

Baja Black Brant

Mexico's Bay of 11,000 Virgins brims with birds

"THERE'S THOUSANDS OF BIRDS. So many we usually limit out by noon."

"I can't stand cold weather," I countered. "You know that."

"It's warm. Lows in the 50s. By afternoon it's up to the mid-70s. Sometimes 80s."

I paused for a moment, and then remembered that Mark had lied to me before. Many times before.

"I don't know. I ..."

"The place used to be called the Bay of 11,000 Virgins."

"Go on."

"The lodge where we'll be staying, Grizzly Adams used to stay there. A lot."

"Dan Haggerty: Grizzly Adams?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, I'm there."

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GAYNE C. YOUNG



Although I've been an outdoor writer for going on two decades, this would be my first-ever waterfowl hunt. My aversion to the cold, being wet and cold, and getting up early only to become wet and cold has kept me from the sport in the past. Knowing this, my friend Mark Buchanan of Big Bore Productions took it upon himself to somehow bring me into the fold of waterfowl hunters. This hunt for black brant in San Quintín, Baja California, Mexico, would be my introduction.

DOWN BY THE BAY

The seductive moniker of *Bahía de las 11,000 Virgenes* — the Bay of 11,000 Virgins — was given in honor of Saint Ursula by Portuguese explorer Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo in 1542. In 1602, Spaniard Sebastian Vizcaíno renamed the bay San Quintín in honor of Saint-Quentin, whose feast day fell on the date of discovery.

Although I was offered no proof the former name was accurate (I encountered less than 40 people on my visit, all of them male), I prefer it over the current one. I just like the way it rolls off my tongue.

My sojourn to the bay began at the San Diego Airport when I met Buchanan. From there, we drove into Mexico and along the Transpeninsular Highway to the quiet fishing village of San Quintín. There, we were met at the hotel by Baja Hunting owner/operator Arturo Malo. When we registered I learned that, alas, Grizzly Adams was not there.

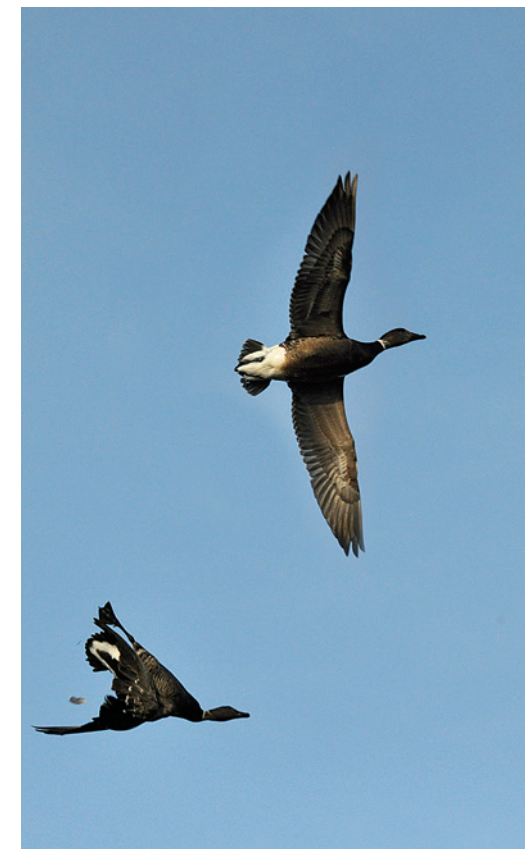
The bay itself is reasonably small, about 50 square miles, but perfectly suited for black brant. Shallow waters blanketed with dense beds of eelgrass stand protected from harsh winds by surrounding ancient volcanic cones. In addition to eelgrass, the waters are teeming with fish such as cod, mackerel, grouper, dorado and giant black bass. Gray whales, porpoises and seals, which are locally known as sea wolves or *lobos* for their affinity to steal hooked fish, also call the bay home.

WATERFOWL INFLUX

The hunt began the next morning with a bang on the door at 5 a.m. with an



The Bay in San Quintín, Baja California, Mexico, harbors dense eelgrass shielded by volcanic cones, making it prime winter brant habitat.



