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Hunts around the World

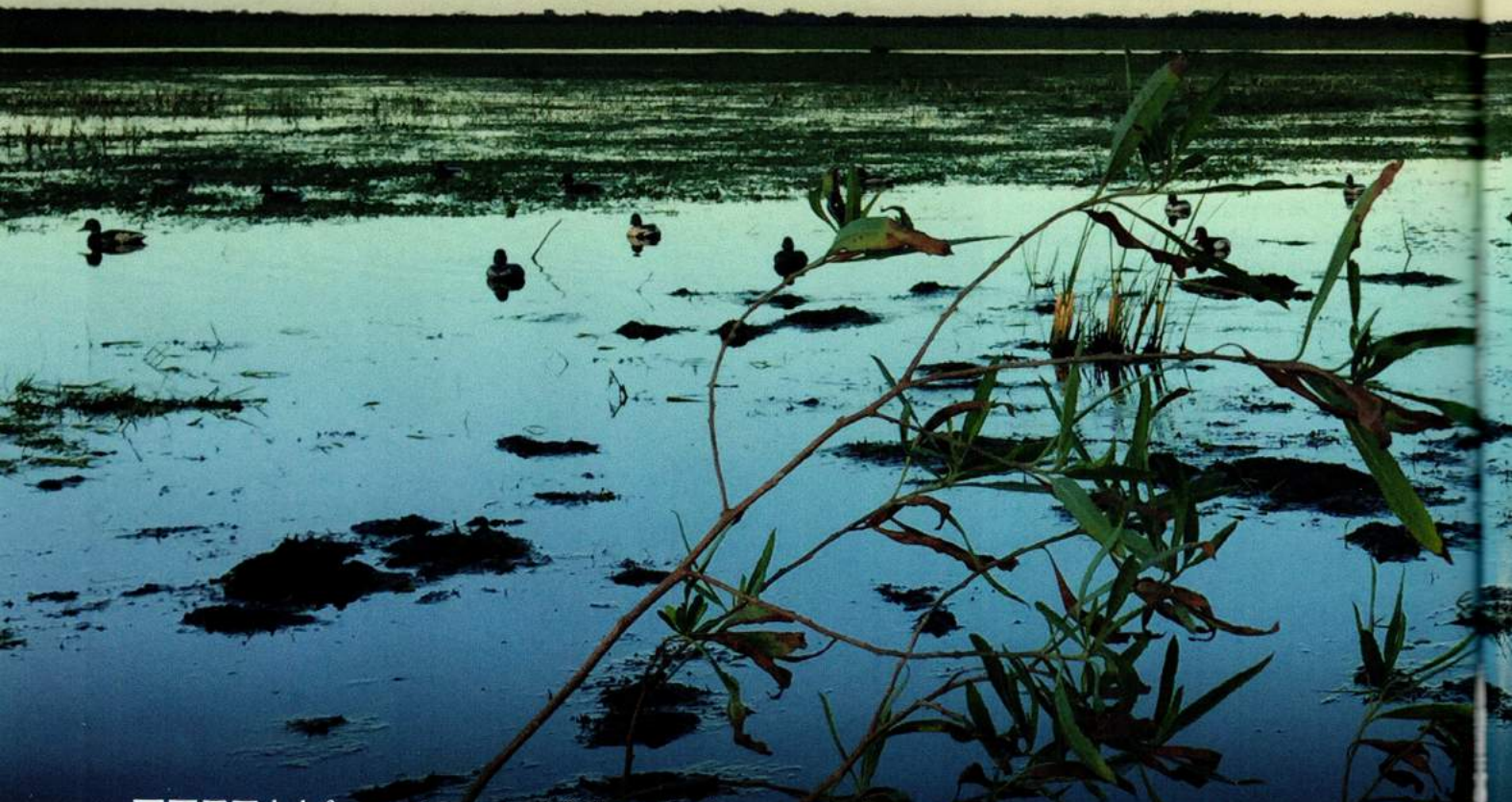
Adventures on Five Continents

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IN REMOTE NORTHERN ARGENTINA, WATERFOWL CONCENTRATES IN ONE OF THE MOST PRODUCTIVE MARSHES ON THE CONTINENT.



