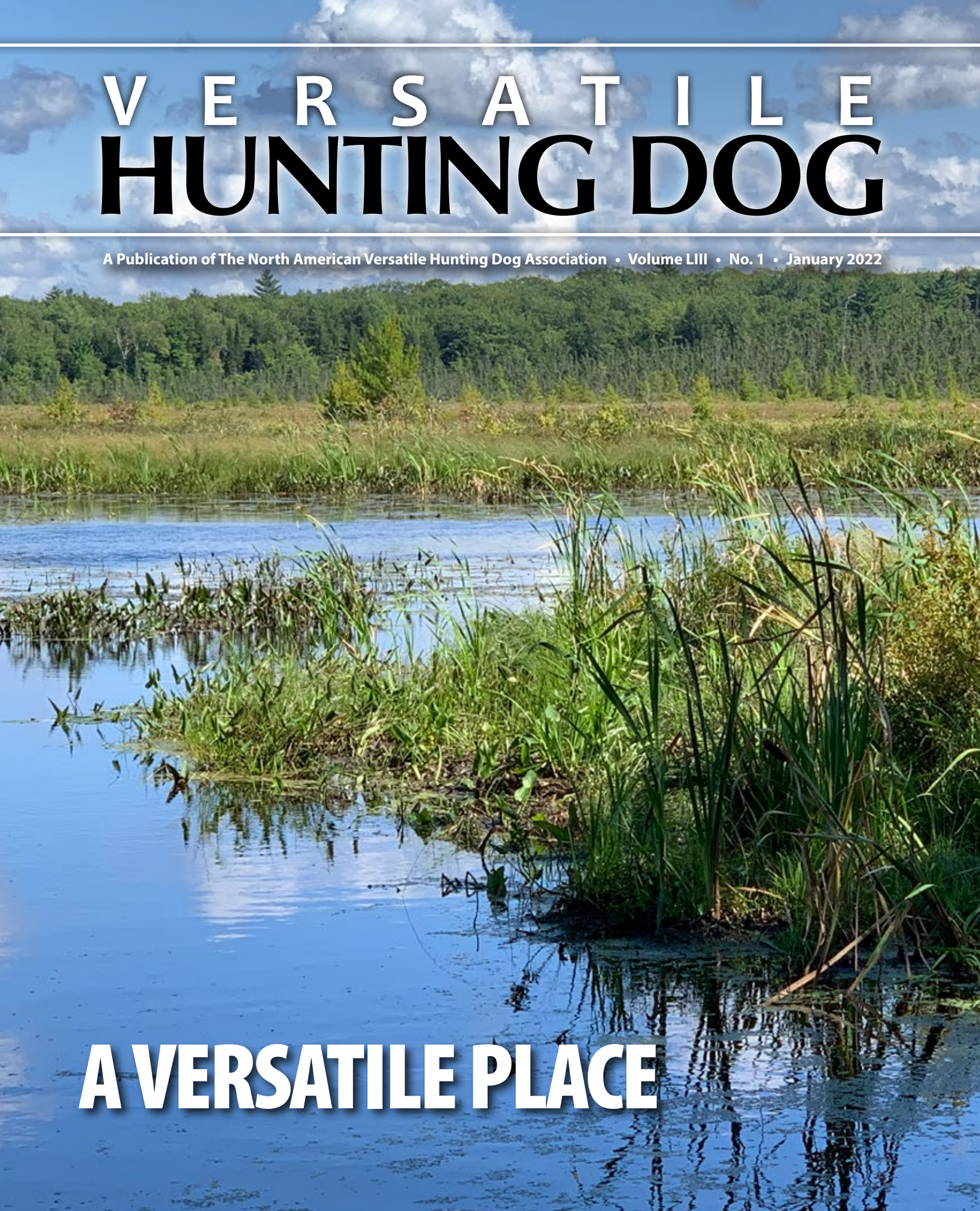


VERSATILE HUNTING DOG

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A VERSATILE PLACE

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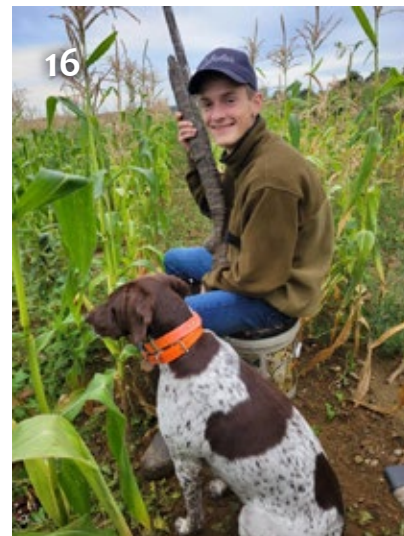
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About The Cover

