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Sixteen

Big-spread fowling on



Dozen

DOUG LARSEN

the Manitoba prairie

photographs by DUŠAN SMETANA





The author (left) tries luring in the birds, while Ramsey Russell's young Lab, Cooper, has her mouth full retrieving a big Canada.

I have reached the stage in life where I consider airlines suspect. Despite my continued lust to hunt ducks and geese as many days as possible and in as many places, I have reached the point where I must steel myself to the inevitable disappointment that comes with flying. So with this in mind, in late October I toted my belongings to the check-in counter of a major airline (the name rhymes with excited) at my local airport, where the representative informed me that I'd have to pay extra for my bag. I argued that my bag wasn't overweight. I wasn't carrying a pair of waders or boxes of shotgun shells; I simply had a medium-size duffel. The officious woman on the other side of the counter informed me that I wasn't paying for an overweight bag. I simply was paying for a bag. Luggage was charged separately. She swiped my card for the fee, pointed me toward the TSA workers who would take my gun case, and then informed me that my flight was delayed two hours due to a mechanical problem. I sulked through the terminal and waited to make my connection to Winnipeg.

Meanwhile my good friend and Southern gentleman Ramsey Russell, who I was to meet in Manitoba, was taking the Memphis airport by storm. There are two kinds of dog people: the dog-stays-home people and the dog-goes-everywhere people. I no longer fly with my dogs, due to the aforementioned

fact that I find airlines suspect. Ramsey does not share my view. For years he had a wonderful black Lab named Delta (named for the Mississippi Delta, not the airline) that flew everywhere with him. She is gone now, and a tiny new yellow Lab has taken her place. This was to be Cooper's first trip by air, and when I called Ramsey to tell him that I would be delayed, he related how he had just let Cooper out of her crate at check-in, and she had celebrated by hopping up on the counter and running in circles. According to Ramsey, this had been well received in the check-in area and had delighted everyone in line. His flight was on time.

Ramsey and I both had hunted with Kris Wujcik ("Woojik") for snow geese during the spring conservation season, but I had not hunted with him in the fall. Kris is a horse of a different color among Canadian outfitters, because he didn't grow up in Canada. He grew up guiding in Michigan and cut his teeth on tough public-land ducks and geese in pressured areas. As a young man, he took a shooting holiday to the Dakotas in search of ducks and geese. Not finding the pure prairie-shooting experience there, he looked to Manitoba in the late 1990s. Long story short, Kris shuttled back and forth to Manitoba for several years after meeting the love of his life there. He finally tired of being lovesick and duck sick, threw a ring on his lady's finger, and nailed



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SIXTEEN DOZEN

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up his guiding shingle in Canada. This is an important part of the story and an important part of Kris's success. I have hunted across Canada many times, and while the country is full of good outfitters, many grew up there in the good old days when birds were plentiful and pressure was light. The collective attitude seems to be that when the birds are good, they are good, and when they are not, then it is simply a tough day. Many outfitters have outdated attitudes, approaches and equipment. Twenty-five-year-old Canada goose shells and pieces of torn-up roofing paper scattered about to resemble feeding mallards might have worked "back in the day," but these days the ducks and geese being hunted are birds that have been getting pressured up and down North America for more than 15 years of liberal seasons. With the exception of young birds, you need to have your act together to be successful. Kris has his act together.

We eventually made it to Winnipeg and drove several hours to camp, and after dinner we settled into Kris's lodge on the bank of a shimmering lake with a promise that the guide would be on the doorstep at 5 AM for coffee. When my alarm went off at 5, Kris was already in the kitchen on his second cup. He handed me a GPS unit and instructed me to put it in my truck and follow the directions to the field. He said it was a six-minute drive, and I was to bring Ramsey and the dog and

be there in a half-hour. He was going ahead with a helper and a trailer full of blinds and decoys. I offered to help with the decoys, but Kris said that he preferred setting things out the way he wanted. Out of curiosity, I asked how big a spread he'd be using. "About sixteen dozen," he replied.

The lights of my truck swung across the stubble of a vast cut barley field as I turned into the approach and saw Kris's trailer in the distance. He had the full-body decoys mostly ready, and he put our layout blinds adjacent to the spread and in front of a truck-body-size pile of lichen-stained boulders. We were all tucked in just before the appointed shooting hour. There was not a breath of wind, and the green moon was brighter than we'd hoped for. As a sliver of orange light appeared in the east, about eight mallards parachuted out of the dark and landed just beyond the layouts. They looked about nervously before leaving, and Ramsey attributed their hasty departure to the fact that they'd smelled my aftershave. They certainly had been close enough to get a whiff, and before I could offer a

witty retort, there were 30 more mallards hanging in front of us and Kris was hissing, "Freeze."

By the time I processed the instructions, Kris said, "Let's get these!" I threw open my blind doors and sat up to find a mallard on my side of the spread. Ramsey already had dropped a duck in the center of the rig. I shot a towering greenhead as Ramsey took a second, and then the birds were gone.

