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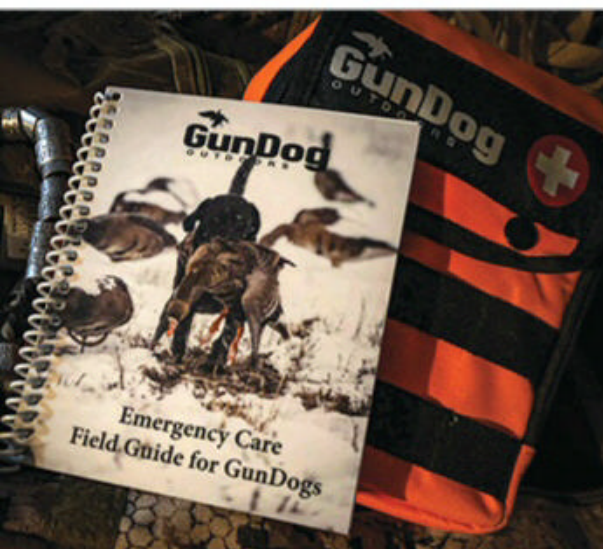


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BY SKIP KNOWLES Alive with waterfowl, North Dakota's Prairie Potholes Region is a perfect test for the exciting new Savage Renegauge 12 gauge semi-auto.

"Sweater-weather wood duck hunts in October can be just as fun as blizzardy late-season mallard forays...**more fun, in fact, for a new hunter.**"

—Tina Dokken (PAGE 49)

Reader William Receski sent in this riveting image of their great old warrior, Scoop, and we had to pay tribute to such a grizzled and determined-looking retriever.



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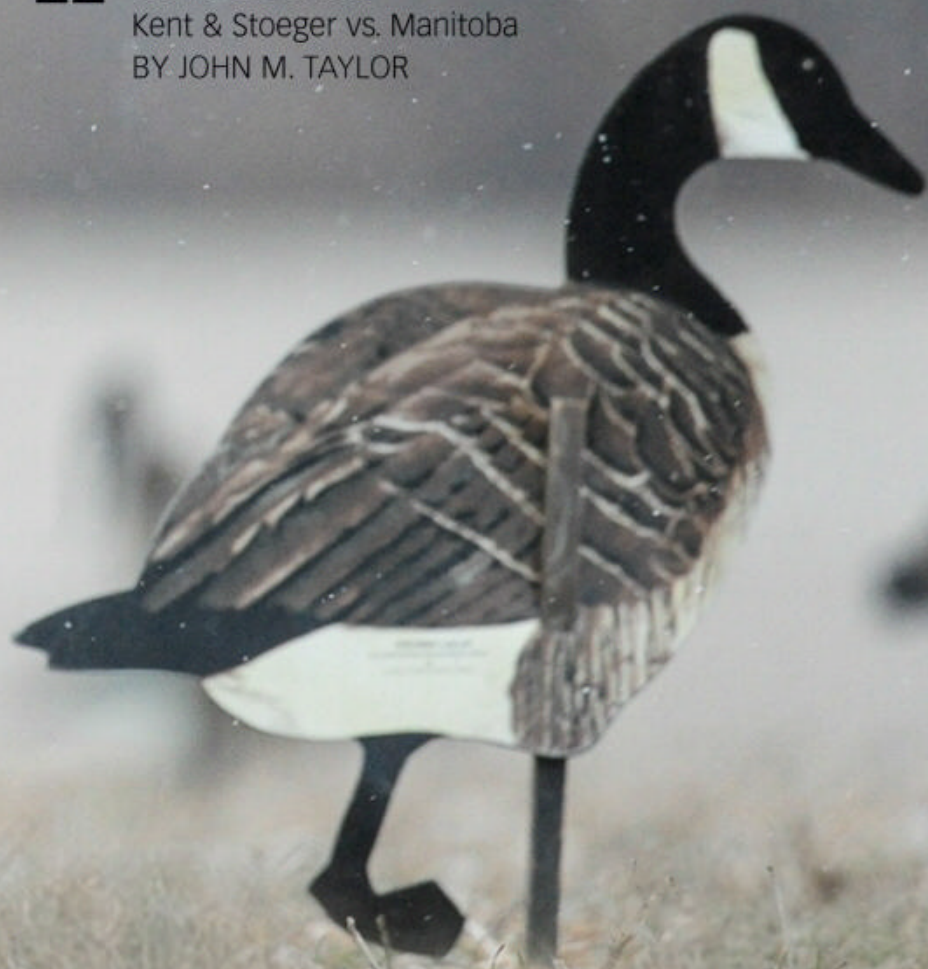


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COVER PHOTO: Lee Kjos' old super-pooch Talon caught mid-launch by his owner, looking more like Secretariat than a canine. When world-famous photographer phenom Andy Anderson, of Superbowl commercial fame (Remember, "So God Made a Farmer" narrated by Paul Harvey? Yeah, that photographer and Kjos' favorite), Andy remarked, "There is NOT a better image of labs than this one. PERIOD. Mic drop!" One of Kjos' proudest moments, and a superlative tribute to an all-time great and beloved Lab, Mr. Talon, trained by none other than The Tom Dokken.

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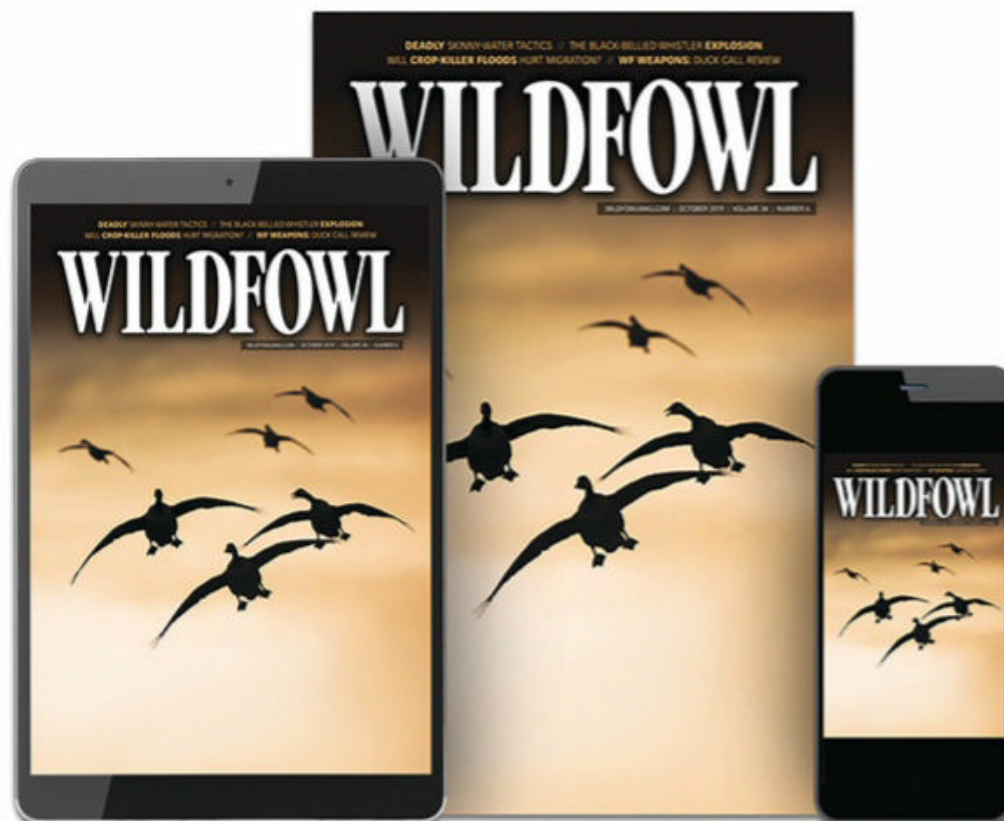
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Dog's Best Friend

THE THING ABOUT good dogs is you don't even know quite how much you love them until you are shown in a way that catches you off-guard.

The tailgate slammed and the five Labs piled out: yellow; pewter, black, white, and Hoss, the tubbarded chocolate, rounding it out. Five colors! What a sight! All swirling in a whirl of nervous excitement. It was late morning and we had clobbered a few honkers and were switching gears to a new loafing spot. We needed to hide, throw out a few dozen full-bodies, and knuckle down. Thanksgiving, a family hunt on the Kansas border.

A handful of volleys broke out and the dogs were off chasing the huge birds. A great water retrieve is the pinnacle of duck hunting, but watching dogs roll out after geese like greyhounds, burning a line through the light snow and blowing them up in a pile of dust and grain chaff and feathers is a real thrill too.

All the dogs got a few birds but the real star to emerge as a goose-killer was a mutt. A tank, a giant Lab and God-knows-what mix. "Timber" is owned by my brother-in-law Phil and is one of the un-papered Underdogs. He looks like a monster yellow with a strange head shape and a white blaze down the middle of it. He was born to catch geese, and what a surprise: Phil uses him deep in the Wyoming back-country. His love for Timber grew that day; he was ecstatic, and now that dog owns him.

I was in transition a few years back, and did not have a gun dog while living in Illinois. We had a newborn and another on the way when I met a true dog man at a show. I asked if I should get a dog with a baby in the house. He said, "Ah, man, there is never a time in your life when you should not have dogs or children running around, all of them you can get."

So we went and got a British black pup from Jim McKenzie (colmorgkennels.com) and she quickly became our own Crazy Black Bandsaw, chewing everything she could

get those puppy teeth on. She has chilled out, and now is this beautiful shiny blue-black duck machine.

I had an elk hunt this fall that ended with a surprise chance to hunt ducks with Fred Eichler on the Colorado opener. Right out of the gate I doubled on canvasback drakes, with one in the water and another out in sagebrush. Then we smacked redhead, gadwall and pintail... suicidal juveniles zeroing in on the call like I have almost never seen. Our own little Grand Passage; like this sudden 18 inches of snow had emptied the PPR.

Without Luna, it took me 20 minutes to find the first two, wandering through the sage and flaring birds. I could not get the one in the water, and the other ducks took another half hour. I suffered a strange guilt doing it without her...and I'd badly needed my canine partner's help. And it would have been such a richer experience had she been there. I made it back down to Fred's with her in January (photo) and was redeemed.

You come to love their quirks. She has so much anxiety to get into the house, "I'm just gonna DIE if you don't let me in, Dad!" But as soon as she gets in my office she flops, starts stretching snoring and passes out like she was hit with a poison dart. My favor-

ite is when she dreams, barking and running on her side in my office, chasing giant slow crippled geese in her head.

It is an emotional roller coaster owning a high-octane hunting dog, but it always swings around. And then it is over too quickly, the way children grow up way too fast. Good retrievers are precious, and I'm spending more time with this one rather than just trying to see how many ducks I can shoot, friends I can make and places I can travel.

I've got a pretty great friend right here...and she wants nothing from me but a little time. And to let her in. 🐾

(Got a dog-love story? skip.knowles@outdoorsg.com)



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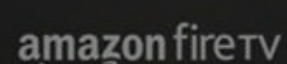
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The Disappearing Duck

Mallards are masters of avoiding hunting pressure. By David Hart

THE PATTERN REPEATS itself every fall. A cold front brings in a fresh wave of ducks and a rekindled passion among waterfowlers. Some of them fill their duck straps. Others don't, but the mood is the same. It's show time. The ducks finally arrived.

A week later, the skies are empty, save for a few random birds that pass well out of range of every decoy spread in the marsh. It's as if the ducks have packed up and moved on to safer grounds. But have they? Or are they hunkered down on a refuge or some secret swamp that no hunter knows about? It's one of waterfowl

hunting's greatest mysteries.

New research sheds light on those disappearing ducks. As it turns out, when food and open water is available, the birds that filled the skies and tumbled into your decoys early in the season haven't headed for parts south. In fact, they haven't even left your county. The mallards that were so visible last week just found a place to hide that you and your fellow hunters either can't go or haven't discovered. And in some cases, those secret hide-outs are available to anyone with a hunting license and a duck stamp.

"They are real good at keying in on

small areas that hunters don't use," says Gulf Coast Joint Venture biological team leader Dr. Joe Lancaster.

As a graduate student at Mississippi State University graduate, Lancaster attached VHF transmitters to 113 hen mallards during the 2010 and 2011 hunting seasons and monitored their locations on and around Muscadine Farms Wildlife Management Area. The 1,423-acre property includes a 200-acre refuge closed to all hunting. The rest was open to hunting to varying degrees, but the entire area was closed Monday, Wednesday and Friday throughout the season.

