

Home | News | Entertainment | Classifieds | Cars | Jobs | Customer Service Last Updated: January 2,



HEADLINES

- >Articles don't appear?
- >Local News
- >State/Regional News
- >Teen Zone
- >Business
- >Sports
- >Outdoors
- >Health
- >Religion
- >Lifestyles
- >Letters to the Editor
- >Editorial
- >Columns
- >Town Talk
- >Obituaries
- >Community Calendar
- >Military/Veterans
- >U.S. Constitution
- >The Federalist Papers
- >Great Speeches
- >Quotations
- >Photo Gallery
- >In Tomorrow's Edition

SEVEN DAY ARCHIVE

SPECIAL SECTIONS

CLASSIFIEDS

CARS

JOBS

e-TECHNOLOGY

SPACE.COM

COUPONS

WEATHER

CUSTOMER SERVICE

FOUR CORNERS

BUSINESS JOURNAL

ADS ONLINE

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Carlsbad Current-Argus

Deming Headlight

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OUTDOORS

Book offers great hunting dogs tales

By Darren Marcy/Outdoor Editor
Jan 2, 2004, 09:38 am

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"Panther and Other Stories of Great Hunting Retrievers"
Anthology
6 X 9, 272 pages
Globe Pequot Press, \$24.50
Information: (877) DUCKS-68

Another book from Ducks Unlimited is a great little collection of tales about hunting dogs and the people who love them.

"Panther and Other Stories of Great Hunting Retrievers," will warm the heart of any dog lover, but those who hunt with dogs are the ones who will most enjoy the stories.

A collection of stories by writers who know and love dogs, this book has stories of great dogs and not so great dogs — but all have a quality that makes their owners love them like no other.

Anybody who has ever taken a dog afield knows the strong bond that can grow from a day in a duck blind or traipsing through upland cover.

Those people will also know the joy of a dog who does its job well, and the angst caused when that same dog decides not to.

This book is full of those stories, as well as heart wrenching tales of old dogs who can no longer handle the physical rigors of life as a hunting dog and have been retired to the living room to lay by the fire.

Don't think, if you're a collector of great dog writing that this is just a bunch of "Me and Bubba hunting ducks" stories.

The tales told in this collection probe the bond between man and dog and the intricate relationships that unfold over a dozen or more years.

Panther, the dog carried in the title, was a no-account black Lab that rose from a little known pheasant flusher and retriever to become the most consistent winner on the field trial circuit in the 1940s and 50s before finally retiring back to those pheasants toward the end of his life.

Along the way, with a little professional training and handling, Panther bested high-bred dogs born and raised to become champions in the sport.

With 18 dog stories, this book will surely keep dog lovers up a little later than intended.

Panther's tale, while a good one, isn't even the best for my money.

Stories about dogs that switch from the tall grass of the upland prairies chasing grouse to the cattails of the upland water prove that a dog doesn't have to specialize, and a tale about a man who picked up a Lab at the pound for a \$5.25



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[Book offer dogs tales](#)
[Wildernes postpone](#)
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[Conservat protection](#)
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[Outdoor N](#)
[Outdoor C](#)
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Search

Go

All Categories

[Advanced Search](#)

proves that the price a man pays for his dog is no indication of the kind of partner it will become.

A story titled "Bologna Hunters" hit a little close to home, when a pair of duck hunters from the south decided to try their hand at pheasants in South Dakota with their dogs.

They hook up with a professional trainer who is in town to show off her handiwork for a couple of well-heeled hunters from Minnesota.

At lunch, one group dines on summer sausage, smoked salmon, cheese and crackers and wine with cloth napkins, while the two rednecks from the south slap together some bologna sandwiches with hot sauce.

But in the end, the good old boys end up with a limit of pheasants. Their Labs performed fine compared to the high-priced Brittanies, and everybody goes home happy, the regular Joes, however, are a bit more satisfied with themselves and their home-trained dogs.

My two favorite stories, however, show man and dog at their best and worst.

In one, "All Ghosts Aren't White," a black Lab is seen by sea-going men over and over. Sometimes, this dog — as big as a small horse — is seen standing on the shore of an island, other times, swimming the choppy waters off the coast of Green Bay, Wisc.

The story unfolds of a man who once owned a great dog, but mistreated it severely. One day the dog went on a retrieve and never came back.

I won't ruin the story for you, but rest assured this tale has a happy — and just — ending.

The other favorite of mine, "Sonny, Good Night," is about a story most of us know all too well.

The writers tells the story of finding his old Lab has suffered a stroke overnight.

The pain of putting a beloved companion down is one of the hardest things a dog-lover will ever do.

But as E. Donnell Thomas Jr. writes, "Death awaits every hunter as surely as it awaits our quarry, whether the hunter walks on two legs or four."

Thomas write eloquently of the moment a hunter realizes he will never again step out of a truck with his buddy bounding out behind.

"Never mind the ducks and pheasants, the flushes and retrieves," Thomas writes. "I was losing a best friend, not a hunting machine."

As many of us know all too well, Thomas points out that the easiest way — certainly not the best, but the easiest — to heal the hurt is with another dog to take up our time and love.

"Labs go on as surely as life itself, even when individuals have left us," he writes.

This book is a keeper.

A little pricey at \$24.50, it's worth it, for the quality-bound, hard-cover collection that stretches 272 page with short bios on each writer.

Panther is a book for people who love dogs, and honors that love with stories that will help pass those long afternoons by the fire after bird season is over.

Information: www.ducks.org/bookstore or (877) DUCKS-68.

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[Top of Page](#)

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