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## BLUE-WING ODYSSEY

A Season-Long Deep South Teal Safari

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# TEAL ODYSSEY

A two-week duck safari through southern hospitality on the heels of migrating blue-wings.

BY RAMSEY RUSSELL



**WORST. OPENER. EVER. THAT**

pretty much sums up last year's Mississippi blue-winged teal kickoff. With my sons Forrest and Duncan, we went through the familiar motions of knocking dust off decoys, joining old friends at camp, oiling up the killing sticks, eating heaps of chicken-fried goodness like starved castaways, and drawing for high card at 5 a.m. sharp. It's one of the most anticipated days of our year. But we strapped only two teal in as many mornings. Similar nearby reports provided little consolation.

When Bart Haddad, owner of SWC Sportsman's Lodge in Venice, Louisiana, called Sunday afternoon to say, "Come on down if you want, we'll eat as good as always, but just warning you that it was the worst opener ever—only 11 teal brought in to the ramp yesterday," I was completely unfazed.

"There's a front hitting tomorrow and the moon is full—what's Chef Richard cooking for supper? Some of that blackened fish I hope," I said.

Blue-winged teal hunting is all about



the when and the where. Between volleys in a duck blind a few years ago, some good friends related the story of meeting a biologist at a central Louisiana boat ramp one morning after an uneventful teal hunt where, surprise

surprise, a lot of previously seen teal had vanished overnight. The biologist was tracking radio-collared blue-wings and described how a majority of the birds that descend thru the Mississippi and Central flyways funnel through



the Texas coastal prairie around El Campo, Texas. That makes perfect sense. They fly south to gulf coastal wetlands, where in most years there is an abundance of excellent habitat. Migrating blue-wings then follow this hospitable corridor all the way to Mexico and beyond. That's how the idea of a two-week odyssey chasing blue-wings was conceived.

Missing Mississippi's opening week-end with family and friends is not an option—too much like vacationing without the kids. For the remaining 14 days of the season, I'd hatched a plan that started in southeastern Louisiana, progressed westerly every couple days, and ended in coastal Texas. The plan hinged on the generous hospitality of friends and associates that hunt those blue-wings like they'd hurt their momma whether I was there or not.

My favorite duck is always the very next one over the decoys, but early season blue-winged teal are my kryptonite. One of North America's most abundant waterfowl species, they kick

it all off with September movements spurred by photoperiod, combined with faint northerly fronts that compel them southward in continual yet unpredictable waves. Most barrel through the Central and Mississippi

the charge; nested hens and their offspring bring up the rear. Though drab-colored compared to spring birds, their presence in the Deep South heralds the arrival of fall, making the last dog days of summer way more

**Most barrel through the**  
Central and Mississippi flyways,  
where hunters from Canada to  
south Texas simultaneously report  
decent numbers of blue-wings.

flyways, where the migration often spans the entire continent north to south, with hunters from Canada to south Texas simultaneously reporting numbers of blue-wings. Adult drakes and adult hens that didn't nest lead

tolerable. Humidity looms as heavy as hoop cheese, snakes sometimes as big as your arm, mosquitos thick as hair on a dog's back, and only 16 days to chase them—I freaking love September blue-wings!



**STOP ONE, NEAR VENICE, LOUISIANA**

The surface-drive mud motor roared as we raced through a rat maze of marsh as familiar in darkness to long-time hunting guide Jesse Morris as the smooth top of the podium from which he preaches each weekend. In the moonlight, the water path glimmered like shattered glass between featureless black walls of roseau cane while we followed the sweeping yellow orb of light from Jesse's q-beam when he actually needed it on.

"They started showing up late Monday afternoon," Jesse said as we pitched decoys from the boat, "There were wads of 25, 50 and more flying around that sure weren't here this past weekend."

That was the when. The flashlight's beam penetrating the clear foot-deep water illuminated a robust abundance of submerged aquatic vegetation prompting Jesse to say, "No big storm surges, the marsh is in great shape again this year, look at all those duck groceries in this pocket."

And that was the where.



From a small blind tucked against the grass line, Bart and I sorted through a limit. From his side or mine, sometimes from the grass behind us so low they almost knocked our caps off, we chipped away, laughing at each other's

inevitable misses, passing on a few opportunities while Cooper was out of the blind. We each strapped six adult drakes and radioed Jesse. We'd seen numerous larger flocks trading to the east, so we scouted a couple square

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miles of wild rice for the following morning.

