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Trophies of a Feather

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The best three hunts in life are the first, the last and the next. Many hunters may even say that their favorite duck is the next one over the decoys, but the universal aura of wildfowling is seducing free-to-go-anywhere-in-the-fenceless-sky-they-damned-well-choose birds to within about 100 feet. It's how the game is played.

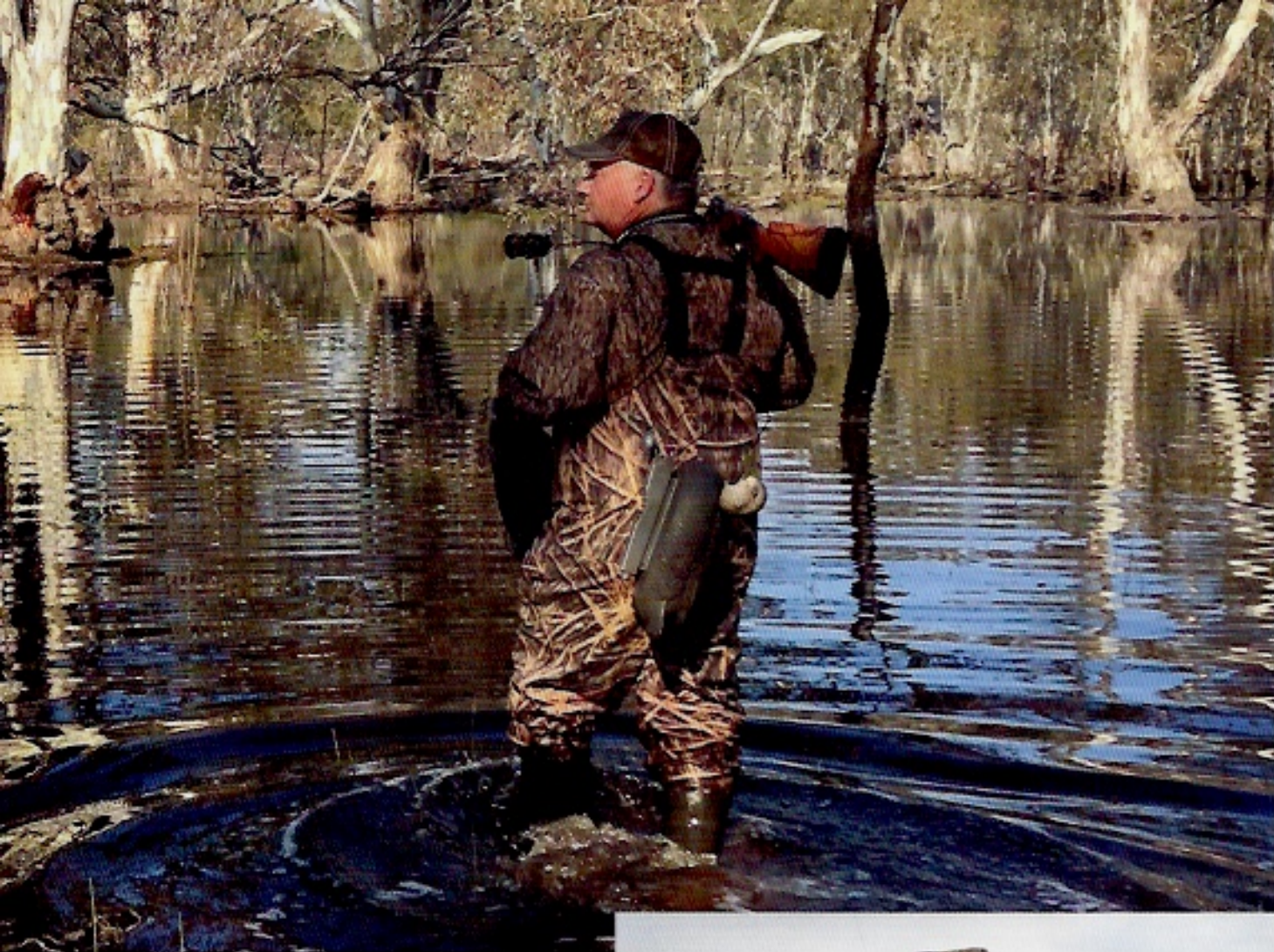
Great hunts don't happen by accident either. Understanding waterfowl's life habits is paramount; skillfully using tools of the trade is essential. As our understanding grows, so too does the world around us. Waterfowl are migratory and we eventually find ourselves compelled to new areas, to species unobtainable in our own back yards. There are 50 waterfowl species in North America alone. And suddenly it becomes a real big world.

