

WATERFOWL SPECIAL

SHOOTING SPORTSMAN

The Magazine of Wingshooting & Fine Guns

— NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2015 —

6

'Working'
Over/Unders

**SECRETS TO
Retriever
Training**

Geese & Ducks In

- Alaska
- Canada
- Netherlands

NOVEMBER/
DECEMBER 2015

US \$6.99 / CANADA \$7.99

+ Benelli, Bosis & Boss



GOING DUTCH *for* GEESE

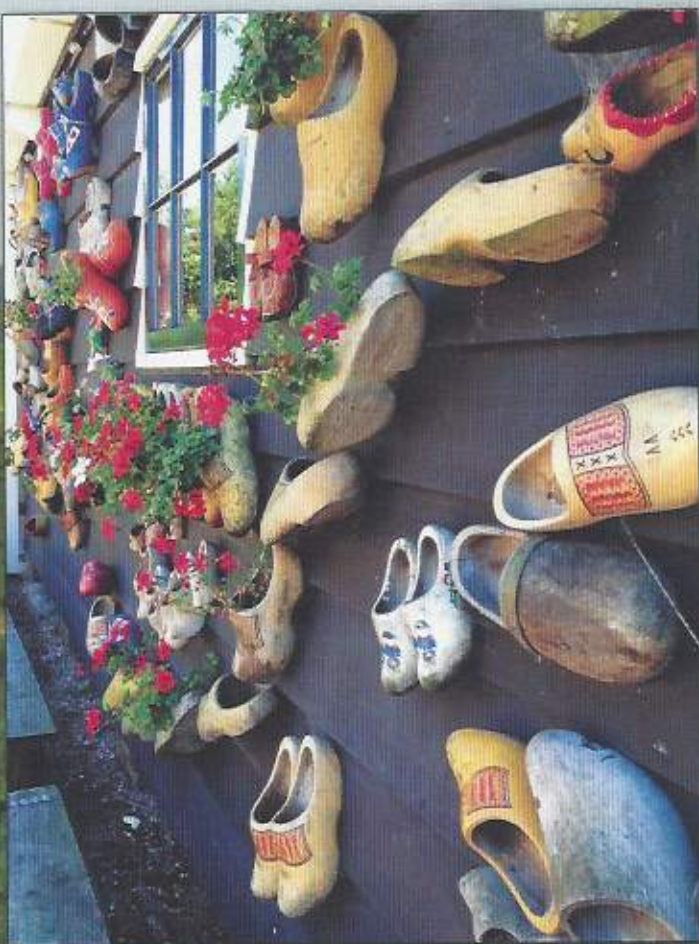
BRIAN LYNN

A BUCKET-LIST HUNT IN THE NETHERLANDS





The Netherlands' lush agricultural areas have provided a buffet for growing populations of geese. Now crop depredation and safety concerns have opened areas to regulated management, allowing local guides to offer hunting in a unique setting—with strong odds of collecting sought-after species like barnacle geese (above).



Hunkered down in the cattails—seated on a small stool with a blind bag full of boxes of steel shot at my feet—I felt like a kid again. The excitement of unknown possibilities that comes with hunting hung in the gray, overcast morning. The simple setup, which included a handful of decoys and a dog alongside a small canal with green cropfields on all sides, reminded me of some of the best hunts I'd enjoyed growing up.

Watching over a distant barn for incoming geese, I was alerted by my guide, Hans, to an approaching pair from the right. The birds stayed low, their wings beating slowly as they cruised over the canal right toward us. Outfitter Ramsey Russell and I mounted our shotguns and fired one shot each, and the gray birds dropped like stones into the canal.

Russell's yellow Lab, Cooper, made easy work of the double, and then settled back in beside her owner. Just another day in the life. And, indeed, the scene would have seemed routine had one not started looking closer at the birds and the surroundings.

The big gray geese, for example, were like nothing found in North America. And the plumb-straight canal was part of an extensive system that pulled double duty as drainage and field margins.



The reason for the differences was that this hunt took place in the Netherlands, a place where hunting is frowned upon but necessary (see sidebar, "A History of Hunting," p. 138). Famous for windmills, tulips and a history of maritime prowess and trade, the Netherlands today has become a crossroads where time, engineering, political progressiveness and wildlife management have intersected in some of the most unusual ways—and oftentimes in direct opposition to one another. In fact, we were one of the first groups of Americans allowed to hunt the country in more than 40 years.

European Fowling

The hunts themselves are distinctly European. They take place on depredation permits, so there are no limits for the waterfowl species that are open. When I was there in October, hunting for Eurasian wigeon was closed because only a few hundred thousand birds were in the northern part of the country. It was a bucket-list bird missed, for sure.