They call it Sportsman's Paradise for a reason. From SWC Sportsman's palatial 9-bedroom floating lodge, you're literally just two to three steps into boats from either a duck blind or the year-round inshore and offshore bite for redfish and sea trout. Other guests had been as successful fishing as we'd been hunting. For dinner that night, Chef Richard Young prepared fresh yellow-fin sashimi, an assortment of ginger root- or jalapeno- or something-else-real-good-stuffed teal poppers; Thai coconut shrimp soup, and blackened caught-a-few-hours-ago redfish with creole lump-meat crab sauce. The quiet banter among folks that have been hunting and fishing all day accompanied each course. We were full to the gills when the homemade bread pudding topped with praline caramel hit the table, but we somehow found room. Comatose sleep came easily that night, as it would for the remainder of the trip.

The soft Popeye-like chatter of blue-wings was heard above our whispers as we tossed decoys into a narrow, funnel-shaped cut in the wild rice bed. The pirogue we'd slid into the thick canes provided solid footing in perfect cover. In the waning darkness the sub-

with our heartbeats of anticipation.

Carefully picking our shots we took turns shooting, but the hunt still passed as quickly as a poker player's furtive glimpse. Cooper stood panting over three limits of adult teal before the sun even topped the horizon. Such

Humidity looms heavy as hoop  
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**on a dog's back.**

stance of dreams unfolded: dozens of wings shredding air; flashes of sky-blue wing patches, white under-wings as teal swarmed; the splashing of water as they abruptly landed among the decoys. The wagging tail beating the pirogue gunwales like a drum synched

epic mornings make it way too easy to forget that the Lower Mississippi River Delta of southeastern Louisiana is truly a vanishing paradise; one of the most vital habitats for over-wintering waterfowl in the eastern U.S, yet also the most imperiled.



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**NEXT STOP, SW LOUISIANA.**

Southern Louisiana is a continuum of cypress breaks, sugar cane, rice fields and crawfish traps piled as high as a cotton trailer. Walking into SWLA Sportsman's lodge, heavenly aromas immediately dragged me straight to the kitchen. "Hey," said the young, camo-clad guide, JB, glancing up, but then quickly back down into the smoking cast iron pot he was stirring earnestly. "Everyone else is out scouting, there's cold beer in the fridge, gotta get a lid on this before I can talk, the cook's off tonight," he said, stirring the cast iron with the intensity of a dog on point. "Hope you like roasted teal because we've got plenty. Make yourself at home." He had me at cold beer and roasted teal, the rest was easy. A large quonset hut located on a generations-old family farm and surrounded by ancient live oaks has been meticulously remodeled into a "sports-barn" lodge specifically designed for making everyone feel perfectly at home. A quarter-section of former rice field out back serves as a scenic waterfowl sanctuary. The pot-roasted teal were absolutely delicious, plenty



to feed the young, energetic staff. I felt perfectly at home.

SWLA's head guide, Garrett Cole, and I drove 5 minutes to an expertly prepared blind on the edge of a rice field. "No more than knee boots are ever needed to hunt here," he reminded me. Ever the hospitable host, he fogged

the blind to get rid of mosquitos, an important detail on a typically windless September morning and a trick I'll use back home. "Last weekend's birds got thin pretty quick," he explained in faint light, "We're waiting on another slug of teal like most everyone else." We whittled away at the steadily in-







termittent traffic of mostly singles and doubles—same as surrounding blinds from the sounds of things—shared laughs between volleys, and finished with our limits of adult birds.

Spend any time at all in a Louisiana duck blind and you'll realize that seasons are cultural events—teal, rice, alligator, crawfish, hurricane, cayenne, they're all just ways of life. But spend any time in southwest Louisiana, and you'll learn very quickly that specklebelly goose hunting is tantamount to religion; that all of the other seasons merely fill the void until speck season begins, and that the top specklebelly goose calls on earth originate from this region for good reason. In the building of his Vendetta calls, Garret is following a destiny. We finished late-morning with a near-limit of adult teal, but several massive flocks we'd seen cruising high overhead throughout the morning were new birds we hoped and were later a hot topic around the table at that night's Delta Waterfowl Banquet in Lake Arthur. About a thousand attendees make it probably the largest in the U.S.