Weeks before your international flight touches down in Argentina, your bird-hunting hosts in most duck lodges prepare for your arrival. They stock the wine cellar with choice Malbecs, order extra shells for their rental shotguns, and they start tossing yellow corn in local ponds—bait to ensure that the ducks are around when the shooters are.

Most visiting hunters aren't aware that the flights of silver teal, whistling tree ducks, and white-cheeked pintails are at-

tracted to corn, not to their guide's sweet calling or choice habitat. But most hunters also don't mind, since their ignorance is blissfully rewarded in heavy duck straps and a mixed bag of species they'd never encounter north of the Equator.

But some hunters do mind, and while there's absolutely nothing illegal or untoward about the common South American custom of corning, these hunters would rather trade heavy straps for the uncertainty supplied by unbaited, free-range

ARGENTINA'S OUTBACK



STORY AND PHOTOS BY ANDREW MCKEAN

ducks. The few Argentine destinations that cater to these hunters are well off the beaten path, but they make up in adventure what they may lack in predictability.

All this is preamble, a way of explaining why I found myself driving through the night as a passenger in a twenty-seat van, sipping Johnny Walker Black from a plastic cup and trying to keep my eyes open as the miles and hours rolled by on increasingly small and potholed roads north of Buenos Aires. I was in the company of five other Americans, two fellow writers and two folks from Benelli, all leaning in to the descriptions of our destination delivered by Ramsey Russell, whose Mississippi-based company, Get-

Ducks.Com, brings hunters to the duckiest spots around the globe.

Russell has been hunting Argentina's outback for the past seventeen years, as a guest and booking agent for many of the country's wingshooting lodges. Over those years, he kept hearing about the duck-rich Rio Salado, a sprawling swampy basin in the country's remote northern frontier, a few hundred miles below the Paraguay border. Logistically, the marsh might as well have been located on another continent: to get there, hunters would have to drive for as many hours on bad roads as they spent in the air flying to Buenos Aires from Dallas or Atlanta. Plus, there's not much infrastructure devoted to visitation. Only one or two hunting operations work the area, which is mainly occupied by gauchos who graze cattle on the salt marsh.

But Russell confirmed it was worth the attention of his sophisticated clientele when he learned that one of those operations had built a business around the idea of hunting wild, unbaited birds across the 75,000-acre marsh. Once Russell experienced it for himself, he realized that a trip to Rio Salado (it means "salty river") was like going back in time.

"It is so pure and so unspoiled, it is what I imagine coastal Louisiana was like back in the time of the Acadians," Russell told us as we motored north through the dark. Rio Salado is, Russell says, the largest intact natural wetland in Argentina, and because of its size and variety, it satisfies all the life-cycle requirements of ducks throughout the year. In other words, ducks here don't migrate, but rather move nomadically through the wetland complex to find food and habitat as the season requires.

"How good can it be?" Russell asked rhetorically. "Let me put it this way. When I die, I want my ashes to be scattered there. But in a wet year."

His qualification is worth noting, because we're heading to duck camp in the midst of one of the most enduring droughts to hit northern Argentina in decades. Will the water and ducks be there when we arrive? And will we rue our lack of corn over the next week?



A mixed strap of silver teal, Brazilian teal, red shovelers, and white-faced whistling tree ducks.

The Endless Marsh

Because we arrive in the early morning hours, our group is deprived of a sunrise on the marsh. Instead, we drive still more, a couple hours on dirt roads to a cut-corn farm where we shoot more doves than I've seen in years of hunting estates around Cordoba and Mendoza, Argentina's wingshooting heartland.

It is here, with eared doves flitting and juking over the agland, our party whooping when one of us makes an impossible shot and groaning when we miss gimmes, that our line of the week is coined: "*Mas cartouches, por favor.*" And it's where we grow to appreciate the consistent operation of our Benelli shotguns, which collectively fire more than 2,500 rounds that day without a hiccup.

That night, as we prep gear for our first foray for ducks the following morning, we get an education in the uncertainties of free-range, freelance waterfowling.

"Get your walking shoes ready," Russell tells me. "You're not headed to a blind. You'll make your own when you get there."