© David Stimac





We suspected they were growing nocturnal, **but not to the extent we found.**

As it turns out, not all refuges draw ducks. The mallards in Lancaster's study rarely used the Muscadine refuge. He thinks it may be too small and too close to the hunted areas to give the birds a sense of security. Instead, most travelled about 10 miles to Yazoo National Wildlife Refuge, where they spent the day. (The refuge was closed to hunting during the study.) Others found unhunted

wetlands around Muscadine, rarely traveling more than five or ten miles.

Winous Point Marsh Conservancy research biologist Brendan Shirkey conducted a similar study in northwest Ohio. The ducks in his study moved even less, an average of just 500 to 1,000 yards. That didn't change throughout hunting season. The study area had a large amount of flooded corn impoundments

constructed almost entirely for hunting purposes. Ducks flocked to that corn, but mostly at night.

"They basically sat out on a bay on Lake Erie that was closed to hunting during the day. The water was five or six feet deep and there was no aquatic vegetation, so they were just loafing," he says. "At night, they would go straight to those flooded corn impoundments and stay all night. Almost all of them were gone by legal shooting light."

The ducks in Lancaster's study did the same thing. They spent their days in areas where they weren't being hunted or in areas closed to hunting. Although 35 percent of daytime locations were on public land, only 8 percent of those locations were open to hunting. At night, they increased their use of hunted portions of Muscadine

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Farms and surrounding habitat that may or may not have been open to hunting.

Shirkey wonders if ducks are becoming more nocturnal, which may be why hunters believe there are fewer ducks than we are told. Despite glowing reports of a bountiful fall flight for the past decade or more, a growing number of waterfowlers say they are actually seeing fewer ducks.

"We think ducks have just gotten smarter about avoiding hunting pressure. We suspected they were nocturnal, but not to the extent we found. They can get all the food they want at night, at least in my area, so they have no reason to visit areas open to hunting during the daytime," he says.

How much food? One calculation found there was the equivalent of 56 million duck energy days in northwest Ohio alone. That is, there was enough planted and natural food to sustain 56 million ducks for one day, or more food than region's ducks could eat in an entire season. That endless buffet of corn could be why ducks fly and feed less in the day now and more at night.

"That behavior increased over the course of the season. The longer they were hunted, the more they exploited refuge during the day and flooded corn at night," says Shirkey. "There was just an 10 percent chance that one of the mallards in our study would still be in a flooded impoundment during legal shooting hours after spending the previous night there."

That's exactly what happened in Lancaster's study, as well. Once hunters started showing up to Muscadine Farms WMA in the morning, the birds left. It didn't matter if the area was open to hunting that day. Lancaster can't say if the ducks became conditioned to leave when hunters began walking to their spot or if something else played a role in their pre-dawn departure. Whatever the reason, the pattern was clear: By legal shooting light, almost all of the marked mallards were resting safely where hunters weren't bothering them. In fact, overall mortality of the ducks in his study was as low as 5 percent. Just eight of the 42 marked ducks were



© Dean Pearson

FIFTH FLYWAY | By David Hart

PRAIRIE POTHoles COME TO THE (REALLY) BIG SCREEN

Delta Waterfowl and the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation, among other conservation groups, are collaborating on an IMAX film highlighting the Prairie Pothole Region. *Wings Over Water* will focus on sandhill cranes, mallards and yellow warblers to show the importance of the region known as the Duck Factory.

"The film helps us tell the wetland habitat conservation story to a broader audience who might not yet understand the importance of the prairies not only for waterfowl and wildlife, but also for the health of our ecosystem," says Delta Waterfowl CEO Dr. Scott Petrie.

It is set to be released in 2021 and will appear in theaters throughout the world. Academy Award nominee and Golden Globe winner Michael Keaton is narrating the film.

FIRED FOR SAVING DUCKS

A Dominion Energy employee from Wyoming was canned for doing a good deed. Adam Roich was fired days before Christmas after his bosses learned he was saving ducks that landed on wastewater ponds over the past five years. Roich told Wyoming News that he captured at least 50 oil-covered birds, took them to a company facility and washed them with Dawn detergent. He would then warm the birds in his truck before setting them free. An official with Dominion said his actions are forbidden based on the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

GUIDE BUSTED. AGAIN.

Various news sources have reported that a popular New York guide and television show host was busted for hunting waterfowl over bait. Bill Saiff, who was sentenced to federal probation in 2017 for hunting over bait with clients, was nailed again for the same thing. The new charges stem from an investigation by federal and state officials going back to 2018. Saiff's first sentence prohibited him from guiding or hunting until 2019.

killed by hunters during two seasons.

"The majority of hunting-related mortality was on private land, mostly five to ten miles from the public hunting area," adds Lancaster. "There was no harvest of our marked birds on Muscadine."

He conducted more in-depth research in the northern Mississippi Delta over two additional seasons (2013 and 2014) and found similar patterns. Lancaster found daytime use of flooded timber was twice that of nighttime use during hunting season. Some of that timber was open to hunting; some wasn't. Plenty of birds spent the day on moist-soil habitat, but it was mostly some sort of refuge. Some found flooded crops, rice and soybeans, where they could rest and feed undisturbed. However, ducks tended to increase their use of moist-soil and flooded crops at night when those places were free of hunters.

"They seem to be more tolerant of hunting pressure in forested wetlands than in more open habitats like moist-soil or agricultural habitat. Basically, they can hide better," adds Lancaster. "Plus, it is their ancestral habitat in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley. They are wired to use that habitat."

Visit any popular wildlife management area with flooded timber in Arkansas and that will be obvious. Despite heavy hunting pressure, the birds still want in the trees. However, they find pockets of undisturbed water, even if it is just a few hundred yards from a group of hunters. Ducks will continue to use those spots until they either deplete the food or they get bumped. Shirkey said ducks

would key on a specific spot in a specific field, visiting that exact location night after night. Eventually, they would move to a different field. Lancaster found similar behaviors.

"They settled into a pattern that lasted about 7 to 10 days. They would use a safe place during the day and the same agricultural field or moist soil habitat at night. Then they would bump over to a different area and repeat that pattern," says Lancaster.

Because he used VHF transmitters, Lancaster can't say for sure what ducks were doing when they were sitting. Those devices only provide an approximate location. Nor can he say

exactly what type of habitat they were utilizing beyond forested, moist-soil, agricultural and permanent water categories.

GPS transmitters allowed Shirkey to get a more precise location. Most birds sat on open water in an area closed to hunting, but some did spend the day in places open to hunting.

"They would hide in the cattails on a marsh that was on a club's property," adds Shirkey. "They repeated this behavior all season and they only left the area when there was no more open water. Until everything froze up, they had all the resources they needed."

FIFTH FLYWAY (continued)

MORE EVERGLADES WETLANDS SAVED

The state of Florida is purchasing 20,000 acres of Everglades wetlands to prevent the owners from exploring for oil. The property, located on the eastern edge of the massive marsh, is owned by the Kanter family. It is the largest wetlands acquisition in a decade in Florida. The purchase price is \$16.5 million and the land is expected to be administered by the South Florida Water Management District, which allows hunting on most of its properties.

SOUTH DAKOTA CONSIDERS SPLASH LIMIT

Efforts to recruit new hunters in South Dakota may include a two-tiered license system that allows hunters to shoot three ducks without regard to species or sex. Hunters could choose between the regular license that follows federal guidelines, including a six-bird, species and sex-specific limit, or the new license system. South Dakota waterfowl biologist Rocco Murano hopes to adopt the experimental license by the 2021 season. Nebraska is also considering a similar license.





Canine Stress

We might not see anxiety or worry in our dogs, but it is there and can affect hunting ability. By Tony J. Peterson

IT WAS SOMETHING a dog trainer said to me while I was interviewing her for my podcast that stuck with me for days. She had mentioned that she believes stress layers itself in dogs, and when it builds up to certain levels, it can affect training for days. It wasn't much of a leap to believe that stress, then, could also influence hunting performance.

Her statement led me down an internet rabbit hole to suss out a canine researcher who could really speak to an expert level on canine stress. After some research, it seemed like I could do far worse than reaching out to Jessica Hekman DVM, PhD,

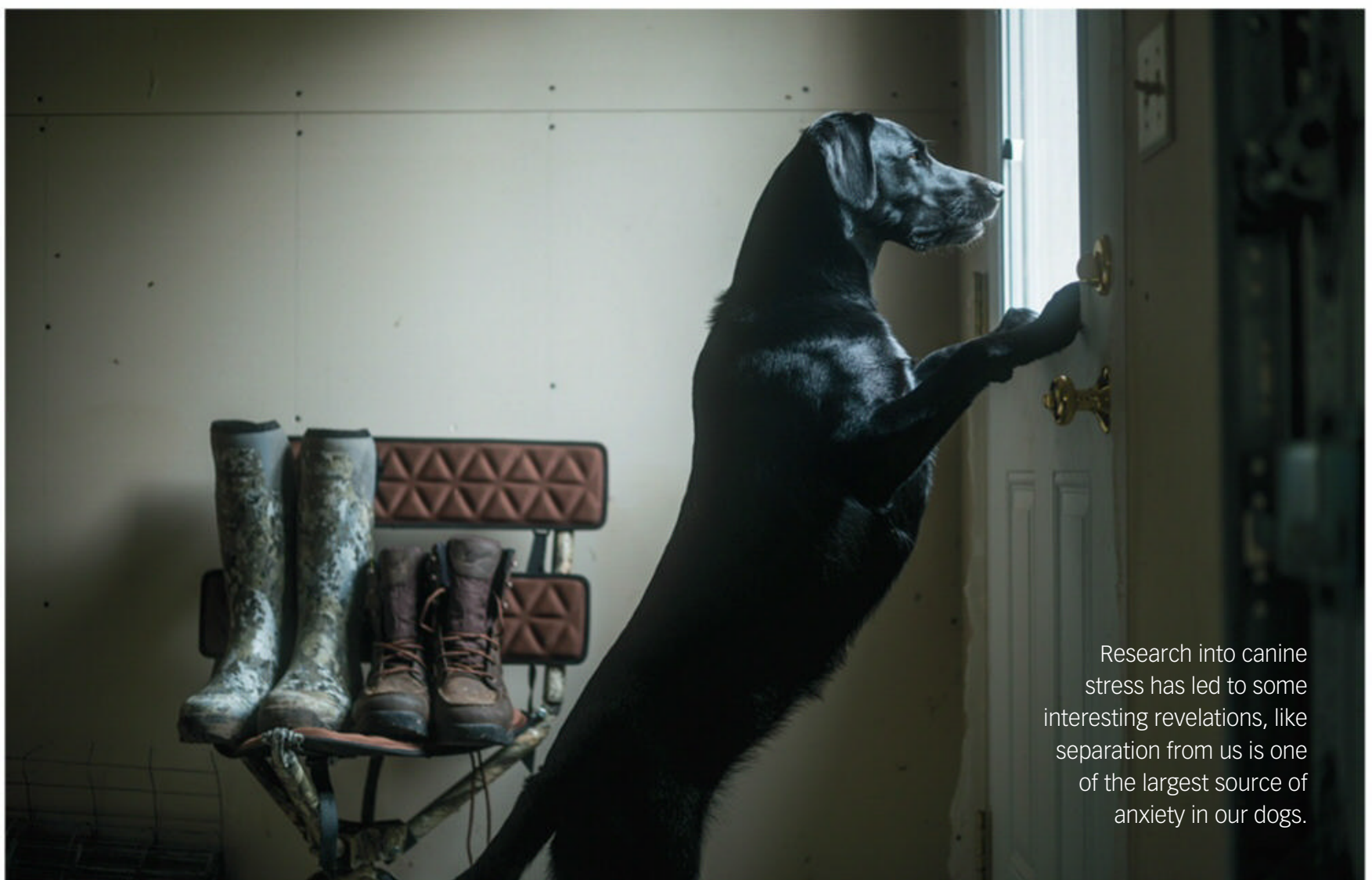
who has spent years of her life digging into the effects of stress on dogs.

Her early research focused on stress in hospitalization of dogs, and she has now expanded that to include canine genetics and the development (or underdevelopment) of certain parts of dogs' brains that are related to stress. In the realm of knowns and unknowns, this type of research has a lot of runway left and could influence how we breed hunting dogs a decade down the road.

It has also yielded some interesting findings about stress. It turns out that some dogs are predisposed to suffer more from the effects of stress than

others. This is likely due to genetics, and for reasons probably due to canine evolution, means that some dogs get over stress quickly while others don't. A fight with another dog, for example, might ruin a specific retriever for days, causing an erosion in performance in the field or in manners at home.

Other dogs might shrug off the same toothy skirmish within minutes and not show anything other than very short-term effects from it. That might seem pretty simple and intuitive, considering humans are wired similarly. The difference, however, is that we often don't seem to fully



Research into canine stress has led to some interesting revelations, like separation from us is one of the largest source of anxiety in our dogs.