You can make a dozen phone calls a day in keeping your finger on the pulse of the blue-winged teal migration, but when it happens it more resembles a traumatic femoral artery spurt than a pulse. We pulled up to a "buffaloed" rice field and it looked like someone had kicked a beehive—it was swarming with teal. Big flocks. Game on! Jumping into a pit blind with a couple SWLA staff, the first flock dumped into the decoys before we'd even loaded. We were ready when they circled back—landing between the decoys and the blind, they were almost too close—shouldered our guns in unison and we clobbered a combination of green-winged and blue-winged teal. Hectically we strapped our respective birds, loaded guns, and picked off incoming teal. A muddy Cooper stayed busy as the routine was repeated. Other guests were volleying steadily in the next blind over. And like it happens when they really come out to play, the flurry of wingbeats and gunsmoke ended way too quickly, with three limits consisting of teal across all age-classes swinging on our straps.



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The really great thing about the bottom falling out while walking to the blind is that you'll not get any wetter as the day progresses. Joining a collection of new friends for a teal hunt the next day, we filled straps with more of those new teal during the between-rain intervals. None of us melted and we were rewarded with a band. It had fared later that afternoon when we joined Bill Daniels in a blind at "The Petting Zoo," as the impeccably managed farm he guides for is locally referred. The best thing about our having already limited that morning was heckling our blind mates with impunity.

"It's in the dirt. Like other places, they always come to, there's just a big ol' X in this part of the world that's existed for as long as waterfowl have," explained a prominent local hunter over plate-sized café omelets. That's as fitting an explanation as exists for six action-packed days in coastal Louisiana, but in this sliver of paradise that interfaces raw marsh, there exists a sense of community that compels people to collectively defy forces of nature like hurricanes and floods just



as readily as to stand elbow-to-elbow for at least as long as it takes to enjoy feasts of catfish couvillion, duck leg-heart-and-liver gravy, and frog sauce picante. Something in the dirt fittingly explains such world-class hospitality, too.

**STOP THREE, SOUTHEAST TEXAS.**

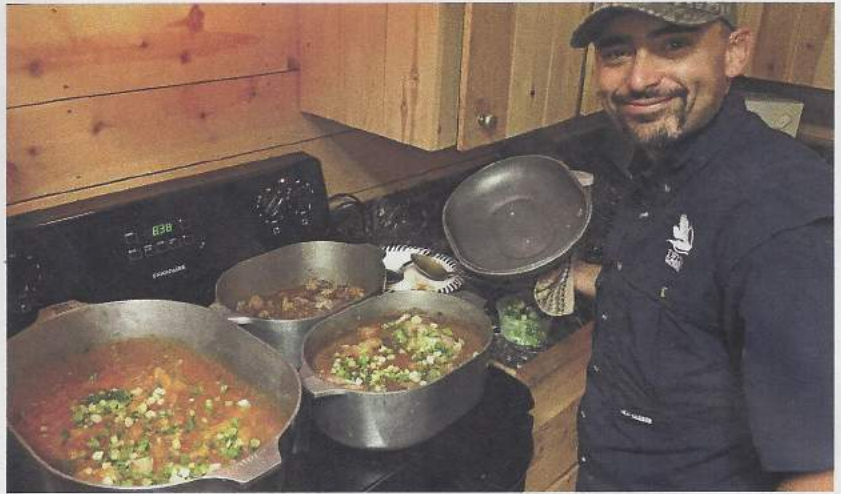
Crossing the Sabine River into Texas, I joined friends Ethan Bowdoin and Brad

Daniels, who hunt "the east side" of Galveston Bay in historic Chambers County. The property consists of tabletop-flat moist-soil impoundments near marsh-predominated Anahuac NWR, just north of the Gulf. "We've been shooting limits, but they're mostly mature birds and it seems like they're flying later each morning," Brad said while arriving at the blind just a few



minutes before shooting time. The decoys had been placed previously; we needed only to turn on the Mojos. An initial bustle of wingbeats put a couple teal on each lanyard. Then came the expected lull. We'd met on a Mexico waterfowl hunt, where we quickly bonded over a shared passion for September blue-wings. Catching up came easily as coast-bound black-bellied and fulvous whistlers occasionally traded overhead.

