There’s thousands of birds. So many we usually limit out by noon.”
“I can’t stand cold weather,” I countered. “You know that.”
“It’s warm. Lows in the 50s. By afternoon it’s up to the mid-70s. Sometimes 80s.”
I paused for a moment, and then remembered that Mark had lied to me before. Many times before.

“I don’t know. I…”
“The place used to be called the Bay of 11,000 Virgins.”
“Go on.”
“The lodge where we’ll be staying, Grizzly Adams used to stay there. A lot.”
“Dan Haggerty: Grizzly Adams?”
“Yeah.”
“Oh, I’m there.”

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GAYNE C. YOUNG

Baja Black Brant
Mexico’s Bay of 11,000 Virgins brims with birds
Although I’ve been an outdoor writer for going on two decades, this would be my first-ever waterfowl hunt. My aversion to the cold, being wet and cold, and getting up early only to become wet and cold has kept me from the sport in the past. Knowing this, my friend Mark Buchanan of Big Bore Productions took it upon himself to somehow bring me into the fold of waterfowl hunters. This hunt for black brant in San Quintín, Baja California, Mexico, would be my introduction.

DOWN BY THE BAY

The seductive moniker of Bahía de las 11,000 Virgenes — the Bay of 11,000 Virgins — was given in honor of Saint Ursula by Portuguese explorer Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo in 1542. In 1602, Spaniard Sebastian Vizcaíno renamed the bay San Quintín in honor of Saint-Quentin, whose feast day fell on the date of discovery.

Although I was offered no proof the former name was accurate (I encountered less than 40 people on my visit, all of them male), I prefer it over the current one. I just like the way it rolls off my tongue.

My sojourn to the bay began at the San Diego Airport when I met Buchanan. From there, we drove into Mexico and along the Transpeninsular Highway to the quiet fishing village of San Quintin. There, we were met at the hotel by Baja Hunting owner/operator Arturo Malo. When we registered I learned that, alas, Grizzly Adams was not there.

The bay itself is reasonably small, about 30 square miles, but perfectly suited for black brant. Shallow waters blanketed with dense beds of eelgrass stand protected from harsh winds by surrounding ancient volcanic cones. In addition to eelgrass, the waters are teeming with fish such as cod, mackerel, groupers, dorado and giant black bass. Gray whales, porpoises and seals, which are locally known as sea wolves, also call the bay home.

WATERFOWL INFLUX

The hunt began the next morning with a bang on the door at 5 a.m. with an offering of fresh fruit and coffee. By 5:30 a.m., we were divided into Panga boats for the short jaunt across the bay to our blinds. Buchanan, his 2-year-old son Carson — to my friend Mark Buchanan of Big Bore Productions took it upon himself to somehow bring me into the fold of waterfowl hunters. This hunt for black brant in San Quintín, Baja California, Mexico, would be my introduction.

The Bay in San Quintín, Baja California, Mexico, harbors dense eelgrass shielded by volcanic cones, making it prime winter brant habitat.

The first to appear was a lone brant that flew in straight and hard. As this was my first goose hunt, I looked to Buchanan for instruction. His scream of “Shoot it!” got me off to a great, albeit, shaky start. Somehow, my first shot was true, and the bird spiraled downward behind the screen. Within minutes, the sky was alive with knots of brant, their coal-black heads and necks glistering like wet ebony. They circled the decoys in groups as small as two and three to as large as 20.

In the distance flew even larger chevrons of brant, portions of the sky black with their movement. Not only were the brant moving, but so were pelicans, gulls, curlew and other assorted shore birds. Wigeon, teal and pintails, all seemingly aware that they missed). During the melee, Buchanan even managed to take a banded bird that flew in straight and hard. As this was my first goose hunt, I looked to Buchanan for instruction. His scream of “Shoot it!” got me off to a great, albeit, shaky start. Somehow, my first shot was true, and the bird spiraled downward behind the screen. Within minutes, the sky was alive with knots of brant, their coal-black heads and necks glistering like wet ebony. They circled the decoys in groups as small as two and three to as large as 20.

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In less than two-and-a-half hours, Buchanan and I took more than half of our limits and missed at least that many (well, maybe it was just me who missed). During the melee, Buchanan even managed to take a banded bird that flew in straight and hard. As this was my first goose hunt, I looked to Buchanan for instruction. His scream of “Shoot it!” got me off to a great, albeit, shaky start. Somehow, my first shot was true, and the bird spiraled downward behind the screen. Within minutes, the sky was alive with knots of brant, their coal-black heads and necks glistering like wet ebony. They circled the decoys in groups as small as two and three to as large as 20.

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of which were banded. Although I was excited about the bands, it wasn’t until Sergio picked us up that I learned how rare one of them was.

“You get red!” Sergio shouted in broken English disbelief. “Russia! I not to see in eight year!”

“So I did good?” I jokingly asked.


“They see more birds?” I asked, not really believing that they could.

“They shoot brant more good!” Sergio laughed.

That night, the guides grilled brant, freshly caught fish and dozens of oysters from an oyster farm at the other end of the bay. We binged on food and drink before retiring to the bayside dock for cigars and talk of the day’s hunt. And judging by the stories of Cassidy and Sanders, they did “shoot brant more good.”

RISING TIDE

Morning found the next day foggy and at least 10 degrees colder than it had been the day before. I put on every stitch of clothing I owned and headed out to brave the lower 50s temperature (I told you I hate cold weather). The blind assignment was reversed for our second day of hunting, with Buchanan, Carson and me taking blind No. 2. In addition to the blind change and different weather conditions, we would also face a different tide, as it would be high tide less than an hour after we situated ourselves. From what I could tell, the only effect the tide had on the hunting was a positive one.

We saw two or three times as many birds as the day before. Plumps of brant swarmed in from all directions toward our decoys. Brant were so plentiful that I could relax and take my time with almost every shot—a luxury on any bird hunt. The bay before us came alive with a small pod of gray whales, the sound of their thundering blowholes sending Carson into full-blown confusion.

“I hope he doesn’t think that’s a bird hitting the water,” Buchanan worried aloud. “That’s the last thing I need: Carson trying to retrieve a whale.” Fortunately, Carson never went after a whale. Either he knew it wasn’t a brant, or he was too chicken to try to take on a whale.

By 9:30 a.m., our hunt ended. We had limited out with 10 brant apiece. Back at the hotel we learned that, again, our three friends had gotten their limit long before we had. Whether the reason was superior shooting or the fact they saw more birds, I’m not sure. But I am sure my first waterfowl hunt won’t be my last. I had a great time, it wasn’t too cold and the birds were more plentiful than pigeons in a park.

Gayne Young stays warm at home in Fredericksburg, Texas.