellents. Sweat Tech is designed to let skin breathe while allowing sweat to evaporate. Water Armor Tech provides long-lasting water resistance for maximum protection. Bull Frog also has DEET-free insect repellent combined with sunscreen. Available at most drugstores. Online: www.bullfrogsunscreen.com.

situation, he won't say whether there will be a third. I get the sense there will be.

Some people think God erred when he gave dogs a brief lifespan. Others believe they are on loan from above, and if we treasure them as we should, our dogs will be returned in the end to sweeten our stay in Heaven as they did on Earth.

David Sikes' *Outdoors* columns appear *Thursday* and *Sunday*. Contact David at 361-886-3616 or david.sikes@caller.com