The rules of the game remain the same, but the playing fields change while hunting waterfowl worldwide. From 16,000 feet in the mountains to below sea level in levee-protected settings, and from the river red gum swamps of the South Pacific to ravaging seas near the Arctic Circle, there exists a spectacular variety of waterfowl.

Many people go their entire lives never knowing that it's not just about dead ducks. We hunters know better. Destination hunting is not only about a trophy; it's about the immersive experience of playing the game. It's the simple reminder of what we've experienced that those feathered trophies shimmering in our game rooms most represent.

Since first exhibiting at SCI Convention years ago, we've enjoyed many great duck hunting conversations among client-friends at campfires and dinner tables around the world, usually about hunting the bread-and-butter mallards, pintails, honkers and woodies that we all cut our teeth on. Following is a sampling of unique gamebirds that sparked such friendships.





King Eider

King eiders epitomize the pinnacle of North America waterfowl hunting experiences. Relatively rare among North America waterfowl collections, they are as spell-bindingly beautiful as the remote marine environment from which they originate. It's the where and the when that these sea ducks are hunted that earns the crown.

King eiders are circumpolar, ranging throughout the arctic, wintering to subarctic marine climates, but the most practical place on earth to hunt them is a 40 square-mile volcanic island located 850 miles northwest of Anchorage. King eider hunting occurs in January, as the birds retreat from ice further north to feed in the biologically productive Bering Sea, diving as deep as 150-feet while feeding on marine invertebrates.

Getting to this corner of the world is daunting to those unfamiliar with travel to remote Alaska where it's rumored that wind originates, especially during the winter. That's just part of the adventure. The somber environment is cold, windy, awe-inspiring. It's humbling. The sea spray isn't so bad after realizing it simply turns to ice on contact.



When the wind blows too hard – and it will – eiders are hunted from rocky points where they're sometimes pushed close enough to the shoreline for shots from hunters hunkering down against the stark island ambience of gale force wind. And when it gets quiet, as it eventually will, pure magic awaits. Lines of decoys drifting behind

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boats, ebbing up and down massive slate-gray swells of saltwater – now you see it, now you don't – then out of nowhere and just a couple feet above the water a king eider or three rocket over. Your name is called. You shoot. Hopefully cheers and fist-bumps follow. There are king crab legs and prime rib for supper. You've earned it.

Logistically, only a limited handful of seats in the boat are available each season. King eiders are singularly the only reason otherwise sane hunters venture into the Bering Sea in January — that and the memory of having experienced such an epic adventure. Associated species include harlequins, long-tailed ducks, white-winged scoters and occasional Pacific common eiders.



Barnacle Goose

Dark skeins of barnacle geese rise from a distant river roost, forming a dark cloud that drifts in the direction of awaiting hunters, cold from laying in wait. The flock numbers several hundred and loosely moves as one toward the decoys, their diminutive barks sounding like as many lap dogs, growing incessantly louder as they descend into the decoys.

Birds fold like love letters at the volley, and the black lab has scarcely recovered the last prized

bird when someone hisses, "more geese coming this way!" The scene repeats itself throughout the morning until what appears to be a half-section of geese of have amassed in the distance, making the ground writhe like heat shimmers, outcompeting the hunters for late-morning stragglers. The action-packed morning provided plenty of shooting action, it's time for lunch.

Once considered a brant goose, the highly-attractive, mid-sized barnacle goose is more



Pink-Eared Duck

"Pinkies are tiny buggers," explains the local guide with a Crocodile Dundee accent. They look like diminutive shorebirds while streaking over the decoys in tightly bound knots. 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 their conspicuous pink ear patch, these diminutive ducks look exactly like what you'd expect in the land of duck-billed platypuses and koala bears.

Duck hunting in Australia is on one hand as familiar as hunting back home, right down to decoying Pacific black ducks that respond amazingly well to mallard-style calls during flooded

timber hunts and English-speaking camaraderie. On the other hand, it's as other worldly as kangaroos busting deer-like through swamp thickets, forest canopies seething with raucous, sulphur-crested cockatoos and bacon cheeseburgers topped with sliced beet root and pineapple.

Australia has a surprisingly rich tradition of duck hunting to include hand-carved decoys and duck calls. Duck hunting season spans nearly 10 months from mid-February through mid-December to encompass Southern Australia, Victoria and New South Wales provinces.