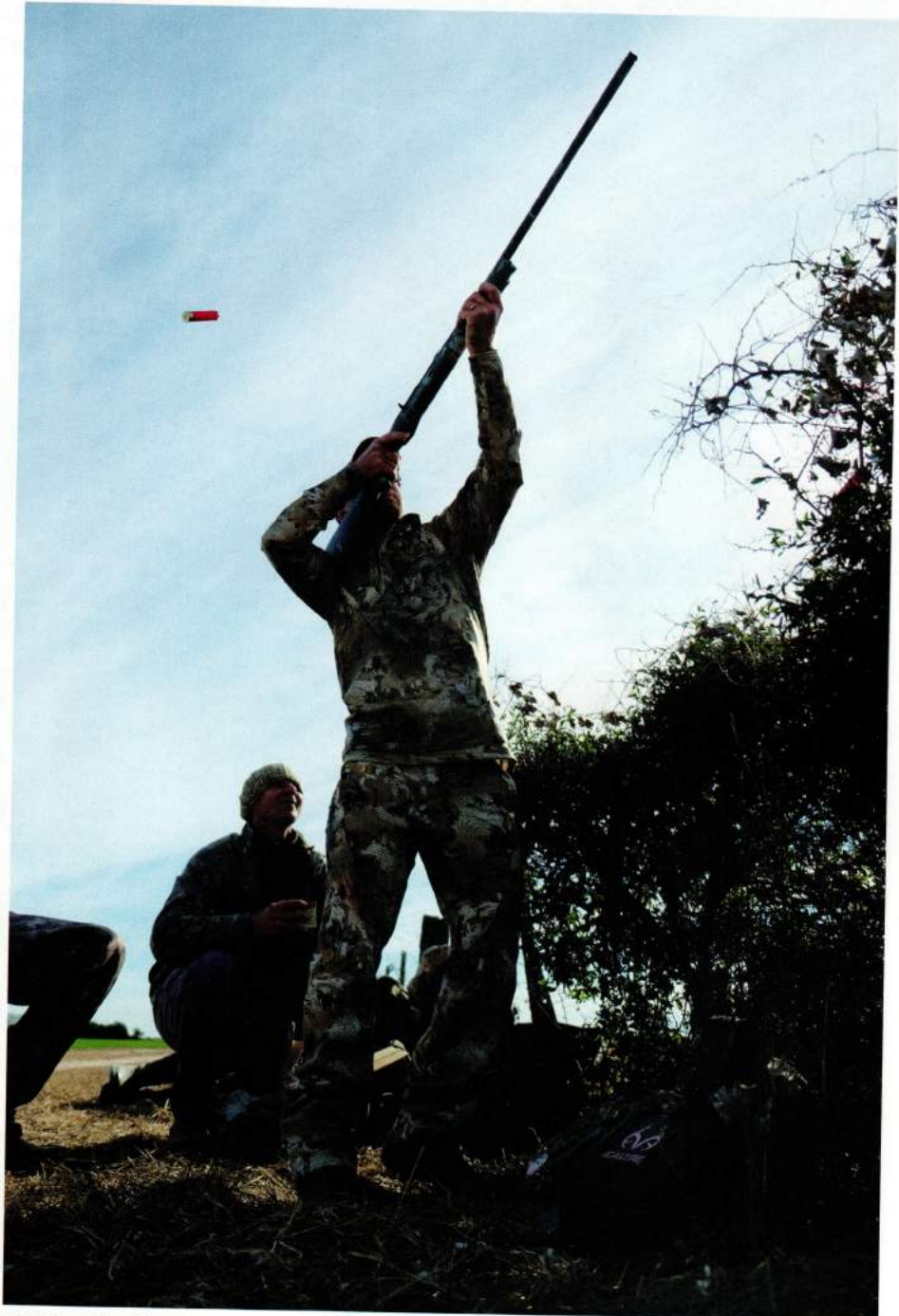
Getting there takes some doing. Breakfast at 4 a.m. and on the road by 4:30, we drive for two hours in a Hi-Lux Toyota pickup to the water. In normal years, according to Russell, hunters find good habitat so close to the *estancia* that you can hear gunshots from its front porch. This is not a normal year.

My guide for the week is Maximiliano Calligaro. He's from Santa Fe, an Argentine city a few hours to the south of Rio Salado. He speaks worse English than I do Spanish, which means that we communicate through a series of hand gestures, pidgin Spanglish, and knowing smiles. But, on that first morning, following the light from Maxi's headlamp, sloshing through ankle-deep muck, a mesh bag of duck decoys over my shoulder, I could be with my buddies back home as we trudge a public marsh to set up before shooting light.