Cooper canvased the stubble and raced to Ramsey's side with dead ducks as Kris looked skyward and I reloaded. Kris explained that a large concentration of mallards were roosting a mile away on a large lake and that they were shuttling out into the barley field. He'd seen them sitting in this exact spot the night before. Despite the fact that the field was at least a mile across, he'd been confident we were in the right spot, as he'd seen the bulk of the ducks near our rock pile. Because the moon was still large, many of the ducks were heading toward the water rather than away from it. Even in Canada the ducks will feed at night with a big moon, and that can lower the number of ducks



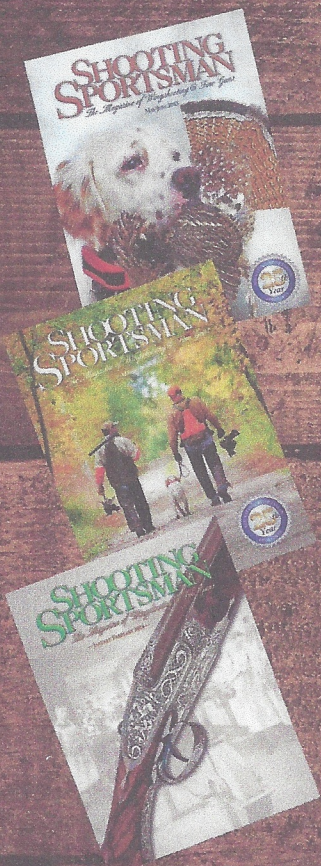
Proof that scouting pays. From left: the author, Ramsey Russell, Cooper the Lab, and guide Kris Wujcik.

that are anxious for a morning feed. We had several large flocks of mallards work high over us, but even with the massive decoy spread, the lack of movement made the decoys appear less than alive. We sat and watched the morning pass on the Manitoba prairie.

As the sun continued to rise, the ground began to warm; and as the ground warmed, the wind began to blow. By 8:15 the decoys were turning and bobbing, giving the spread movement. The next flock of mallards that approached was about 40 strong, and the first 10—led by an old hen that quacked and chuckled the whole way—absolutely fell into the decoys. The remaining 30 made a downwind swing, and when they started to backpedal on top of us, Kris called the shot. For a few seconds it was chaos over the decoys as ducks attempted to climb out while others were trying to land. Ramsey and I both shot well, and Cooper toted back greenhead after greenhead. Two more flocks visited before 9 AM, and we had our mallards. Even for jaded old puddle-duck hunters, it had been a terrific morning.

You'd think that a great mallard hunt would be sufficient

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action for a morning, but as my empty stomach growled, I looked over to see Kris gnawing the end of a granola bar. I've hunted long enough to know that if the guide is eating, you aren't leaving anytime soon. As the mallards stopped flying, flocks of Greater and Lesser Canadas began to crisscross the broad skies, leaving their roosts. We decoyed singles, pairs and small groups. Most of the Greaters decoyed like heavy jets angling into an airport, and the shots were often easy. Little Cooper struggled but was able to drag each goose back through the stubble like a small woman with a large suitcase.

While the big geese were receptive to our monster spread and Kris's calling, the larger flocks of Lesser Canadas were really tough. These birds typically move in flocks of 75 to 300 geese, and they seem to exhibit a snow-goose-like aversion to decoys. Lesser Canadas are everywhere, but they are well on their way to becoming un-huntable—and they have Kris pulling his hair out. There is a lesson here someplace about hunting pressure and season lengths . . .

Ramsey and I stopped on the honk-

MANITOBA BOUND

Hunters fly into Winnipeg, Manitoba, the day preceding their hunt, rent a car and drive about three hours to camp. They depart the morning after their final day of hunting. Full-package guests enjoy accommodations in a modern log cabin, meals, guided hunting, ammunition, licenses and bird processing. A popular no-meals plan includes lodging and guided hunts only.

The season begins in late September and runs through the first week of November. The standard program is honkers in the morning and greenheads in the afternoon, with trophy trout fishing available right behind camp. Manitoba allows electronic callers with mixed decoy spreads for snow geese during the fall season.

For more information on this and other waterfowl and upland hunts, contact Ramsey Russell at GetDucks.com, 866-438-3897; www.GetDucks.com. —D.L.

ers after we killed seven or eight. We enjoyed the experience but felt that we had gotten plenty of action with the mallards. By the time we helped pack up the decoys and returned to the lodge, Kris's staff had a great lunch waiting.

I had threatened to go straight to the lake for some trout fishing after lunch, but by the time I was ready the wind had built to a veritable gale, and the lure of a book and a nap kept me on the couch for the afternoon.


The days that followed featured more of the same: an almost idyllic schedule coupled with a great resource and great hosts. We enjoyed the same kind of shooting in similar locations. Kris would scout and tell us where to be, and we would show up to watch mallards swirl into the cut barley just like they do in old Les Kouba paintings. I did a bit of trout fishing on the lake in front of the lodge, and that was a definite bonus. Solid mallard hunting and trout fishing made the hassles of travel worthwhile.

Light snow and skeins of Canada geese were visible through the windshield as I drove back to Winnipeg in my rental vehicle. I was keeping a close eye on the time, as I had to return the car and check in at the airport. I was later than I'd wanted to be when I landed at the back of the check-in line, and after waiting some time I heard the gate agent say, "Next."

Only then did I find out that my flight had been cancelled. With limited connection options, I had no choice but to remain in the Winnipeg airport for six hours. Then the agent added, "By the way, I'll need to charge you for your bag."

They are all suspect. I stuffed my luggage-claim ticket into my breast pocket and wandered off to find the coffee shop. ✈

A product of the prairie pothole region, Doug Larsen has been waterfowl hunting for more than 40 years. He has authored two books and countless articles on duck and goose hunting, and his work appears regularly in Ducks Unlimited Magazine and Retriever Journal. He also is the waterfowl host of the new "Remington Country" TV show. Larsen and his family live in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, with a Labrador puppy that is chewing on all of their belongings.



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