"DUCK HUNTING MADE EASY"
by Luke Clayton

Ever hear the old adage about duck hunters? How do you spot a duck hunter at a dinner party? He’s the one that’s half asleep! Granted, duck hunting does require getting up early and possibly loosing a few hours sleep but ask a veteran of the duck blind why he or she makes the sacrifices and they are usually quick to point out the fact that hunting ducks is one of the most interesting, challenging and down right fun endeavors in the outdoors. There’s something about the sound of whistling wings that, once experienced, keeps duck hunters coming back for more. I never harvest a mallard or gadwall that I don’t wonder where the bird has been and what’s it’s seen in it’s long migration route.

I hunt ducks often and am fortunate to live close to some backwoods sloughs and ponds that annually attract a smorgasbord of ducks. I build several blinds from natural vegetation before the season opens in areas that have been productive in past years. Usually my blind locations work just fine but occasionally, I have to move them, sometimes as little as a couple hundred yards to set up in areas the ducks like.

Years ago, I had an old duck hunter give me some very good advice “Son, you can’t make a duck go somewhere he doesn’t want to go.” Forty years later, I now find myself the old duck hunter and I couldn’t agree with him more.

Volumes have been written about decoy placement but I’ve come to believe the only real trick about setting a decoy spread is to leave an opening, usually within 30 yards of the blind, for ducks to set down. Wind direction will dictate the direction the birds approach the spread. Ducks and all birds take off and land into the wind. Many novice duck hunters never give this fact a second thought when choosing their blind location. Remember, you have the odds stacked in your favor. If the wind is blowing steadily out of the north, set your blind along a north bank so that you can easily see ducks coming into your spread.

When hunting small waters, as I usually do, I never set more than a dozen or so decoys but I have great confidence in the motorized spinning wing decoys. I truly believe one of these spinning wing decoys takes the place of at least a dozen extra decoys. When there is little or no wind to keep the decoys bobbing and weaving on the water’s surface, I like to use a pull string on a couple of the decoys. Movement in a decoy spread is a big plus for attracting passing ducks. Ducks are almost never motionless on the water and still decoys spook more ducks than they attract. I’ve watched old timers toss pebbles into their decoy spread on a calm day. I’ve also hunted over battery powered ‘dipping’ decoys that mimic feeding ducks putting their head underwater. The more motion you can incorporate into your decoy spread, the more ducks you’ll shoot.

Novice duck hunters often do way too much calling. While photographing ducks, I’ve set out in
the blind with my camera and simply observed. Ducks are vocal birds, especially when deciding where to land and sometimes while feeding but their calls are often subtle. I’ve seen lots of ducks spooked by overzealous hunters calling too loudly and too much when ducks were working a spread. When ducks are leaving, a loud highball call is necessary but once ducks spot my decoys and begin circling, I usually remain quiet, sometimes giving a confidence “quack” for mallards or, if decoying pintail or widgeon, a soft whistle. I carry only two calls when duck hunting: a raspy mallard call and a pintail whistle that serves double duty for attracting widgeon. I’m certainly not a great duck caller but one doesn’t have to sound like a competitive duck calling champ to attract ducks. It is imperative to know when to call, what call to use and when to remain silent.

Learning when to shoot is another important trick that comes with practice. Years ago, I took the shot when ducks were within 40 yards, regardless. Doing so, I missed many opportunities for close in shots at decoying ducks. Looking back, I had just as well been pass shooting. Decoy spreads are for getting ducks in CLOSE, not banging away at them when they make their first or second pass over the spread. Ducks will often make two or more passes over decoys they are eyeing. Each pass gets closer and closer to the spread/blind. Unless the birds appear to be spooked, I wait until they actually land in the spread. A good practice is to let the majority of the flock land, then shoot one of the last of the birds coming down. This practice often provides multiple shots at birds flushing from the water.

Photo by Luke Clayton

*Duck hunting has many rewards; a chance to watch a beautiful sunrise on a cool winter morning and, if everything goes just right, a nice strap of ducks!*

GOOD EATING! Ducks, if properly cared for in the field are excellent eating. For many years, I removed the breast halves and marinated them overnight in a fifty-fifty mixture of Coke and soy sauce, then wrapped the breast halves in bacon and grilled or smoked them. This tried and
true treatment of duck is pretty much fool proof. John Bryan, a good friend that is a duck hunting guide on the Brazos River, recently introduced me to a method of frying duck that is absolutely awesome! First, use a tenderizing mallet and pound the breast halves, just as you would venison round steak. Then season well with your favorite seasoning, place in a freezer bag and allow to marinate a few hours. Pour a little milk in the bag, dust the duck breast in flour and fry in hot oil. Served with a pan of cream gravy and hot biscuits, this is a great meal any time of the day.

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