

A man wearing a camouflage jacket and a cap is smiling while holding two ducks. The ducks are held vertically, one in each hand, with their heads pointing downwards. The background is a clear blue sky with some light clouds. The ducks have green heads and yellow bills. The man's jacket is a mix of brown, tan, and grey patterns.

DEER OR DUCKS?

by Brad Fenson

The alarm screamed out its annoying call to get up and instead of hitting the snooze button, I hit the ground and started to dress. It was the first day of deer season

around home and I couldn't help but wonder what bucks would be roaming? It had been a long, strange fall and normally by the time deer hunting starts, I've been satisfied with the amount of waterfowl hunting I'd taken in. That simply wasn't the case this year. It was supposed to be a record year with more ducks than any of us had ever seen in our lives, but I'm here to tell you they snuck south at night, never stopping en masse to produce the huge concentrations I expected.

November 1 brought with it warmer temperatures and the icy grip that put a stranglehold on our wetlands in late October lifted to give us a slight reprieve. The change in temperature created turmoil in my mind and instead of being geared for deer, I was still dreaming of ducks.

My good friends Bob and Angie called and said they'd found a late-season duck shoot and invited Stef and I to join them in the morning. It was all I needed to hear to put the rifle back in the gun safe and retrieve a couple smoothbores for one last round of shoulder kicking excitement.

We headed out of town on Halloween eve and arrived at our friend's place in time for a late dinner. I was more excited than a kid on his first hunt was and asked questions while trying to picture events for the coming morning. We'd be hunting the edge of a big wetland in the middle of a huge barley field. There were ducks and geese utilizing the field, but the ducks were bouncing in and out of the water as their preferred drinking location. It was the perfect scenario for one of my favourite types of duck hunts.

We left early to set up blinds and place decoys in the water. There had been a bunch of snow geese in the field so we opted to place about 100 snow goose decoys in the stubble behind us. With any luck, we'd get a shot at some geese while shooting mallards over water.

We placed two standup blinds near the water's edge and scattered a dozen floating



duck decoys on the water in front of us. A slight breeze from the south helped draw incoming birds in close and even before legal light arrived, the ducks were flying. To our surprise, we also had two giant flocks of snow geese circling the field 10 minutes before shooting light. I'm not sure what had them up so early but we watched with anticipation as the minutes ticked down until we could shoot.

A small flock of mallards set their wings and approached our decoys. They angled in a little short but were still





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close enough that two of them remained on the water after we shot. The geese heard the noise, started to mill and before we knew it, a flock of snows circled overhead. Bob and I shot and two of the whites fell from the sky. Bob's trusty chocolate lab Molly was anxious to make the retrieve and soon collected both of the downed birds.

The ducks weren't cooperating as expected and were pulling up short on the shoreline just south of us. After a quick discussion, we opted to grab everything and move while the birds were still flying. The blinds were situated another 50 metres down the shoreline and because Bob and I pulled the short straw we pulled on the waders, quickly collected the decoys and moved them to the new location. We were back in business in a matter of minutes and the move proved to be a smart choice.

A flock of mallards cupped their wings and soared straight in towards our blinds. When the leader of the flock was just touching down, we opened up on them. More birds in the bag.

Stef was hunting on the far end from me so I couldn't see how she was doing. Bob was in the middle with the dog and Angie was along to keep an eye on the sky, provide colour commentary and document it all with the camera. A single mallard came in and Bob told Stef to get ready. When the bird set its wings, Stef stood up and as the bird flared skyward, her over and under barked. The bird flinched on the first shot but the second sent it crashing into the sedge on the far side of the water. Molly made short order of the downed bird and brought it back to Bob with a look of satisfaction on her face.

A single duck winged towards us and met its fate, as Bob stood up and dropped it on the first shot. To our surprise, it was a single redhead and a welcome addition to our daily bag. Another flock of snows tried to skirt the wetland and we downed another of the white geese. I had just reloaded when a blur of white skimmed the shore to my left. I swung the gun hard to catch up with the speedster and dumped a beautiful adult bufflehead before he got out of range. It was turning out to be a productive morning and the mixed bag of beautiful birds made it even more interesting.

To our surprise, the duck action didn't slow down when the sun started to rise farther into the sky. In fact, the action picked up with more and larger flocks of ducks bombing us from above. Flocks of two and three birds and some with as many as 12 set their wings and cruised towards our decoys. We all got plenty of shooting in and the pile of ducks beside the blind continued to grow at a steady pace.

It was one of those mornings when the wind was blowing hard enough that when the birds flared their wings, it acted like kites to pull them quickly away. It made for tough shots and all of us were going through a considerable amount of shotshells. I've always said those that make the most noise have the most fun and that morning was no exception.

We did a quick count and were only a couple of birds short of a full limit. Stef was starting to feel the effects of shooting two boxes of shells, but it didn't stop her from stepping up to the plate when Bob told her to take a big greenhead that tried to slide off her end. It splashed down and Molly was on the job once again to clean up the downed bird.



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The morning felt like a gift, as the ducks just kept coming, making up for our lack of shooting skill. We had so many opportunities that we eventually shot our limit. It was an outstanding way to end the year and we gathered for photos as the birds were still trying to land on top of us.

I collected the decoys with mixed emotions. I knew it could be the last hunt of the year, but I didn't want it to be over. I had to mentally prepare for the deer season ahead, which would be the complete opposite of hunting ducks. I'd spend days in the woods and hopefully culminate events with a single, well-placed shot. Duck hunting on the other hand is a shooter's paradise, providing plenty of opportunity to test your hearing protection and see if your shoulder could actually bruise from the continual banging of magnum loads.

It was the last hunt of the year and I'm grateful I made the time for it. It was a great start to the deer season and helped get rid of the itch that develops after days of hunting and never pulling the trigger. Perhaps next year we'll see the massive



flights of ducks and make time for more waterfowl hunting during the warmer months. But, I'm guessing more time in the field early on won't stop me from heading out in November even if the birds are still around. ■



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