During wet years on what is otherwise the driest continent, limits are generous by U.S. standards. Other species include grey teal, maned ducks, mountain shelducks, chestnut

teal, hardheads, occasionally Australasian shovelers and, in the Northern Territories, magpie geese, plumed and wandering whistling ducks. Several other game bird species endemic to the South Pacific may be hunted in nearby New Zealand to include black swans, paradise shelducks and pukekos.



closely related to cackling Canada geese as evidenced not only by its prominent white cheek patch but by its gregarious nature, feeding habits and bark-like calls. The best places to hunt barnacle geese worldwide are Sweden,

where the migration peaks in mid-October through mid-November, and in the Netherlands, where migrating barnacles overwinter but where, due to an anti-hunting sponsored 10-plus-year cessation of "goose hunting season," barnacle geese have taken up residency, proliferated like resident geese are apt to do and are now conservation-hunted under government-issued depredation permits.



Proximity to water and abundant agriculture are ingredients for prime goose habitat. In addition to barnacle geese are greylag geese, Canada geese and, in the Netherlands, a few Egyptian geese. Adhering to common European traditions, there are no conventional limits in either country, and the bags can be relatively considerable.

Rosy-Billed Pochard

There may be sexier-looking ducks, but beauty is in the beholder's eye and no species best embodies the essence of real duck hunting than Argentina's rosy-billed pochard. The prominent blood-red knob at the base of the drake's bill seems to glow like an ember at times.

Large-sized and gregarious, rosy-bills are strong-flying, agile, their wings tearing through the air like ripped paper, responding to calls and decoys like frat-boys to free draft beer. Where first-timers and ardent collectors want to put their hands on all of Argentina's different species, old salts simply ask, "when do the rosy-bills show up?"

Argentina's most ubiquitous species, rosy-billed pochards are hunted over natural marsh, lakes, rivers and flooded agriculture. Associated species are geographically or habitat dependent, with greatest diversity occurring on truly massive marsh complexes located in remote areas to the north, where the time-honored skills of traditional scouting, calling and blind building consistently produce much better results than the short-cut practices commonly used elsewhere.

The usual suspects of Argentina duck species include Chiloe wigeon; brown and white-cheeked pintails; speckled, silver, cinnamon, ringed and Brazilian teal; white-faced, fulvous, and black-bellied whistling ducks; black-headed ducks; red shovelers and more.





Ramsey Russell owns and operates *GetDucks.com*, a full-service agency specializing in worldwide duck hunting and game bird adventures. Wading the world's greatest wetlands, always searching for the next great duck hunting adventure, is his commitment to clients and personal life mission. Australia is among the newest additions to a growing line-up that encompasses 6 continents. It's duck season somewhere. Visit Ramsey Russell's *GetDucks.com*, SCI Booth #4921-4925.



Western Capercaillie

After leaving the cabin about 10 p.m. and walking two miles down a winding bear trail, you stand waiting in a half-million acre tract of ancient boreal forest at sunset. Listening intently. It's so silent that you imagine hearing exhaled breath crystalize into frost. Or maybe you're not imagining things. Twenty kilometers from the Arctic Circle, it's only dark-dark for a couple hours in May, but it takes a few hours for the sun to slowly creep over the horizon. It's then that capercaillie cocks sing on their lek.

To an old duck hunter's ears, the four notes sound like a marble dropped on wet table, bouncing twice and then dribbling through the puddle. Perched, the capercaillie sings with its eyes closed. Between notes two and three, a gland in its inner ear swells rendering it momentarily deaf. The hunter-guide duo then deftly two-steps towards the call. *Crunch crunch*. Then don't move.

Their eyes are opened, keenly searching for incoming hens. When everything comes together, the distance is closed to within 30 meters; the bird can be seen and cleanly taken by shotgun. But it could take nights of the most wonderful black forest adventure imaginable. At times they can't be seen, the forest canopy is just one contiguous ink-black shadow backlit by sullen sky. Or the bird flushes. Or is missed. Or maybe on the third morning an eager bird anxiously sings later into the morning. Crouching and holding your breath you peer around cover, see him clearly perched atop a hemlock like a Christmas angel, his iridescence sparkling in a single beam of sunlight. A smile creases your face as you begin pulling the trigger.

Capercaillies are the world's largest grouse, and one of Eurasia's most prized game birds. While the birds are often rifled or hunted using pointers during the winter, spring capercaillie hunting consists of stalking prime breeding birds as they call.

Nowhere is their density higher or the hunts purer than in parts of western Russia. It's an exhilarating adventure for a noble species. During the spring months, associated game bird species include black grouse that are hunted by traditional ground-blind methods. Hazel grouse and snow grouse (willow ptarmigan) are also commonly taken.





Cinnamon Teal

The richly-colored cinnamon teal, its bright, chestnut-red body contrasting beautifully with sky-blue upper-wing coverts and gold-and-black tertial highlights, is probably the foremost requested species to someone like me who has met with duck hunters, helping to organize trophy duck hunts worldwide on a daily basis for the past 15 years. Rarely are cinnamon teal the last one needed to complete a gamebird collection.

