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WINTER 2016

HUNTING PERFECTION IN MEXICO

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HUNTING FOR PERFECTION IN

MEXICO

Story and photos by YANCEY FOREST-KNOWLES

Waterfowlers perpetually dream of a place where birds still darken the sky. This is part of our longing – never quite satisfied – to return to a time when game was seemingly endless.

Still scouring the globe for my perfect waterfowling place, I try something different every year. I've pursued ducks and geese extensively throughout much of the U.S. and Canada, as well as in Western and Eastern Europe, Argentina, New Zealand and even Japan – but, amazingly, never in Mexico.



The adventurer in me had always wanted to hunt in Mexico, and for good reason – proximity, affordability, balmy weather and the availability of high-quality shooting. But frequent headlines warning of a variety of dangers made it seem ill-advised.

That changed with an unexpected invitation from longtime hunting pal Brad Jones, who owns Willow Creek Calls.

Brad wanted me to join him for the perfect Mexico wingshooting combo: ducks, dove and most intriguingly,

Drake canvasbacks and Mexican mallards from the first morning's hunt.



brant. He had done this hunt the year before and assured me we would enjoy world-class shooting in complete safety. This was all I needed to hear. This just might be the perfect waterfowling place.

We decided to schedule our hunt in late February through international outfitter Ramsey Russell of GetDucks.com. You can imagine my surprise when I answered the phone and heard Ramsey's Mississippi drawl on the other end of the line, returning my initial call. Ramsey's business has grown into one of the most reputable waterfowl outfitting businesses in the world, and for him to return my call personally was impressive.

Hunters return from a duck hunt on an airboat.



The teal trifecta: blue-winged, cinnamon and green-winged.
PHOTO BY RAMSEY RUSSELL



Even more impressive, though, was his detailed honesty and thoroughness. By the end of our conversation, I was convinced this was a truly excellent hunting program, one that would produce shooting somewhat between what I could expect in the U.S. and Argentina.

ON THE GROUND IN MEXICO

Shortly after entering the airport terminal in Hermosillo, lodge staff greeted us, gathered our gear, and led us quickly through customs, immigration and gun permits, then whisked us 150 miles south in a new Chevrolet Suburban.

As we approached our destination in Obregón, I could see why the coastal region, blanketed with agricultural fields and plentiful water, was an optimal staging and feeding ground for wintering Pacific Flyway waterfowl. Inland, mesquite trees, sage and brown grasses dotted with intermittent reservoirs and watering holes promised equally productive dove and quail habitat.

As we approached the lodge, I kept hearing the driver saying "Hammer time!" Hammer time? What were we possibly going to be doing?

We pulled up to the curb and met Hammer, the staff butler, with a tray of expertly prepared margaritas and chilled Pacificos. Now this was a greeting! It was one I would look forward to each time we returned to the lodge, and just



The author (left) and hunting partner Brad Jones (right) with the fruits of their first morning's hunt.

one example of how we were treated like royalty by the staff.

The air-conditioned, hacienda-style lodge featured nine bedrooms, open bar, satellite television, telephone and internet – all the comforts of home. The atmosphere was gracious and welcoming, and a bit intriguing, with trophy mounts of interesting game birds, big game and fish.

There were introductions to other guests, cocktails, hors d'oeuvres, tales of past hunts, a classic Mexican dinner and finally bedtime – time to dream of that endless supply of game we're always seeking, and to wonder if we were about to find it.

DUCKS AT DAWN

Morning found us traveling south in pursuit of ducks at an especially early hour, heading to one of the many bays



Gambel's and elegant quail.
PHOTO BY RAMSEY RUSSELL

that line the Sea of Cortez coast. After leaving the paved highway, winding dirt roads led us through a few quaint agricultural villages, eventually delivering us to a dock where our airboats were warming up. Within minutes, we were heading to our blinds.

Airboats are essential to traversing the sloughs and shallow bays in coastal areas and can add to the excitement of the overall adventure – definitely an “E Ticket” ride. The pilots amazed us with their ability to speed through the secretive maze of mangrove trees, relying on the last vestige of the moon and faintly glowing stars as guides.