© Love Creative



© Tony J. Peterson

New situations can be stressful to our dogs, which can result in a dip in performance in the field...sometimes for days.

understand what is stressing our dogs out and how long that stress can affect them.

We just see normal dog behavior, and then we see dog behavior that might seem a little off, but probably don't think much of it. Our dogs can't explain to us that they are having a bad day because another dog had them by the throat this morning, or that we yelled at them for not working through a retrieving drill properly. Or that they were put into a dark duck blind with three unfamiliar dogs, five strangers, and then all hell broke loose as the guns started going off and chaos ensued.

While we might not see the symptoms of stress and anxiety fully manifest themselves, they are there to some degree. If you've got a timid female Lab, this might mean for a few days things won't go too smoothly and it's your job to reset her with some confidence building work. If you've got a male Chessie that could shake off getting hit by a semi if it meant he could keep hunting, then you might not have much

to worry about. The takeaway is that you shouldn't assume your dog is shrugging off stressful events simply because it's easy to believe that's what they do.

While going back and forth with Hekman on this topic I ended up asking her what the most stressful things

our lives we establish a new pack with them and when the pack is intact, they are likely to be content. When we leave them alone, that pack dynamic has dissolved and it's not easy for our dogs to handle. It's also not possible for us to always be with our dogs, either, but it means we

"Our dogs can't explain to us that they are **having a bad day** because another dog had them by the throat that morning"

are that a dog might encounter in everyday life and she answered without hesitation by saying, "Being left alone. Separation from us is a huge stressor." This speaks to their desire to be with us, of course, but also to their evolution as a pack animal.

When we bring that puppy into

should think about the stressful things our duck dogs might deal with and prepare them, just as we would train them for a new hunting experience through confidence-building baby steps that result in controlled exposure to new tasks, environments, and challenges. 🦆



PACIFIC OCEAN



Waterfowl BAND REPORTS

1

HUNTER: Nicholas Farris, Minot, ME
BAND #: 1927-83749
SPECIES: Mallard (D)
BANDED: 08/13/2015
LOCATION: Pierreville, QC
RECOVERED: 09/23/2019
LOCATION: Minot, ME
COMMENTS: My first banded bird ever and first male mallard couldn't have been any better for a season opener.

2

HUNTER: Pat Arntson, Minot, ND
BAND #: 1208-25126
SPECIES: Large Canada Goose (F)
BANDED: 06/19/2018
LOCATION: near Galesburg, IL
RECOVERED: 09/16/2019
LOCATION: Near Karlsruhe, ND

3

HUNTER: James Shaver, North Saanich, BC
BAND #: 1138-70899
SPECIES: Canada Goose (M)
BANDED: 06/22/2012
LOCATION: near Chatham, ON
RECOVERED: 09/12/2019
LOCATION: 8.7 miles NE from Plumas, MB

4

HUNTER: Irvan Mclean, Lovell, WY
BAND #: 0914-90672
SPECIES: Green-winged Teal (H)
BANDED: 08/02/2018
LOCATION: near Huslia, Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area, AK
RECOVERED: 10/05/2019
LOCATION: Big Horn County, WY

5

HUNTER: Joe DelSoldato, Pittsfield, MA
BAND #: 1245-08708
SPECIES: Wood Duck (D)
BANDED: 08/29/2018
LOCATION: near Birchwood, TN
RECOVERED: 10/12/2019
LOCATION: Richmond, MA

6

HUNTER: Bill Jordan, Homedale, ID
BAND #: 2117-00678
SPECIES: Mallard, (D)
BANDED: 08/16/2015
LOCATION: near Ft. Providence, NT
RECOVERED: 10/12/2019
LOCATION: 5 mi SSE of Adrian, OR

7

HUNTER: Ben Van Voorhis, Oakdale, MN
BAND #: 1727-12706
SPECIES: Small Canada Goose (M)
BANDED: 08/12/2006
LOCATION: 5 SW Bluegoose Delta, NU
RECOVERED: 10/26/2019
LOCATION: Devils Lake, ND

FLYWAY
VETERAN

8

HUNTER: Anthony Dulac, Harpswell, ME
BAND #: 1827-52843
SPECIES: Mallard, (D)
BANDED: 08/12/2014
LOCATION: Lisle Verte Ouest, QC
RECOVERED: 11/12/2019
LOCATION: Bowdoinham, ME
COMMENTS: Third band in three years.

9

HUNTER: Cameron Boggs, Springfield, IL
BAND #: 1176-09920
SPECIES: Lesser Scaup (D)
BANDED: 02/15/19
LOCATION: Westwego, LA
RECOVERED: 11/5/19
LOCATION: Oquawka, IL

10

HUNTER: Andrew Meckley, Dillsburg, PA
BAND #: 1917-87127
SPECIES: Mallard (D)
BANDED: 08/25/2019
LOCATION: near Tessier, SK
RECOVERED: 11/27/2019
LOCATION: 0.8 miles W from Harrisburg, PA

WE WANT YOUR INFORMATION Please send band report information including Band Number, Species, Sex, Banding Date, Banding Location, Recovery Date, Recovery Location, Hunter Name and Address and Comments, or photocopies of your band certificates for banded waterfowl taken during the 2019-20 season to: Bob Humphrey (bob@bobhumphrey.com) or Wildfowl Magazine, 727 Poland Range Rd. Pownal, Maine 04069. Wildfowl will attempt to publish as many band reports as possible. Please be sure to submit your own name and band information to the USGS.

FOR AN EXPANDED "BAND TALE" SEE NEXT PAGE »

Rebound

Jack Hole's Honey Hole Holds Bling. By Bob Humphrey

LIKE THE BIRDS they pursue, it's not unusual for ardent wildfowlers to travel great distances seeking out new and different hunting experiences. But most have a favorite honey hole back home they return to over and over. For Jack Hole, it's Cardinal Lake, which lies about 20 miles west of Alberta's famed Peace River. "We frequently hunt Cardinal Lake for a mixed bag of divers and puddlers," he explained. "The divers are better in September, and mallards and pintails get better mid October," he continued.

And it was a mid-October day when he and his pals Cap'n Dr. Darryl Smith and Jon Mark Walls from Jackson, Tennessee headed about four miles across the lake where they found hundreds and hundreds of mallards. "We set up the mallard floaters and a few Canada goose confidence decoys, put up the boat blind and hunted out of the boat. And what a hunt it was.

The mallards were trading back and forth, most coming back to the

lake from a field about a mile away with crops jammed full of field peas. In the end, they'd all harvested limits, mostly mallards, a few pintails and a wigeon. And among them was a little unexpected surprise.

"In the middle of the hunt, two drake mallards came through the decoys," Hole began. "I shot the first one on my side, and Darryl shot the second on his side, both splashing down out of sight on the other side of the little cattail island we were sitting against." Hole sent his two year old black lab, KoKo, on the blind water retrieve from the boat and with hand signals directed her first to Darryl's duck, which she successfully retrieved. She then brought back Hole's duck, in similar fashion. He was delighted, though not especially surprised to see it was banded. "We've taken several bands there over the years," he explained. But never one quite like this.

It was not until he sent in the band information that he learned it was a bit

THE BAND

HUNTER: Jack Hole, Gunn, AB
BAND #: 1867-10693
SPECIES: Mallard (D)
BANDED: 08/25/2012
LOCATION: Cardinal Lake, 20 W Peace River, AB
RECOVERED: 10/22/2019
LOCATION: Grimshaw, AB

unusual. For starters, it was banded in 2012, meaning it had survived seven migrations down the central flyway and back, perhaps as far as Walls' home state of Tennessee. And apparently, this particular duck shared Hole's affinity for that special hometown honey hole, for it was banded right there on Cardinal Lake. Then again, maybe it's not so unusual after all. 



F



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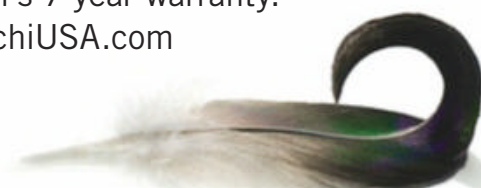
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FEELS RIGHT

Duck Man on a Mission

Mossy Oak Founder and CEO Toxey Haas has fallen in love with managing waterfowl, and he wants you to share that obsession. By Brad Fitzpatrick

ON A SUMMER morning in West Point, Mississippi, a blue and yellow crop-dusting plane sits on the tarmac in the rising heat while its tanks are being filled. It isn't herbicide that's being loaded in the tanks, though, but millet. Or, more accurately, Mossy Oak BioLogic Guide's Choice, a special blend of millet that Toxey Haas and the rest of the GameKeepers at Mossy Oak have developed specifically for waterfowl managers.

When the plane is heavy with seed the propeller cranks and hot air blows

in all directions. The crop-duster taxis to position, nose pointed down the runway. The RPMs increase as the plane starts forward, rushing head-long over the tarmac before rising on the warm air currents then banking to the right. The goal of this run isn't to knock back weeds on agricultural land. Today, the objective is to conserve wetland habitat.

OBSESSION

In 1986 Toxey Haas took a handful of Mississippi dirt and leaves in his hand

and saw something that everyone before him had overlooked. He saw perfect concealment, nature's own camouflage. That handful of leaves would help him create a brand, and that brand would become a dynasty. What started as a man peering into a handful of Mississippi soil became the genesis of the Mossy Oak brand.

Mossy Oak is about more than concealment, and anyone who knows Toxey Haas understands why his keen eye recognized the broad-reaching potential of a camo



pattern. Today Mossy Oak is everywhere. It's on hats, on sofa covers, pickups, dog collars, and, of course, guns. But Mossy Oak is hardly just a camo pattern.

"I dearly love whitetail hunting and spring turkeys will probably always be number one for me, but I have become completely obsessed with ducks and managing for ducks," Haas said in a new documentary, *Duck Dreams*, on the Mossy Oak GO streaming service. "You can't just show up, not around here. You have to put in time in the summer and even in the fall leading into season."

Mossy Oak, like Harley Davidson and John Deere, is a brand that has come to represent a lifestyle. For Toxey Haas and his team that lifestyle is being outdoors in nature, a year-round obsession that's as much about conservation as it is about harvesting game.

THE RISE OF GAMEKEEPERS

"In 2000 we bought a 200-acre piece of property," Haas says. "It had originally been timber land but they had screwed up the drainage and killed the trees." Toxey and his family began converting the wasted timberland into a waterfowl impoundment, manipulating water levels and planting crops in the area to draw in ducks.

"In a couple of years that area became a major landing point," Haas told me. "That became our sanctuary. We called it the Refuge."

The Haas hunting land isn't on the Mississippi Delta but rather in the state's "Black Belt," a strip of fertile land that stretches into Alabama. That part of Mississippi isn't in the heart of the flyway, but those initial efforts paid huge dividends. Now Haas says that when he plants the area and water begins to rise he'll see very large numbers of ducks in an area that was once home to a handful of birds.

"Without taking care of the land, without being a gamekeeper first, nothing happens. Mossy Oak is based on conservation everything else is a subset of that."

Toxey and the rest of the team at Mossy Oak soon had another brand under their umbrella—GameKeepers.



The objective of the GameKeepers is to provide support for private landowners who want to conserve wildlife on their property and to shine a light on the efforts of landowner-driven conservation efforts through their magazine, television show, social media and email. Mossy Oak's BioLogic brand offers the highest-quality seed blends available to help landowners meet the critical habitat and food resource needs required for increased productivity on their property.

"It doesn't matter if you have two acres, 200 acres, or 2,000 acres. Private landowners can take matters into their own hands, and that benefits wildlife."

Just how important is private land management for waterfowl? Perhaps more important than we ever imagined. In talking to wildlife biologists, Haas learned that the primary limiting factor in nesting success of waterfowl isn't just the condition of their prairie nesting grounds but also the condition of the birds when they reach those nesting areas. When waterfowl complete their northbound spring migration their body condition dictates whether the birds will be able to successfully survive the nesting season. When that northward journey takes the birds over areas that are devoid of food and habitat it stresses them,



and stressed birds have lower odds of reproductive success. That means that every landowner who lives along the flyways (and even those who live outside the primary migration routes) can play a vital role in conservation.

"It's not just the state fish and game department's job to conserve these birds. It's not just DU's job." Haas says that landowners play a pivotal role in creating enough habitat to help birds thrive.

"It's like a sport," he says. "Wildlife management is like golf or baseball or hunting."

And when landowners win the management game all hunters—and wildlife—share in the victory.

THE HAAS FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

The original 200-acre refuge that the Haas family constructed in 2000 is still intact, and it's still a sanctuary for birds. Thousand of birds. The Haas family has built impoundments around that area, but birds in the Refuge are off-limits. Toxey says that formula has proven successful.

