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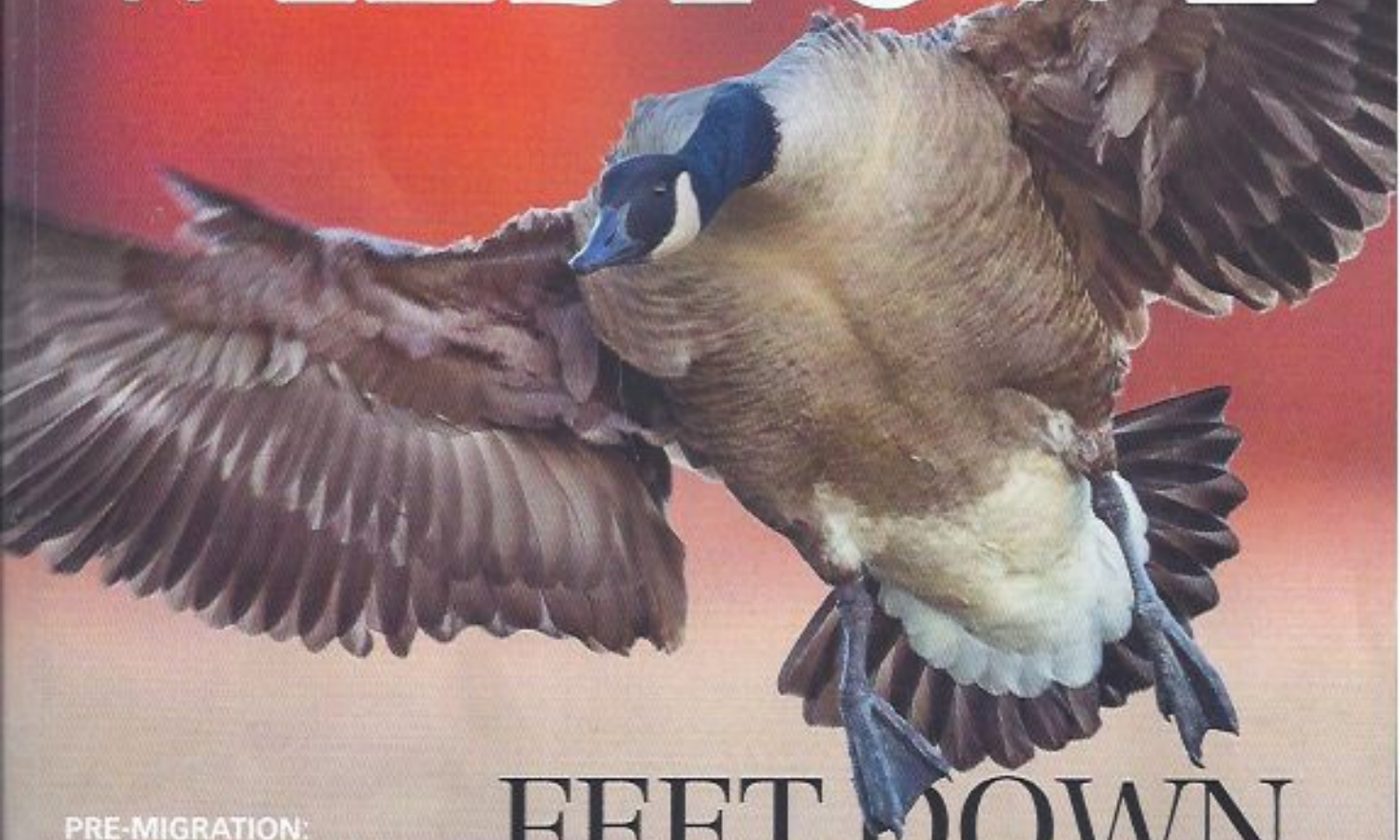
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AT BEAVER DAM

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A TEAL-HUNT TURNAROUND



Goose Bumps & Chills in the Texas Heat

Intensely beautiful in flight, blue-winged teal are much more than a harbinger of duck season

BY SKIP KNOWLES

IT TOOK SOME TIME, BUT I FINALLY figured out why southerners are crazy. It's the bugs.

This epiphany on southern sanity struck me while hunkering in a blind in south Texas at daybreak about the third time a flock of teal entering my peripheral vision turned out to be a swarm of giant mosquitoes.

Teal season is sticky-gross-hot everywhere, but in Texas just off the Gulf in September, the heating is a throbbing extreme. And as I was looking these Tex-sized skeeters over for neck collars and leg bands, Mojo founder Terry Denmon, who is as "country as a stick of firewood," to borrow a Mississippi expression, was hunkered beside me, staring at the sky. I told him my revelation about "why ya'all be crazy." He responded without the ego of a man who struck it big and changed waterfowling forever, but with the self-deprecating southern skin he is much more comfortable in.

