

# Outdoor Writers & Other Liars

“HOW DID YOU get to be doing what you’re doing?”

It’s a question people in the outdoor media business hear probably once a week. Hunters tend to be intrigued and a tad envious of people who get paid to write or film in the outdoors for a living, though the joke is that nobody really makes it—behind every “successful freelance outdoor writer” is a spouse who is a doctor or lawyer. The full-time gigs as editors are a heaven-and-hell mix of hunting adventure and stressed-out deadline anxiety.

By and large I love my outdoor media brethren. It’s one big fun fraternity with many talented women in the ranks. And writers and TV types are in the enviable position of getting to go and see and do a hell of a lot bucket-list things, chase wild game all over, if they’re any good at the occupation. We should be humbled and grateful at the opportunity.

Should be. But there are there are folks in every avocation who march along behind their Goliath ego. Some of the worst hunting stories I hear are about the two most terrible types of writers: guys who act like it’s entirely about them or; just as bad, the imperious self-proclaimed expert.

Writers are mostly generalists. We know a little about everything and everything about nothing. Those who act like they can rain down knowledge about how to hunt a certain area better than the locals that live there just kill me, a much worse flaw than those prone to exaggeration. We read for entertainment, so I don’t mind a truth-bending story, as long as it is not a facts-and-tactics piece, or feigning to

be taken as gospel. Hell, I grew up on Peter Hathaway Capstick’s too-good-to-be-totally-true tales of African man-eating everything, and such mind-fodder captures our imagination and fosters a healthy lust for adventure and the outdoors.

Some of the best stories are about writers, though, and true, and hilarious. Tony Vandemore, who is a hunter of renown and a terrific photographer and TV talent himself, has spent a lifetime dealing with writers because of his top-notch waterfowl outfitting business. He gave one well-known outdoor writer directions to his farm house lodge, and the guy showed up a couple hours late. Typical. This nimrod had headed up the highway, turned right and left as advised, pulled into the driveway of the big white farm house, parked and gone inside, surprised to find nobody home. He stripped to his skivvies, rested on the couch, grabbed some snacks from the kitchen and a beer or three from the fridge, then destroyed the bathroom with the aftermath of gas station burritos, bad coffee and the long drive.

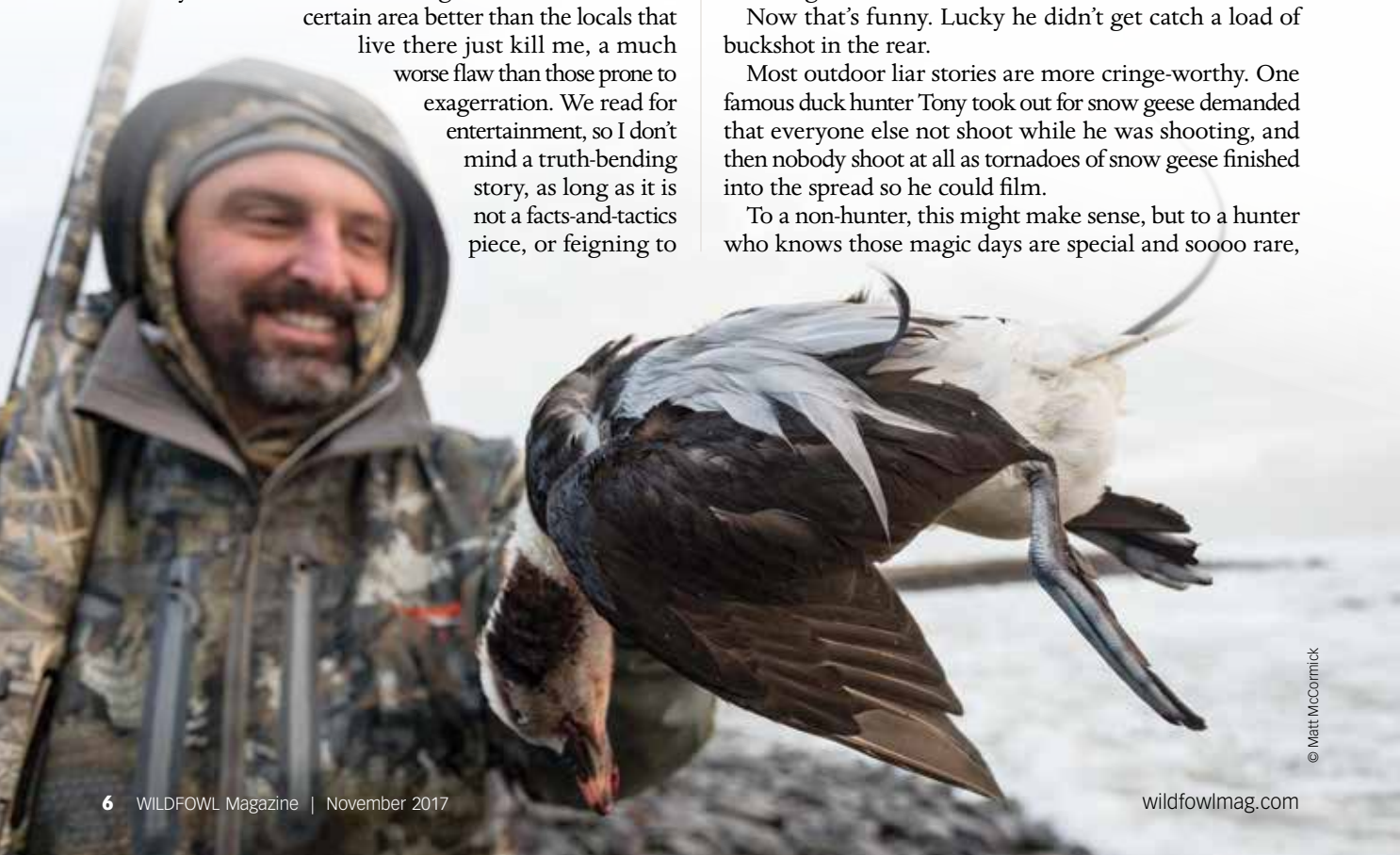
He saw the phone ring. It was Tony, asking, “where the hell are you?”