While there are no limits for certain species, this isn't like a South American high-volume hunt. It's more akin to a day of spring snow-



With waterfowling in the Netherlands based on depredation permits, there are no limits on the species in season, and some areas allow electronic calls, bait and even live decoys (above). As a result, bags can be mixed and large—on the scale of spring snow-goose hunting in the States.

goose hunting. A mixed bag will include geese (possibly barnacle, graylag, greater and lesser white-fronts, Canada, Egyptian and barheaded) and ducks (mallard, green-winged teal and wigeon). Mute swans and wood pigeons can be had as well.

Pass-shooting is common, especially in late summer and early fall, but Russell has worked to get full-body decoys and windssocks to his guides in an attempt to attract birds in a more North American approach. How the birds react is dependent upon the time of year, flock size and luck.

In the States reliable factors can funnel birds between feeding and watering areas, but in the Netherlands almost everything grown is edible to geese. Practically the entire country is a green pasture, and high-carbohydrate feed, such as corn and soybeans, is available too. Water literally lines every street, with canals running beside roads and the network of pumped water bisecting fields every couple of hundred yards, forming huge rectangles. (Barbed-wire fences are unknown here, as canals keep livestock on



individual properties.) Large reservoirs, rivers and the North Sea all provide sanctuary for waterfowl.

For these reasons decoying is hit or miss, and hunting is often more like gunning birds shifting between loafing and feeding areas in the States. Pass-shooting at 50-plus yards is common—and surprisingly effective, given the shells: 2³/₄" No. 3 steel (the largest shells and shot size allowed).

Because the country's problem is resident birds, depre-

dation permits are valid anytime except during the migration. Which means that hunting closes in almost all of the country from November 1 to March 1. The differences between hunting during the fall and spring seasons are the number of birds, flock sizes and quality of plumage.

Until the end of October, building numbers of birds present more opportunities and a greater variety of species. "In October," Russell said, "in addition to the hun-

Continued on page 136



GOING DUTCH FOR GEESE

Continued from page 79

dreds of thousands of barnacle geese, more and more birds are migrating in and the volume can get significant. If there's a fall storm up north in Friesland, you'll see wave after wave of birds coming off the big water."

Larger flocks mean more eyes inspecting the blind and spread and a greater chance of birds veering off for the next field. Mature birds abound at this time, but if you're looking for a wall mount, you'll have to look close, as during the early season more birds still sport pinfeathers. A day's harvest can range from a couple of dozen to more than 70 for two to four hunters.

The spring season offers mature breeding pairs and small flocks of uneducated juveniles. The older birds are tougher to decoy once they start nesting, but the juvies come willingly. The breeders are fully plumed and prime for collectors. This tends to be a more targeted hunt for trophies, and harvests typically top out at about 30 geese a day.

A River Hunt

Upon arriving in the Netherlands, Russell had arranged for us to participate in a rare river hunt. As with all types of hunting in the Netherlands, severe restrictions applied—with hunts being allowed only on certain days and for a specific number of days.

Our guide, Uretch, the depredation-permit holder tasked with killing 2,000 geese per year, met us at a wharf southwest of Rotterdam. Jumping into the bright aqua-colored 1960s boat, we traveled an arterial river that flowed directly into the North Sea.

As we cruised the river, Uretch kept an eye out for lounging waterfowl. When they were spotted, we motored in close under slow speed, Uretch killing the engine when the birds got nervous. As they'd lift, we'd shoot, and the black Lab would bail out and begin chasing downed birds.

An ill wind from the west-northwest had birds pushed onto protected areas on land with only scattered handfals remaining in shooting zones. Even for hunters tasked with killing thousands of resident birds, refuge areas exist

A HISTORY OF HUNTING

In the Netherlands, liberal even by European standards, animals receive political representation. The Party for Animals holds two seats in the House of Representatives, one in the Senate and one in the European Parliament. The Netherlands was also one of the first countries to turn animal-rights theories into working policy. In the late 1960s and early '70s, hunting was severely restricted or banned outright. And for decades afterward goose hunting was either strictly curtailed or prohibited.

With few natural predators and taking advantage of the perfect

habitat, goose populations exploded. Migrating geese started arriving sooner than normal and staying months longer. Eventually, large resident populations became established, and that's when the philosophies of the animal-rights movement met the realities of modern society.

For a small, densely populated country, the Netherlands is an agricultural juggernaut. It is the second-largest exporter of food and agricultural products in the world, trailing only the US. The moist, fertile soil and mild climate offer the perfect growing conditions for crops

of corn, soybeans and sugar beets. Green-grass pastures provide nutritious grazing for cattle and sheep.

The productive fields acted as a buffet for the growing—and problematic—resident-goose populations, which some estimates put at more than 800,000. Issues began arising, with depredation disbursements tripling and public-safety concerns growing regarding flights in and out of Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport. Eventually this led to the loosening of hunting regulations, and in 2014 Ramsey Russell began hiring resident guides and offering waterfowling trips. —B.L.

in hunting areas. Arbitrary lines designated a safety zone where no hunting was allowed. Of course, the ducks were stacked in the safety zone and rarely ventured out.