"What they're crazy about is hunting," he said. "Why ya'all always picking-on us poor ignorant southerners, just cause we don't know no better."

Just then, another flock of teal charged into the spread and committed suicide, trying hard to land on the Mojo, like bugs to a zapper. It was a reminder of why Denmon—my "poor southern" friend—is such a wild success story.

We were here to film a Mojo TV show and see what the world's best teal hunting looks like. Steve Biggers' Rocky Creek Retrievers.com/Team Waterfowl outfit is regarded as holding more blue-winged teal than anybody, and our hunt out of the



Double GG Lodge west of El Campo is no secret spot. It's The Show, and you better come here at some point in your 'fowling travels. In a two-week, six-bird season starting around Sept. 12 hunting flooded rice two hours west of Houston just off the Gulf Coast, Steve runs 350 guys by September 20. It ends a week later.

El Campo used to be a big time snow goose place "but now we mostly shoot specks, and it's spectacular hunting," Biggers says. But The Show is in September, when blue-winged teal are here like nowhere else, before these elegant little early birds clear out and run as far south as Central America

and even further.

The climate is unpleasant. Hot, muggy, so damned buggy, and the annual hatch of black "love bugs" means there is no escaping insects. Forrest Russell, his pa Ramsey, Denmon, Mike Morgan and Jim McConville were eager for the dawn and could care less about discomfort. We were there for the lovely blue-winged teal, not ambience, but prayed for an early cool snap anyway. (prayers eventually answered). Guide Tyler Forrest cheered us up with a report that when one guy hit the bushes to relieve himself he was attacked by mosquitoes so brutally, his rear end looked like it had caught



a load of No. 7s. Even as a Florida boy, I had never seen mosquitoes this big, scary-looking things $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch long, a size 8 if you flyfish. You could see their eyes, fuzzy muzzles and striped abdomens.

TEXAS TRADITION

In El Campo, I'd never seen so many hunters, either. The spectacle of the giant Bucky's convenience store, a Texas institution, blew my mind. People filed in and out in camo shirts by the dozens, non-stop, Texas-friendly and lots of pretty women in tight camo outfits and kids with Slurpees chasing dads with beer cases under their arms. Pallets of deer-feeder corn came and went. These were just a few of the nearly 400,000 dove hunters that hit the field each year in Texas, and probably every party runs Mojo dove spinners. We were told it is the biggest annual outdoor happening in the state, but when I arrived I did not know it was the Big Day. I just hoped they weren't all teal hunters.

I asked one fit, friendly mommy who strolled past just what was going on, "was it a dove opener or something?" As she climbed into her Suburban, the official Texas State Vehicle, she stared at me, cocked an eye and said, "Tell me you are joking. You aren't from around here, are you?"

Indeed, though I once lived in Corpus Christi. But as we drove out to the Double GG we saw few doves, and none of the mobs of people we



expected to see poised in every field.

"That's 'cause the doves are all on the black dirt north of the Big Sandy Creek, that's where they grow all the milo/sorghum," Biggers said. "We're south of the creek and the soil is all sandy. It holds moisture well and is terrific rice country. Which means teal paradise."

The insanely early migration of blue-wings puts so many birds here Biggers bags between 1,500 to 2,000 most years for his clients, who flock to the area from Texas and Louisiana so they can hunt over their dogs in gator-free water. For so many of us, it's the dogs as much as the ducks that drive our waterfowling obsession, so it's a cool opportunity. Snakes? Well,

they didn't get the memo.

Days are long in September, so we were up at 4:30, slipping on shorts to wear under my Cabela's Gore-Tex uninsulated Millennium wader-jeans, a perfect waist-high set up for this kind of weather. Those waders, designed for Alaskan moose hunters, are the bomb for warm weather and travel, and mine have lasted for years.

We hike about 10 yards across a board to a huge blind, but no birds are flying yet. It's already in the high 80s, and the bugs...dear lord. A constant humming sound of insect wings. Then, like a splash of cold water to the face, feathered wings rip the air with that turbo fan noise as teal from behind rocket through before anyone can react,



reminding you just how impossible they can be to hit. The birds circle out 200 yards and come straight back in, flipping in that erratic wonderful flight that so distinguishes them from all waterfowl. They steady up, low and so much slower, a reminder, too, of just how mortal they can be.

Our group is ruthless, and birds rain dead into the spread. The pace of the hunt is perfect, stretching the time it takes to approach limiting over several hours. We stop just shy of limits, happy to do so because by 9 it's getting throbbing-hot and it's better than risking an over-shoot.

