



The Waterfowl of San Antonio Bay

Few places hold more ducks in a greater variety or with more exquisite late-season plumage than the wintering grounds along the Texas Gulf.

By Kyle Wintersteen, Senior Associate Editor

2/12/10

There does not exist a more special place than the cold, wet interior of a duck blind. Not just because it's where duck hunting occurs, but because it's the only place you'll find grown men who are not only awake but happy before the hour of 6 a.m.

I like to get there early to give myself time just to enjoy being there before the shooting begins, so I'm happy when guide Harold Dworaczyk asks me to meet him at the dock at 5 a.m. I arrive to find the airboat prepped and within minutes we're headed toward the shallow flats skirting the San Antonio Bay—perfect habitat for ducks to replenish themselves after a long migration to the Texas Gulf Coast.

Harold slides the airboat around a bend. It kind of skids into the turns, more like a dirt-track racecar than the prop boats with which I'm accustomed. I tilt my coffee cup and the boat's giant fan sucks hot liquid into my face. Caffeine will have to wait.

We arrive at the blind, a box design at the edge of a point that juts out about 20 yards from shore along a massive flat. Harold starts tossing decoys, slinging them underhand with a flick of his wrist like he's pitching softballs. It's interesting form, but it achieves impressive distance and accuracy. Noting a slight right-to-left crosswind, he places five or six dozen redhead, bluebill and dabbling decoys upwind of the blind and three to four dozen downwind. We expect mostly redheads and other divers, so I'm curious as to why our spread more closely resembles a dabbling rig.

"We get a lot of wigeon, pintails and greenwing teal, too," Harold tells me. "This bridges the gap a little between a diver and puddle duck rig to pull in a variety of species. We even see a cinnamon teal now and then and the occasional mottled duck."

The decoys are out with 45 minutes to spare, affording time to pour a cup of coffee and locate the constellation Orion. It's a silent tradition I carry out when the clouds permit it. The Lone Star sky is perfectly clear—perhaps not the best duck hunting weather—but I can even see the dim stars that make up the shaft of Orion's bow. I often imagine the hunters who came before me: the American Indians who first formed sticks and clay into crude decoys and later taught settlers this trick; the market gunners who fed a hungry America and their conservationist reformers; and even those ancient hunters who looked to the stars and saw an archer among them.

My meditation is interrupted by the swoosh of unseen wings in the blackness over the blind. It sounds like hundreds, so close I can almost feel their wingbeats stirring the air.

"Redheads," Harold says. "Lots of 'em."

The orange hue of morning begins to stain the horizon behind us. There is just something about watching a body of water come alive ... I can't put my finger on it, but I know terra firma doesn't have it. I love the way the light causes the water to glow as it begins to stretch across the landscape, the sights and sounds of shorebirds, marine mammals and, most especially, the ducks.

Harold gives the go-ahead to load the guns and a concerto of shell shucking and bolt closing rings out. I'm joined by three other hunters, including Mike Leeds, a young man who started his career at the NRA and now works for Benelli USA. Mike is a diehard deer hunter and avid skeet shooter, but he's never hunted feathered game. That's about to change, an opportunity that excites him and I suspect causes slight anxiety—if you're a Benelli employee it stands to reason that you better also be a decent wingshot.

"What do you say we let Mike shoot first?" I suggest in one of my rare moments of generosity.

"I think it's a fine idea," says Paul Wait, editor of Wildfowl magazine. My friend Tim concurs. No sooner have we made the decision than a drake redhead banks downwind and cups into the middle of the spread.

"Get it now," Harold says as Mike stands up and flicks off his safety. The duck begins to flare, but Mike's shotgun booms and it's down.

I'm happy for him, at least until a bluebill comes in. I empty my Benelli Vinci but don't draw a feather. Then Mike stands up and kills it.

"Okay, that's enough, you're taking it too far now!" I rib.

Mike started his duck-hunting career two for two. How many of us can say the same?

I'm barely through photographing Mike's ducks when I hear Paul say, "Would you look at that?" Several clouds of ducks are moving about the bay. There are at least a dozen groups, each of them a few hundred ducks thick.

“Redheads and bluebills,” Harold says. “They look like they know where they’re going.” They swarm like blackbirds and descend into a nearby lake. Sandhill and whooping cranes, snow geese, Canadas, specklebellies, storks and pelicans are also on the move.

The Texas Gulf is a wintering area for many species of Central Flyway ducks, particularly redheads, which can be found in huge concentrations. By the time they arrive late in the year, their plumage is absolutely exquisite. It’s a chance to take a real trophy duck, notably one that’s on every list: a mature bull sprig that’s long in the pin and beautifully adorned. December and January are good months to hunt the region. My trip takes place just days before Christmas, though the 60-degree temperatures make that easy to forget. Back home the ponds are freezing up and the birds are leaving; in Texas they are still arriving in droves. Of course, sometimes you can have too much of a good thing, and by 8 a.m. we have hundreds of redheads with bluebills among them rafted up 200 yards behind us.

