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THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

Issue 7 August – October 2017 \$9.95



## 2017

## Year of the Black Duck

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Russell's  
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odyssey

Should  
disturbance  
stop hunting?

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ISSN 2206-0707







# "It's duck season somewhere"

**He's been described as the Christopher Columbus of waterfowl but Ramsey Russell's most recent escapade was more Captain Cook as he set out to discover Australia and experience some of the best duck hunting in the world.**

"I'm just a simple duck hunter from Mississippi" is the line Ramsey Russell uses to deflect the attention and at times adoration he receives from around the world.

A wildlife biologist who worked with deer in North America before pursuing his passion for waterfowl, Ramsay has parlayed his pastime into an international business connecting keen duck hunters with quality outfitters on six continents.

Ramsay still bears the scars from an accidental explosion that nearly killed him as a teenager. Doctors doubted he would survive and told his parents if he did, he would most likely lose his legs and an arm. He beat the odds and not only kept all his limbs but his trigger finger; he determined, once he recovered, he wouldn't waste an opportunity to use it.

"I've hunted so many places and collected so many experiences; I find the story of hunting compelling," he said over a post hunt bourbon.

"Right about the time you think you've seen and done it all you come to Australia and it feels just like home. Australia is very blessed with hunting opportunities: a long season, a very liberal limit, some great habitat and a hunting tradition that reminds me of home more than anywhere else in the world."

Ramsay's Down Under adventure had its beginnings in a duck blind in Arkansas.

Sitting with him were two eager Aussies on the trip of a lifetime, Glenn Falla and Trent Leen.

"I could see they were duck hunters: they shoot well, they call, they hide, they play by the rules of the game, but I just had no idea that Australia was so blessed with a very rich duck hunting tradition," Ramsey explains.

Some of the hunting tourism Ramsey organises around the world seems at odds with his love of tradition and as he puts it, "playing the game".

He explains it this way.

"If I want to shoot 70 ducks over a bait pile in Argentina, I'll go do that. I go to all these places where it is shooting not hunting, but to come down here and play by the rules and have to earn that duck, there's something about that connection.

"It is real duck hunting, with the decoys and the calls; it reminds me of home."

For Ramsey, the total hunting experience matters, not the raw numbers, and he's drawing others to that philosophy.

"Hunters have changed in the past 15 years, clients going to Argentina or Mexico, our two biggest destinations, the first question they asked was how many ducks; it was very numbers driven," he said.

"Nowadays a lot of hunters don't even ask it; they are going for the experience, they aren't compelled by numbers. It has been a progression from quantity to

quality and that is the big selling point I see for Australia, it is a quality hunt and a quality experience."

If anyone can put Australia on the hunting tourism map, it is Ramsey Russell but there are regulatory barriers.

For international hunters, the WIT test is waived in Victoria but not in South Australia and restrictions on exporting taxidermy would deter hunters who travel the world for new species.

"I don't collect species, I collect experiences, but a lot of hunters do and that would be a big limitation," he said.

"I think Australia has got the opportunity for hunting tourism: the interesting species; the friendly people; there's no language barrier and you have a great duck hunting tradition.

"A lot of my clients would come here to hunt, just from a few posts on social media I've got some clients vibrating right now about Australia."

Ramsay's tour of Australia and New Zealand had another purpose; he is working on a book project based around his theory that it is "duck season somewhere". With 100 000 photographs and a memory filled with anecdotes from around the world it will be some book, and you can guarantee Australia will feature prominently. Ramsey can't believe how good it is and as he pours another bourbon he speaks with the excitement of a child





Ramsey Russell

on Christmas morning.

"I stepped off a plane at midnight, grabbed a cheeseburger (with pineapple) and went to a duck blind. Right off the bat I see some black ducks and I hit them with the Mallard call, they turn on a dime, quack, quack, quack, all the way into the decoys and I'm like, holy cow, that's just like a darn Mallard back home.

"That has been one of the most enjoyable aspects, the Pacific black duck responds to a Mallard call just like a Mallard.

"I'm from Mississippi and by the time a Mallard makes it there he's been hunted since September, from Canada all the way down and he's pretty educated and doesn't play as nicely as these black ducks do down here."

His personal duck camp in Mississippi keeps drawing him back even though the hunting is "mediocre" in the best of years. The reason is simple: Ramsey likes to work hard in the field, if hunting is easy, it is just shooting.

"You've really got to get down and dirty and hunt, play by the rules of the game," he said.

"You have a wild bird with a brain the size of a pea, to interact with it, to talk its language and to bring it into shotgun range, on its terms, that is what I enjoy the most.