The sun was high and we'd moved well into shady parts of the blind when the first flock scorched the decoys from out of nowhere. Whatever world problems we'd been solving were immediately forgotten. They turned to our fervent, fast-tempo calls and paid rent on the second pass. An inbound 12-pack was on track and we cut into them on their first cross-over. Within an hour-and-a-half of the first mid-morning flock, we'd collected the balance of our limits, cleaned and iced them, and made Tex-Mex and margarita plans for dinner. "First juveniles we've really gotten into this season," Brad said, noting that about half the morning's bag were heavily pin-feathered hatch-year teal. The next morning was a repeat



of the first except that after waiting them out until nearly noon, we came up a few teal short of limits. Juveniles comprised most of the morning's take.

**NEXT STOP, MATAGORDA TEXAS**

Further southwest into Texas, somewhere between Bay City and Matagorda, I joined Daniel Kubecka and Nick Stillwell of Run-N-Gun Adventures. We scouted some high-quality dirt under their exclusive management. Lots of it. It paid off with a couple solid blue-wing shoots, but it was clear

that the migration was in full-blown Energizer-bunny fly-south mode. Glassing a couple prime fields one afternoon, for example, we estimated a couple hundred teal in the first hole and several hundred in a second hole a few miles up the road. The next morning, our six hunters managed three or four birds each at the first spot, mostly singles and pairs. Another team averaged only half that many in the field we'd anticipated would serve up a slaughter-house shoot. About 500 birds had refueled and disappeared as



quietly as a whisper overnight.

Far from being a one-trick pony, Kubecka offers cast-and-blast and combo-hunts. "You ever hunted alligators?" he nonchalantly asked one afternoon. Sure enough, the next day I hauled up a 6.5-footer, perfect for making alligator hide Christmas gifts. On the end of next line was an ugly-spirited 12-plus-footer. As if the blue-wings and gators weren't plenty, the Texas dove opener was a social event of epic proportion—lines of shooters, incoming waves of high-flying white-wings and lower-flying mourning doves, cold drinks under the shade of hackberry trees while picking doves, a live band, Texas-sized ribeyes and bacon-wrapped dove breasts sizzling over mesquite flames. It hardly gets better.

#### LAST STOP, EL CAMPO, TEXAS

With two mornings remaining in the season, I pulled under the live oak shade at the GG Lodge & Ranch, base camp for Steve Biggers' Rocky Creek Retrievers Team Waterfowl during teal season. The first time I met Steve, Forrest and I had driven overnight following a Mississippi high school football game, walking right into the blind within minutes of shoot time. Watching countless waves of blue-wings at dawn remains one of the most amazing spectacles I've witnessed in North America. Steve's annual blue-winged teal scoreboard remains impressive, numbering many more in just 16 days than many great duck camps tally during an entire season.

Greeting me on the front porch with his big toothy grin, warm handshake and a tall glass of iced tea, he pointed at the season's scoreboard. "You missed them," he said, "It slowed way down the last few days, but we'll still get a few."

Here today and gone tomorrow, there's no more pinning the fleeting teal migration than there is stopping the Gulf's rising tide, but there's so much more than shooting birds that comes with the chase. Really, really good people and southern hospitality makes it an adventure that for a duck-loving hunter, well, you just can't lose.

Completely unfazed and leaning back in a big porch rocker I asked, "So what's Mrs. Peggy cooking for supper tonight? Some of those fried pork chops I hope." 🦆



## Something about BLUE-WINGED TEAL

And wouldn't you know it? The Monday after the 2016 blue-winged teal season ended, a front pushed a huge wave of teal down! Blue-winged teal season is an excellent time to knock cobwebs out of the waders and add days to the season. It's the perfect time to introduce youths and new hunters to duck hunting, too. The weather is warm and the best water is extremely shallow. Equipment needs are minimal, just a few decoys, hip-boots and a call really, but many of us use Mojoes for good reason. Mississippi is a fly-over state for coastal marsh-bound blue-wings, we either have them during their ephemeral stop-overs or we don't. The following reputable outfitters deliver excellent early teal hunting opportunities in September. Contact them or visit [USHuntList.com](http://USHuntList.com) for details.

- **Team Waterfowl, Rocky Creek Retrievers**, El Campo, Texas.  
Contact Steve Biggers at (281) 610-8226.
- **Run-N-Gun Adventures**, Matagorda Bay, Texas.  
Contact Daniel Kubecka at (979) 240-5312.
- **SWLA Sportsman**, Lake Arthur, Louisiana.  
Contact April Cox, (337) 661-1163.
- **SWC Sportsman's Lodge**, Venice, Louisiana.  
Contact Bart Haddad at (601) 466-0152.