offering of fresh fruit and coffee. By 5:30 a.m., we were divided into Panga boats for the short jaunt across the bay to our blinds. Buchanan, his 2-year-old Lab, Carson — as in “No Carson!” “Hurry up Carson!” and “Get the hell over here Carson!” — and I were to hunt blind No. 1, while Richard Sanders, Mike Cassidy, Malo and his Lab, Chavo, would hunt blind No. 2. The blinds themselves were actually nothing more than on-the-spot-constructed screens of short poles and camouflage netting or cut vegetation. Despite a lack of aesthetics, the blinds worked flawlessly. Less than 10 minutes after the decoys had been placed and the

boat left, birds started flying. The first to appear was a lone brant that flew in straight and hard. As this was my first goose hunt, I looked to Buchanan for instruction. His scream of “Shoot it!” got me off to a great, albeit, shaky start. Somehow, my first shot was true, and the bird spiraled downward into the retreating tide. After much coaxing, yelling and prodding, Carson retrieved the bird. “Your first goose on your first shot!” Buchanan yelled excitedly. “You think you can get another nine more?” I pulled my facemask back up with a nod and a smile, offered a resounding “Hell yeah” and hunkered down

behind the screen. Within minutes, the sky was alive with knots of brant, their coal-black heads and necks glistening like wet ebony. They circled the decoys in groups as small as two and three to as large as 20. In the distance flew even larger chevrons of brant, portions of the sky black with their movement. Not only were the brant moving, but so were pelicans, gulls, *curlew* and other assorted shore birds. Wigeon, teal and pintails, all seemingly aware that they were legal species, also darted through the bright sky. In less than two-and-a-half hours, Buchanan and I took more than half

of our limits and missed at least that many (well, maybe it was just me who missed). During the melee, Buchanan even managed to take a banded bird we later discovered was captured in Alaska. Around 9:30 a.m., the boat unexpectedly returned. Despite our success, our guide, Sergio, thought it best we move, given that it was almost low tide. He and his assistant loaded the decoys and our birds, and moved us to a blind constructed of palmetto leaves known as *tules de viejo molino*: bulrush at Old Mill. This blind proved even better. Strings of brant numbering 10, 15

and 20 birds exploded in and among the decoys. The birds kept coming despite Carson's thrashing in the water and our standing to shoot. The storm of geese was unlike anything I'd ever seen before. During the hour-and-a-half swarm, I shot my first triple, two birds



The group limited out with 10 brant apiece, all reluctantly retrieved by Carson, a 2-year-old yellow Lab.



A red band encircles a brant's leg, a sight the local guide hadn't seen in eight years.



of which were banded. Although I was excited about the bands, it wasn't until Sergio picked us up that I learned how rare one of them was.

"You get red!" Sergio shouted in broken-English disbelief. "Russia! I not to see in eight year!"

"So I did good?" I jokingly asked.

"For the band? Yes," Sergio replied. "Not too good to shoot, though. Arturo, others finish 9:30."

"They see more birds?" I asked, not really believing that they could.

"They shoot brant more good!" Sergio laughed.

That night, the guides grilled brant, freshly caught fish and dozens of oysters from an oyster farm at the other end of the bay. We binged on food and drink before retiring to the bayside dock for cigars and talk of the day's hunt. And judging by the stories of Cassidy and Sanders, they did "shoot brant more good."

RISING TIDE

Morning found the next day foggy and at least 10 degrees colder than it had been the day before. I put on every

IF YOU GO

Each season, between 40,000 and 50,000 black brant from Alaska, Russia and the Yukon flood San Quintin Bay to winter. The season lasts from January until the end of February. Visit Baja Hunting at bajahunting.com.

stitch of clothing I owned and headed out to brave the lower 50s temperature (I told you I hate cold weather). The blind assignment was reversed for our second day of hunting, with Buchanan, Carson and me taking blind No. 2. In addition to the blind change and different weather conditions, we would also face a different tide, as it would be high tide less than an hour after we situated ourselves. From what I could tell, the only effect the tide had on the hunting was a positive one.

We saw two or three times as many birds as the day before. Plumps of brant swarmed in from all directions toward our decoys. Brant were so plentiful that I could relax and take my time with almost every shot — a luxury on any bird hunt. The bay before us came alive with a small pod of gray whales, the sound of their thundering blowholes sending Carson into full-blown confusion.

"I hope he doesn't think that's a bird hitting the water," Buchanan worried aloud. "That's the last thing I need: Carson trying to retrieve a whale."

Fortunately, Carson never went after a whale. Either he knew it wasn't a brant, or he was too chicken to try to take on a whale.

By 9:30 a.m., our hunt ended. We had limited out with 10 brant apiece. Back at the hotel we learned that, again, our three friends had gotten their limit long before we had. Whether the reason was superior shooting or the fact they saw more birds, I'm not sure. But I am sure my first waterfowl hunt won't be my last. I had a great time, it wasn't too cold and the birds were more plentiful than pigeons in a park.

Now, if I could just match my return trip to the Bay of 11,000 Virgins to coincide with Grizzly Adams' fishing trip...

Gayne Young stays warm at home in Fredericksburg, Texas.

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