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Fast Food

Good eating, hard-flying teal are the fair-weather friends that serve up some of the best days of duck season

BY SKIP KNOWLES

BARRING AN EPIC NATURAL disaster, this is shaping up to be another hum-dinger year for those who love to chase teal both in special early seasons and throughout the fall. Blue-winged numbers were nothing shy of staggering last year, nearly twice the long-term average, and we appear to be poised for an encore, according to federal officials.

That's thrilling news for the huge flocks of teal fans. Ramsey Russell of Getducks.com hunts all over the world, but will not leave the southern U.S. during September. Asked why he loves teal hunting so much, he took an uncharacteristic moment of pause to know where to begin.

"Man, my favorite bird in North America is probably the blue-winged teal. God help me, I love them and I don't know why. I just like the way they decoy and flock. It takes something outrageous to get me out of Mississippi during blue-winged teal season...just to get a four-duck limit in hot weather," he said, laughing at himself.

He hunts most of the typically 16-day season.

"It's all worth it during those handful of days when the wind picks up and they come out of the north," he says. "We all love the art of decoying mallards. That's the art and romance of duck hunting. But let me ask you, is there anything like when 40 or 50 teal come screaming in and five guns come up and you all cut into them and they fly straight up? Is there anything more exciting?"

He also likes that you don't need a lot of new flocked decoys, fancy camo, state-of-the-art gear, or a lot of calls. "You can sometimes turn them with a blue-winged teal call. They sound a lot like Popeye laughing. It doesn't always work but what does with a duck?"

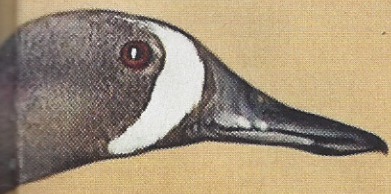
Mojo doves work well too, he adds. And speaking of Mojo, CEO and president Terry Denmon puts teal near the top of duck hunters' passion.

"There is nothing more fun to hunt than teal. They fly fast, in small groups and are highly attracted to decoys," he says. "They migrate on such short schedules—here today, gone tomorrow—that it tends to be feast or famine. But there is nothing more sporty in the duck world."

FURIOUS MOTION

And everyone knows they like spinning-wing decoys. Denmon likes to put out several to make it look like a flock landing, and puts at least one on a high extension pole so they can see it from a long ways off, so they will often come and at least buzz it. Fast wing beats are better, obviously, which is why Mojo developed a Teal Decoy with super-fast wings.

Russell loves green-winged teal nearly as much as blues, because not only are they delicious, but "you can shoot green-wings across all types of habitat, though their first love is rice fields and broad shallow waters. They are always looking for new shallow-water areas. It doesn't take a lot of skill to get them," says the former biologist.



Decoy setups are simple too. In September he runs just an elongated blob, a long loose string in the gentle shape of a long shanked fish hook (“bream” hook, down south) with lots of landing places in front of the guns, typically in small open bodies of water surrounded by flooded crops, moist soils and weed patches. He deploys the long hook scattered over 30 yards and curved back in toward the blind.

Russell likes to set up crosswind, with the wind coming in from the left so the birds are coming in right to left, “so when they commit they

are at eyeball level,” he says.

For early season blue-wings Russell runs about 30 decoys, half a sack, and in the winter he goes to a mix of about 16 teal decoys, a few gadwall, a few mallards, and a few shovelers, always putting the teal in the pocket. Most hunters use their favorite duck load, but Russell has found a light gun with high-pellet density loads in smaller shot sizes is terrific because of the modest shooting range. He shoots a 20-gauge Remington 1100 with 2³/₄-inch steel No. 7s with an IC choke, going to a 12-gauge and No. 3s later in the year.

If you're down in cottonmouth country, toss a snakebite kit in the blind bag. “I did have a dog snake bit during teal season. You have to be careful but

Tony Vandemore at Habitat Flats in Missouri, where the limit will be upped to six for blue-winged teal this year, as it is for green-wings, pictured here.



© tonyvandemore



© Dean Pearson



The family shot: Duncan, Parker (daughter's first duck), Ramsey, dog Delta, and Forrest.



that's part of living in the South.

"Lots of guys in Louisiana don't hunt dogs early season because of gators," he says.

HERE THEY COME

Adult drakes pile in first, typically starting in mid-August. James Kelley, Mississippi Flyway Rep. for USFWS, explains when the breeding population is estimated between 3.3 and 4.7 million, a nine-day teal season is established. When it gets over 4.7 million or greater we get a 16-day season.

This year should be memorable, as it appears BWT limits will be raised to six in many places.