Wrong house.

Now that’s funny. Lucky he didn’t get catch a load of buckshot in the rear.

Most outdoor liar stories are more cringe-worthy. One famous duck hunter Tony took out for snow geese demanded that everyone else not shoot while he was shooting, and then nobody shoot at all as tornadoes of snow geese finished into the spread so he could film.

To a non-hunter, this might make sense, but to a hunter who knows those magic days are special and soooo rare,



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it is selfishness that is unsufferable to hear. You can go years without experiencing a snow goose hunt like that, on a no-limits species. And they require slavish amounts of hard work, from expensive leases to finding guys tough enough to put out over a thousand decoys in the middle of the freezing night.

To top it off, the writer-hero-jackass quit and left entirely while the birds were still finishing, and took off in his vehicle, his "work" done. Some hunter...

Most stories are just annoying, like when a writer jumps out and starts shooting images when the only geese of the day are about to finish because it's all about him, though he is in truth ruining his own photo opportunity. And outdoor writers are famously bad shots. When I hunt with veteran guides they are always shocked if you can halfway shoot, because gun "expert" writers are famous for whiffing at everything but happy hour.

I posted a mild rant a while back about writers who write like they have a captive audience on a barstool and are the kind of people that just want to hear themselves talk, taking the reader entirely for granted.

Veteran waterfowler Kyle Green teed off in response about how most writers he has hunted with "needed a third arm to hold another drink and couldn't wait for the hunt to be over to race back to the bar." One writer asked

Kyle if he should use his own calls. Kyle said thanks, no, and the writer didn't call the entire hunt. Strangely, the story later read how "the birds fell victim to my calling..."

Ha. I have to work that into a story some time. "Fell victim to my squawking."

Writers get to travel a bit, and most have seen a lot, but that gives you no right to go to a guide's home turf and act like a condescending jerk, telling a pro how to dope the wind or when to call or how to put a spread out in some

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desperate lust for self-validation. Sadly, I have seen that a lot, and it makes me cringe.

Greatest compliment I ever received was Vandemore telling me that a guide he knew had told him, "Hanging out with Skip ain't like hunting with most writers," and that at the end of our first hunt together, he happily agreed.

"Whatcha mean?" I asked. He put it mildly as he could.

"They're mostly just, I don't know man...pretty weird, don'tcha think?"



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Most outdoor writers are humble and fun, witty folks who are grateful for the chance to do what they do and eager to pitch in and make a good impression. The kinda people you like to be around. Even the “less-experienced” writers (to be kind) are nice folks, and the real jerks are rarely invited back. Stereotypes are such great time-savers: A friend of mine observed it seems the older generation of outdoor writers has a lot of grizzled old cool guys who have done things you can't believe (stalked by vengeful elephants, etc.) but that's also where a small contingent of privileged crotchety old know-it-alls also lingers, from back when it was a lot easier to get into the business. My generation tends to be competent and just happy to be here, mostly legit guys who grew up in the woods and are gun dog owners and can shoot pretty well. There is a new crop of Millennials who are by and large on shaky ground, to put it nicely, as outdoorsmen. What can you say. They're Millennials. They can't shoot worth a dang, but have lovely social graces and are way-into hunting, if mostly for the modernist locavore chic of it and the beard-and-retro-lumberjack fashion sense (see "Fowl Thoughts," back page).

Except these Milloonnials like to hug too goddanged much. And their faces are tinted pale blue from staring at iPhones 24-7.

Then again, if all writers were super-cool, we wouldn't have all these silly stories, right? A person's ego is generally reflected in their writing. Most outdoor liars need to

be reminded it's all about the reader, not themselves. The best stories are those in which there is truly a story to tell and in which the writer just needs to get out of the way.

Ramsey Russell's terrific southern teal safari feature was one that I just loved recently (Sept. WF). He is an intuitive storyteller. I was supposed to make that trip with him but couldn't, yet you were right there with him when you read it. Mouth-watering descriptions of food and peculiarities of southern life and teal obsession, all focused on everything but himself. Ramsey has not been a writer much until now, and is a real natural, yet he is also not a fan of a lot of outdoor writing, “because too much comes across like a bunch of neophytes masturbating their egos. The whole great thing about reading as a kid was falling off into a world unlike the one I was sitting in every day. That's what it should always be. No one is buying autobiographies when they buy *WILDFOWL*, they're buying themselves a vicarious visit into a duck blind they've never hunted.”

Amen to that. *WILDFOWL* staff's offerings might not be mistaken for Nash Buckingham's finest, but I promise you, it is not because we aren't trying, or that we take our audience for granted. We will continue working hard to get it right, and to know the difference when we see it. And hey, thanks for reading!

[Got a funny TV guy/outdoor TV/ writer story, or peeve? 🦉

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