SERPENTINE FOR WATER TESTS ON THE
PROPERTY IN SMITHFIELD, MAINE

Photo by Anna Lyon



A Versatile Place

By Anna Lyon
Wayne, Maine

ANDY DOAK PROUDLY CLAIMING
OUR FOREVER HOME.
ANNA LYON © 2022

There is little more prized to a bird or waterfowl hunter than a sweet hunting spot. Second to that, perhaps, would be a place to train your versatile hunting dog.

“Early on, my father instilled in me the importance of access to land, which is becoming harder to get,” said Andy Doak, president of the Sebecicook Chapter of NAVHDA. “Land access will always be a problem as time goes on. The writing was on the wall, so we wanted to be ahead of the curve.”

Doak and founding chapter members made land acquisition a top priority since forming it in 1999. That dream became reality in 2020 as the chapter purchased 100 acres of open field and waterfront in Smithfield, Maine and became the first NAVHDA chapter to own its own training and testing grounds.

“We recognized that it was becoming very difficult for chapters in general to locate testing and training grounds.

Even public land fell under the potential political pressures and could be changed at a moment’s notice,” said Bob England, the chapter’s director of judging.

“When we first started the chapter in 1999, the goal was to buy property so we could take and run our dogs,” said Director of Training Dan Albert. The Sebecicook Chapter was an offshoot of the Yankee Chapter, which was becoming crowded, and it was harder for members to get as much training time as they wanted.

Initial meetings with potential donors were not promising. “We were extremely unsuccessful,” said Greg McNeal, former board member who, with previous President Peter Wade, met with potential donors about investing in the land. “People didn’t see the benefit. ‘What’s in it for me?’”

Meanwhile, the chapter had been using land in Smithfield for training and testing for more than 10 years. The landowners, Steve and Joanie Greer, freely allowed the



MICHAEL PICHER © 2022

chapter to use it. Six years ago they approached chapter members to let them know they wanted to sell the property and offered them first opportunity to buy it. If the chapter hadn't taken them up on the offer, it would need to find another training ground. "He wanted us to buy it," said Doak. "This was our chance."

"The Greers really worked with us. They wanted us to have this place. They didn't want it to be developed," said Albert, who thinks it would have likely become a solar farm if the chapter hadn't bought it.

"They wanted to give us a chance to purchase because he and his wife liked what we were doing. It was a childhood piece of property that he visited while in summer camp as a youth," said Bob England. In 2016, the chapter started working to buy the property with \$10,000 in the bank. \$150,000 was still a long way off. "People thought we were crazy," said Doak.

The Smithfield property wasn't the only property looked at, but it provided the best combination of field and water. Previous training grounds had field but no water or steep fields with obstructions that presented safety concerns or neighbors too close. Past President Malcolm Charles generously allowed the chapter to use his land for water tests and training but, not unexpectedly, that was no longer the best option when he passed away two years ago.

Initially, the chapter hired a professional consultant for guidance in fund-raising and grant-writing. "It didn't get us where we needed to be but started us on the pledge process," said Doak.

"It was in some ways not well spent but in other ways it was good because that was the turning point," said England, of the consultant's recommendation for getting member pledges. "We knew what to do."

First, they asked members to pledge a \$1,000 donation over three years, or an amount they could comfortably afford. After the three years, they were halfway there. When it came time to broaden the net and seek donations from outside the membership, the persistent question was, "What happens to the money I give you if you don't make it?"

"People just had to believe," said Doak.

In 2018, NAVHDA opened the bid process for its 2020 Annual Meeting, which was due to be held in the east. To the Seabasticook Chapter, this presented an incredible fund-raising opportunity. The chapter submitted a bid in hopes of pushing the project over the top.

Next came 18 months of planning and executing the event. The chapter fell short of the purchase and sale deadline but by negotiating with the landowners they were able to have it extended just long enough to get over the finish line.

