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At Home With DUCKS DOWN

BY RAMSEY RUSSELL

Twenty minutes had passed since the boys had declared official shooting time. A black duck trio was spotted beating it down the far side of our hole in the middle of a sprawling cattail marsh. Instinctively grabbing the call lanyard, I hit them with a loud series of descending mallard notes. Two were apparently deaf but the rear bird looked like a hit tetherball when it broke ranks and banked steeply towards us. *Quack-quack-quack-quack-quack*, it talked itself all the way into the decoys, right off the end of an awaiting gun barrel. It folded like a greeting card at the shot. A shaking-wet black lab, Larney, soon delivered the first of many Pacific black ducks the week would render.

**AUSTRALIA IS SURPRISINGLY
MORE SIMILAR TO DUCK
HUNTING IN THE U.S. THAN MOST
OTHER FOREIGN DESTINATIONS**

UNDER



AT HOME WITH DUCKS DOWN UNDER

“Yes, mate, those blackies can be quite vocal at times,” said host Glenn Falla, “Welcome to Australia, mate.” That first black duck would be one of many pleasant surprises during the week.

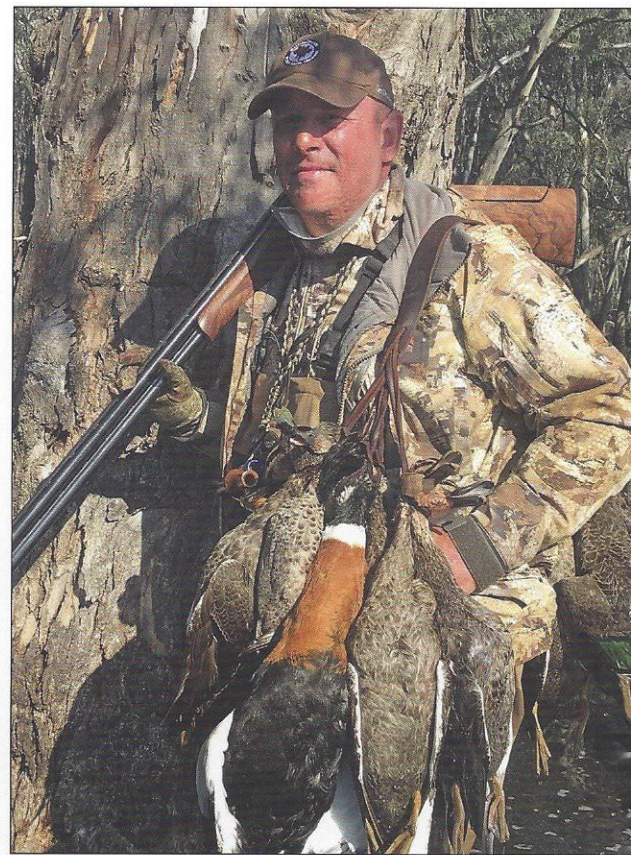
Getting there had been a chore. The initial flight had been cancelled due to mechanical problems. Instead of arriving at 6:30 a.m., the flight had landed 18 hours later, just after midnight. My host had just gone to bed an hour-and-a-half from the airport when I called to tell him the great news. Only an hour later, he had asked if I wanted to rest or go hunting.

“We’ll sleep plenty in the grave, and after three days of Airport Hell, I really need to air out” was my quick response. We were soon backing down a boat ramp. I felt immediately at home when the mud motor roared to life. We kicked out plenty of birds during the loud ride in.

“They’ve bugged out for the time and will trickle back throughout the morning. They were fogging this spot yesterday morning,” explained Larney’s owner, Trent, while pitching a couple-dozen over-sized black duck decoys from the boat. Sure enough, after that talkative single icebreaker, ducks began working the area, mostly small flocks of black ducks. A breeze picked up mid-morning and they started working beautifully.

Taking turns picking over singles and pairs, we worked together like a well-oiled machine on larger flocks. Having spent a few days together previously in an Arkansas duck blind, catching up between volleys came as naturally as chatting with your barber. I felt almost doubly at home when hearing the daily limit was 10 ducks. Thinking we’d missed our chance on a 12-pack of black ducks that had caught us deep into a forgettable discussion, we coaxed them nearer with a blind full of comebacks, soft quacks and pleas. On the third swing, they dumped abruptly into the pocket – the lead birds splashing paddles-down into the decoys, enticing the rearward bunch into crossing the magical 20-yard mark.