Outside the refuge, the Haas family uses a multi-pronged management program to attract and hold waterfowl. Of course, BioLogic Guide's Choice plays a vital role in that, but it's not the only technique that Toxey uses to improve habitat.

"When you have corn with food underneath it like barnyard grass it holds birds," Haas says. "Some ducks, particularly mallards, don't like to spend much time in the open. They'll feed and then they'll look for shelter." Standing corn with waterfowl forage below (which Haas says is referred to as "dirty corn" by many duck hunters) provides both cover and food for the birds, and that makes property much more attractive and productive. He also says that organic material in corn feeds the invertebrates below, adding



to the biological diversity of the wetland area and providing yet another important food source for ducks.

Water level management is key, Haas says. If you're able to install risers and other water control systems it's a real benefit, but even tearing out beaver dams works. Toxey likes to lower water levels after the Fourth of July, and that gives moist soil plants a chance to emerge.

"Ducks learn where to find those areas real quickly," Haas says. By manipulating habitat landowners not only increase the value and potential of your land but also help to increase the overall health of migrating populations that require stopover points with food sources for maximum breeding success.

TEAMING UP FOR CONSERVATION

Mossy Oak has become one of the leading voices in conservation, and they are the official camo of Ducks Unlimited which means a portion of the purchase price of Mossy Oak



Shadow Grass Blades and Mossy Oak Original Bottomland camo goes directly back toward DU's vital conservation efforts. Additionally, Mossy Oak's support of Duck Country and other private land conservation efforts is poised to help improve the overall health of waterfowl populations across the continent. That's why we're proud to help Mossy Oak in an effort to educate private landowners on the technical aspects of waterfowl conservation.

More importantly, that collaboration is a rallying cry for all waterfowl hunters to get on board with private land conservation. More ducks means better hunting opportunities, and that grassroots efforts will help wetland conservation efforts in the future. And those who love waterfowl understand that duck hunting more than a passion—it's an obsession. And that obsession can pay big dividends for generations to come. 🦆

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PHOTO BY CARSTEN McCONNELL





In a Hot Corner

With a Stoeger M 3500 and Kent Fasteel 2.0. By John M. Taylor

If you've got a new shotgun with some great ammo and you want to turn the barrel red hot, you can't beat heading north. Far north. The Stoeger M 3500 is an inertia-operated shotgun that worked its way through several boxes of Kent's Fasteel 2.0 and some of their Bismuth loads to boot during my time at Kris Wujcik's Michitoba Outfitting, located a stone's throw from the Saskatchewan/Manitoba border near Strathclair, Manitoba. The beauty of inertia-operation is that it is very clean

with none of the dirt and carbon left behind by gas-operated guns.

Inertia operation ain't nothin' new. It was developed by a Danish gunsmith named Christer Sjørgen in 1903, the same year John Moses Browning's long recoil-operated Automatic 5 hit the market. The updated version by Stoeger uses a rotating bolt head that is forced tightly into the barrel extension cuts when the gun is fired by a heavy calibrated spring while the rest of the gun starts rearward in recoil. By the time the shot and wad have

cleared the barrel the spring gives up and allows the bolt to move backwards shucking the fired hull from the chamber and slammin' in a new round for the second shot you need because you missed the first time.

Wujcik's Michitoba Outfitting has a broad selection of Canadian lands from which to choose when he sets up. Canadian farmers consider all waterfowl pests that eat their grain, so most all welcome hunting. One of the plums of his area is the chance to bag Giant Canadas geese (*Branta canadensis*



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maxima) which can weigh on average 10 pounds. Thought to be extinct in the 1950s, a flock of 200 birds was discovered in 1962 at Silver Lake in Rochester, Minnesota. Experts say they are the easiest geese to relocate, so they took starter flocks here and there and their numbers have since grown to an estimated 1million-plus in the Atlantic Flyway and over 2 million in the Mississippi Flyway. One afternoon we got into a bunch of these Zeppelin-sized birds, and the No. 2 Fasteel 2.0 dropped them like dish rags.

Most duck and goose hunters are aware of Kent's Fasteel, for its deadliness on birds at a very reasonable price. The Canadian-owned company loads its ammo in their West Virginia plant where virtually everyone is a hunter, so they take extra care loading your shells as if it were for themselves.

Fasteel 2.0 combines some new twists on this long-proven shell that include a high-performance base wad, and precision-plated steel shot. Zinc-plated shot has the advantages of rust proofing, plus there is some added lubricity that allow the pellets to slip and slide against each other as they zoom down the barrel leading to improved patterning. The shell heads are nickel plated to prevent rust and for smooth chambering.

As a Lucky Strike extra Andy Laidley, Kent's Canadian VP, brought along some No. 4 bismuth loads, and the combination of the M 3500 and



© Howard Communications



this load that you can shoot in grandpa's Model 12 dropped a Canada at a good 40 yards the first morning out. I love shooting my Model 12 Heavy Duck with bismuth whose density is 9.7 grams per cubic centimeter (gr/cc), which is gobblety-gook for very close to lead shot's density of 10 to 11 gr/cc with steel at 7.8 gr/cc.

Stoeger is one of the stablemates of Beretta's holdings that include Benelli, Franchi and Stoeger. The M 3500 uses essentially the same operating system as the Franchi Affinity and Benelli Super Black Eagle 3, at a near couch-change price. The M 3500 is chambered for 2 3/4, 3 and 3 1/2-inch shells and comes in all-camo Mossy Oak Bottomland and Realtree Max 5 with either Burnt Bronze or Dark Earth receivers for extra weather proofing and a cool look, or all-black, all for \$769 or thereabouts depending on your dealer.

I shot the 3-inch M 3000 version all one season when it first came out some years ago without a hitch. The

only negative I heard was that if you sat the loaded gun down hard, they had the tendency to slip the bolt out of battery causing a trigger-straightening pull and no Bang! Benelli/

were repeatedly overrun with mobs of mallards. The shooting was fast and furious and I heard no bellowed profanity because of a jammed gun.

For a great trip check out Michitoba

We felt like Custer at the Little Bighorn as we were overrun with **mobs of mallards.**

Stoeger's head guy Keith Heinlein told me that particular problem had been solved, and I sure didn't have a problem during our three days of hard shooting. In fact the last two days Wujcik found an edge of a wheat field that had major mallard concentrations nearby, and we felt like Custer at the Little Big Horn as we

Outfitting (kris@michitobaoutfitting.com), and for shootin' at home maybe a new Stoeger M 3500 should be in your future along with a wheel barrow full of Kent's Fasteel 2.0 and Bismuth. Ya can't go wrong! 🦆

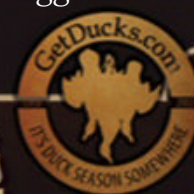
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"Villainous Goods" and classic Mississippi River duck hunting.

IT LOOKS LIKE these boys had a fun morning! Most likely these hunters were chasing birds in Illinois or maybe across the Mississippi River in Iowa. This stretch of the Father of Waters has hundreds of timbered islands that line the shores, many of which offer sloughs that fill at flood stage and provide excellent duck shooting.

These gents appear to be shooting Winchester Model 97s, one of the Cadillacs of shotguns in Illinois: The Browning Auto 5, Winchester Model 97 or the more recent Model 12 were *the* guns. Designed by John Moses Browning and put on the market by Winchester in 1897, the venerable 97 stayed in the Winchester line until 1957, a run of 50 years, amazing in today's throw-away, latest-version world. My dad shot one from 1931 until the 1950s. He bought it from his land lady in Havana, Illinois for the \$8 in room rent that a duck hunter owed when he lost at cards.

What catches the eye in this photo is the duck call hanging around our buddy's neck. It is an Illinois-made call by Fred A. Allen of Monmouth, Illinois. That's a stone's throw from the banks of the Mighty Mississippi. Allen first made his calls as early as 1863, which were all metal and shaped like a tube. Allen claimed them to be the first "production" call made, and he's probably right because C. W. Grubbs of Chicago didn't launch his until 1868. Somewhere between 1863 and 1910, Allen began making them with a wooden barrel and metal insert. In V. Kindler's Saginaw, Michigan, catalog of hunting gear published in 1910, Allen boasts "Fred A. Allen's Improved Wooden Shell Duck Call," for sale either by Allen himself or Mr. Kindler who advertised them at .35 cents! Allen further states, "As parties in the east have placed on the market a horrible-toned imitation of my duck call . . . none are of my make unless stamped F. A. Allen Monmouth Illinois . . . I will prosecute all parties making such villainous goods . . ."

Villainous goods aside, Allen also made "bow-facing oars." This contraption was set up so that the rower could sit facing the bow of the boat while still pulling on the oars for maximum forward motion. He also sold frames where the hunter could drape the skin of a duck over the wire hoops then impale the head on an upward standing spike and have a life-like looking decoy.

So it was in the early days of 'fowling on the banks of the Mighty Mississippi. 

—John M. Taylor

Photo courtesy of NCTC Museum/ Wayne Capooth Collection





Low Profile Killer

A Long Island Hunter Converts a Sailboat into a Sneak Boat that Slices Through Waves Like a Trident. By Mike Marsh

IT WAS A bluebird day, yet Marco Costiglio was determined to hunt ducks. A friend invited him to hunt an area where he had seen a few green-winged teal. It was Nov. 28, 2019 and he was anxious to test his sneak boat. While launching a converted sailboat directly into the Atlantic would seem a fool's mission, accompanied by his pal in a kayak, he sliced safely along the shoreline and ducked into an inlet. The inlet gave way to a small creek with trees closing in so tightly he saw a deer.

"We set some decoys and teal started ripping in," Costiglio said.

"The water was only 18 inches deep, so no one else was around."

When the shooting was over, they had bagged three teal. It was a great maiden voyage of the "Water Sword."

Costiglio lives in Freeport, New York, on Long Island. He hunts Merrick Bay, Hudson Canal and other nearby hotspots. A steam fitter, he is 42 years old and began hunting with a friend whose father is a guide.

"When I was young, I never had to do anything related to a duck hunt myself, but eventually began to learn about hunting ducks on my own," he said. "I really began taking it seriously

when I started hunting three or four times a week rather than three or four times a year. I became immersed in the tradition of hunting from sneak boats like those originating on Great South Bay."

His main focus is sea ducks, which he hunts in the bays from a 17-foot Boston Whaler and in the Atlantic from a 31-foot BHM tuna boat. He wanted a sneak boat for smaller waters, but it turned out to work great for all types of hunting. Trying it for sea ducks, he took two long-tailed drakes during one of its initial hunts. He sets Tanglefree and Hardcore



puddle duck decoys and makes his own diving duck and sea duck decoys from wood and corrugated plastic.

"I found a Mossberg Mallard, made by the Mossberg firearms company in the 1960s, for sale," he said. "I paid \$300 for the boat, two 5-horsepower Evinrude outboards and some decoys. The guy was going to turn it into a duck boat, but lost interest."

The Mossberg is 13 feet long and 42 inches wide. Using an oscillating saw, he enlarged the cockpit, reshaping the opening roughly parallel to the gun-wales and 30 inches wide by 72 inches long. He also cut out the centerboard.

Voids were filled with two-part expandable foam. A 1-inch PVC conduit laid along the centerline allowed installation of wiring for navigation lights, bow mounted spotlights and a phone charger. The switch panel is located on the starboard bow wall of the cockpit and electric power is supplied by a rechargeable lithium-ion battery.

Foam board was used as backing for the cockpit walls, with aluminum foil glued to the foam board to protect it from deterioration by resin. On top of the aluminum, he laid three layers of fiberglass mat. The fiberglass and resin is about ¼-inch thick, with a coarse texture.

Two round inspection ports with watertight covers were installed in the forward and aft decks. He installed a 1/8"x4"x6" aluminum plate to reinforce the transom. Another ¼-inch aluminum plate on the outside of the stern extends 5 inches above the transom. To this is bolted a piece of 2" treated lumber that provides a 9-inch high motor mount. The aluminum plates are bolted together through the transom.

The next step was attaching two teak grab rails bought at a yard sale. Then he painted the boat with Parker duck boat paint. Camo patterns were added with aerosol paints.

The spray dodger consists of fabric from an old boat cover with a hoop of PEX plumbing pipe sewn into a hem. The hem has holes that correspond to eyehooks in the bow deck. An elastic cord in the hem attaches to the eyebolts, making the dodger easy to attach or detach. Two elastic cords



are tied to the grab rails and the top of the dodger hold it erect and it hinges on two Bimini swivels.

Most of the camo grass is held in place with a truck bed cargo net. He attached the net to the boat with the supplied hooks, cut out the cockpit opening and wove grass into the netting. Grass bundles are also attached along the edge of the dodger with spring clamps.

