

Working to Hunt

Searching for the ultimate duck blind

By Dick Ellis

Less than six weeks earlier, we had sat hunkered down in a shallow, winding creek outside of Adell in Sheboygan County, waiting for wood ducks to visit the acorn-laced ridges of Kettle Moraine. Root systems just above water level served as seats and we rested against the trunks of oaks. Humid temperatures of September lay on us. Slow moving current pressed against the boots of hip waders. Spurred by distant shotgun reports from hunters on bigger water, woodies did drop in to join a lone decoy with their three-second promise to shoot now, or forever hold your "piece.

As the pages opened on November, my brother and I again took on the duck hunter's posture 300 miles to the north, looking down into the marsh grass but somehow contorting the neck and eyes to track the darting flock of 30 greenwing teal above flirting with our spread of blocks. We sat on the entrance of a slough, high winds howling from the south and new snow painting both skiff and marsh grass at water's edge. Wood duck decoys, mallards and teal rocked on wild water at the river's mouth feeding the small lake. And the temperatures plunged toward thirty.

The southern hunt had required a pack-in through the northern unit of the Kettle Moraine State Forest.



John Ellis glasses a small Wisconsin lake in search of ducks. Greenwing Teal, Mallards, and Wood Ducks still remained ahead of a snow storm pushing cold weather and more migrating waterfowl east from the western states. (Dick Ellis)

Our reward was up close and personal meetings with three drakes over three hours on opening day in the southern zone. The northern hunt had begun with a map search for new secluded water, and had evolved until we struggled against the elements and terrain just for a chance at the perfect blind.

How hard is too hard when a hunter hunts? At least until age or physical limitations steal our abilities to continue the search, there is no such thing. For many of us, hunting for the perfect place is more

of what defines hunting than pulling the trigger. The actual kill verifies that you have done your homework well.

We had traditionally hiked in to hunt the southern creek before. It side-steps the hassle of fighting too many hunters seeking too few places on a popular opening day. But John had searched for new lakes in northern Wisconsin first on a map and by driving back roads. Then we had gone together to actually look for ourselves.

The lake was a few hundred



Dick Ellis waits for the arrival of ducks on the shoreline of a northern Wisconsin lake never before hunted by his party.

acres in size, void of any cabin or other sign of humans and dotted with vegetation. It was dotted also with ducks when we arrived on the shoreline, and glassed the water to identify mallards, teal, the dreaded merganser, and wood ducks dabbling and diving among the greens in a never-ending quest for more food. A large flock of greenwing quarreled among their own hierarchy, trying to determine just which winged vegetarian had squatter's rights to the choicest weeds.

With few exceptions the lake was just six inches deep or so over muck. A deep hole was two or three feet, and our first attempt to

Wisconsin Duck Hunters Bag Wisconsin Ducks

According to Wisconsin Waterfowl Association (WWA) Board Member Tom Lutes, Wisconsin hunters are predominantly hunting locally-hatched ducks during the season. Department of Natural Resources numbers, he said, indicate that approximately 70 percent of ducks killed in Wisconsin are raised in Wisconsin.

Lutes, who also is the President of Kolpin Power Sports specializing in ATV accessories located in Fox

Lake, said that the WWA helps increase those local production numbers with wetland and upland habitat restoration and through distribution of wood duck houses and hen mallard nesting structures.

Because the large percentage of the Wisconsin bag is from ducks raised in-state, Lutes said that WWA's habitat program is extremely important to Wisconsin waterfowlers.


"Predator control has proven to improve nesting success, but it all

starts with habitat; grasslands that adjoin wetlands," he said. "Large tracts of grasslands are key to reducing predator success. Small strips are easy for predators to patrol."

Early season Wisconsin duck hunters, Lutes said, expect to see a mixed bag of ducks dominated by wood ducks and blue wing teal with some local mallards included. As the season progresses, Wisconsin sees nearly all puddle and diving duck species. More than 60 percent of

North America's canvasback population travels through Pool 9 on the Upper Mississippi river.

Waterfowl migrating through Wisconsin, he said, primarily originate in Manitoba, the eastern half of Saskatchewan with some coming from Ontario.

Visit these websites:
www.wisducks.org and
www.KolpinPowersports.com. 



Maggie retrieves a duck from an inlet connecting a backwater slough and a small, shallow northern Wisconsin lake. (Dick Ellis)

navigate the water failed, the skiff laden with all the equipment necessary to hunt ducks and two hunters at 200 pounds each bogged down. We struggled back, and I struggled along a shore to meet John and the ship on a point on the north end of the lake that appeared to offer the only possible place to hunt. The wind was wrong to appease the ducks though, and with nothing in the bag we changed our location that afternoon.

Glassing the south end of the lake did not leave us confident that we could find a location near the water that would serve as a blind or that we could make it there if we did. But prevailing winds that would make the ducks fly that way also made us try. I would circle the lake on a pine ridge until it melted into wet lowland of tight tag alders and stunning golden tamarack bordering the lake. The alders ripped at me and wetlands vowed

to suck me in as payment for intruding on this pristine country and took its toll on not-so-young hips and knees. But I made it, soaking with the sweat that would soon send me from very hot to very cold. On the slough we didn't know even existed, I met John already setting his decoys from the skiff.


We pulled the skiff into the high grass and waited. John is an expert on the call, and he worked his magic as the sun set behind us. A stunning northern shoreline where we had hunted earlier was bathed in the amber of last light. Trumpeter swans that had rested all day took flight in flocks of six to a dozen and flew directly over the camera. We returned the next morning to more high winds driving snow over our landscape. In the pre-dawn black, it took a try or two to negotiate the tag alders and lowlands and find our natural blind. We set the blocks and settled into the bordering cattails on folding chairs and savored the hot coffee warming cold hands and shivering bodies that were again paying the price of heavy sweat from the long walk in.

Out world lightened slowly. We were hoping that winter storms we tracked brewing in the western states would be pushing the

migrating ducks into Wisconsin.

One or two flocks of mallards with scores of birds moving south high above gave us hope for the near future. But, our lake remained quiet with gun-shy local birds.

The teal returned to tease us on the coattails of four mallards before darting off again in the wake of their larger cousins. It was extraordinary to watch the tumbling ball of 30 or so greenwing with rapidly beating wings obviously fixed on remaining with the more deliberately-flying mallards come and go. We would go too finally, beginning the chores of packing in decoys, storing shotguns and other gear, and paddling out. This time, it was John who walked with the tags and tamarack. I felt the sting of the wind and snow that pushed my skiff quickly to a mud landing chute and drag up a ridge to a waiting truck.

We had just one duck to show for our effort. We had pulled the trigger on two flocks. But we had hunted. We will go again this week. And I wonder...just where will we find that perfect blind? 

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