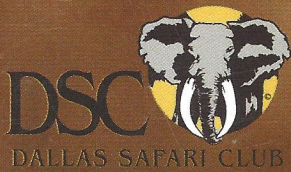


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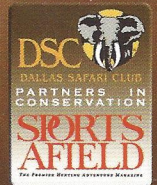
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VOL. XIX, NO. 3

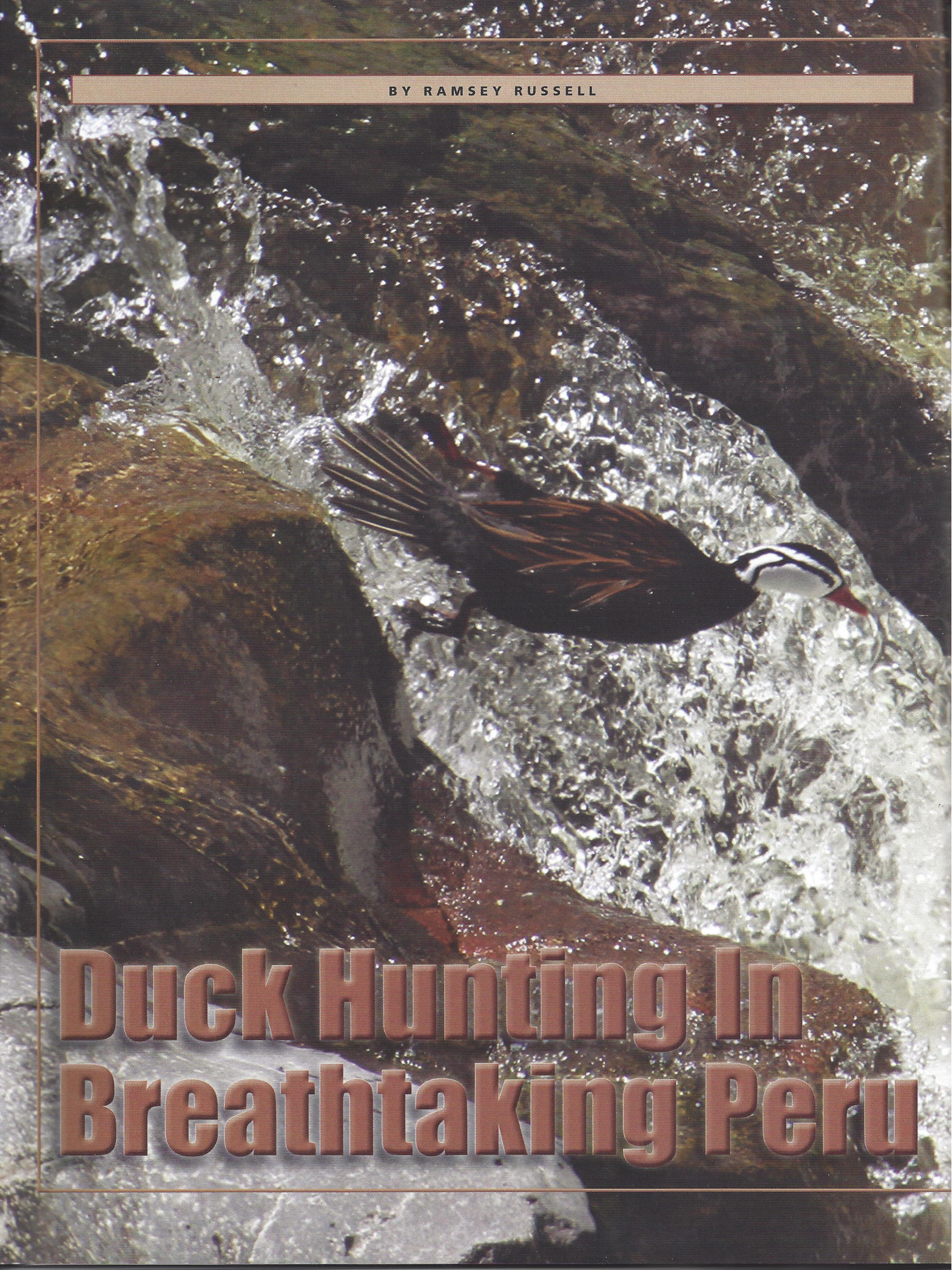
FALL 2012



JOURNAL OF DALLAS SAFARI CLUB



BY RAMSEY RUSSELL



Duck Hunting In Breathtaking Peru



Leaving a small highland village well after daylight, we drove daily along rock-studded roads among mountains that tower above the world's typical duck hunting marshes. Past endless miles of stacked-stone walls that doubtlessly took centuries of tireless, ant-like labor to build, and delineate the highly-terraced, panoramic landscape into cropped patches of traditional grains and tubers; or that at higher elevations contain long-since domesticated herds of mostly indigenous alpacas and llamas that render the time-honored staples of fleece and flesh. Past a local populace with the sartorial inclination of traditional Andes herdsmen, who continue to cultivate crops with benign indifference to modern device. I saw neither a horse nor a hand tool longer than a claw hammer.

And yet we were duck hunting.

