

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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November 17, 2008

Fields of Dreams

Deer hunt not the only late game in state

By Dick Ellis

We're just eight days shy as this is written of the most cherished of Wisconsin's season openers. On Saturday, November 22, more than 600,000 sportsmen and women will participate in the gun deer hunt. But Wisconsin's fields of dreams won't begin or end on that fourth Saturday in November.

Invitations are already coming in from waterfowl hunters working cut corn in southern Wisconsin and northeast counties for mallards, black ducks and geese. A waterfowl hunt on dry ground is one of the most satisfying a Wisconsin hunter will ever participate in. And according to two veterans of the game interviewed Thursday, basic preparation and a minimal amount of equipment can successfully place even the novice waterfowl hunter in those field too.

"In the last five to 10 years, right before, during and or right after the gun deer season the ducks really start using the cornfields with the geese," said expert waterfowler John Volkman of Neenah. "Some mallards are already using corn September 1st. But the birds really start working the corn as the weather gets colder."



Jim Tostrud holds two greenheads and two geese after an afternoon of cornfield waterfowl hunting in southern Wisconsin on November 8th.



After a field corn hunt in southern Wisconsin November 8, Jim Tostrud, Scott Boren, Renegade, Justin Stofferahn, and Tim Cox show some of the Canada geese. A number of greenhead mallards were also taken

Volkman, who won the maximum of three Wisconsin Goose Calling Championships sponsored annually by the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association (WAA) before they kick a contestant out for having too much expertise, addressed the "what", "where" and "how" of field hunting. The "why" is more obvious; it's a

pure blast. The "who" is even more obvious; why not...you?

Volkman said cornfield targets primarily are geese, mallards, and black ducks with the occasional bonus pintail showing up in the bag. Birds include a mixture of local ducks and waterfowl pushed by cold fronts or precipitation from the prairie pot-

hole states and Canada. Weather and open water play key roles in knowing when and where to set up.

"As the temperatures get colder the birds begin to group up and follow each other to feed in the fields," Volkman said. "They stay in that pattern until they're forced out by hunters or the water



John Volkman of Neenah works the call during a duck and goose hunt in cut corn near Green Bay.

they're using to roost freezes or we get too much snow cover and they can't find the corn. A light snow won't bother them but six inches of snow will pretty much end it. Although there have been times when I had a difficult time seeing the corn and the birds still found it."

To find and hunt ducks using cornfields, Volkman suggests finding open water being used by the flocks as roosting, or resting areas. Waterfowl roost all night and during parts of the day. Open water roosting areas can be, for example, lakes as large as Big Green or Michigan, to a river with current, to a refuge pond without hunting that the birds keep open themselves.

These roosting birds must eat, but when and where? To find what fields are being used as a food source, the hunter must stay in touch with local DNR waterfowl experts or other regional hunting contacts and regularly network for information, see ducks and geese on the fields personally, or watch the flocks leave the open water and follow them in a truck to the food source. The hunter may have to follow numerous flocks, stopping often and waiting for the next flock coming off the same water that might include hundreds of ducks. Eventually, you'll find the field of dreams and ask permission to hunt.

"As the temperature gets colder, the ducks will usually want to feed during the warmest part of the day," he said. "But any weather change can get them moving. A front coming in, high winds or rain. As

soon as they feel that barometer change they're moving. You have to be cognizant of what the weather forecast is the day you're hunting. Sometime you'll have to get out there right away at a time you normally wouldn't expect to be hunting."

Scott Boren, an Illinois waterfowl guide who extensively field hunts southern Wisconsin counties with friends for the pleasure of it, stressed that scouting to pattern the birds is crucial to success. The ducks and geese, he said, may be eating green grass like alfalfa or they may be eating grains, food preferences that can change daily or even by the hour.

"A lot depends on the temperature," he said. The colder it gets the more they will



Joe Porten sets decoys in cut corn for ducks and geese roosting on Green Bay. When conditions are right in November and December hunters can encounter flocks each consisting of literally hundreds of ducks, and equally impressive numbers of geese.

be using the grain. But it's most important that you get permission to hunt from the landowner, hunt legally and respectfully and abide by any rules the farmer may have. He's doing you a huge favor and you're representing all hunters. He doesn't have to let you on."

Once you find the feeding fields and have received permission to hunt, the hunter must pay strict attention to the precise location the birds prefer on the field. You may be on a 100 acre field but setting up on the wrong end, Volkman stressed. You need to set the ambush where the birds want to be.

"It's called being on the 'x'," he said. "If you're on one end of a field and they're on the other, you're bird watching, not hunting."

Goose and mallard decoys are preferable but ducks, he said, will "definitely" come in to only goose decoys if you're set up on the field they want to use. Layout blinds are nice but also not necessary. A piece of camouflage fabric will work. A few rows of standing corn conveniently left in the right spot can also provide great cover.

Homework complete, now you wait. When the stars align, look out... and up. These flocks literally can be made up of hundreds of ducks, or more. Imagine living, dark waterfowl tornados twisting down from the skies above and you have just begun to paint this picture.

"When more northern ducks come down pushed by a storm or some weather change it's always a bonus," said Scott Boren. "New birds are easier to hunt. They're not local and they don't know yet if their coming into a safe haven like in an industrial setting or into a field that's being hunted."

"This is by far the best waterfowl hunt you can experience," Volkman said. "It's easy to distinguish hens from drakes. It's relatively comfortable. And there are lots of birds." ^{OWO}



John Volkman and Joe Porten show the fruits of a successful cornfield hunt for ducks and geese roosting on Green Bay.