The Seabasticook members had the motivation and drive, knowing it was the right thing to do, and pursued the project like a dog with a bone. "They were part of something much bigger than just us and training our dogs," said Doak.

"This was a great acquisition. I'm so glad we did it. It makes it great for the members," said longtime volun-



NATIONAL ANTHEMS AND SCORE
READING AT OUR FALL TEST.
ANNA LYON © 2022



teer Rick Thompson, who recalls the many fund-raisers in the early days.

Hosting the Annual Meeting in Portland, Maine, was a smooth process, thanks to guidance from NAVHDA International in planning, accommodations and, ultimately, success, said Michael Picher, chapter vice president, who also credited many other chapters for contributing to the auction and raffle donations.

"I committed myself to say this is the right place for our chapter for the future. I never wavered in making that happen. I never felt we were going to fail at this process. I pushed that (commitment) to the membership," said Doak. "The key is never believing you will not be successful."

"I truly believed if we raised between 50 and 75 percent of the cost, that would be the turning point. There would be a change for those who feel this is going to be a stretch," said Doak. And, when they reached that point, all the members pitched in. Doak points out that nearly 100 percent of people who donated had a connection to NAVHDA.

When the NAVHDA Annual Meeting was said and done, the Chapter had raised \$145,000 of the \$150,000. It still needed \$5,000 plus operating costs in the bank. Board members donated a significant

amount of money and at the member's meeting additional funds were raised.

"That put us in a position where we felt comfortable to write a check and have the operating funds we needed as well," says Doak. In March 2020, the Seabasticook Chapter officially wrote the check and the deed was transferred to Seabasticook Chapter NAVHDA – Paid in full.

"I didn't have any concerns that we couldn't do it. I think the leadership team led," says Picher. "Andy's a strong leader who had a good vision. And we had a good team formed."

Timing is everything: The Annual Meeting was a huge success and dodged a bullet, having taken place just two months before Covid-19 put an end to all large gatherings. In the meantime, the chapter pulled together the final pieces, wrote the check for the land and, with minutes to spare before the Somerset County Registry of Deeds closed Friday night, registered the deed. The following week, Covid shut everything down. "There were so many things that fell into place."

"How incredibly lucky we were with the timing," Picher said.

"It's clean living my friend. We just made it happen,"



**THE CABIN NEAR THE WATER AREA,
BEFORE AND AFTER RENOVATION.**



said Wade. “We have it really, really nice. As long as nothing changes, we can run our dogs forever.”

Now that the chapter members are landowners, interest and activity have increased, as has the potential for burnout of officers and core member volunteers. At the upcoming Seabasticook Chapter Annual Meeting in December, the executive board will need to reach out to members to broaden participation as volunteers. Things will need to change. Some members have been putting many hours into many jobs, everything from property maintenance to raising birds and new members may need to step in to relieve them.

“What won’t change is the opportunity for Seabasticook to always own and use this piece of land.” Said Doak. “The long-term strategy is first and foremost to maintain access and manage it fairly.”

Volunteer work has been important. At this point, members are asked to volunteer eight hours a year. Doak said the process may evolve.

Since purchase, the dilapidated horse stable structure has been torn down and in its place a puppy pond has emerged. The ‘80s era cabin on the Serpentine Stream, which serves as a viewing and staging area for utility water events, has been restored and sports a new roof. At the water area, England built a deep cedar outhouse

that smells surprisingly pleasant inside. Outside, both the outhouse and the cabin feature siding cutouts of pointing dogs and birds, crafted by his wife, Allison.

The volunteer work has had a side benefit of bringing the membership closer together. Over the winter, chapter members constructed and installed wood duck boxes along the Serpentine and had a great time doing it.

“It takes a village,” said Wade. “Everyone has a different skill. When building the wood duck boxes, we were all laughing and joking. It brought a lot of people together, not training dogs, just building something to make it better.”

Going forward, the land is available for others to enjoy. A father and son who want to fish would be welcome to use the water area, Doak said, as an example. But those who want to work and train their dogs would need to join the Seabasticook Chapter and NAVHDA International and participate in the work needed to keep it viable. The chapter was happy to lease it to a spaniel group for a field test weekend this summer. It’s such arrangements that help pay the bills and fit in perfectly with the chapter’s goals.

“It is important for us to understand and ensure that those who come after us will always have this opportunity,” said Doak. 🐾