

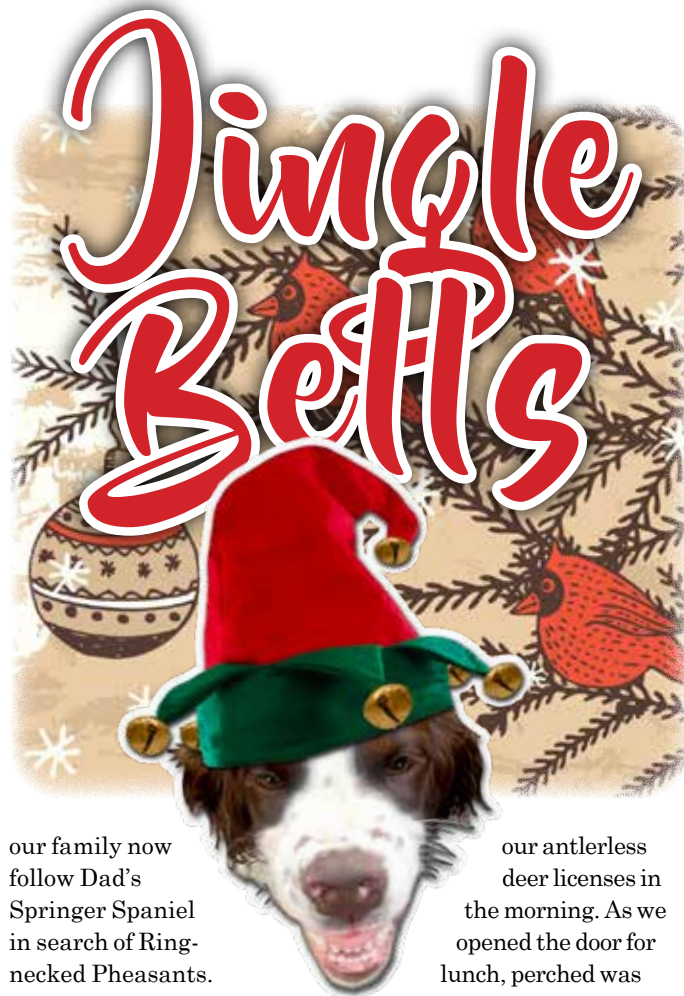
A QUOTE from the Christmas classic *It's A Wonderful Life*, unexpectedly accumulated like December snow during a holiday pheasant hunt. "Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings."

The distinct chime of winter conjures so many different memories to so many. I cannot fault folks who associate the sweet sounds with Christmas caroling or Santa Clause and a team of reindeer. Nor can I judge others who believe a bell's best use is fashioned with ribbon to a tree ornament or other holiday décor. At one time or another, I likely spent excited holiday nights in all aforementioned camps.

Recently, however, I have come to anticipate a different seasonal ring. My favorite jingle bells are ones echoing from a good bird dog just prior to the pheasant's cackle, as blunt as it is brilliant.

With respect to upland birds, years hunting as a young man were dedicated to ruffed grouse. Some of my fondest outdoor memories will forever be the tough pursuit of an even tougher bird. In recent years, may it be temporary in nature, grouse populations have drastically declined. Among my very greatest of hunting hopes are ones with my children one day experiencing the rapid flush of a ruffed grouse and, after missing with both barrels, chasing them across the most beautiful and wild places Pennsylvania offers.

In the meantime, Dad and I have adapted. A new holiday tradition has gift wrapped itself during Christmas vacation the past few years. Christmas stockings have less to do with socks tacked on the mantle and more to do with birds in the brush. Hunters of



our family now follow Dad's Springer Spaniel in search of Ring-necked Pheasants. Deservedly retired, my hard-working and hard-hunting father pursues pheasants in October and November. Contrarily, precious fall hunting time afforded to me is focused on whitetail deer with my loving pair of bowhunting children. Father and, to a lesser degree, Kimba understand my plight.

Kimba is Dad's dog. She is as good looking a Springer Spaniel as anyone ever saw. Kimba can outrun a truck, swim like a fish and outhunt any bird, dog, or bird dog. Kimba possesses an uncanny knack for flushing birds from places thought impossible to hide quarry. To boot, this Springer is eternally smiling. That's right, Kimba often shares the most endearing grin from floppy ear to floppy ear.

