

Where The River Narrows

By Ramsey Russell

Trying to convince myself I'd rather be elsewhere was futile. I'd rather be mowing the lawn. No. I'd rather be at the office. Nope. I'd rather be painting the front porch. Not happening. Duck season ended months ago and little league baseball was underway. But even with rivulets of icy rainwater occasionally breaching a cinched collar and winding down my back, there was absolutely nowhere I'd rather have been than hunting snow geese adjacent to the mighty St. Lawrence River in Quebec.

For a six week period beginning in mid April and lasting through late May, practically the entire world population of greater snow geese streams through the narrow St. Lawrence River valley during their northbound migration to their arctic breeding grounds. The South has already become ensconced in pre-summer swelter. The preceding week's snow here may have pushed most geese an hour south, as explained by host Luc Lapierre of Kennebec Outfitters, but it was a welcomed reprieve from honey-dos back home. Hunting's like that.

Long hunted in parts of Texas and Louisiana, snow goose hunting became mainstream during the late 90s when the mid-continental population of lesser snow geese grew to epic proportions. Consequently, their breeding grounds on the fragile arctic tundra began to show signs of irreparable damage. Extremely liberal limits for hunters have since abated continued growth of snow goose populations and provided hunters with shooting opportunities that extend late into the spring months.

Greater snow geese differ from their counterparts, the lesser snow geese; "greater" are one-third or more again the size. They're huge. The northernmost breeding goose species in the world, they stage in the fall primarily in Quebec and overwinter along the mid-Atlantic seaboard. Blue-morph greater snow geese are extremely rare—some biologists say they don't even exist—and this rare color phase is coveted by hunters far more so than bands and collars. Gregarious and wary, like snow geese everywhere, they are nonetheless comparably docile. Experienced snow goose hunters marvel at how well greater snow geese consistently decoy closely when the day



Greater snows joining their counterparts near the St. Lawrence.

and conditions are right.

Greater snow geese have been long a favored staple of French-Canadians. After Samuel de Champlain founded the city of Quebec, which literally translates as "where the river narrows" and is among the oldest European settlements in North America, a second settlement, St. Joachim, was soon established just to the north to provide the growing city's inhabitants with food. The area was rich in game, particularly in geese, which are synonymous with

Quebec's long-standing hunting traditions.

By the early 1900s, the greater snow goose population had become depleted, dwindling to as few as 3,000 geese. Protective measures included creating the Cap Tourmente National Wildlife Refuge and enforcing hunting regulations. The population has rebounded to about one million greater snow geese that, like threading a needle, migrate through the area in great numbers twice annually.

The Canadian snow goose limit is a liberal 20 daily but as savvy hunters know, this in no way abates the coefficient of difficulty for hunting snow geese. Weather and migration timing are fundamental to successful snow goose hunting anywhere, but when hunting greater along the mighty St. Lawrence River, tidal fluctuations are absolutely critical. It can be a real deal breaker. Greater snow geese feed primarily on rhizomes along the muddy riverbank where they can be seen stretching for miles at low tide. During high tide, which can surge as much as 20 feet, geese are driven from the riverbed into adjacent fields. They are most active at peak high tide, and as the tide recedes they resume grubbing up to their necks in the iron-rich mud that casts a roux-colored stain on their plumage.

Hunting greater snow geese in Quebec involves various hunting techniques to include decoying birds in fields and along the water's edge, as well as pass shooting lowflying geese that trade along the water's edge. A gentleman's hunt as compared to wallowing all day in muddy fields back home, Quebec custom calls for short, easy walks and cabins kept warm with potbellied stoves stoked with wood during inclement weather or while awaiting a falling tide.

Unlike western Canada, Quebec consists entirely of leased

private property; some of the best blind locations are generations old. Newly arrived birds are the essence of good shooting and it's not uncommon to see the density nearly double during a three-day hunting period when the migration peaks. At the better camps, hunters enjoy an 11-geese per hunter daily average, which, while considerably lower than the occasionally epic upside of high-volume shoots in the Mississippi and Central flyways, is superior to seasonal daily averages for many lesser snow goose hunts.

Hunting trips to Canada can be daunting at mealtime—great food being one of Quebec's fine pleasures. Around the table may be genial guest hunters from the U.S., France and Italy. All politics and accents aside, it's all about a shared passion for waterfowling. In keeping with French-Canadian hunting camp traditions, menus may include moose, winterkilled caribou and, always the crowd pleaser, greater snow goose. In the name of manners, guests resist licking the plate, but I would if no one were looking.

Back on our hunting grounds, playing over the loud speakers were the melodic cries of certain greater snow geese, recorded nearby specifically for the purpose of spring hunting. Between guttural feed chuckles—with a French dialect it had been jokingly stated earlier—and weather related flight delays I was on the brink of a major catnap when I heard guide Martin Poisson suddenly and urgently hiss, "Get ready! Out front! Snow geese!" I opened my eyes. Like watching a dream unfold in slow motion, a pair of snows, their wings locked, swung off the river and towards the plastic imposters. They slid slowly into the decoys, looking larger than life against the cloudy sky. Big as billboards. Two shots from the other side of the spread sounded like claps, and the two geese simultaneously hit the ground with soft thumps.

Yes. Summer can definitely wait. There's snow where the river narrows.

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