I don’t care how large or elaborate your spread is, plastic decoys tied to anchors simply scream “fraud” when you have a few hundred live ducks chattering and feeding voraciously nearby. The birds are fun to watch but pull every duck in our vicinity to them.

Then a boat sweeps through. “He’s looking for redfish,” Harold says. “He’ll make a few casts if he sees some.”

He also gets the ducks up, and within minutes of their departure three wigeon swing over that appear eager to dance. Shoo-shee-shoo ... shoo-shee-shoo, Harold beckons.



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They swing out with the wind and bank back hard, carefully inspecting our decoys.

“Let them go, one more pass, they’re looking good,” Harold advises.

The ducks drop and hit the brakes, their primary feathers whistling as they slice the air. This, my friend, is why we spend all our time and money tinkering with dogs, shotguns and decoys. The chance to watch ducks work the spread, which, for even the most skillful of hunters adds up to mere minutes each season, merits the hours of labor and borderline financial ruin. Curious is the hunter who chooses to hide in a roofed pit blind only to spring out when it’s time to shoot. Personally I’d rather flare a few ducks than miss the glorious sight of cupped wings.

“Okay, get ‘em there!”

Tim, Paul and I stand and shoulder our guns. It takes more shots than it should but we connect with all three baldpates. The best drake has magnificent white shoulder patches and a shimmering green “mask” over its eyes. Its beauty leads to an idea.

“You know, since you’re only allowed one pintail, and we have so many down here, some guys like to take turns shooting,” Harold points out. “One hunter per flock picks out a nice bull and shoots.”

We decide Paul will have first crack, but that has to wait—redheads are in the air and lots of them. Three big flocks, each a few dozen strong, swing over the blind. Through my periphery I see a substantial number of bluebills mixed in. Three redheads break off and come in low over the decoys flying right to left with the wind. Tim shoots first and drops the lead duck. Paul and I shoot nearly simultaneously, my shot dropping the middle duck and Paul’s connecting with the trailing bird.

We’re shooting Federal Black Cloud FS Steel loaded with No. 3 shot. It performs well, plus now I can avoid getting dragged into a 2’s vs. 4’s argument by saying, “I don’t know, I shoot 3’s.”

“It’s 9:30, time for the pintails to wake up,” Harold says, tapping his watch.

“Isn’t that a little late?” Tim asks.

“You’d think, but it just seems to work out that way. Be ready, Paul.”

Harold’s prediction rings true as three sprigs begin to work, kind of dancing over the decoys the way only pintails are apt to do. Two bulls escort a hen, and one of them is an exemplary bird indeed. It is the kind of sprig people obsess over, its tail dangling behind it almost like a pheasant’s, and for a moment I’m in a stupor. My knees grow weak. My hands shake. I’m pretty sure my eyes dilate. And when the guide says, “Shoot,” that’s just what I do. At the gun’s report, I snap out of it, think, What are you doing, stupid? and sit down just in time for Paul to kill the bird. I’ve missed a lot of ducks, but I’ve never been happier to do so.

“Well I’m glad one of us got it because I think it’s a Boone and Crockett sprig,” Paul says as the others joke about my attempted theft.

God doesn’t make pintails any prettier. Its head is a dark chocolate, with a purplish tint along the side only seen on big, mature sprigs. It’s the type of duck you put on your bucket list and if I’d poached it from Paul I’d never have forgiven myself.

Shortly thereafter I get my chance on a pintail crossing high left. I enjoy few shots as much as towering crossers, and I hope you forgive me for admitting that I enjoy watching the bird as it tumbles from the sky and lands with a hefty splash. It’s a very nice bull—not as nice as Paul’s, but one with which I’m very pleased.

At day’s end our bag includes redheads, bluebills, wigeon and a limit of pintails. I spend the rest of my morning taking photos of the birds while Harold and the rest of the staff at the Bay Flats Lodge (www.bayflatslodge.com) in Seadrift, Texas, scout for the next hunt. They work hard, scouting every day and adjusting the plan accordingly. One afternoon they went so far as to assemble a blind from scratch based on the morning’s observations.

The San Antonio Bay is publicly accessible, however, the best hunting occurs in the shallow flats. I’m not sure how one would access those areas without an airboat or similar craft, so the use of an outfitter is probably the way to go for the average hunter.

Regardless, if you plan a trip, you’re likely at least going to see birds. If you’re a duck hunter first and foremost because you love ducks, it’s worth pursuing. Ducks winter along the Texas Gulf in a variety and abundance the likes of which you’ll be hard pressed to find anywhere, and I would rate the area among some of the more famed duck hunting locales.