Maxi stops to cut branches from a willow tree, cleaving the wrist-thick wood cleanly with his gaucho knife. Then he dallies the butt-ends of the branches with a hank of poly rope and carries this

sheaf of limbs for the next quarter mile. Finally, he stops, assesses what we can see in the feeble light, and then stabs the willows into the mud to set up a thin screen. He pushes a stool into the muck, motions for me to sit, and then leaves me to throw out decoys. They look like mine back in Montana—chipped and dented and in sore need of a fresh paint job. A few have BB holes where some ground-swatting hunter clipped them. Maxi pulls out a spinning-wing decoy. It's homemade, with cardboard for wings and a motor that looks like it had an earlier life powering a ceiling fan.

Maxi slogs back to our blind and we stand in the cold water, listening and watching. There is no sign of human



Will Brantley shooting incoming doves from the fenceline of a picked corn field.

civilization, no farmhouse lights, no traffic, not even a plane winking in the night sky. But as dawn breaks, the marsh comes alive with shorebirds. A few long-legged ibis and pterodactyl-looking lapwings, which Maxi calls “*los teros*,” flap overhead. I’m not prepared for the first flight of ducks, mainly

because I can barely distinguish that they’re ducks at all.

“*Chute! Chute!*” hisses Maxi, surprising me with the first identifiable English I’ve heard from him. I follow his orders and send a load of lead No. 5s toward the overflying birds. One drops with a *splat*, but I can barely see because

I’m blinded by the muzzle blast. Back home, legal light would be a half-hour away. By the time the sun rises over the shallow marsh, I have shot what would be a considered a double limit in any North American flyway. With lead shot, no less.

The next two hours represent the single best day of duck hunting of my life. I bag three dozen elegant little silver teal, their cloud-blue beaks capped with an operculum of canary yellow. I kill a handful of drake rosy-billed pochards, possibly the most prized duck of the Southern Hemisphere. Bulbous red beaks lead their blocky black-and-gray bodies, making them look like broken-nosed boxers in formal wear.

But the most distinctive bird of the day is the Brazilian duck, which flies in small flocks that tear over our decoys and turn as a choreographed formation. When they stand on a wing to drop into the spread, the eastern sun lights up their chromium-blue speculums, which flash like Mylar. “Butterfly wings,” says Russell, when I show him my trophy drakes. “They catch the light like butterflies.”

The final bird of the morning is the one that I’ve come here to find, a fully plumed cinnamon teal drake whose rufous feathers seem to glow with an internal light.

Back at the lodge, over a lunch of fire-charred steaks and a cheesy squash casserole, I inspect the straps of my partners, who were hunting the same marsh but several miles from me. There are blocky red shovelers, yellow-billed pintails, speckled teal, and a long-necked brown duck that I can’t identify. It’s a fulvous whistling duck, Russell tells me, as he picks through the bag with the care and affection of a museum curator.

If this is the possibility of Argentina, baitless and wild, then the next two mornings show me a more relatable side. On both days, Maxi and I slog into marshes that smell and sound ducky before the light arrives, but we’re not in the right spot either morning. Birds skirt wide around our willow-branch blind, or they flare at our spinning-wing decoy. By the time we adjust



A cinnamon teal. This was one of McKean’s bucket-list ducks, and he finally encountered one in Rio Salado.



Bagging handfuls of eared doves from an afternoon shoot. The birds all went to local farm families.

and reset our spread in a more productive lobe of the marsh, the birds have stopped flying.

On our second morning, we find satisfying consolation by pass-shooting wood pigeons as they fly high over the marsh. I bagged twenty-five ducks—considered scarcely worth mention at most Argentina waterfowl lodges—but the thirty-three pigeons I put on my strap make it an epic day. Maxi, who loves to eat the meaty birds, approves of my affinity for pigeons and my shooting ability. “Bravo!” he shouts with every bird I drop into water the color of bone broth.

Swamp Things

There’s another consolation: afternoons hunting the unfeathered denizens of the marsh. The drought has concentrated nutria, capybara, and even wild pigs, most of which are fair game for duck hunters with fast-cycling shotguns and some time to kill.

Nutria are the most surprising contributors to my increasingly mixed bag.