Still suffering whiplash from trying to swing through a pair of maroonish-colored, low-flying blurs called hardheads that had streaked like lightening bolts through the decoys, the idea that sleep depravity had somehow greatly enhanced my shooting prowess was shattered when a flock of chestnut teals fluttered over



The author in his element, ducks on his strap, boots in water

the decoys, and I punched two holes worth of miss in their direction. We pulled decoys with about a half-dozen birds apiece swinging from the ends of our straps.

Show me a group of duck hunters anywhere in the world and, not bragging or anything, I’ll show you folks that can put away a 14-day diet before lunchtime. After loading the boat and shucking waders, we visited with a few other local hunters, hatched plans for the following morning and fueled our ambitions on hearty Anzac biscuits and deliciously sweet capsicum muffins that Glenn’s wife had prepared. We scouted a few properties and finished the day working over a few more black ducks in a shallow-flooded pasture. The divine smell of crockpot-barbequed lambs shanks greeted us at the door. Tasting better even than they smelled, they proved to be a definitive southern hemisphere comfort food. Deep sleep came easily.

“I want you to experience everything Australia has to offer in the short time your here, mate,” yelled Glenn over the bellowing engine. The boat cut through the slick, blood red surface of a reed-lined river at dawn. Smokey mobs of mostly black ducks and grey teal sprang into air as we rounded each bend. Anticipation for what the morning would bring was as palpable as the black lab’s wagging tail beating the boat sides. The plan was simple: we’d split into two



Pink-eared ducks are a delightful and unusual sight in a duck hunter’s bag.



Pacific Black Duck

groups and bounce birds between a couple of ponds. The one pond limited particularly quickly, and Plan B was executed. I walked across another flooded field mid-morning and slid into a strip of sparse, head-high

cover. The grab-your-ankles mud and trip-you-vegetation felt perfectly at home.

Not yet having even caught my breath and loaded the Browning two-shooter, an Australian shelduck's honk directly overhead had me scrambling. With time to only load the top barrel and swing quickly behind my left shoulder, I somehow managed to connect with my first "mountain duck" prize.

And then things got serious.

Mobs of blackies and grey teal, seasoned with singles and pairs for good measure, intermittently swarmed the field. Coming off the river and flying headlong into enough wind to steer predictably, they worked low over an line of decoys. Singles and occasional doubles began filling the strap, but it's difficult to triple with an over-under, and my trigger finger grew weary pumping for that third shot when flocks were floating on the deck! A flock on mountain ducks passed high and wide, remaining unscathed. A 10-duck limit came quickly enough; the leather-strapped heft swaying across my shoulder felt especially gratifying while sloshing towards the boat.

We moved north several hours to Glenn's hometown in central Victoria, hoping that a particular "turkey dam," as water storage dams are colloquially referred, would produce opportunities a couple new species in addition to ubiquitous black ducks for which I'd developed a serious crush.

"Those pinkies are tiny little buggers," Glenn reminded me as he dropped me off where the reservoir tapered to an end. Peering over the levee, there were piles of ducks, including sought-after pink-eared ducks and maned ducks.

The pond erupted into a plume of waterfowl at thunderous clap of Glenn's first shot. That was the signal. Sliding into a tall clump of cover, I waited for the inevitable rally. Picked from a pair, a fine, rusty-headed drake maned duck soon cartwheeled to the water with a splash.

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Yet another tightly bound knot of tiny little shorebirds had been given a pass before the light hit them just right, and I realized they were pink-ears. Properly tuned, I dialed in on the next couple flocks and picked up three beauties before the music stopped. Zebra-striped with raccoon-like eye patches, a spatulate-shaped bill that has specialized, mandibular flaps for feeding on plankton, and distinctive carotenoid pigmentation that renders the conspicuous pink ear patch, they are exactly like what you'd expect in the land of platypuses, kangaroos and koalas.

