

Life's Short - Get Ducks

By Ramsey Russell



T *The most definitive days in life start like any other. One minute it's life like you've always known it and then – boom – in the blink of an eye it's forever altered.*



Two weeks before my sixteenth birthday, on a beautiful mid-May afternoon that smelled like fresh-cut lawn, I was involved in a home explosion. After painting doors that had been scratched to smithereens with the feverish zeal of a beloved springer spaniel, I was cleaning brushes in the storage room when fumes ignited. It blew the wall of the storeroom into the garage, melting fishing rods and plastic baits along with other cherished belongings.

A crowd of friends and neighbors gathered in the driveway during the centuries-long moments preceding the ambulance's arrival. The looks on their faces revealed a grisly reality to which I was then oblivious. On the way to the emergency room, I remember worrying Momma about my missing a work-shift busing tables.

They said I died that night but was resuscitated. Probability of mortality was an estimated 92%. They told my parents I'd likely lose my right arm and both legs if I even lived.

Six months later I left a Shriner's burn unit in Galveston, Texas, in a wheel chair and bandaged head to toe like a mummy. By God's grace, all limbs remained intact. The surreal horrors of burn units are best buried with time and forgotten.

The unavoidable long row to hoe stretched several years into the future, to include outpatient rehab and countless surgeries. Actual recovery involved physical, mental and spiritual trials. An eventual realization that everyone goes through difficult challenges, that everyone has scars and that those on the outside are just more conspicuous, helped my forward movement. Scars are just an honest reminder that wounds heal.

That Labor Day spent in the burn center was life-defining. Since I'd been old enough to race his retrievers towards felled birds, that weekend had always been spent hunting doves with my grandfather. Those innocent times were lost forever. Loved ones die, favorite dogs run away, but I made a promise to myself that I wouldn't miss another opening weekend. In hard times, these kinds of self-commitments are real motivation. Though worse for wear, I still had a trigger-pulling finger. Weather and bird reports be damned - I haven't missed a dove opener since. Three decades later, it's easy to see where that self-promise was only a beginning.

A reconnection with my delta duck hunting roots happened years later while working as a co-op student biologist in South Texas. As explained by a classmate while dissecting earthworms at Mississippi State, there was a big ranch hiring student technicians to shoot deer down by the Mexico border. Sign me up! For a whopping \$500 per month, there was a lot of grunt labor involved, but deer and hog removal efforts were earnest. We shot them like they'd hurt our mommas; reloading ammo became a popular pastime. But a funny thing happened. Every time we dropped a disc to plow food plots, the doves swarmed. Five years of above-average growing season precipitation had produced copious bobwhite and scaled quail coveys. Every time the wind blew from the north, new ducks covered the stock tanks. Deer became part of the job; wingshooting made my heart skip beats like a sweaty-palmed teenager at his first dance.

High school years spent reading *Field & Stream* in study hall (some called it detention) had crafted fascination for snow goose hunting, particularly on Texas' coastal prairies. Migrating snows migrated over Greenville, Mississippi, on frosty, childhood mornings but I'd never seen one up close.

The first trip during grad school was a friend of friend kind of deal. It was magical - noisy flocks of snows, blues and specks came off the roost and appeared through dense fog, paddles down over the decoys and at the ends of our gun barrels. That it was duck season somewhere else than Mississippi opened a world of possibilities limited only by the obligations of a new career, a growing family, money, and imagination.

My first Canada waterfowling trip was an unmitigated disaster. Anyone that's travel hunted has been there - nothing's as it was described, the best meal of the week is boiled steak, the guides are lazy inebriants, and the long-awaited trip of a lifetime amounts only to time and money wasted. I drew mine right out of the gate, but it was an epiphany. The next one was taken after due diligence (the outfitter later described the pre-booking interview as a cross between rubber-hose interrogation, an IRS audit and proctologic exam). Giant Canada geese and mallards decoying in Alberta pea fields, months before the Mississippi season opened - for what more could one ask? Impressed with the growing number of acquaintances that subsequently joined us, and saying his staff appreciated that those hunters were excellently prepared, the outfitter asked over cold beers one night that I become his "booking agent." While years more were spent in federal government career, that one conversation set my life on a new trajectory.

GetDucks.com has existed more than a decade as a hunting adventure agency dedicated to worldwide wingshooting. Forget the old black and white photos; the good old days are now. It's duck season somewhere 365 days per year and modern travel delivers hunters to prime hunting locations overnight. The grandfather that introduced me into hunting on a dusty dove field could not have imagined. In Argentina and Uruguay, we've



developed GetDucks.com-exclusive duck-only or duck hunting combos based on extensive knowledge of US client preferences. The list goes on to include several Canadian provinces, Mexico, South Africa, New Zealand, and Russia. All hunts are personally visited and we're still scouring the world's wetlands to find yet-discovered destinations. The cultural backdrops of hunting styles, foods, and scenery comprise a very big - of these experiences.

Netherlands is the latest venue. This year's guests will be among the first US hunters in generations to hunt there. Hunted strictly under depredation permits on private properties managed under long-term lease agreements, guests will hunt an impressive list of waterfowl species with liberal bags and year-round opportunities. The irony is that this biological tsunami of waterfowl is the result of decades long anti-hunting policy. We're developing other locations around the world, but as hard as it is for me to keep a secret, we'll not disclosing them until the right time.

Our brand favors superior hunting adventures over "high-thread count and haughty wine list" amenities, but sometimes the two coexist perfectly. There's no place like home either. There are 32 species plus subspecies of waterfowl right here in the United States, and the regional diversity of hunting styles are enviable relative to elsewhere. Our phones ring for credible referral to everything from sandhill cranes to tundra swans to flooded timber mallards. Last year we rolled out the US Hunt List (ushuntlist.com) as a subdirectory of GetDucks.com. There, hunters can book trips directly with proven, reputable affiliates. We spent the last 10-plus years bringing the world's best ducks hunts to the US and now we're showcasing US hunts to the world. The next great hunt may be much closer than you think.

The many clients I've come to know over the years, their stories, experiences, and friendships have been a rewarding part of GetDucks.com and of my life experience, itself. Many overcame very difficult obstacles in their own lives. Too many of them have now departed. I'm honored to have played a small role in some of the happier moments of their lives, which ensued in duck blinds around the world. Seeing their grins in time-tinged photographs reinforces the lesson learned many years ago, that life is a gift not a guarantee.

On a blustery January morning nearly 20 years later, I watched it snow from yet another hospital window. Mallards swarmed the decoys in my absence, but there was nowhere else I'd have rather been than with my wife during the birth of our third child, a beautiful daughter. My two sons and daughter never really stood a chance - they grew up duck hunting. We have our own traditions. Labor Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas break, along with every other opportunity, are spent at hunting camp. There's an unspoken truth I've tried to instill in them: Life's short. Get ducks.

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