During a hunt, he sits on a small plastic cooler with a cushion. Shells and other gear are kept dry inside.

While initially the boat was powered with a 55-pound thrust Minnkota trolling motor, it now makes way at 10 knots with an Evinrude with a camouflaged cowl. The fuel supply is a 3-gallon remote tank and it takes less than a gallon to motor four miles

to a favorite hunting spot and return.

The entire boat without the engine weighs approximately 100 pounds. For transportation, he simply slides the rig into the bed of a pickup. Most of the time, though, he uses a winch to haul the boat out of the water and onto a floating dock.

"Hunting so low to the water makes it feel a lot more intimate," he said. "Once I accidentally knocked a bufflehead decoy from beneath the dodger without seeing it. The next thing I knew, three buffleheads were sitting right next to the boat beside the decoy. The whole time I was building the sneak boat, the rap song, "Liquid Swords," kept running through my head. That seemed the appropriate name for such a sharp little sneak boat." 🦆

Level Up

Are you asking enough of your retriever?

Maybe your good gun dog could be great. By Tom Dokken

WHEN IT COMES to training dogs, it is very easy to hit a point that either feels like it's "good enough" or that it's as far as the individual retriever can go. I realize this is highly subjective, but most of the dogs I get my hands on are sitting on more potential than their owners realize.

This means the dog that is pretty steady in the duck blind and good for 40-yard retrieves could most likely be rock-solid and willing to bring back a cripple that is 150 yards out, provided he's had the right training.

And now is the time to provide **that training**. But first, you've got to recognize what upper-level work you

want to ask of your dog and then how you'll ask it. Provided your retriever has all of the fundamentals and the basics down perfectly, there's nothing standing between him being a good dog and a great dog.

MONTHS OF SUCCESS

If there is one thing I see amateur handlers do with their dogs that isn't as productive as it could be, it's training without ensured success. Now, failure is going to happen with all dogs and is a natural part of the process, but you want to minimize it as **much as possible**. A dog that finds success and rewards through a series

of small steps, on the path to something bigger, is a dog that is going to achieve great things.

A retriever that experiences failure in training, especially repeated failure, isn't going to level up very easily and might shut down completely. A dog that disengages from drills because it anticipates failure is a dog that is very, very tough to work with. Think about this throughout the spring and summer months when you're looking to help your dog get to the next level of performance.

If you design training drills to **ensure the right amount of challenge and guaranteed success**, you're well

© Tony J. Peterson



THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TRAINING
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OR JUST PLAYING FETCH.

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on your way, but there is still something else to consider—corrections. Or more simply, when is a correction necessary?

Just as the dog that experiences failure might not work the way you need him to, a dog that is corrected too often or corrected when the timing isn't right will have trouble reaching his full potential. The goal when moving your dog, step by step, into advanced level hand signals or blind retrieves or what-have-you, is to pay close attention to the lessons that have stuck. If you're confident your dog knows exactly what you're asking but you see him do something else, then it's time for a correction.

If you've shown your retriever something for one day, or one small training session and then correct him the next time you ask, that could lead to problems. Again, give your dog the time and opportunity to succeed in every way so that you can greatly reduce the chance for failure or correction simply because there might have been a training oversight on your part.

IS IT NECESSARY?

You might be thinking at this point that your retriever did everything you asked of him last fall in the blind, so why try to add in more skills? There are a couple of ways to answer this. The first is simply to wring the most potential out of your dog that you possibly can. The second is that it does a dog good to keep learning and to keep problem solving. Our hunting dogs are working dogs, and they thrive off of structured lives and challenges.

This means that even though your dog never let a cripple go and sat quietly in your flat-bottom for hours while you waited on flocks of green-heads, it would still do him good both physically and mentally to be asked to do more.

And if we are honest about our dogs, it's hard to find one that couldn't use a little help somewhere. I've handled hundreds of dogs in my life, many of which were really skilled retrievers, but they all had some holes in their game. This might have been something as simple as whining a bit



© Tony J. Peterson

Most dogs aren't trained to their full potential, but asking them to keep developing is good not only for their physical well-being, but their mental health as well.

too much in the heat of the moment, or having a long-distance switch that kept them from going out farther to retrieve a bird despite the fact that the whistle-work and hand signals were telling him do just that.

Be as honest about your retriever's skills as you are about your commitment to training the dog. If your dog has only ever worked one retrieve at a time, he's probably ready for dou-

most days. That consistency is the key to the whole thing once you've identified what you want to work on.

CONCLUSION

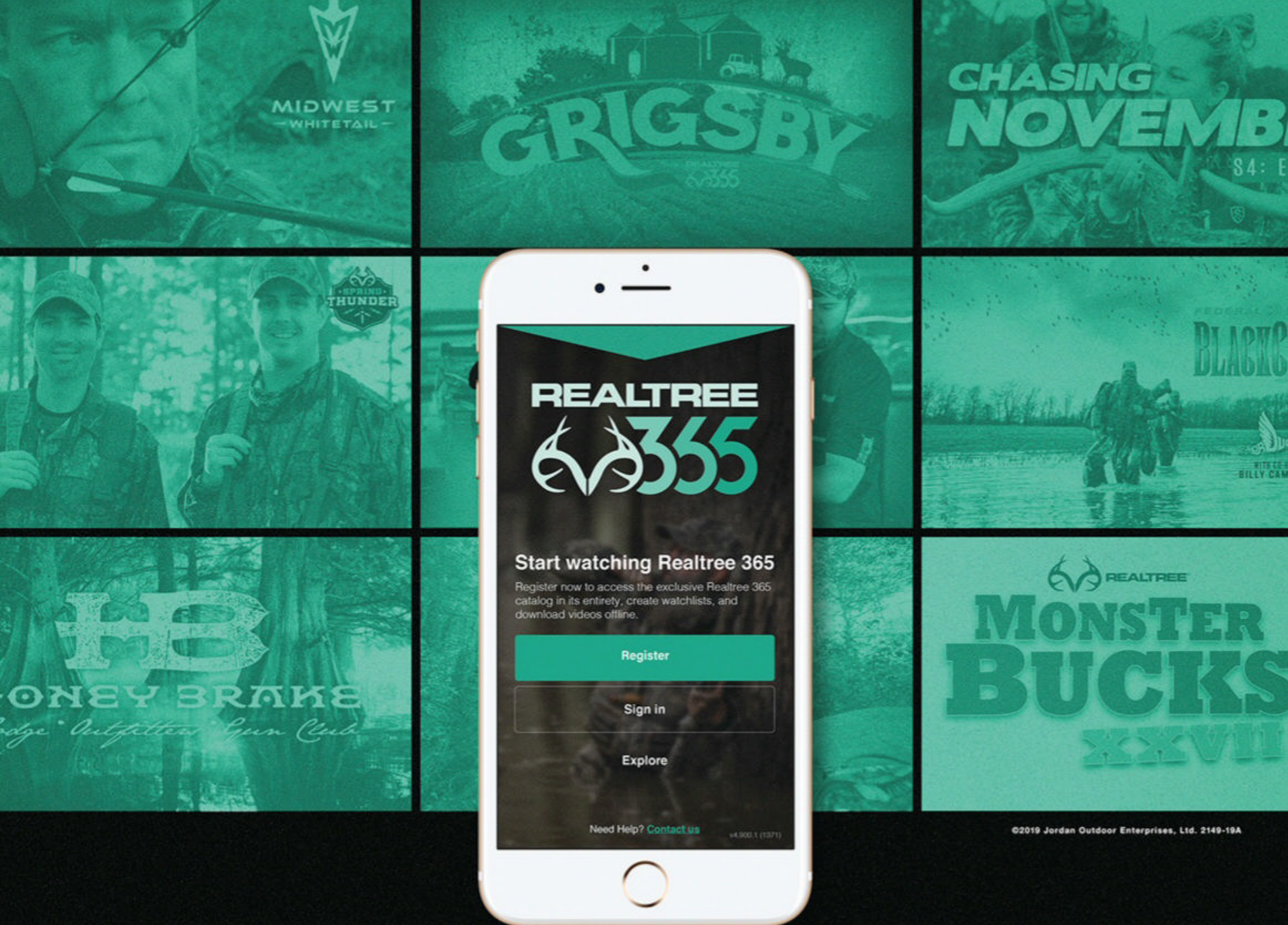
Our duck dogs are loaded with potential, but it's up to us to figure out the correct way to unlock it and to keep our dogs developing. Fortunately, it's quite a few months until the first early teal and goose seasons open up, and

A dog that anticipates failure is **very, very, tough to work with.**

bles and then possibly, triples. If he's not used to honoring another dog's retrieve but you anticipate hunting with a few buddies next fall, then you know what to work on.

This might sound daunting, but it's not. Even advanced level retriever training won't eat up more than 10 or 15 minutes of your day—provided, of course, you work on it

even more before the major migration swings through and the best time of the years is upon us. Before that happens, think about your dog's skills and just what you might be able to do with him this off-season to help him level up. 🦆



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■ MOSSY OAK GAME KEEPERS/GUNNER KENNELS G1

Mossy Oak Game Keepers joined forces with Gunner Kennels to give your dog a double-walled fortress designed to keep your hunting buddy safe and comfortable. Available in sizes of G1 Intermediate (\$599.99) and G1 Large (\$699.99), this rotomolded dog box offers monthly financing options, and Gunner was so satisfied with the build that they branded the dog box with a lifetime warranty. Tested to withstand over 4,000 pounds of force, this kennel was tossed over a 200-plus foot cliff and was shot at a mere seven steps with a 12-gauge shotgun. No problems. www.gunner.com



■ BLOCK OUT THE BLAST

Young or old, you should protect your hearing...or what's left of it. Tetra's Waterfowl AlphaShields are available in 60 or 90 circuit models, blocking out shotgun blasts but allowing you to talk with blind buddies, hear whistling wings and calls. The 60 has three volume levels for hunting or at the clays range. The 90 also has three volume levels, but is more advanced and includes a ClearComm program for speech understanding, wind noise reduction, voice prompts, and personalized hearing profile customization (following completion of the on-line hearing test). **\$699-\$999 | tetrahearing.com**





■ REALTREE PETS DUCK SHOTS

Designed for your on-the-go dog, Realtree Duck Shots (\$11/14-ounce bag) is a chewy reward loaded with health benefits. Blended with wholesome, natural ingredients, Duck Shots are a tasty snack for all dogs, especially those with allergies to other meat proteins. Give them what they need so they can perform in the field. www.realtreepets.com

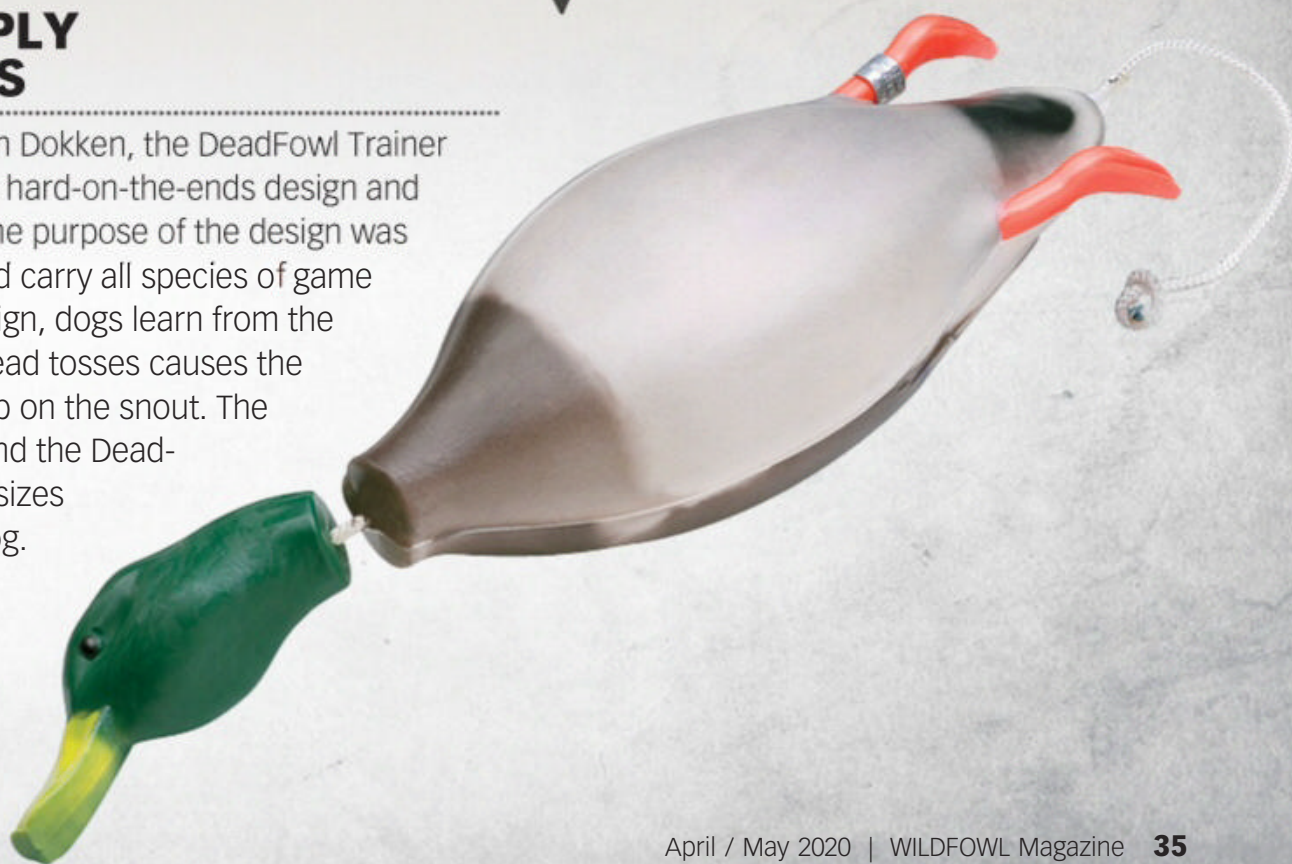
■ ALPS OUTDOORZ DOG STAND

An ideal companion for your dog when hunting difficult wetland environments, the Dog Stand (\$109.99) from Alps OutdoorZ features a durable aluminum frame and wedged feet for added support. The TechMesh platform is comfortable and allows water to run away from the seat to prevent puddling. The frame showcases an easy-to-use hinge system as well as a shoulder and handle strap for ease-of-tote. www.alpsbrands.com



