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MEXICAN revolution





The original North American wingshooting dream destination is back

BY SKIP KNOWLES

WHILE NOT A TOTAL MEXICAN standoff, Americans at least have been stand-offish about heading south of the border to enjoy what was for decades prior North America's great fair-weather wingshooting escape.

And that's too bad. Mexico has everything going for it. Argentina-style shooting at far less flight time and expense, and the weather we all dream of escaping to at the same time

our sordid, soul-sucking late winter is lingering in the States (whereas in Argentina, winter duck hunting occurs in our summer).

But the murderous border wars between drug lords created too much fear over the past decade or so, and Gringo traffic to pursue the great numbers of deer, dove, and waterfowl slowed to a crawl, along with the famous bass and deep-sea fishing. Travel bureaus

claimed the major tourist cities safe, but not the backcountry, and even so, reports would filter down about a kidnapping in Cancun or a shootout in Mazatlan.

So I'd sure been hesitant to sign on for a trip to Mexico, and these things weighed on me, but my lust for a black brant hunt got the better of me. Despite hunting all over the continents, I hadn't even seen a brant in years, and the idea of hunting Pacific black brant right on the Sea of Cortés across from Baja in late winter was more than I could stand. I had to go. Booking agent Ramsey Russell assured me if you were not looking for trouble or trying to relive *The Hangover* and stuck to the areas you were supposed to go with the people you were supposed to be there with, there would be no unwanted trouble.

Now it was late February, I was on my way, and my flight was canceled due to yet another Illinois blizzard in the never-ending polar vortex. Worse, Ramsey was starting in with the shoulda-been-here-yesterday stories on the phone, padding my expectations after a year of hype. He cited clouds of ducks, and eight banded brant falling in just one shoot the week prior to my arrival... *prior*. But now the weather had turned, he reported, and it had grown unseasonably hot in Hermasillo and Obregon in the state of Sonora, and I

was already rolling my eyes. Blaming a heat wave? If heat hurts your hunt in Mexico you have a problem. Stuck in the Illinois blizzard, the idea of a sub-tropical heat wave only made a frozen drink sound better.

I re-booked a flight for the next day, and that was the end of all stress for the next week. The flight from Dallas into Hermasillo was casual and low-key, and getting my shotgun through customs was no big deal. Nobody asked for bribes, and from start to finish I never felt uncomfortable or met a menacing glare.

Big, gregarious, Frank Ruiz has outfitted out of Obregon for decades. A half-dozen American hunters were already in camp when we arrived, greeted by Frank with cold drinks from his sharp-dressed staff. Inside, the place is a hunter's palace, a veritable natural history museum of birds and animal heads, all magnificent specimens, the result of Frank's globetrotting outdoor enthusiasm.

DUCK HUNTING, BUT WARMER

At dawn, the airboats lined out in the humid darkness, humming toward a tidal marsh of vast deep grasses that looked like the Everglades as we twisted our way through trails and over bushy obstacles. The marsh here is green and breathes saltwater in on the flood tide and exhales water so fresh on the ebb

tide that cows appear from cover and drink from it.

Wings slit the air. A flicker of motion from the right sped into the dekes and I reflexively slap-shot the teal without thinking. Which was good, because if I'd known exactly what it was I'd have





probably frozen up and missed, if I even found my safety. A fully-plumed, later-than-late season drake cinnamon teal came to hand, my first ever, and my first bird in Mexico, ever.

A dawn flurry gave way to an hour of quiet, and with eight or so ducks down it was a nice start for me and Ramsey, but not the kind of hunt for which Mexico is known. The winds shifted slightly, and once it turned on the action was dirty-good. Soon, I was digging for more shells in my bucket seat and I hear Ramsey say, "OK, OK, some from the left now... more still coming from straight out, straight out. Three more. Oh, here's more from the right...and some from behind..."

Bewildered now at trying to mentally track the action, I looked up to see he pretty much had been spot on: We had different groups working on every side and still more circling.

Glorious late winter shovelers in full tuxedo mode were stunning in the Sonoran sun, only outshined by bands of pintail with long quills flowing off their backsides. Teal of three types

were a constant challenge, and we had chances at a gorgeous trophy subspecies—Mexican mallards. Rounding things out were a few other favorites of mine in the loveliest plumage I had ever witnessed them, gorgeous gaddies with white blazes and auburn accents, and the odd bluebill zipping through the mix, always in a hurry. Thirty-something ducks fell to our shots; an epic day without seeming like overdoing it. Back at the ramp, we saw other groups shot far more birds, but well within the law. Regional allocations are awarded to guides to act as their limits, and in this case it was the last week, so if your outfitter has not "tagged out" so to speak, if you are in the last groups, you can make it rain.

