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Top dogs ready to compete for the birds

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Gazette Reporter **Date:** November 28, 2010 **Section:** B

Michelle **Linnane** steered a utility vehicle around a bend trying to keep up with her dog, Ruby. She let the Llewelin setter go near her house and, in high wind, the trained bird dog circled the property as instructed.

The energetic canine made a beeline right to a thick patch of grass, roughly 300 yards from where it began its hunt, and stood motionless, tail in the air, pointing at the pheasant.

Next weekend, **Linnane** will host the New York State Chukar Challenge at her Stonewall Boarding & Game Preserve. Chukars are game birds similar to grouse. Competitors bring skilled or amateur hunting dogs and a shotgun, vying for prize money by getting the dog to find the bird so the hunter can get ready to shoot.

Linnane held a similar event last year. This year, however, she got the competition sanctioned by the National Bird Dog Challenge Association which she hopes will draw more hunters to the 106-acre Schoharie County property north of Esperance.

Winning events at the competition will earn hunters points they can use to qualify for a national tournament, so she expects to draw people from further away than last year's challenge when about 30 hunters traveled from all parts of New York as well as Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, she said.

TRAINING AND DISCIPLINE

Linnane said many dogs instinctively find birds, but getting them to point to a bird, or find and flush the bird, then go and retrieve them after they're down, is not easy. It's a skill that takes specific steps and discipline to develop in a hunting dog. But it all begins with the relationship between the dog and its owner.

"Before you can train a dog I feel you have to have a bond with them. People spend a lot of time with their hunting dogs, most good people do and it shows," **Linnane** said.

The training entails using bird carcasses to get the dogs used to finding them. Then it progresses to working with live birds.

"Once they get a little bit of experience, once you've established that kind of bond with a dog, they pretty much want to do anything to please you," she said.

Llewelin setters are English setters that can trace a bloodline back to 19th-century breeder R. L. Purcell Llewelin. But setters aren't the only bird dogs. **Linnane** said guests at the game preserve, which hosts pheasant hunts as well, bring a variety of breeds including Labrador retrievers, cocker spaniels, German shorthairs, springer spaniels and standard poodles, to name a few.

SOMETHING NEW

Linnane and her friend Mike Cornell of Esperance, a falconer with 27 years of experience, have been practicing a new twist to the action at the Stonewall Boarding and Game Preserve.

Cornell last week brought his falcon hybrid Zema in for some action. The 4-month-old, high-speed raptor chases red-tailed hawks and even Canada geese when it gets the chance, but last week's treat was the pheasant Linanne's dog Ruby sniffed out of a patch of grass in high wind.

When released from about 300 yard away, Zema burst into the air, flew a brief arc and landed on the pheasant with a crash.

Cornell said the two are still refining the work -- Zema isn't overly comfortable with hunting dogs.

Linanne said she hopes to turn the bird dog and bird-bird into a feature of events in the future, but for now, she's concentrating on next week's event.

The New York State Chuckar Challenge will take place next weekend, Dec. 4 and 5.

The event will include a flushing and pointing division, top gun, doubles and puppy. The deadline to enter is Monday.

Spectators are welcome at the event which will include a bonfire.

More information can be found on the Internet at www.stonewallboarding.com and under the events listing on the Web site of the National Bird Dog Challenge Association at www.nbdca.com/events.