■ DOKKEN DOG SUPPLY DEADFOWL TRAINERS

Designed by legendary dog trainer Tom Dokken, the DeadFowl Trainer (\$49.99-\$34.99) was engineered with a hard-on-the-ends design and a soft, durable, scent-injected body. The purpose of the design was to teach dogs how to properly hold and carry all species of game birds. Because the head is of hard design, dogs learn from the get-go not to grab and shake. A few head tosses causes the solid trainer dome to give the dog a rap on the snout. The soft body helps create a soft mouth, and the Dead-Fowl Trainer is offered in a number of sizes and styles to better fit your growing dog. www.deadfowltrainer.com



■ DOGTRA 1900S TRAINING & BEEPER E-COLLAR

Designed for those that prowl the wetlands with man's best friend, the 1900S Wetlands (\$249.99) provides a ¾-mile range with high output stimulation in levels ranging from 0 to 127. The collar is coated in a blending-with-the-terrain camo, and the receiver is IPX9K waterproof certified to better withstand high heat and extreme water pressure. After all, durability and dependability are staples of the serious waterfowler. This is a single-dog only system. www.dogtra.com



■ EUKANUBA LAMB & RICE PUPPY

A premium life-stage puppy food, Eukanuba Lamb & Rice Puppy formula delivers 100 percent complete and balanced nutrition for growth. Best of all, it contains zero fillers. A specialized fiber system made from natural beet pulp and prebiotic FOS, boosts absorption and leads to healthy digestion. Containing optimal levels of omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids, healthy skin and a radiant coat are ensured. www.eukanuba.com



■ YAMAHA MOTOR COMPANY WOLVERINE X4 XT-R

The all-new Wolverine X4 XT-R (\$18,149) comes with a factory installed Warn Winch, Special Edition paint, color-matched wheels and aggressive GBC Dirt Commander tires; everything you need for a serious waterfowl excursion. Assembled in the USA, this side-by-side is backed by Yamaha's 10 Year Belt Warranty and is powered by a Magellan GPS mapping and navigation system. This system allows for online locale planning via 115,000 pre-loaded trails and waypoints. To go along with the adventure planning, the Adventure Pro system also provides vehicle feedback about speed, coolant temperatures, drive selection and the list goes on. www.yamahamotorsports.com



■ MOSSBERG 500 PUMP-ACTION

New to the legendary 500 platform line, Mossberg adds the 500 Bantam FLEX Youth 20 Gauge (\$531). A pump-action model, the Bantam Flex is fitted with a 22-inch ACCU-SET choked barrel with a vented rib. The barrel is topped with dual bead sights and sports a stylish blued metal finish. The EZ-Reach forend and FLEX System-compatible compact stock are ideal for young waterfowlers. www.mossberg.com



■ RANCHO SAFARI SHAGGIE KAYAK COVER

Kayak hunting is all the rage in the waterfowl world, and designed to allow you and your craft to fly under the radar of wary birds is Rancho Safari's Shaggie Kayak Cover (\$149.95). This 14-foot cover is perfectly tapered to go around the edges of the bow and stern, and the zip-in seat compartment opens just like that of a layout blind. While fabric offerings and color options are many, this cover has a mass weight of just seven pounds and was designed for seasons of rugged abuse.

www.ranchosafari.com

■ CROWN ROYALE LTD BIOVITE SHAMPOOS

A great way to reduce the amount of debris your dog collects while afield, Crown Royale LTD's Brushing Spray (\$8.99/8 ounce) repels dust and prevents unwanted coat matting. The spray provides a natural fragrance with no heavy build up. In addition, the spray protects your dog's specific coat type and helps prevent static build up. Formula #12 was engineered for full and flat coats while Formula #16 was designed for hard and wiry coats. www.crownroyaleltd.com



■ HUNTING PITS UNLIMITED SIGNATURE PRO KIT

A popular product for serious waterfowlers, the Signature Pro Pit (\$NA) sports full-welded seams inside and out to prevent leakage. The blind was built with a walk-down design that promises ease-of-entry for both hunters and their dogs. Constructed using heavy-gage steel, the blind boasts a durable powder coat finish. Measurements for the blind are as follows: 9-inch wide shelf, 18-inch wide bench and a 24-inch open top.

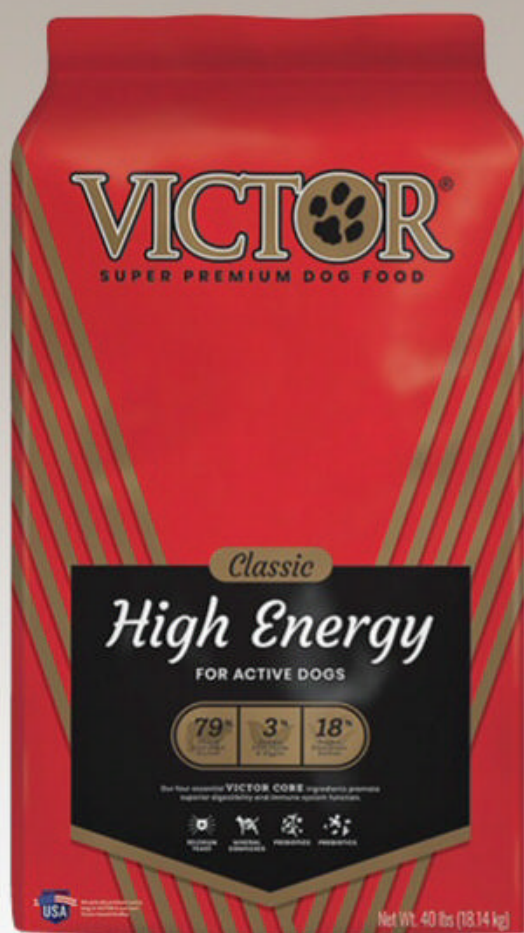
www.huntingpits.com.



■ LOW PROFILE WATER-FOWL BACKWATER

A patent-pending design, the Low Profile Waterfowl Backwater (\$74.99) is a chest-mounted shotshell carrier that provides both convenience and comfort. The webbing sleeve holds 19 shells securely, and the tapered, lay-flat design keeps the carrier clear of your gun mount. Velcro closures on the lid keeps the weather out and brass concealed. Designed for 12-gauge shells of any length, the adjustable fit works for those with small, medium, large and extra-large frames.

www.lowprofilewaterfowl.com.



■ VICTOR SUPER PREMIUM HIGH ENERGY

A dog food formulated for all breeds of dogs at all stages of life, Premium High Energy (\$38.57) is a dry kibble formula ideal for highly active sporting dogs. This 79 percent protein from meat blend provides sustained energy to promote better stamina and endurance, and its superior digestibility means less food intake for a better pound-for-pound value. Made from gluten-free grains and fortified with vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids, protein and amino acids, the mixture promotes healthy immune and digestive systems. www.victorpetfood.com

■ KNUTSON'S SPORTING GOODS' CARSTENS MALLARD DUCK BOAT

Based in Brooklyn, Michigan, Knutson's Sporting Goods' Mallard Duck Boat by Carstens boasts a mass weight of 100 pounds and was specifically engineered to glide across the water. Designed with safety and maximum maneuverability in mind, the Mallard has a 24- x 95-inch cockpit and can tote as much as 500 pounds. The boat measures 13 feet 7 inches long, and allows the waterfowler the ability to add accessory items like a gun rack, extra seat, layout seat along with a few others. www.knutsonssportinggoods.com



■ PRIMOS KENNELUP DOG KENNEL

A quality, lightweight home-away-from-home for your dog, the Primos KennelUp (\$499.99) dog box was built specifically to keep your dog safe and comfortable. The roto-molded kennel features one-piece construction and a single-wall design that reduces weight while adding rigidity. Other notable features include a locking door and built-in drains. www.primos.com



■ PURINA CALMING CARE

Traveling can be hard on dogs. Anxious behavior due to new environments, separation, novel sounds and thunderstorms can spark nervousness. Enter Purina's Pro Plan Calming Care. This probiotic supplement, available through veterinarians, contains Bifidobacterium longum, a strain shown to help dogs maintain a calm behavior. Testing has shown after Calming Care has been added to a dog's food once a day, when used in combination with FortiFlora, reduces anxious behaviors such as jumping, pacing and spinning after six weeks of use. www.purina.com

■ PETSAFE RICOCHET ELECTRONIC DOG TOY

A challenging toy for your hyper pup, the PetSafe Ricochet Electronic Dog Toy (\$59.99) is a no-mess device that contains zero stuffing or fabric. The two-unit system operates like a game of hide-and-seek. One unit plays an exciting squeak sound and when the pup goes to investigate the sound, the squeak switches to the other unit, which keeps the pup bouncing between the two. This promotes activity and creates a great exercise session. In addition, the moving squeak creates a great puzzle, which provides mental stimulation. www.petsafe.net.



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For the past 15 years, Bill Gibson has studied, trained and learned how to apply low-force training methods from masters in the United Kingdom, Ireland and U.S. Bill and his dogs have won Team and Gundog Challenges in Northern Ireland. He has also served as a judge for the British Field Trial Society of America. A retired law enforcement officer, Bill is the Director of Gundog Operations for Mossy Oak GameKeeper Kennels.

Hunt Dead Drill

Find those unseen birds with a little fun training command magic. By Bill Gibson

The purpose of the hunt dead drill is threefold:

- to teach pup to hunt within a small area
- to teach pup to use his/her nose
- to build the pup's confidence in you as the handler

To teach the "hunt dead" command, prepare and use an un-mowed patch of grass about 20 feet in diameter. Place an orange tennis ball in the uncut circle. The tennis ball can be placed anywhere within the circle, but the location should be changed every time the drill is repeated. Heel pup to the edge of the circle of uncut grass and command "sit." Release the pup into the grass by using the command "hunt dead." If pup tries to leave the circle, command "no" and while moving your hand in an up and down motion, verbally repeat the "dead bird" command. Every time pup attempts to leave the circle, repeat the command until pup finds the tennis ball and delivers to hand. After pup understands this scenario, send pup into the circle without first hiding a tennis ball in the grass. Work the pup in the grass for a while, then when pup is not looking at you, drop the tennis ball in the grass and repeat the "hunt dead" command. Repeat the command as necessary until pup finds the tennis ball and delivers to hand. Repeat these drills until you are satisfied that the pup fully understands the drill. 🍀



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WOMEN MIGRATE TO WATERFOWLING

Duck blinds are no longer
just a boys club—
a good thing for all of us.

BY TINA DOKKEN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEE KJOS

TO BE HONEST, I never intended to hunt with my chocolate Lab even though I knew both of her parents had been hunters. This knowledge led to just enough guilt to prompt me to start messing around with my retriever by keeping a full-sized duck in my freezer, which was supplied by my brother-in-law, to provide her with a weekly “hunt” in the field next to my townhouse. This was a far cry from an actual hunt, but my dog loved it.