Big Jim McConville lines out to go chase a cripple that sailed over 160 yards behind us. I admire his spirit, but I'm doubting. It's a tall weed field and the bird didn't look very dead. I'd snapped a twig as a marker, after lining it up with a board to mark the downed bird. In the distance now, Jim marches out, I signal him right and left, and incredibly he nearly steps on the dead teal nearly two football fields away in heavy cover, raising it in victory. I am in disbelief, and shout wildly.

Hunts like that are where bonds are built. But just as important is slack time to jaw with the Mojo crew of what we just experienced. With no doves around, we are forced to relax in the lovely pine interior of the GG lodge, watch football and nap, thinking about going fishing and then being too lazy, the crushing heat too daunting.



The shot pattern caught in this photo shows exactly where most guys don't hit teal.



But a few slip guys slip out at dusk and return with raw thumbs from releasing bass. Perfect.

TURN-N-BURN

Pre-dawn the next day, a puff of north-east breeze breathes promise, and a strange murmuring noise builds in the air during the long trudge down a dike. The veterans in the group are

stopping to stare at each other in the dark. What is that sound? Can that dull roar possibly be ducks? It's a jet engine hum, a white noise, like an old dial-knob TV between stations. Approximately 5,000 to 10,000 blue-wings begin to lift off in groups and whistle overhead.

The sound gave me a shiver and goose bumps despite heat that has sweat running down our backs before sunup.



But soon our opportunity seems lost as we are late to get the spread set and hunker on a dike beside the flooded rice. The birds are mostly gone, and I don't like the setup. Way too many people (nearly a dozen) for a spot with no blind as we sit strewn along a grassy rice levee. We drop a few singles and doubles, then it dies as the sun creeps up and our faces and cameras start to shine. One of them days, I figure. Almost...

We are unprepared for what we're about to witness.

Singles start dipping in and splashing, then a few groups. Spirits lift, and so do gun barrels and in a matter of minutes we are forced to start counting birds. Teal hunting is spotty, but when it's on it is nuts. Birds that were flaring are now making just one turn-n-burn before dropping their feet and dicing on down.

Something soon goes terribly wrong with me, and I start hitting everything I shoot at with Kent TealSteel 5s and a Rob Roberts short range IC choke. Never a fan of low-energy smaller steel shot, I'm surprised at the effectiveness. A group swings in from the right, I drop a clean triple while the rest of the flock sags to the water under fire. Two survivors rocket upward past the 40- and 50-yard mark. McConville rains both of them, the second taking about six seconds to drop. Don't know if I've ever seen a duck fall so far. Jim and I look at each other, wide-eyed...*did that*

just happen?!

It doesn't get better than this. A single nobody else sees comes blasting down the levee far overhead. I spin around on my knees twisting as far as possible while raising the gun violently and *blam*, kill a teal that falls forever far away with that wonderful loud plop.

But the group does not applaud. Any good shots made here are greeted by comments like "Wow, Mike, I didn't know you could shoot them in the air, too." Steve, a much-sought dog trainer, runs his Lab Goose on 200-yard retrieves while his daughter Laura is working the baby dog, Stormy, owned by Forrest. The pup is making grand retrieves one minute then grabbing a plastic decoy the next.

It's over for us in no time, but the birds are just building. As we pick up it really gets nuts, loads of teal returning to feed, coming within 20 yards of us as we laugh and pose for photos. While people are standing on top of the dike talking and yelling at dogs, a full party of 12 in plain sight, we are buzzed constantly. These new birds that came on the north wind do not care. We could have walked the dike with no decoys or calling and limited.

"We gotta get outta here," Steve would hiss, looking nervously at the sky. Cutting out and letting the birds rest happy is money in the bank.

These new birds could also care less about calling, while on day one I'd watched Ramsey dirty talk several

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groups right to us with a little *Primos* teal call. Blue-wings are trying to land 30 yards from the Jeep as we load.

Steve's camps consistently have good-as-it-gets blue-winged teal hunting, and the food is...well, Texas. Homemade Boudan, local grass-fed ribeyes, battered pork chops and smoked sausage. Mojo has been coming here for years, and it is easy to see why. Combined with the dove gunning, it is as fun and laid-back as waterfowling gets stateside, an experience as southern as shrimp and grits.

The hunting is so good because of the rice.

"It's second growth," Denmon says. "They cut it early and since they're so far south they get a second crop...you get into north Louisiana and north Texas and our growing seasons are not long enough to sustain that."

TEAL TALK/TACTICS

Denmon loves these little Mexico-bound birds, and was hooked on El Campo from the first hunt.

"Teal everywhere want shallow water with food. People hunt them over big water but they are not feeding. We want a foot of water with grass and seed, and in El Campo that means rice. On our farm in Louisiana we grow millet and put 8 to 10 inches of water on it for them."

Green-wings are legal but it's not common to get one. They arrive much later than the genteel BWT.