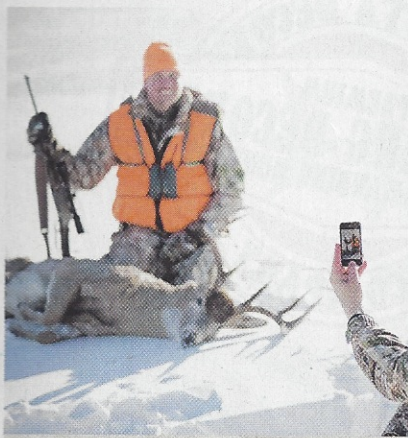
"They are doing real well," Kelley says. "We are still doing a survey (at press time) but the population has been doing extremely well. Last year there were 9.2 million BWT and the long-term average is 4.8 million. Given that we are not in drought, we would not expect big changes. We are hesitant to give numbers, but we expect similar numbers to last year, which is great news, well above the trigger that would allow a 16-day season.

"We've had great water conditions going back to '93 when the prairie started getting wet and teal started doing well," he explained. "And though we've had a few dry seasons the last five years, the CRP benefits have given us good habitat in uplands and good water and good nesting conditions."

Breeding populations of BWT last year were at 9.2 million, compared to green-winged at 3.4 million in 2012. As for cinnamon teal, "I don't think we have a good estimate because they are not widespread. In surveys, they are found more in the inter-mountain west, not in the east much, and not commonly in the Mississippi Flyway."

The Mississippi Flyway holds by far the most teal. Hunters normally kill 326,000 BWT in the regular season and about 378,000 in early season. Regular season hunters kill about 618,000 U.S.-wide and in the September early-season they harvest 633,000, so the September season for BWT is a very important.

The little ducks head south fast and are mostly gone from all but the Louisiana end of the flyway early on. For example, about 170,000 are shot in Louisiana's regular season, whereas in Illinois, hunters shoot 6,600 in the regular



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season and 20,000 in early season. Total duck harvest in the Mississippi Flyway in 2011 was roughly 8 million. Of that, BWT comprised just over 700,000.

"They are very important," Kelley says. "I just wish I was a better shot on them. I don't like swatting mosquitoes and wiping sweat off. But any day you can get after them is a good day."

And he's seen some good days, even on public land. Back in mid-80s, Kelley and crew went up to the Fountain Grove WMA in northwest Missouri.

they are going to be zooming through," Kelley says. "They may make some passes but unless you get lucky they aren't landing."

Seek out emergent vegetation and moist soil habitats, open marshes, not rivers, and remember "they are not a timber bird," he says. "You need a definite open area with some vegetation that has been drowned out a little bit so you can put down some dekes that are visible and they'll take a look at you."

Teal are mostly prairie pothole breed-

"I felt this one little puff of wind and I put my hand in the air and I said 'that's fall.' And that was it, the last super-hot day was over and fall showed up. And the **birds** came on that wind. In the next hour **flocks** poured in."

"They had 12,000-15,000 teal there during opening week and it was just birds everywhere, just a phenomenal hunt, all blue-wings," he said. "We had one guy who took a little longer, but we finished pretty easily. There were so many hunting parties they had a draw for blinds and were rotating groups in when a party finished. We didn't start until late morning and it was still good."

QUICK LIMITS

He agrees that it's not complicated. Find attractive openings and the little jets will buzz your setup. "You have to be ready and scanning the skies because

ers that take advantage of good habitat and water to produce a lot of eggs. Since they are lightly harvested (because they migrate so early) the percentage that get killed each year are much lower than, for instance, mallards. In the spring, they feed a lot on invertebrates but are primarily grain and seed eaters. Practice your duck I.D. Kelley says, because similar species like ruddies and wood ducks are often not legal early on. He recommends the "Ducks at a Distance" study guide, and says lots of state DNR sites will have duck I.D. charts. Hens have a real raspy high-pitched quack, while drakes are not very vocal, he says.



Also be cautious finishing limits. Russell has seen guys kill four teal with one shot. "They came in...and the birds went straight up and he shot one time and made it rain ducks."

Don't miss opening day, as most places have them early and then it's all about the weather, he says. "Twenty years ago I never saw blue-wings in January in Mississippi and Arkansas. Now on any given day you are liable to have a flock fly over. We cut'em, man, I don't care if there are mallards working."

Russell once helped band 7,800 teal in Saskatchewan and 5,500 were BWTs, mostly adult males at first.

"Those big, multi-year mature drakes are the first vanguard of the migration. We'll be killing them here in September and guys are killing the same species way up in Manitoba. If a front blows in you better be in the duck hole right then, not the day after," he said.

Russell spouts hip boots and a vented hot weather shirt. Another reason to love teal hunting.

"I love it most because of the kids," he says. "They get wet and it doesn't matter, their teeth aren't chattering. It's just the best time of year. The humidity is drying up...this one time we were out in late September, and hunting was slow. I felt this one little puff of wind and I put my hand in the air and I said 'that's fall.' And that was it, the last super-hot day was over and fall showed up. And the birds came on that wind. In the next hour flocks poured in."

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