I also started taking her to some hunt classes, where they would let our dogs retrieve a bird from the pond while several dog owners huddle around with their leashed dogs. When it was my Lab’s turn at one of these events, she managed to retrieve the bird and continue to swim around the pond, not wanting to come out for fear of other dogs getting her prize. This showed me just how deep her passion for bird hunting really went, which was eye-opening. A similar moment occurred during one

of those sessions when my retriever brought back a live bird. I was happy with her that she hadn't killed it, but as soon as I handed it off to the trainer she snapped its neck. I pretended it didn't bother me, but it did.

While that was a weird situation for me personally, it was clear that my dog was in her element with these close-to-hunting-but-not-quite-there experiences. Looking back now, I realize I was being pulled in the direction of hunting with her, but wasn't there yet.

I kept looking for more ways to expose my dog to hunting situations, which led me to the Game Fair in the Twin Cities where I attended all six days of the event. That's where I met my future husband, and while my Lab and I were leaning into the world of actual duck hunting, we got more than a nudge in the right direction when our relationship started taking off. Even in those early days, I was a long way from becoming the kind of woman who would be comfortable loading up her dog and some decoys and heading to a nearby pond



for some whistling-wing action.

I needed a gun intro first.

THE FIRST MAJOR HURDLE

There are a lot of things that keep women from hunting but without doubt, one of the biggest is familiarity with firearms. We aren't very far removed from a time when it was

absolutely common for young boys to unwrap BB guns and .22s as presents while their sisters opened up boxes containing dolls and make-up kits.

It has simply been more acceptable for boys to be introduced to guns and taught how to handle and use them, which means a lot of the potential adult-onset duck hunters out there





WOMEN HELPING WOMEN WATERFOWLERS

without a Y chromosome are left unsure of this process. This is why I'm forever grateful that my husband led me on a well-planned path to firearms comfort and familiarity.

Initially he took the reins and introduced me to gun safety and how to hit a clay pigeon on a stick. After that he hired a shooting coach to get me to the next level. This meant that even though I was somewhat familiar with how to handle and shoot a gun, I'd get instruction from a coach on the kind of shooting that would be necessary in the duck blind.

This all started with two boxes of shells and no instruction. I was told to keep shooting and after I was finished with two boxes of shells, my instructor told me that he'd wanted me to realize the 20-gauge wasn't going to kick, which was my biggest fear in the beginning. This was an excellent way to take the edge off the lesson and allow me to start to feel comfortable with shooting. This eventually evolved to proper

There are some great opportunities out there for women to learn about hunting, even if they don't have someone to mentor them. I've been a part of some B.O.W. (Becoming an Outdoor Woman) classes, which were created by the Minnesota Dept. of Natural Resources in an attempt to recruit more women into the outdoors. They are great opportunities for women to learn the basics around duck hunting (and all kinds of other hunting and shooting), without the intimidation factor. If you're an interested woman but don't know where to start, look around. Several state game agencies are offering similar styles of classes, and they are a great jumping off point for starting the process of becoming a duck hunter.

stance, form and the process of finding something with my eye, pointing, pulling the trigger and following through.

To anyone reading this with enough years of shooting under his belt, that probably sounds elementary—and it is. That's the point. A woman who wants to try to bag her first wood duck or mallard but isn't comfortable with a shotgun, will need some help getting to a point where her confidence allows for comfort in the field.

...AND THE SECOND

Just like my husband would tell you with a young duck dog, you should carefully expose your retrievers to hunting situations long before actually hunting. This is done, of course, though training. While it might not be advisable to say you're going to work some training drills to whip your wife into hunting shape, it is important to go beyond the shotgun comfort realm into an understanding of what the hunt involves.

This can be simple explanations

of all of the different parts of the duck-hunting process, from calling to decoys to big-water retrieves to you-name-it. All of that is good and encouraged, especially when it involves asking and answering lots of questions about the situation at hand, but an even better way than that to understand a hunt is to go along on one without a gun.

Being a camo-clad observer in a duck blind will open up a new world to a woman who has never seen it before, just as it would for a man or a youngster. Without the pressure to have to think about handling a gun and shooting it as ducks approach, a 'hunt' takes on a different kind of feel. It allows you to experience hunting without the pressure of being a hunter, which might sound strange but is a huge benefit.

This, once again, might seem like overkill to readers with 40 duck seasons under their belt, but to a newcomer, waterfowl hunting can seem overwhelming. The early hours and the environments in which good hunts often occur can seem like a

lot. Add in the chaos of approaching ducks and the calling, shooting and retrieving, and it's a pretty dynamic situation to watch—let alone participate in.

This is why I recommend to any women who approach me about becoming a duck hunter that they should find someone who is will-

hunts are those that I spend out there by myself and with my dog. In fact, there are an awful lot of mornings before I go teach school that I'll load up my Lab and head to a pond for a short hunt. These hunts might produce a limit of wood ducks, or I might never fire a shot.

But, they are all productive.

Every hunt doesn't have to be a mettle-testing suffer-fest.

ing to take them and be patient with them throughout a couple of trial runs. The fewer the people the better in these cases, and they set the stage for the first actual hunt.

SOLO & CLOSE TO SOLO

I've been duck hunting long enough to know that some of my favorite

Not only is spending time in the blind always worth it, but going solo allows you to operate at your own pace without having to worry about anyone else's safety. This also provides the added benefit of keeping my dog as relaxed as possible—and easily in my control because she doesn't have a pile of



distractions around her.

Now, I realize that newcomers to waterfowling aren't likely to start out going on solo hunts. But, they should hunt with as few people as possible. Ideally, they'll be the only shooter and someone more experienced in duck hunting will provide the setup and the calling. This is a perfect way for a new hunter to develop her comfort level in the blind while truly starting to understand how hunts can unfold and what she can expect.

Any fellas reading this who want to introduce their wives, girlfriends or daughters to duck hunting should really consider what I just wrote. Even though it stinks to think about giving up your own shooting opportunities for someone else, it really will help you teach them how to become duck hunters themselves and will change the entire dynamics of the situation. That's not nothing, and it's really a great route to developing a new duck hunting partner who will be in it for the long haul.

Eventually, if she (like me) decides to try hunting on her own, encourage that. Hunting can be a wonderful experience from a social perspective, but it's a different endeavor than a solo adventure with a dog. Both are worthwhile experiences, but low-pressure hunts should always be the first priority with newcomers.

MISERY-FREE DUCKING

In the world of waterfowling, the notion that all good duck hunts will involve barely staving off hypothermia is the norm. Ducks fly in crappy weather, no doubt. But that doesn't mean every hunt has to be a mettle-testing suffer-fest.

Sweater-weather wood duck hunts in October can be just as much fun as blizzardy late-season mallard forays. More fun, in fact, for a new hunter who is unsure of the whole process and just getting her feet wet in duck hunting.

This means it's worth paying attention to the weather and understanding that the ideal first hunt might occur during beach weather rather than true duck weather. If the duck hunting bug bites, she'll want to go when it's crappier out, which means



those warmer hunts will be a precursor to the later, less-comfortable hunts. That means it's time to get the right clothing, from base layers to wind-blocking, waterproof outer layers, and for me—electric socks.

If my feet get too cold, my hunt flies away like a flaring pintail. The same goes for my hands, which is why I also like using a hand muff with a rechargeable handwarmer in it. Anyone with a few duck seasons under his or her belt understands how quickly you can go from feeling pretty good, to being downright miserable, which can drain the fun right out of a hunt. The right gear

helps the “pretty good” feeling stick around a lot longer.

CONCLUSION

While it's a slow migration, it's happening—more and more women are becoming waterfowlers. There is a lot they can do for themselves to smooth out the transition, just as any guy can who would like to see the woman in his life develop a love for waterfowling that is equal to his, can take plenty of steps to ensure it all goes according to a good, long-term plan. 🦆





FINDING FOCUS

Develop the duck dog of your dreams by paying close attention to the neurological needs of your new retriever puppy.

BY TONY J. PETERSON

THERE IS A COMMON MISCONCEPTION among waterfowlers, and sporting dog owners in general, that we need to teach our dogs to hunt. While there is a glimmer of truth to that when it comes to developing advanced skills like triple-blind retrieves, the reality is if you go out and research pedigrees and pick up a pup with even a mild case of good bloodlines, that dog will know how to hunt.

What it won't know, is how to behave. Or how to learn very well (at least at a young age). Teaching a puppy to learn better is as hard as it sounds, but the foundation for it is exposure to new environments, textures and controlled experiences. This may seem like a long bridge to cross to get to a dog that can retrieve geese in a field or mallards in a two-foot chop, but it's not.

Dogs need to learn more than just obedience and hunting commands. They need to learn to be comfortable and confident at a young age, because that will help set the stage for a rockstar duck hunter (and house dog) later in life.

There are a lot of ways to start this process, but the most common is through Early Neurological Stimulation (ENS). Since puppies are born with their eyes closed and a limited digestive system, they are also limited as far as what they can do or how they can interact with the world. Basically they can suck, sort

FINDING FOCUS

of crawl around, and sniff. This also, some data suggests, means they are more sensitive to movement, textures, and heat.

While all of that might seem benevolent, any stimuli to a newborn puppy—like a change in temperature or being carried even a few feet—is a stressor. This, when conducted through ENS in tiny increments—like brushing along the pad of their foot with a Q-Tip, creates a small stressor. Other methods include holding a puppy with its head pointed down or placing a pup on cool, damp towel for a few seconds.

Studies have shown that when conducted during about the first two weeks of their lives, these ENS drills can lead to healthier dogs that are not only more active than pups that didn't receive ENS, but also more willing to explore.

You might be thinking that this doesn't do you a hell of a lot of good considering you don't get to see your new retriever until he's seven weeks old, but it's something to consider when sussing out killer bloodlines and a trusted breeder.

This is one of the reasons Rhett



Hall, owner of Iron Point Kennels, tried ENS with a litter of his Drahthaars, even though when he asked around the results were mixed on whether it was worth it. "When I was thinking about ENS, I reached out to some veterinarians and some breeders who I trust. Some said ENS works, but others said the science just wasn't there. I decided to do it anyway, just to see."

Hall went on to conduct ENS with

a litter of 10 pups, five of which he still has heavy contact with today, including one puppy he kept as a personal dog. "This is all anecdotal, but I pay attention to my dogs' stress levels when I travel for training throughout the summer. Because we might travel from North Dakota to

A dog that is exposed to ENS and proper socialization will not only be more pleasant around the house, but also more enjoyable to hunt with whether you're after field geese or big-water divers.



Utah and then up to Idaho, our dogs can get stressed out over so much trailer time. This is a very common reaction. But during this last summer, I realized that the pup that had ENS was always laid back. He was just calm and focused, while other dogs would be losing their minds.”

That might be a case of ENS working, or it might simply be the difference between dog personalities. But, Hall isn't alone in his attempts and perceived outcomes.

THE JUMP TO SOCIALIZATION

Owner of One Shot Retrievers, Alex Brittingham, has also attempted ENS with a litter of her Labs. “I can't say that ENS helped with force fetch or some other things, but it seemed to help keep the puppies calmer when new people held them. It also seemed to help when my dogs ended up moving on to treat training and I was working on socialization.”

Brittingham is big on developing eye contact and a working relationship, and she felt that ENS certainly didn't hinder that development at all. And when asked about whether it is worth it as a breeder she offered up a statement that is pretty hard to argue with, “If you're doing ENS with your litters, you're probably breeding for the right reasons.”

While subjective, her last point is a salient one and it ties into the overall process of researching and buying a dog that has loads of duck-hunting potential. You want a breeder who is doing everything possible not only to craft the right bloodlines, but to take advantage of the tiny window of development that they alone get access to.

This type of breeder, whether ENS is legit or largely bunk, is also the kind of person who is likely to start socialization before you get your hands on your new hunting partner. That is not nothing, and it matters in waterfowl hunting more than most would think.

For starters, a puppy that is introduced to slightly stressful, new environments learns to tamp down that anxiety and go with the flow. If you think about the varying places where a duck hunt might occur, you can

start to understand why this mindset is so important.

It's also the reason why so many dogs delaminate when opening day hits. They go from a couch lifestyle that is broken up by dummy drills in a neighborhood soccer field, to a pre-dawn wake-up call, a truck ride, possibly a boat ride, and then decoys, calls, actual live ducks (hopefully), gun shots, and exciting and often overwhelming chaos. How is a young dog that hasn't been exposed to new environments supposed to handle that with anything short of pure lunacy? That's a situation when the wheels

really fall off, and then a stressful hunt can turn into something worse if we, as handlers, lose our cool. This is an unfortunate reality, and at least partially, is tied to poor socialization even though we often think of socialization as introducing a dog to other people and dogs.