Teal behavior can be as erratic as their flight. In our case, they fed in rice all night and took off to some protected place and then they all came back. Your spread can be simple. Teal will light amongst the decoys, Denmon says, so you don't have to build a big landing hole in the middle.

"I put the spinners right where I want them to land and they will generally land right on top of them unless it's a cloudy day. I like something to make ripples on the water. They buzz around in those balls, tight little flocks, and they can see ripples from far. You are only hunting them the first few hours of light, and that's when it's calmest."

He runs three-dozen or so scattered out with spinners in the hole. A 20-gauge is fine for teal, but Denmon likes that Kent TealSteel and shoots true Hevi-Shot whenever he can.

Manual jerk cords can be tough with teal because they are so fast. Denmon likes to run his Flyway Feeder and another called the Mama-Jama.

"The issue with blue-wings is they are SO migratory, so here-today-and-gone-tomorrow," he says. "All you can do is scout and hope for the best."

Or go to Texas. Our last morning we cut 21 in about as many minutes and

the guide's trucks back so hard to get me his dog vomited.

Another highlight? A cottonmouth sneakily swam up to our blind. "Jim, shoot that cottonmouth in front of you," the guide said.

"Snake!!! Where?" he pleaded.

I knew the Ohio native would be looking for a whole snake in front of him. My southern-trained eyes spotted

What is that white noise? Can that dull roar possibly be ducks?

it died. Typical of Mondays—without hunters to move birds around it can slow down quickly.

Seems every hunt has humorous bright spots. That morning I'd walked back inside to use the restroom at 5 a.m., came back out and all the vehicles were gone into the empty darkness. *Very funny guys*, I thought. I called McConville to learn I'd actually been left for real. One of our drivers chased

its head poking out like a turtle three feet in front of him, and obliged with a *ka-bloom* that showered us with water. Hah. Yankees.

The third surprise were the Stoegers. There is no question the model 3500 (3.5-inch capable) is a good-shooting and reliable gun. We pounded birds with them and had no malfunctions. Denmon reports using them for two years with no problems hunting all over



the planet, hammering geese, ducks, pigeons and even coyotes.

Everyone yucked it up over brunch about me getting left behind that morning, but it got better. That evening before our dove hunt Ramsey yelled at me to "go git in the truck, Skip, and wait 'til we are ready to leave."

But guess who was "accidentally" left behind on that same evening? It was not a conspiracy. Ramsey'd gone to the bathroom. Car-ma.

Teal hunting is always flighty, to say the least, but we'll never forget that white noise sound of thousands of birds, and McConville smacking those screamers that flew straight up. And who could forget the teal swarming us by the hundreds as we picked up, and everyone just so damned happy, especially the dogs.

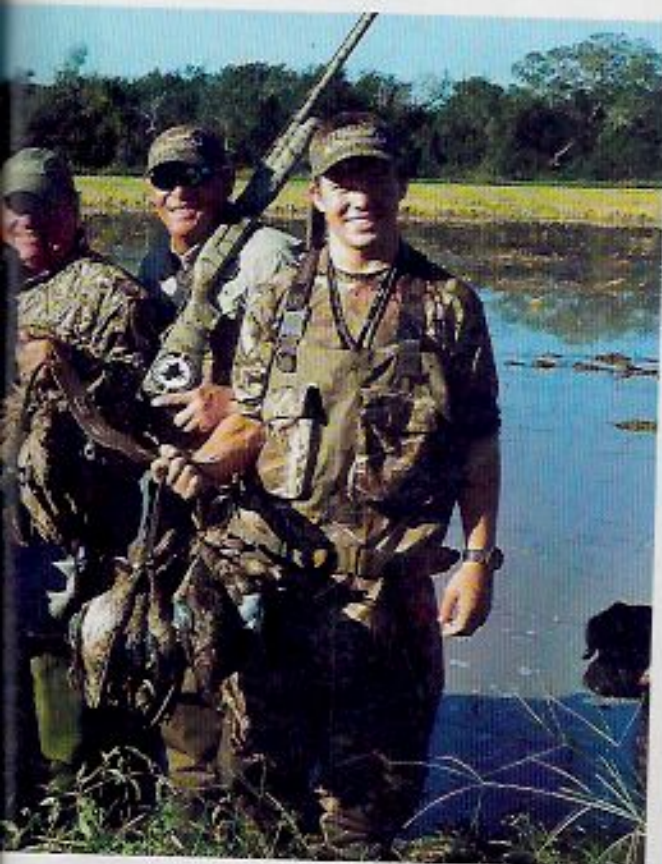
Most of all, I learned that romantic rhetoric aside, I honestly love the tearing-the-air sound of the teal ripping past you, the sound of a bedsheet being ripped in half, just as much as the shooting. The greatest part of teal hunting? When the big ducks finally come, they are going to appear fat, slow and easy to hit over the gun barrel. 🦆

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