Ducks were conspicuously absent for the first half-hour. Then, like a magic spout had opened they began to trickle in from all directions – left, right, behind, front – – quacking black ducks, barking grey teal, meowing maned ducks. From separate cover, we communicated with soft whispers, whistles, and sometimes-abrupt and flip-flopped ducks to alert each other to inbound fowl.

The spout opened wider, more ducks flew. Glenn clobbered one from a pair of blackies, and I caught the other overhead. A single black duck from his side, a single one from mine; a pair tumbled in a flurry of flapping wings from low flying trio of grey teal sweeping break-neck behind me, and a high-flying “wood duck” that had tried sneaking past Glenn waddled up like a spitball. From the direction of the ancient trees came a flock of 40 some-odd gray teal that passed high and wide on the first turn. A rapid-fire staccato of barks turned them and they passed low and out of range. Feeling red-faced and breathless, I stood on the call and again turned them. We punched four from the flock as they made a third pass only 20 yards off the deck. And with that, the spout clamped shut and the flight ended.

At times, it feels like countless miles traipsed through six continents' worth of wetlands have culminated at a specific location without which the entire journey would have been for naught. Scouting into an enchanting flooded green-timber stand was one such time. Massive river red gums towered overhead, their canopies seething with thousands of raucous, sulfur-crested cockatoos. We walked a few hundred yards through shin-deep, iced coffee-colored water when the sound of startled deer crashing through water – except that it was kangaroos, dozens of them. We knew exactly where we'd be the next morning.

We parked quietly and assembled our gear. With two black duck decoys, a mojo decoy, shotguns, ammo-filled pockets, we skirted silently and lightless



This retriever managed to understand the author's Mississippi accent just fine.

along the woodland edge. Quacks reverberating within the dark forest beckoned us through the murky, knee-deep water rife with submerged cap-floaters. Entering an elongated opening, ducks jumped from pockets as we approached. First placing the mojo 30 yards to the front so that it could be seen from all angles except from the downwind approach, we then placed the pair of decoys in the hole and retired under a couple leviathan red gums. Our brief wait lasted until the first sunbeam hit the decoys.

The morning's first customers were a pair of tree-top high black ducks that sulked in silently on outstretched wings. Glenn's quarry bounced on a few limbs before splashing down, but my shots did little



more than whittle a couple of overhead branches. Redemption came with the next pair that responded to a few soft quacks and sailed in to the decoys. The morning progressed at a perfect pace. Other than a stray mountain duck and a few teal, the strap slowly but surely filled with fattened black ducks. For two days, we had enjoyed a thousand-acre public-use swamp entirely to ourselves, which is common mid-season and during the week.

Despite the prettier faces, the black ducks stole my heart. Home or abroad, isn't it usually just the hard-boiled basics of interacting with responsive ducks that makes one's heart beat most? Pacific black ducks made me feel perfectly at home.

The story of duck hunting repeats itself worldwide. Put a group of duck hunters from just about anywhere together in a duck blind, and for that brief span of time differences cease; they are above all else, simply duck hunters. Scenery, species, local protocols and tools of the trade may vary among locales, but the basic rules of the game remain unchanged. With friendly, English-speaking people and a long-standing tradition of duck hunting, Australia is surprisingly more similar to duck hunting in the U.S. than most other foreign destinations. And yet so wonderfully different.



Oz Duck Hunting Basics

In Victoria, the duck season runs 90 days, from mid-March through mid-June, and in South Australia, it runs from mid-February through late June. Australia's endemic duck species include Pacific black ducks (blackies), pink-eared ducks (pinkies, or wigeon), hardheads, Australian shelducks (mountain ducks, or honkers), maned ducks (wood ducks), grey teal, and chestnut teal. In some seasons, Australian shovelers (blue-wings) are also occasionally legal depending on census results. The rare freckled duck has fidelity for certain wetlands and is strictly protected.

Exporting birds from Australia has been difficult in years past; it's legal but it appears that governmental bureaucrats have not been approving the export permits. In working with Field & Game Australia, we hope to see this situation improved. My own birds are in freezer storage until . . .

Ramsey Russell owns and operates GetDucks.com, a full-service agency specializing in worldwide duck hunting adventures for serious duck hunters. Australia is among the newest additions to a growing line-up that encompasses six continents. An Australia duck hunt for two has been donated to the 2018 Dallas Safari Club Convention.