As we pulled into the area we were to hunt, we saw decoys were already in place and the blind was freshly dressed. We had only to wait for the sun to peek over the distant sand dunes separating us from the ocean ... and to enjoy the warm, savory breakfast burritos prepared earlier by lodge staff.

Soon, hints of gold and amber began to paint the eastern horizon, and we heard the first sounds of whistling wings against a backdrop of waves lapping against the shore. Dark silhouettes began plopping into our decoys, and the distinctive harsh quacking of Mexican mallards heightened our anticipation.

The magic moment arrived and the mallards responded to our calls, coming directly. We rose and fired, watching the mallards fold and drop at our feet. What a grand start!

The sizzling sound of teal slicing through the air brought us back to attention, and we rose in unison, firing multiple

shots as the miniature forms zoomed up to escape the confusion and disorder we had created. Flock after flock of teal appeared, responding with abandon to our calls. Most were green-wings, but there were blue-wings and occasional cinnamons as well.

Sprig, canvasbacks and redheads joined the aerial display in abundance, and we found ourselves stopping often to stare in awe at nature's display. We decided to slow the pace and enjoy the experience more fully, taking only prime drakes with wings cupped and feet down. Throughout the morning, top-quality birds continued to arrive on silky wings – a vision, peppered with the intoxicating smell of burnt powder, that would be etched into our memories of the day.

After our morning hunt, we returned to our launch site, where we met up with Ramsey and learned he and the other hunters had enjoyed an equally spectacular shoot – a great way to bring the morning hunt to close.

SIESTA OR DOVES?

At this point, each hunter had a choice: Return to the lodge for an afternoon siesta, or head out for an afternoon dove hunt.

It was an easy choice. Few places on earth compare to coastal northern Mexico for dove hunting. Millions of doves populate this area of unlimited natural nesting habitats, expansive grain fields and ample water.

We headed an hour north to a private ranch with a large milo field bordered by high desert, where we were greeted by smiling bird boys who whisked us to shooting stands. Each location had a seat placed in shade with a cooler of chilled drinks and unlimited ammunition. We were barely in place when the action started.

At first, the flight was intermittent, but then doves came in good, steady numbers. Halfway through the hunt, we were invited to walk up quail, both Gambel's and the prized elegant quail. A short walk produced a pair of each before we returned to the dove action. After two hours, the flight waned and we called it a day.

Now it was “Hammer time.”





Hunters reset brant decoys to adjust to the outgoing tide.

GEESE TO SET YOUR CLOCK BY

The next morning, we were off early again in pursuit of black brant, this time with Ramsey Russell himself. Ramsey is an exceptional hunter and a particularly interesting person, with a most wicked sense of humor; time with him is informative, but also definitely entertaining.

As an innovative call maker, my hunting partner Brad had developed a new brant call, and we were anxious to see how effective it was. Between Ramsey's understanding of brant habits and Brad's calling ability, our confidence level was high.

Each year, these birds migrate from the Gulf of Alaska, the western Canadian Arctic and western Russia to the Obregón coastal area, which holds one of the largest concentrations of overwintering brant in North America. When not feeding, brant spend their time loafing in the Sea of Cortez. Once the tide begins to fall, the birds return to the large, tidal-influenced estuaries to feed upon freshly exposed eel grass. You can set your clock by the arrival of the birds to the turn of the tide.



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Brant and a new brant call.
PHOTO BY BRAD JONES

The first flock of brant appeared suddenly in the distance. Skimming close to the water, the first dark V appeared at almost the instant the tide began to retreat. Instinctively, we began to call in unison, the distinct-sounding *braaaapt* of discordant music that is unique to brant.

As if mesmerized, the birds began moving in unison to the bobbing display of our decoys. Surprisingly, the birds pulled off at the last moment and entered the river mouth to our side. One bird broke loose, though, and I was given the honor of the first shot. At my gun's report, the bird tumbled from the sky and hit the water in the middle of our decoys.

In my excitement, I leapt out of the mangrove blind as if on wings, and when I reached the downed bird I let out a hoot that I'm sure could be heard throughout the bay; the first brant of the day was double banded.

No sooner had I crawled back into the blind than the next flock appeared on the horizon. This time the whole flock came straight to the call, finishing in unison. We rose as one, emptying our guns, and multiple birds tumbled to the water.