During the quick afternoon hunt, we boated 17 mallards and an Egyptian goose.

Barnacle Bonanza

Knowing that some members of our party were interested in trophies, Russell had set up a hunt on the second day for barnacle geese. This outing again took place southwest of Rotterdam, and first light revealed thousands of geese trading back and forth in all directions.

We sat in a simple wooden-frame box in a field-edge ditch, with thatched reeds tied to the container acting as our only camouflage. Flocks of graylags stayed high, at best circling once or twice before moving off. Guide Hans and his son, Jans, called to passing birds, trying to draw them into range. Barnacle geese came much more willingly to investigate the decoys. While none ever fully committed, they were curious enough to provide consistent shooting. Even in early October there were several adults with plumage suitable for taxidermy.

"There's nowhere better to go to shoot barnacle geese," Russell said. "So many of the people we talk to have gone to Iceland and not come back with their barnacle goose. In the Netherlands you're going to shoot your barnacle goose."

All told, our four-man party—consisting of myself, Russell, Derek Puckett from Mississippi and Sam Vanhook from Florida—managed 25 mature barnacle geese, two speckle-bellied geese, five mallards, two wood pigeons and a crow (a prime target in Europe, we were told).

The Airport Zone

With the public-safety threat that geese pose to flights from Schiphol, the area around the airport enjoys more lax hunting restrictions. Electronic calls, bait and even

live decoys are allowed.

For our first hunt in the airport zone, Hans, Russell and I hunkered down in cattails lining a canal bank. A couple of full-body decoys stood on the green grass across the canal from us, and two days earlier a pile of grain had been placed a hundred yards away in the canal. While geese can be baited, it is forbidden to take ducks over bait, so we kept our distance from the attractant. With so much food available, the grain didn't seem to have much effect on the birds, anyway.

Steady action on singles, doubles and small flocks of up to a half-dozen birds came continuously until about 11 AM, and we finished the morning with eight graylags and 18 greenheads. The other half of our party, hunting a pasture less than a mile away, took 12 graylags and 12 ducks.

Venturing North

On the fourth day we loaded up early and headed north. A two-hour jaunt from our bed & breakfast headquarters between Amsterdam and Gouda took us to an area known as Friesland. There we hunted a dairy farm and adjacent agricultural fields just off of a North Sea bay.

Splitting into groups of two and three, we went our separate ways. I ventured with Otmar, the business partner of Hans and Jans. We set up specklebelly decoys in the field behind us, hoping to draw in geese approaching from out front.

With few exceptions, the graylag and barnacle geese remained too high to shoot. There were thousands of birds in the area, and they were kept moving by our party's shooting and the activities of nearby farmers.

After a couple of hours of goose watching, Otmar said that we were moving. We took up a position on the opposite side of an adjacent field, laying on a canal bank and pulling reeds over the top of us.

"Now we will pass shoot," he said with a thick Dutch accent and a smile as he lit a cigarette.

This time enough birds crossed low and from all directions to make for a fun set.

I came away with a half-dozen graylags, while the other group was in the heart of traffic in the next field and bagged 30 of the big birds.

Return to the Airport Zone

On our fifth and final day of hunting we returned to the area near Schiphol Airport with Hans's son, Jans. Again we could see thousands of birds trading back and forth between distant fields. Each time a group would begin making its way toward us, Jans would turn up the speaker and let it scream into the Dutch pasturelands.

The variety of recorded calls broadcast at high volume drew birds into range and allowed us to take a mixed bag of specklebellies, graylags, Canadas and a couple of Egyptian geese. (We were even talked into shooting several crows.)

With the hunting over, most of the group departed the next day to explore Amsterdam. I had arrived a few days prior to the hunt and already seen most of the city, so I opted to investigate nearby Gouda—the origin of the famous cheese and home to a large open-air market, pubs, restaurants and cathedrals with architecture dating to the 1500s.

Hunting in the Netherlands provides the perfect combination of old-world European charm and great fowling for trophy birds in a nearly untouched setting. It is an opportunity that should be on every waterfowler's bucket list. 

Author's Note: Ramsey Russell's full-service travel agency specializes in waterfowl and upland bird hunting worldwide. For more information or to book a spring or fall hunt in the Netherlands, contact GetDucks.com, 866-438-3897; www.getducks.com.

Brian Lynn is the Vice President of Marketing and Communications for the Sportsmen's Alliance, a nonprofit organization that protects hunters, anglers and trappers from animal-rights initiatives. A veteran in the outdoors industry, he has served as Senior Editor for Outdoor Life and ESPN Outdoors.