We hike into a dry basin, crunching with our wading boots the bleaching shells of crabs and snails that in a normal year would be covered by a foot or more of salty water. When we arrive

“It’s Duck Season Somewhere”

International duck hunting is fraught. Variable water conditions can make or break a hunt. Even neighboring countries can have wildly different firearms and hunting regulations, and duck-hunting traditions vary so much that regional names of species can change within the borders of a single nation.

None of that deters Ramsey Russell, the owner of GetDucks.com, one of the most established international wingshooting consultants whose website, www.getducks.com, can take you from Peru to New Zealand and from Sweden to South Africa. There’s a good chance that Russell, who operates GetDucks.com from his home in Brandon, Mississippi, has hunted each destination himself. He’s an encyclopedic resource for species as varied as Africa’s Cape shelduck to the tufted ducks and barnacle geese of Europe to the Mongolian swan goose.

Russell organized our trip to Rio Salado, but participated as enthusiastically as any of his guests. His mantra, “Happiness is a heavy duck strap,” was uttered as frequently as the tag line for his company: “It’s duck season *somewhere*.”—A.M.



Grilling butterflied and salted ducks on hot coals as the centerpiece of an afternoon picnic near the hunting area.



A heavy strap of ducks from a morning shoot: Brazilian teal, silver teal, cinnamon teal, and rosy-billed pochard.



A brace of nutria, shotgunned on canals in the interior of a drying wetland complex.

at the remaining water, a long, narrow ditch at the center of the basin, it's alive with nutria. Dozens of the rodents cruise the canal. We spread out and by the time our Benellis are quiet, we've bagged several of these hefty, muskrat-looking marsh rats.


Maxi gathers them up on his duck strap and struggles under their weight on our slog back to the pickup. That night, we eat them in a pepper-and-onion stew, their mild meat reminding me of young squirrel.

That night, one of our party floats the Rio Salado with his guide, spotlighting the steep banks from a push-poled canoe. They spot dozens of caimans, some stretching to 9 feet, and come back in the wee hours with a 90-pound capybara, which also finds its way to our dinner table. Another of our group bags a wild hog, and on our way back from one of our duck hunts, the guides flush a brocket deer,

which provides a bush-meat stew for the week.

This is wild South America, with variety and surprise that's hard to find in the manicured shooting fields of Argentina's wine country. The guides, too, are a different breed, much more like the country boys I grew up with than the seasonal workers that many high-end lodges employ in the Cordoba and Mendoza areas of the country.

Maxi, too, senses a connection that transcends our inability to understand our words. As we prepare to depart Rio Salado for the excruciatingly long drive back to Buenos Aires, Maxi hands me something. It's his gaucho knife, the long-bladed hybrid of machete and Bowie knife that he used for everything from hacking blind material to field-dressing a brocket deer.

I give him my Sitka jacket. He'll need it for the cold, wet weather that's reportedly on the way. 

Gear for Rio Salado

The most critical ingredient of any high-volume bird hunt is the gun, and South America's combination of dirty shotshells, gritty conditions, and thousands of shot opportunities has undone many otherwise solid shotguns. There's a reason that many wingshooting lodges stock their own rental guns; they can count on their reliability, and they know how to clean them, which the staff does every evening.

Our group brought Benelli's freshly redesigned Super Black Eagle 3 semi-autos, and even though we were a little too casual about cleaning them, they operated reliably through a diet of thousands of Todo Terreno's Caza-brand shells. Toward the end of our week in Argentina, we started having cycling and lock-up problems. It turned out the problem was build-up of plastic from the hulls in the locking lugs. Once we cleaned out the gunk, we were back in battery. The SBE3's combination of recoil-reducing technology and lively ergonomics made it a delight to shoot, even with hundreds of relatively heavy lead waterfowl loads.

Our camouflage was Sitka's Marsh Wetlands System, which features layers that we could adjust to the conditions. Constant companions were the Grinder pants and Merino half-zip top. Chilly mornings brought out the Gradient Hoody over Sitka's warm Dakota Vest. And many of us got a chance to field test Sitka's new Delta Wader, an all-season laminated (and extravagantly expensive) wader designed to take years of abuse and to be repaired and rebooted as needed.—A.M.



Practical tools for Argentina's outback: A traditional gaucho knife and Benelli's Super Black Eagle 3 clad in Gore's Optifade Timber camo pattern.