Retrieving brant. PHOTO BY RAMSEY RUSSELL

This scene repeated itself throughout the morning, pausing only enough to retrieve our quarry and adjust decoys as the tide receded.

When the hunt was finished, we lifted heavy straps for photos and admired the number of banded birds, which was indeed impressive. Most of the birds sported double bands, one of which was always the traditional stamped aluminum and the other, a brightly colored and numbered plastic. Each color indicated where the bird had been banded, and there were seven colors in all.

After lunch at an ocean-front restaurant, it was tempting to lie down on the warm white sand and take the proverbial afternoon siesta. But we were bound for another evening dove hunt, and anxious to get started.

DOVE MECCA

Mexico has long been known as a mecca for dove hunting, especially the western coastal region. Nothing, however, had prepared us for what was shortly to come.

As our Suburban eased down the dirt road leading to the area we were going to hunt, we passed increasing numbers of doves perched in trees and on wire fences. When we saw power lines sagging under the weight of resting birds, we knew we were in for something special. We set up quickly, and soon the action began.

There were small groups of birds at first, some low and close by, and others high and a long reach – about what one would expect in an area known for year-round dove hunting.

As if by magic, though, the flight kicked into high gear quickly. Even with our bird boys feeding us shells as

expertly as they could, it was difficult to keep our guns loaded. The birds literally swarmed in as if someone had rung a dinner bell, sometimes in groups as large as 50. They were coming from all directions at a torrid pace, and it was increasingly difficult to pick out and track the swirling and dipping singles.

The furious action was both amazing and incredibly challenging; some might say humbling.

We eventually slowed down, relaxed and started picking out our shots. As the sun began to settle, the temperature eased its grip and the cool evening breeze signaled the end of the flight. We had each gone through 10 to 15 boxes of *cartuchos* with, to be honest, varying degrees of success.

What we all experienced in common, though, was the astonishing wonder of the seemingly endless flight of mourning, white-winged and Eurasian collared doves, and red hot barrels, the trademark of south-of-the-border wingshooting.



Ramsey Russell with double-banded brant.

RELENTLESS GOOD HUNTING

During our four days of hunting, we went out each morning in pursuit of either ducks or brant, alternating each day between these two species, and hunting new locations each day.

From early November through early March, the duck population in the region is estimated

at 2 million birds, so limits are common. We bagged 13 of the 16 species available. The combination of liberal limits and great diversity of species add up to an exciting hunting experience.

Because I hunt ducks frequently at home, I was particularly enthralled with the brant hunts. The California limit for these special birds is two per day during a short 5-week season, and hunting is limited to only a very few established locations. Mexico, on the other hand, offers fabulous black brant hunts and liberal limits.

Each evening we experienced similar action-packed dove hunts. The prime dove season is actually August through October, so we were especially pleased with these hunts.



Hunters with their double-banded brant.

The lodge also offered alternate activities in the afternoons, including jump shooting for ducks and incredible Florida strain bass fishing in 32,000 acre Lake Oviachic. All of these programs are in exclusive zones, limited solely to lodge clients. There are no rogue operations or guides.

This trip dispelled quite a few misconceptions about hunting in Mexico. First and foremost, we felt entirely welcome and safe during our time in and near Obregón.

Second, with the assistance of an outfitter, hunters can bring their own guns into the country easily and safely. Or, they can use outfitter-provided guns. I used a provided gun, and it performed flawlessly, as did the ammunition: 4 shot for brant, 6 shot for ducks and 7 ½ shot for dove and quail.

In addition, outfitters can help you prepare required permits to take home trophies for mounting.

Why had I waited so long to hunt Mexico? With an outstanding outfitter and an abundance of game, I may just have found my perfect waterfowling place! 🦆

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About the author: Yancey Forest-Knowles is a former chairman of the board of California Waterfowl. He lives in Santa Rosa.

If you're considering a wingshooting adventure abroad, you can learn more at Ramsey Russell's website, www.getducks.com. Better yet, give Ramsey a personal call at 866-438-3897 and let him help you arrange a waterfowl or upland bird hunt of a lifetime. His motto is, "It's duck season somewhere," and his brand of hunting is real hunts for real hunters.