The Rio de Colca originates at Laguna Jayuchaca, which is situated 14,850 feet above sea level and derives water from an array of tributaries and low gradient marshlands of the Peruvian altiplano into which snowmelt from adjacent peaks feeds. It was there, in the headwaters basin, that my Peru duck hunting adventure began with a successful spot-and-stalk for a handsome pair of *huallata*, or Andean geese. Further up slope we drove past native herders tending their flocks and chinchilla-like *viscachas* perching on rocks, to a small lake at nearly 16,000 feet where another stalk brought an Andean ruddy duck to bag. Below Lake Jayuchaca dam, where the Rio de Colca is unleashed, we spotted a pair the rarest of the Peru trophy waterfowl collection, *pato puna*, dabbling adjacent to the roaring

It's a fact we learned in kindergarten: Water runs downhill. It collects in low-lying areas, forming wetlands. Generally speaking, it is there that waterfowl – and waterfowl hunters – spend favored days of their lives. But generally speaking, there are exceptions to every rule. The rugged Andes Mountains in which Peru duck hunting takes place is one such exception.

river. Puna teal are an Andes-sized version of silver teal that are easily recognizable among ardent South American duck hunters.

The *piricho*, or sharp-winged duck, is a lighter-color, larger-sized variant of speckled teal, or yellow-billed teal as they are sometimes referred. They, along with the cancana, or crested duck, seem the most prevalent of Peru's mountain waterfowl species and were taken easily. Though more common, they are by no means less rare; all trophy waterfowl species encountered in Peru are available nowhere else on earth. In hand, the giant coot has the sizable heft of a Ross' goose gander. I secretly wish to slip one into a pirogue during a Louisiana duck hunt just to see everyone's reaction, and I doubt not one bit that the boys I hunt with down there possess a big enough gumbo pot to work their magic with it!

Peru duck hunting in the Andes is neither about the art of seducing wild ducks to decoys, nor about the thrill of high-volume trigger pulling. It is about collecting specific trophy waterfowl that can be found nowhere else on Earth. The allowable limit is one pair per species, except for the torrent duck which is limited to one drake only.

Binoculars are as necessary as shotguns. Patience, as well as fortitude for full days of bouncing along unimproved mountain roads, is an asset. For those lacking altitude



The local market in Chivay is filled with interesting tastes and sights.

acclimatization, oxygen is always available. The locals swear by *mate de coca* to alleviate altitude sickness.

The month of April preceding my hunt was unusually rainy. Engorged with runoff, the Colca River was much wider than usual and unhuntable. We hunted aptly-named torrent ducks in its tributaries. Torrent ducks inhabit fast flowing waters where, aided by spur protuberances on the wings, they swim and dive with ease even in white water. Male torrent ducks have a striking black and white head and neck pattern, a red bill, and bright green speculum. With binoculars, we glassed streams from the bank high above the water where we

scrambled over stacked-stone fences and through hand-cultivated crops as we navigated ourselves to vantage points.

The stretch of stream we hunted will be bone dry by June, but during this Peru hunting trip, we glassed four torrent drakes and one hen. That was the easy part. As a male torrent duck made its way up the stream, diving under to feed and then subsequently resurfacing further upstream, we descended over 1,000 near-vertical feet to the stream's edge. Using large boulders and stream-side vegetation for cover, we carefully stalked upstream until we were in position. From a distance of 50 feet, I paused briefly to look



A pair of Andean geese



Puna Teal



Crested Duck

DUCK HUNTING

down the vent rib at what would soon become my torrent duck, the apex trophy duck species of Peru that, in the absence of waders and breath, I might only compare to sheep hunting. A single shot completed the mountain species portion of my Peru duck hunting adventure.

At the midpoint of its length, the Colca River dramatically defaces Andean rock into one of the deepest canyons in the world. But about 300 miles downstream from its beginning, it emerges as the Majes River onto a large alluvial floodplain and quietly empties into the Pacific Ocean. As viewed from above, in the shade of Incan colcas – ancient granaries chiseled into the hillside from which the river garners its name – local fishermen wading waist deep into the currents, plying their trades in its quiet, shallow water. Fertile farmland lies pinched between mountains and beach in a valley that is Peru's foremost



Ramsey Russell admires a prized pair of puna teal.

producer of rice. And home to the world's largest concentration of cinnamon teal.

Peru duck hunting the Pacific Coast is entirely about drawing flocks of eager, fast-flying ducks into the decoys, nearer to waiting guns. It's entirely about volume trigger pulling. Andean cinnamon teal, mostly, and the largest of the world's five known races of cinnamons, too, but white-cheeked and brown pintail are also commonly bagged.

After several days of spot-and-stalking Peru's trophy species in the Andes Mountains, collecting them with only one or two frugal shots per play, it was a welcomed change of pace. There was no hurry to beat sunrise. The teal were thirsty after foraging in brackish water and swarmed to fresh water after the sun came up. We were waiting. Walking easily to shooting stations on wide rice dikes, feeding low-brass ammo into unplugged guns and witnessing first-hand – while looking down a shotgun barrel: hundreds of red streaks and flickering blue-winged flashes rocketing low over bobbing decoys. At only 19 feet above sea level, it was yet another breathtaking Peru duck hunting experience. The liberal limit of 25 ducks per hunter passed way too quickly.

Local restaurants featured fresh seafood, which is always readily available. The afternoon activity was volume shooting for white-winged and mourning doves over grain fields, with 40 to 50 birds per gun experienced. That's a story for another time. I first need to catch my breath. *GT*

A graphic advertisement for Peru Duck Hunting. It features a central image of various ducks in a landscape with mountains. The text "PERU DUCK HUNTING" is prominently displayed at the top. Below the image, there is contact information for Ramsey Russell's GetDucks.com and a description of the hunting experience.

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