With distinct breeding populations in North America and South America, cinnamon teal are interesting as well as beautiful. Unlike most North American dabbling duck species, cinn-

mon teal only rarely breed in the midcontinent prairie-parkland region. A significant amount of North America's cinnamon teal is thought to breed in remnant marshlands of California's Sacramento Valley. Most overwinter south of the border where they are hunted with great success and in prime plumage.

Cinnamon teal are never seen in sizeable flocks on wintering grounds such as North America's green-winged teal or Argentina's speckled teal. Whether it's a function of their discreet preference for deeper, muck-bottomed marsh habitats where they share a similar diet to shovelers or a behavioral dynamic is unknown.

As would be expected, cinnamon teal comprise a relatively small portion of the bag in Mexico and Argentina. By contrast, the greatest density of cinnamon teal on earth is found in coastal Peru, where massive flocks assail the decoys along a thin sliver of coastal marsh habitat sandwiched between the Pacific Ocean and the stark, Atacama Desert.

Where the beautiful but otherwise ordinary cinnamon really earns its place in a unique game bird listing may be in the company it keeps. In addition to the normal line-up of Pacific and Central flyway species, associated species in western Mexico include the Mexican duck, a non-migrant that is very closely related to the mallard that exists in greatest abundance in Mexico's Yaqui Valley, and the black brant, which primarily overwinters along the Sea of Cortez.

In Peru's coastal marshlands, white-cheeked pintails accompany cinnamon teal in the hunting bag, and at higher elevations within Peru's Andes Mountains are puna teal, crested ducks, sharp-winged teal and Andean geese, all of which are usually spot-and-stalked.



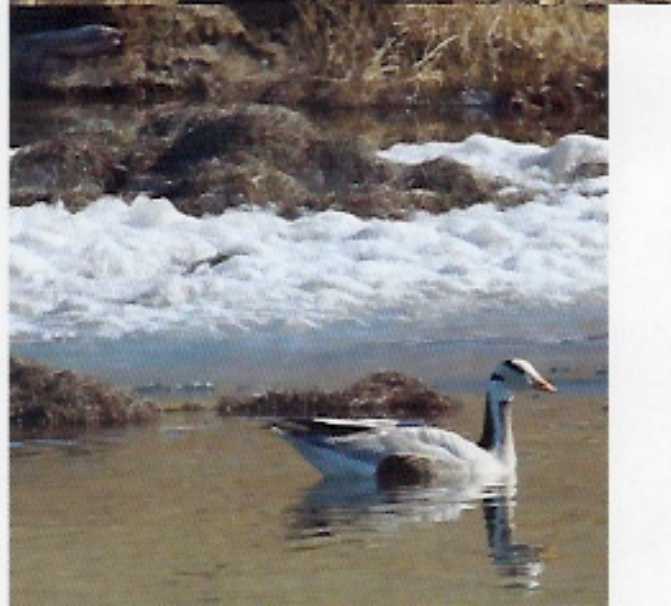
Bar-Headed Goose

Written about in ancient and mythological literature, bar-headed geese migrate at high altitudes through the Himalayan Mountains, where there's only about 10 percent the amount of oxygen found at sea level. Their spring migration from wintering grounds in southern Asia, principally near the Pakistan and India interface, take them through some of the most unique places you'll ever hunt waterfowl.

The remote grassland steppe of central Mongolia appears as beautifully uninhabited as ever. More than 40 percent of the country's population lives in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. Nomadic *ger* and horse culture traditions persist. There are three million citizens, 30 million head of livestock and not a single strand of barbed wire to be found. And where there's water, agriculture or both, there exists impressive numbers of unique waterfowl such as the elegant bar-headed goose, which can be hunted nearly nowhere else on earth.

Breeding pairs of bar-heads seem to key in on tiny, alkaline springs nestled among secluded pockets of sand dunes where they feed on protein-rich fairy shrimp. Finding them takes scouting and a little luck. Ruddy and common shelducks, swan geese, Eurasian wigeons are endemic Asian species commonly taken in association with bar-headed geese. Depending on migrational timing, other possible species include garganey teal and eastern spot-billed ducks.

Binoculars, patience and improvised game plans are important elements for successfully hunting in the cultural absence of a waterfowl hunting tradition. Finding waterfowl among a landscape as vast as Mongolia can be like finding the proverbial needle in a haystack, and must then be hunted using bare essentials because no matter what you packed, most of your tool box is sitting back home 6,800 miles away, which is really one of the most beautiful aspects of the entire experience. Of any hunting experience. It's how the game is played. 🐾



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