

Cold Bay, Alaska: Waterfowl and Upland Hunting

I recently returned from a wing shooting adventure in Cold Bay, Alaska, where I hunted with Four Flyways Outfitters. **Four Flyways is owned and operated by Captain Jeff Wasley, a very experienced guide.** Prior to opening his guiding operation, Jeff was a waterfowl biologist, and the knowledge he gained during that stage of his career adds much to the quality of his hunts.

With a desire for late season birds with taxidermy-quality plumage, we selected the last week of October 2011 for our hunt. Our waterfowling itinerary included sea ducks, diving ducks, puddle ducks, Pacific black brant and Canada geese. In addition, we planned to hunt willow ptarmigan.

The Cold Bay area offers literally hundreds of thousands of acres of hunting territory. Cold Bay itself lies east of the small village of the same name and

offers primarily sea duck hunting. We tried for sea ducks several times during the week, with an emphasis on beautiful



and hard-to-get harlequin ducks. We hunted once from a barnacle-encrusted rock island exposed by a low tide and another time from a rocky shoreline. Captain Jeff's knowledge of the area, the birds and their habits, coupled with his exquisite decoy spread, gave me a limit of four prime incoming drakes. Every harlequin was suitable for mounting. We also tar-

geted white-winged scoters and black scoters with some success. In addition to harlequins and scoters, I also observed several oldsquaws, red-breasted mergansers and even a Pacific common eider, which is considered quite a trophy bird.

One morning, we hunted diving ducks on a large stream-fed freshwater lake. **We waited until first light to approach our hunting area — to ensure that no brown bears intended to share it with us.** Good thing, for a mother and cub were indeed present. Captain Jeff and assistant guide Brian Froegel managed to persuade the bears to leave the lake to us, and we soon had a nice shoot underway. Our birds were primarily greater scaup (broadbills) and buffleheads. We also killed three Canada geese of the Taverner's subspecies, as well as a couple of mallards and green-winged teal.

A highlight of our trip was hunting the Izembek Lagoon, which lies about ten miles west of Cold Bay and

situated between the west coast of the Alaskan Peninsula and a series of barrier islands separating the coast from the Bering Sea. **Neither my friend nor I had ever hunted or seen black brant, and Izembek was the place to go to remedy that situation, for it is host to the largest gathering of these birds in North America.** The secret to this congregation is the lush growth of eelgrass, which is the preferred food of brant.

Brant hunting takes place from shore and point blinds, selected according to wind, tide and bird concentrations. Our first afternoon was slow, despite a huge concentration of brant about a mile offshore from our position. Still, we each took a beautiful male bird from decoying flocks and that was enough. **We were aware that later-season birds could be tougher, but wanting the best taxidermy specimens, intentionally chose later dates.** After that first hunt, Jeff explained that the difficulties arose from a combination of mild weather and the birds' pre-migratory staging instinct to gather in flocks of thousands, rather than smaller early season groups.

We made several more brant hunts, which combined with Canada geese and ducks, provided excellent mixed bag shooting. Canadas in the Cold Bay area are comprised of both the Taverner's and cackling subspecies. We had considerable success on a couple of these outings and bagged a number of brant, both types of geese, mallards, pintails and teal. We also observed gadwalls, as well as American

In addition to the great variety of waterfowling that we enjoyed, we also made several extremely successful afternoon hunts for willow ptarmigan. These interesting birds live on the tun-



dra, primarily along watercourses and among alder thickets. They are brown in the summer and transform to pure white by winter. During our week, the ptarmigan were in transitional plumage, making them very striking to the eye. Because of their coloration, ptarmigan are typically located by sight, then walked-up. They gather in large coveys and provide very exciting flushing shots. Alaskan ptarmigan limits are a quite generous: twenty birds per day.

The scenery in this area is spell-binding, with unending tundra, snow-capped peaks, crystal-clear streams and even an extinct volcano. Wildlife also abounds — in addition to the large variety of waterfowl species that are hunted, there are Steller's eiders, tundra swans, emperor geese and plenty of bald

shed caribou antlers on the tundra and wolf tracks along the beach of Cold Bay. **This was a true wilderness experience.**

Four Flyways operates from a comfortable lodge just outside of town. Amenities include a washer and dryer, satellite television, a "mud room" and plenty of freezer space to preserve game for the return trip.

Any sportsman who has not visited Alaska needs to do so, and I highly recommend this trip. Thanks to hospitable and knowledgeable guides, our week was safe, productive and great fun. **My friend and I have hunted many states and countries and we agreed that this hunt was among each of our top five favorites.**

Our pre-trip details and air arrangements were handled seamlessly by Ramsey and Anita Russell. Air travel was provided by Delta and its partners, Alaska Airlines and PenAir. My round-trip airfare was approximately \$1,800. At the time of this writing, the six and a half-day hunt program is offered for \$3,300. Hunters must supply their own ammunition, and costs will vary depending upon their preferred loads. **Steel shot is required for ptarmigan, as well as waterfowl, since all hunting takes place on the federal refuge.**

Four Flyways Outfitters is represented by Ramsey Russell.

For more information: **Ramsey Russell, 866-438-3897, getducks.com, ramsey@getducks.com.**

—Jim Crews, III