Once my cousin Barrett and I had filled

our antlerless deer licenses in the morning. As we opened the door for lunch, perched was a pooch showing every tooth in her mouth. Barrett initially feared an attack. Cousin couldn't have been further from a kind truth. Kimba is the most tender, affectionate dog our family ever owned.

During a separate canine kerfuffle, a friend of the family, Miss Loretta, called me at work. "There's a dog here! I can't tell if its smiling at me or going to bite me!" she frantically cried through the phone.

"That's just Kimba's smile," I reassured her. They became fast friends.

As December solidifies, crisp cold and Christmas music fill the air. So too does size 6 shot. Aside from a muzzle-loader miracle, deer tags are as filled as they are going to get. Bows and rifles have been

meticulously cleaned, safely stored, and promptly swapped for shotguns. Fa-

ther's over-and-under complements my side-by-side nicely, like Christmas carolers ranging from bass to tenor.

At home, Kimba is as calm and sweet as one could ask for in a dog. Once afield, the Spaniel springs to business. No cuddling. No standing around the parking lot. Just pheasants. Any hunter is lucky to keep pace.

Kimba, normally as silent as the night, emits her signature call deep from within when she spots a bird. The guttural sound is the prelude to what has become my preferred holiday harmony. Though they were present before the bark, the constant jingle of the bell seems to strengthen moments before the flush. Simultaneously, a new player joins the symphony, feathers catching wintry air like skilled woodwinds before a hauntingly catchy cackle. If, as the music falls upon the ears, sights and sounds align, the song concludes with the piercing percussion of a 12-gauge. Personally, I hope song ceases with a smoking side-by-side. Though, admittedly, the performance of the over-and-under is more accurate.

To a small, devoted fanbase, such a Christmas concert played out last season along the banks of the Shenango. Father and I woke earlier than a kid would upon a few mornings come Christmas. The first hunters to the State Game Land, we had the best seats in the house.

Traces of snow revealed the presence of pheasants. Hexagonal crystals landed atop my gun barrel with the most attractive contrast, as countless of flakes' cousins shattered beneath hustling leather. The avian tracks,



somewhere between song bird and turkey, led towards a tuft of grass no larger than the pine wreath hung on our family's front door. I wrote them off as passing through and continued my trek to better cover.

Kimba leapt logs and bounded brush as athletic and graceful as only a Springer Spaniel. For every step my father and I took that frigid foray, the dog took twenty. Conservatively. She hunted exponentially harder and intrinsically better. There exist few greater joys in the outdoors than watching a well-trained dog hunt. Society could learn a thing or two about such a love for work and such a work for those you love.

"Kimba's getting birdy!" Dad shouted. "Get ready!"

Kimba's jingle bells doggedly approached the unlikely island of misfit grass I had already trudged. The synapses between brain and mouth sparked. Before I could formulate doubtful words of a bird's existence, I heard the jingle bells reverberate across the golden pasture. The magic preceding the festive chorus of cackle and blast was aimed directly at me.

Though my footfalls were mere inches from where the rooster erupted, my aim was

not. The flush, flight, and crumpled descent of the cock pheasant took on the arch and hues of a rainbow.

"Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings," I joked with Dad as Kimba merrily assumed retrieving responsibilities.

I held the fallen angel in all its heavenly wonder. The shimmering spectrum of color more dynamic than any Christmas tree. How such shades conceal so well equally atop snowy fields or within drab thickets is yet another one of nature's fine mysteries. I was left to believe the namesake plumage, the pure white ring, was a halo hovering above the rooster's festive green and red head, but drifted around its neck during the descent of the sweet symphony.

Dad, like his dog, much preferred to focus on birds tucked into gamey thickets rather than game vests. Yet, I knew Father heard my comment, understood my heart, and shared my thoughts as he nodded, "Let's go make a few more angels."

It truly is a wonderful life. 🐾

🐾 *Retired Deputy Game Warden Marshall B. Nych, Pennsylvania Game Commission*

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