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Sculptor breathes new life into a dead tree

'Birds Up' by Larry Lefner depicts a dog flushing a pheasant.

BY PAMELA HOWELL
Special to the Express-News

Larry Lefner is a soft-spoken man who lets his hands do the talking — though he usually uses a chain saw or chisel to help him get the point across.

"The simpler I keep things, the better," said Lefner, a sculptor from Woody Creek, Colo. "I let the work speak for itself."

Lefner recently finished transforming a century-old Texas live oak tree into a monumental sculpture at Joshua Creek Ranch, a nationally recognized game preserve and hunting resort in Boerne owned by Joe and Ann Kercheville. The tree was struck by lightning last spring.

"We hoped that (the tree) was going to come back, but it didn't," Ann Kercheville said. "We knew we had to do something about it, and one of our ranch hands said, 'You know, you should have that tree carved.' ... and that's when we contacted Larry."

The "lightning tree" is now an 18-foot-tall sculpture titled "Birds Up." It depicts an English cocker field spaniel flushing a ring-necked pheasant out of tall grass, a fitting image for a resort that offers guided hunts with dog packs.

"Birds Up," which is located on a slight rise off the ranch's main entry road, stands in an outdoor gallery of 1,200 acres of rolling Hill Country vistas, wooded hilltops, prairie grasses, Guadalupe River frontage, rugged bluffs and open fields.

"To me, this is paradise ... we are mightily blessed," Kercheville said.

A song bird trilled above and then, somewhere in the distance, the sound of dogs barking arrived with



PHOTOS BY KIN MAN HUI/kmhui@express-news.net

Artist Larry Lefner stands near "Birds Up," which he carved from a live oak tree that had been struck by lightning on the Joshua Creek Ranch. He was commissioned by ranch owners Joe and Ann Kercheville to depict an English cocker field spaniel flushing a pheasant.

a warm breeze.

From across a gently rolling field, the pack writhed like an unimaginable snake, a swirling mass of black and brown, tan and white, racing toward its destination.

Soon the 20 or so English cocker field spaniels were at the tree, panting and yapping with excitement, dried grass and twigs caught up in their wet, matted fur. They created a stir of noise and dust, stepping on wood chips from the tree. The dogs were out for their usual Saturday morning romp across the ranch with their owner, Joe Kercheville.

"It was Joe's idea to have a cocker flushing a pheasant, but it was the tree that decided how many pheasants," Ann Kercheville said.

"Birds up" is the command hunting guides give to the dogs to direct them to start flushing birds.

"That's when (the dogs) just storm and slam in, and the hunters start shooting and getting their shots," she said. "It was important to us that the dog and the bird have that depth of movement, and Larry just captured it."

The Kerchevilles have collaborated with Lefner before. They also own the Lodge at River's Edge in Basalt, Colo., near Aspen, where Lefner sculpted a dead cottonwood tree into a trout jumping out of water.

Lefner, a professional sculptor for 35 years, owned the Woody Creek Art Studio next door to the Woody Creek Tavern, a favorite hangout of the late gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson.

The medium as well as the subject — capturing the essence of a hunting dog springing toward the pheasant — made "Birds Up" a challenge, he said.

"Live oak is a lot harder," he explained. "The cottonwood trees I did up in Basalt were relatively soft. It's like beating on a rock; it is really hard stuff."

But live oak has positive qualities, too.

"The wood has so many beautiful colors of its own from the outside layers to the most inner layers," Lefner said. "Each one of these rings has characteristics of their own, (and) every now and then you'll see one kind of color that fades out all of a sudden."

The process of turning the dead tree into a work of art began in April, when ranch employees pruned the tree to a more manageable size. Lefner and the Kerchevilles worked together on ideas for the sculpture, then Lefner researched his subject so he could capture the breed characteristics of the English cocker field spaniel.

Sculpture requires the artist to think of profile as well as depth, Lefner said, so "I'm constantly thinking when I'm up there."

"You have to think about where you're going to commit yourself ... and then once you get a whole lot of stuff taken away, you have to sit back and look at it again and see it with new eyes."

Lefner used a chainsaw, chisels, knives, other specialized tools and sandpaper to create "Birds Up." Finally, he used a water sealant "to protect it from all the rain we have around here," he said, tongue firmly in cheek.

Each day, he worked high up on scaffolding, sometimes in 100-plus degree heat, protected only by a tarp and a ball cap atop his gray hair. He said



A pheasant appears to fly out of the wood in the sculpture "Birds Up." The hard wood of the live oak tree posed some challenges for sculptor Lefner.

he was visited by an occasional spider and scorpion and even a pheasant and a quail that wandered by.

"I said 'Hi' and kept on working," he said.

The work took about two months of eight- to 12-hour days.

"I'd try to get there about 8 each morning and work until my wife would bring me lunch," Lefner said. "I'd take 15 to 20 minutes off, and then I'd be making more wood chips."

Except when he was using the chain saw, Lefner didn't wear work gloves "so I can have more of a rapport with the piece ... so I'm constantly touching it."

"I worked (each day) until my hands gave out," he said. "They just get numb; they're vibrating. My wife's a nurse, and she does all these treatments on my hands each night so I'm back in shape for the next day."

At first, he said, the idea of sculpting an oak tree was overwhelming. "And then, bit by bit, chip by chip, it gets done."

Lefner's wife, Janna, created a blog at www.lfnerart.com to chronicle his



The English cocker field spaniel depicted in the sculpture is used for hunting on the Joshua Creek Ranch.

work on the tree, and the Kerchevilles also have posted information on their website, www.joshuacreek.com, to document the process and perhaps spark interest in tree sculpting.

"I'd like to encourage people to consider hiring a sculptor to make something nice out of these trees instead of chopping them to make them into firewood," Lefner said. "I hope the idea catches on to other people."