"There are Mallard enthusiasts in

Mississippi and Arkansas I hunt with and the game to them is to land the Mallards and have them swimming in front of you.

"I love all these pretty ducks over here, they are very interesting species, but my favourite aspect of Australia is the Pacific black duck."

One species eluded Ramsey during his time in Australia: the anti-hunting protester. He really wanted to find one and study it because he cannot fathom what makes it tick.

**"I don't collect species, I collect experiences, but a lot of hunters do and that would be a big limitation."**

Ramsey Russell

"I look at anti-hunters and wonder who they are, but I know who they're not, they are not me, they weren't raised the way I was," he said.

"They despise me for what I do but I know for a fact they don't love the resource like I do. We need to change our message and the delivery of our message because in America, the Netherlands and

other parts of the world, we're losing ground."

Mississippi was the first American state to pass a hunter harassment law.

Under the law, no person shall intentionally interfere with or attempt to prevent the lawful taking of wildlife by another, attempt to disturb wildlife, or attempt to affect wildlife behaviour to prevent lawful taking. Further, a person may not harass another person engaged in the lawful taking of wildlife or in the preparation for such taking.

Ironically, the first application of the new law was on a hunter who got into a dispute but it has protected hunters from protesters.

What the law does not stop is the online campaigning where Ramsey Russell admits hunters are bringing the proverbial "knife to a gunfight".

"If you ask me to describe my perfect client, I could close my eyes and picture him like a sketch artist, he'd look kind of like (former US Vice President) Dick Cheney: older, above-average wealth, educated, retired or close to it. That's the guy doing most of my hunts.

"What he isn't is a digital native — he's tactile, he reads printed products and wants to shake hands on a deal. We're on Facebook so we can keep in touch with a sister a town over or see our grandkids; we're not on there because >>



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we want to make the world a better or different place."

The next generation of hunters is needed, digital natives who can carry the argument for wise use of wildlife, the link between hunting and conservation, and the joys of the outdoors lifestyle and the wholesome food harvested.

"We do need to own it, and I'm not picking a fight about Donald Trump but whether you like him or not is beside the point, he says it, then he owns it.

"I wish we had someone like him as a spokesman for hunting; oh, I hurt your feelings, I'm sorry, I'm a hunter, that's how it has to be.

"We have to own the fact that we are killing wildlife; if there's rubbish left, shotgun shells, we have to own that too."

In the Netherlands 0.2 per cent of the population hunts and there is little prospect of a next generation now that you need to be 18 before you can get a permit. Ramsey says hunting there is so marginalised, "It's over."

Elsewhere there is still hope but an important component of maintaining or growing hunter participation is continued access and that requires the current generations to respect the privilege of hunting on public land. They also have to be willing to pay a price to keep it.

"I know with my sons, if I give them something it gets treated one way, if they buy it themselves it gets treated another way," he said.

While inbound tourism can add to the already significant economic contribution hunting makes to regional Australia, it would have to be as variable as the climate

and the duck seasons.

"None of us, as hunters, want to go out and deplete species, practically speaking it is what it is, and you have to accept in dry seasons with tight bag limits it won't be too attractive to tourists," Ramsey said.

Some would still come because like Ramsey, they have a view that the harder the hunt is, the better the experience.

"The thing I love about duck hunting is in a blind, it's social.

"You are not spending every waking moment waiting for a bird or shooting, there are voids you get to visit. My son just completed his freshman year in college and in the Christmas break of his senior year at high school we endured a horrible season in Mississippi; the ducks just didn't come down and we struggled.

"What I realised is, at a time when I needed to be visiting with him and having those father/son talks, here we were just sitting in a duck blind by ourselves talking heart-to-heart in those voids."

Ramsey picks up his now empty bourbon glass to make another point.

"You take a product like this glass, everybody that buys that glass expects the same thing from it, all they expect is what a glass does, which is hold a drink; then there's duck hunting.

"You get five people, they're all buddies, they pick a trip and you follow up afterwards and you get five different responses because duck hunting is such a subjective experience.

"We've tried to build a reputation on real duck hunting for real duck hunters. Some are nicer than others; Mongolia is pretty darn spartan, no running water, no shower,



no toilet, but the hunting is spectacular. It is all about the hunt and the hunting experience, that's our heartbeat."

During a week in Victoria with Glenn Falla, Ramsay hunted open swamps, lakes and heavily timbered country where the eucalypts create the atmosphere of a cathedral. He tried every duck call he could lay his hands on and bagged nearly every species. Heck, he even ate a hamburger with pineapple.

His hunting heart now has a very soft spot reserved for Australia.



Ramsey Russell