Light jackets in the mornings and we were down to shorts by 8 a.m. I thought of the blizzard back home and it was hard to believe. I was so giddy over the cinnamon teal I couldn't stop grinning. The only thing I wanted worse was a brant.

Back at "camp," we were soon chomping on the kind of hors d'oeuvres that make it really tough to not over-do it before the authentic barbacoa chicken and steaks came, and I began a true daytime appreciation tour of the lodge. The service at Gabino's was the best I've ever had in the hunting world, with a cold drink always waiting when you arrive back at the lodge, the guys whisking your gear away and your guns appearing the next day sparkling clean inside and out. I found an extreme cold threat actually did exist in Sonora—if you drank a frozen beverage too fast you'd get a nasty headache.

BLACK MAGIC

I could see it all in my head. The brant would come in low on the deck and in small numbers, pounding heavily across the water with straight steady wingbeats like big black eiders, I imagined, in that heavy one-dimensional sea duck style of flight. They would probably flare like eiders or long-tails too, skirting an obvious blind at 40 yards, never to turn back.

And that would be fine. I'm an ocean

freak anyway and would be happy if I could scratch one down and smell and hear the sea, and just seeing fish jumping all around the boat as we motored to the blind made me happy.

Imagine my waterfowler's delight when I saw I was dead wrong. Brant are in fact these magic birds that came in sneakily off the open sea to our stand-up blind on the sand bars at the back of a huge bay, and often in flocks of dozens. Dancing in over the dunes from over a mile away, they appear to have a visible joy in their flight as they loft about, swooping downward then lifting up hundreds of feet in the air, very light in their motion, not heavy and steady at all. Then here they come again, before whirring in another direction to make you panic, before settling out and zooming straight in and finishing right in your lap, feet-down right smack in the dekes.

The two of us flagged with our hats and grunted like divers with our mallard calls, as with each approach they slowly faked left and right. Somehow they whirl and spin, despite having a relatively large body (about like a snow



with Ramzilla because cameras were rolling (for *World of Beretta*). Besides, the guy with the dog wins that argument, anyway. Ramsey added two more to his long string of bands from the week before, and that was the only banded brant any guy in camp saw of the dozens shot on my trip. You can

The winds shifted slightly, and once it turned on the action was dirty-good.

goose) connected to rather diminutive, pointy, wings that would appear to lack the surface area needed to make them fly so effortlessly.

The first group of 10 or so came in and veered, and we let them go at 35 yards. I was sick. What if that was our only shot? Anxious, Ramsey ran out and made a hole in the middle of our large blob of brant decoys, while I yammered at the guides in my terrible Spanish to leave the spread alone as they boated over to repair the hole we created in the blob. Seriously. Twice.

The hole worked like magic. The next two birds snuck right in on us while we chatted. I called left bird, and they crossed right at the finish as we shot. Both dropped at the shots and I swatted the left side bird as it tried to keep going. The right bird proved to be double-banded, and I couldn't argue

get into bands big-time with brant, but it's always hit or miss. But that was another wild thing about this trip: Ramsey's dog. I did not expect to come and hunt over an awesome retriever from the States, but his killer yellow Lab Cooper made the flight. "Just paperwork, man, preparation. No big deal," he said.

Pelicans sometimes made us eager with their size at great distance, but then you'd see the flap-flap-glide, flap-flap-gli-i-i-i-ide and know they weren't brant. We had some brant flare and not come, but action was steady and just the two of us cut eight from one flock. At 18 total, I called it, because to me they are such a cool species, I felt like I'd just shot a dozen deer, and was unsure of total populations. I later learned there are upwards of 150,000 in the Pacific flyway, and they are widely

considered under-counted in the aerial counts at Izembek Lagoon in Alaska, where many stop on the migration to gorge on eel grass. The minuscule number of hunters that visit Mexico surely have minuscule impact.

Always a fan of the pintail over the garish wood duck, I found the handsome brant, in all his dark mystery, with that lovely white collar and chestnut brown against black and white, to be the absolute embodiment of understated elegance. Combined with the love of the ocean so many of us have, they are a profoundly beautiful and evocative bird...as well as fabulous eating.

What I can say about Mexico is that I simply can't wait to go back, and that I deeply enjoyed this relaxing trip. Escaping the bitter northern winter to bag bucket-list birds under warm skies in late February was purely sublime. On day three, taking a break from waterfowl to shoot a hundred gorgeous white-wing doves in an hour was none too shabby, either, though the 40-plus yard shots humbled my wingshooting.

That first cinnamon teal was like a ghost from a fantasy, and those undulating lines of brant working inward toward our dekes are seared in my brain forever, locked in with all the good stuff nobody can ever take away from you.

To book this trip go to www.getducks.com, or call Ramsey Russell at (601) 214-9737. To watch the hunt go to www.thesportsmanchannel.com and check scheduling for *World of Beretta* starting in June.