Which is a component, no doubt. You don't want your dog to fear a true social setting that is any slight deviation from the comfort of your living room at home, but the act of socializing a dog runs deeper and it has direct links to better behavior in the field.

It's also wholly dependent on your



PUPPY NUTRITION & BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

What your pup is fed before you pick it up, and what you feed it after, matters—a lot. Puppies have very specific nutrition needs not only to foster physical growth, but brain development. Purina's Karl Gunzer, recommends paying close attention to the type of food you offer your puppy for several reasons.

“When searching out a good puppy formula, always make sure it has an AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) statement on the bag showing that the formula is complete and balanced for growing puppies. Then dig in to whether the formula is highly digestible, contains the fat and protein levels necessary to provide energy and endurance, and offers up omega-rich fish oils and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid).

Gunzer's last recommendation is an important one, because DHA is a structural component of the brain (omega-3 fatty acid) that is crucial in the development of the nervous system, brain function, and has been linked to eyesight. After pups are weaned, their sole source of DHA is through their diet—so choose wisely.



ability, and willingness, to introduce your puppy to new, relatively controlled environments, as soon as you take ownership. Just like with ENS and the window that opens up when puppies are only a few days old and then shuts down four or five weeks before they'll be sent to their new homes, the socialization window is a tight one. This is not something you want to play catch-up with in a flat-bottom boat in a marsh somewhere while you're simultaneously scanning the skies for the first teal or wood ducks of the season.

You want to start the process early—as early as the day you bring your puppy home. Not only is this the right time to start teaching your new retriever about basic obedience skills and overall manners, but it is the time to bring him to new places where you can keep a close eye on him. As with all puppy work, this means small controlled steps that allow your dog to develop just a little inkling of confidence every day.

DON'T MISS THE WINDOW

The foundation for a good duck dog starts generations before your chosen litter hits the ground. Once that happens, a good breeder will likely work toward helping your pup handle, and overcome, tiny stressors to set a path in their life that will allow them to be calm and focused while other dogs are coming unglued or shutting down.

Of course that's just the work that will be accomplished before you get your hands on your new duck hunting partner. Once you do, it's up to you to keep the process going and to truly allow your dog the opportunity to develop into a calm, collected, mallard retrieving machine. While there are a lot of ways to accomplish this over time, they almost all originate from the same point in time through specific kinds of action. If you miss that window, you might regret it come opening day.

Or every opening day for years.



A woman with long dark hair, wearing an orange knit beanie and a camouflage jacket with a teal lining, is looking off to the side. A rifle is visible in the background.

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THE PROVING GROUNDS

The Prairie Potholes Region is a dynamic zone alive with waterfowl and a perfect place to test a new shotgun.

BY SKIP KNOWLES

THE DUCKS WERE FOLLOWING THE SCRIPT, pumping their wings straight into the prairie winds and working right into the slough we huddled along. We were hunting like college kids, with no duck blind, simply standing in the waist-deep freezing water, crouching in the reeds and cattails just deep enough to not be seen. It is that dance you do between hiding deeply enough and at the same time needing to be able to clear enough vegetation off to shoot.

© Photos courtesy of Savage

THE PROVING GROUNDS

In our hands were the new Rengauge semiautos by Savage, a gun that wouldn't go to market for three more months, trimmed out in Mossy Oak Shadowgrass, perfect for the cover we were in. We were eager to get into the birds, it being the first real duck hunt of the year for most of us.

The slough ran north-south, a couple hundred yards of waterfowl habitat perfection. We'd scattered the decoys on the north end, then hid downstream from them about 40 yards. They came as singles, doubles, triples and groups of five, and we brought down gadwall, wigeon, teal, redheads, and the odd mallard.

It was the perfect pace for a duck hunt, steady action and not over too-quickly (yes there is such a thing if you are nuts about ducks) and that's the beauty of this country, the species you shoot. It's a beautiful region, which I had not expected. This part of the prairie potholes region (PPR) is not flat cornfields. Rolling hills and ridges, still verdant in early October, reach around and cradle hundreds of small lakes and wetlands in the area around Bismarck. And about every one of those ponds and sloughs in mid-October can fill with ducks. Every waterfowler should make a pilgrimage to the PPR at some point in their career.

For a mag editor, it's awfully nice when the stuff we are testing works, and we were tickled to death the



guns ran and shot well. Wonderful balance and feel and "shootability." The new Savage has square-jawed good looks in the receiver, like some of the Brownings and older Berettas we love.

The most noticeable thing right away is the fluted barrel. We've all seen fluted barrels on rifles but never thought of a shotgun built that way. At the presentation at the lodge, the engineer had us hold one, just a bar-

rel, by its end and wave it around a bit like a sword to see if we could see a difference between the fluted one and a standard steel pipe in terms of how it wielded, (standard barrels are also available in this gun). I did not expect to feel a difference, but waving the melonite-coated fluted barrel, it was wand-like compared to the stock steel pipe and noticeably lighter-feeling.

It looks stronger, but it's probably

© Riley Baxter

It was the perfect pace for a duck hunt, steady action and **not over too quickly.**



© Skip Knowles



appearance; the idea of fluted barrels being truly stiffer is not proven, as is the idea it creates more surface area for cooling.

An interesting gun. American made, and you just get the feel it will run and run. The chrome-polished one-piece bolt carrier construction is a work of art in itself. What sets the Renegade apart is a dual-valve gas system called D.R.I.V. (Dual Regulating Inline Valve), which takes only the amount of gas it needs to run the action and dissipates the rest forward. So lower recoil is not just your imagination. Also it's not the lightest 3"-only gun at 7.9 pounds, and that also reduces felt recoil. A rod buffer in the stock also helps. And that stock is adjustable not just for drop and cast, but for length-of-pull.

But the biggest thing Savage is emphasizing is the gun will eat anything. Back at camp busting clays, we stuffed light skeet loads alternating with heavy duck loads and it gobbled them up under the cold

NoDak skies.

"We have been fine-tuning the system throughout the development of Renegade, and have been impressed with its versatility and dependability. This shotgun can handle anything, and shooters don't have to adjust a single part of the gas system," Renegade Design Engineer John Linscott said.

It's exciting to see Savage foray

into the world of high-quality shotguns, as I have shot their guns since I was an 8 yo. No word on a 20 gauge yet but we are hoping for one down the road. While the 20 gauge has seen a nice resurgence with the advent of better ammo and guns, it is still a small percentage of the market evidently, floating around between 10 and 20 percent, according to Savage experts.

© Photo courtesy of Savage



The D.R.I.V. dual valve gas operating system uses only the gas needed to operate the action and expels the rest, reducing recoil and reliably cycling both heavy and light loads.

BRUSHING UP LAYOUTS in the pre-dawn the next day preceded the sound of wings at sunrise and a thriller field shoot, a nice mix of mallards and huge honkers. The ducks weren't pretty yet this time of year, still brown mostly, but wonderfully responsive to calls both in the field and over water where we ducked down in the reeds.

The layouts are a terrific test for semi-autos because you are firing from a compromised seated position and it tends to reveal flaws in a gun, whether it is inertia-operated and needs to be held hard against a shoulder, or if it's a touchier gas gun that is picky about what ammunition it will run. It's also a good test, of course, because it's just filthy laying there in the mud and grain and chaff and the guns get full of all that gunk. I'm pleased to report the Savages handled it all in stride, and something about the weight and balance of these gas guns make them fun to shoot.

The hunt was a memorable start to the season, not always lights-out limits but pleasant with the pre-winter

weather and North Dakota is actually quite lovely when it doesn't feel like the arctic.

We like the name Renegauge as well, clever, and just may have a little crush going on this All-American shotgun. Not cheap at around \$1,500, but we just have the feeling this gun doesn't have any quit in it, and it made believers out of loads of wigeon, teal and gadwall.

I set the team at Savage up with what should be a memorable snow goose hunt with my good friend Jordan Moll, one of the truest natural

born goose killers I know. Should be a barn burner. I look forward to their report.

A close friend recently bought his teenager a new-used Benelli SBE3 for his sixteenth birthday, and I thought, "with all the guns I have been through, it's pretty neat that kid got the last gun he will ever need for his first one, and one day he will pass it on."

It looks like Savage is building guns on that level—this could be the last shotgun you need to buy, and it's one soft-kicking auto. 🦆



© Skip Knowles



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the ambiance of a glowing fire is lost when your hair is frozen and you have snotcicles hanging from your nose. If I were to build again, I'd have a firebox the size of a Buick. I'd burn a cord at a time, and to hell with the ambiance.

I'll let both dogs sleep in the house tonight—even welcome them onto my bed. They probably won't stay long, though, as they prefer the carpet on the floor, and I think my shivering annoys them. My dogs never seem to be cold, and would probably prefer the kennel outside. I let them in because I'm not yet ready to let go of the magnificent day in the blind and I need someone to talk to.

I have a fair number of ducks to deal with tonight. I plucked them pretty clean in the blind, so the worst part is over, but I was anticipating the finish work at the kitchen sink with a hot fire in the stove and a cup of hot chocolate generously laced with peppermint schnapps to make sure my innards stayed happy. The dogs

would sit attentively by my side waiting for hearts and livers, biting playfully at any stray floating feather. Right now, the call from the hot tub on the deck is more enticing than that from the kitchen sink, but getting out of a hot tub in winter nullifies all the benefits. The word “shrivel” takes on

There's beer and the makings for tacos in the refrigerator—a lazy day at home. Out of habit, though, I stick my head out the door to check the weather. The wind has picked up and the temperature has dropped further yet. There is a light snow falling. That little eddy on the river will probably

If I were to build again, I'd have a firebox **the size of a Buick.** I'd burn a cord at a time, and to hell with the ambiance.

new meaning when you climb from 104 degree water into 0 degree air.

Tomorrow morning, Sunday, I will sleep in under the weight of two extra quilts. There will be football on the tube all day long, and my house will have warmed up some by then.

be the only open water around. I ask the dogs if they want to go duck hunting again in the morning, and both respond with wagging tails. I put my damp parka and gloves a little closer to the anemic flame in the wood stove. Sunday snotcicles it is. 🦆

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Sunday Snotcicles

The upside to talking to your Labs. By Alan Liere

THE WIND IS blowing and the temperature is nine degrees Fahrenheit—cold enough, as my uncle Pat used to say, to “freeze the balls off a brass monkey.” And though I never did understand that whole concept, two hours ago in the blind, icicles were hanging from my nose. Because I was hunting mallards on the river, that wasn’t all that unusual, but I’m home now, having just exited a hot shower in an attempt to warm up, and I’m still shivering.

I hate it when I can feel ice forming in my beard while I’m still in the house. Many years ago, recently divorced, I was living in a shack at Loon Lake in northern Washington State. In late winter, my hair often

froze when I got out of the little shower. I was much younger and much poorer then, and I accepted frozen hair as one of the punishments I had to endure for having let a marriage fail—guilt, compensation, and all that. I thought it was fair enough that I had been allowed to keep my black Lab and my hair.

The hair on my head didn’t last as long as the dog. I haven’t had enough on top to comb for 35 years. My digs have improved, though, and my shower is a lot larger. In a normal year, I’m never cold in the house, but this year is different, and tonight I’ve been contemplating the reason duck hunting cold is not nearly as uncomfortable as cold-house cold.

When I’m cozied up to a tangled bull pine root ball on the banks of the Pend Oreille River, I’m thankful for the wind and the cold that are sucking the mallards down through Alberta and Saskatchewan; I revel in the adverse elements and the joy it brings on beating wings. But not in my home. In my home, I curse the wind that has driven the chill through the walls. Had I been here to keep the fire stoked, it wouldn’t be so noticeable, but I’ve been gone many hours, and while a log home will hold the heat, it will also hold the cold once it makes its way through the cracks.

As luck would have it, my wood pile is yielding the worst fuel of the winter. It is stuff I cut last spring, mostly just to get it off the ground—punky and damp, and white fir to boot. Before I moved to the country and determined to heat with wood from my own property, I thought all firewood was created equal—if it made a flame, it was all the same. Since, I have learned about BTUs. I still don’t know what the initials stand for, but it has to do with heat generation—with warm versus cold, with snotcicles versus a mere drippy nose. And here I am on the coldest Saturday of winter and the next two rows of logs in my wood shed are stacked with wood that will give off about as much heat as a candle.

When I’m home, my wood stove has a built-in alarm—me. When the fire is almost out, I begin to shiver, my reminder to throw in another log. My wood stove is much too small. I foolishly sacrificed size of firebox for a glass window in the door, and

Marsh Madness By Bruce Cochran



(CONTINUED ON PAGE 63)



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