

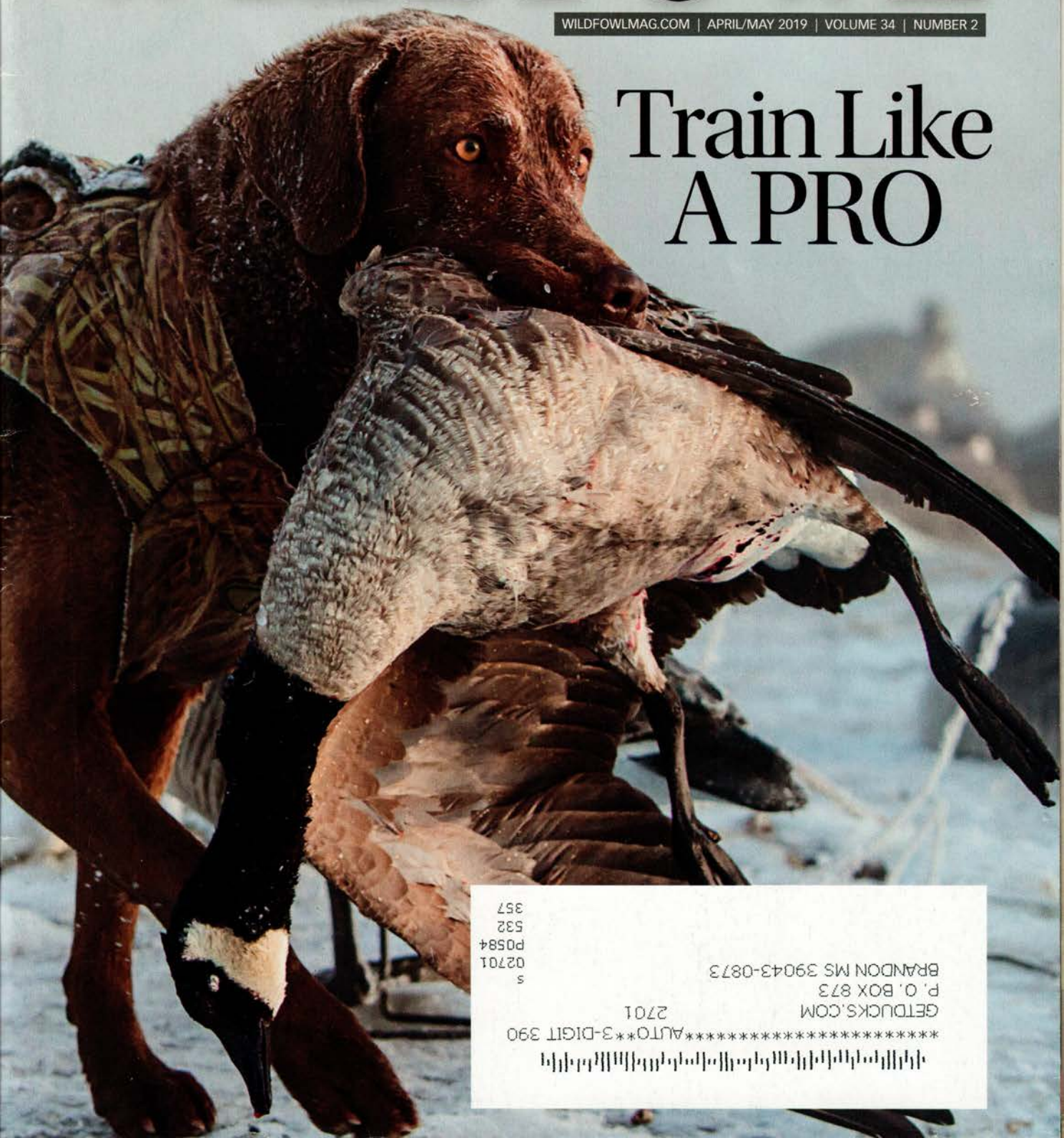
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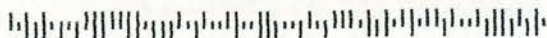
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MOTTE Possibility

Rio Salado in Northern Argentina Is One of Waterfowling's Final Frontiers.

BY SKIP KNOWLES

TIM JOSEPH'S DUCK HUNT had taken a wild turn as we crept along the riverbank, where deep, slithery impressions left by caiman made trails that were punctuated by tracks of the capybara, the giant rodent we could not wait to see. After hours of hiking, a heavy-bodied hairy black wild pig was spotted rolling in the sun along the banks, and Joseph's SB3 was about to prove it was a lot more than a duck gun.

In the gun's gullet were primitive low velocity duck loads that had been pried open and stuffed with hand-cast slugs or chunks of lead that these backcountry Argentine guides had hacked off an old piece of lead pipe plumbing fixture with their long, wicked gaucho knife, the *facon*. At about 30 yards Tim stood up with confidence to shoot. I wished we were closer,

expecting these home-grown slugs to fly wildly, but he did not hesitate and sent a kitchen-sink load into that hog right in the spot where things matter most. We chased, expecting a charge, but it did not go far, and a long, tough, porker-packing hike-out ensued. We took turns jumping in to shoulder the swinging pig lashed to a log the guides had hacked from the bush. Once I convinced the guys that gutting it would be smart, it wasn't so bad.

Some duck hunt. Outdoor folk always talk and dream of finding themselves "in the middle of nowhere," but we rarely arrive at that destination. Even that little rock in the middle of the Bering Sea, St. Paul Island, has wireless.

Not here. Duck hunters can find the middle of nowhere in the wild northern tier of Argentina, where the Rio Salado ("salt river") winds

through the Santa Fe Province and the second largest wetland in this enormous country, a nation that stretches from the Brazilian jungle clear down to Tierra Del Fuego, where Patagonia's tip dives into the Antarctic Ocean.

We were roughly 10 hours north of Buenos Aires, but worlds away from that metropolis, in a 130-square mile wetland, and having the time of our lives. This is a different kind of Argentine waterfowl hunt. Inconvenient, slightly labor intensive...you know, like actual duck hunting. The long-dreaded drive north was actually pleasant, a post-plane unwinding mix of cocktails and snoozing in a large, comfortable van, the countryside rolling by like film, fading from the grass and fields of the pampas country to the scrubbiest wetlands of the far north.

Step back in time to the 1850s, and this is what the Mississippi River Delta may have looked like before the Big Muddy was diked, dammed and degraded. And the duck hunting even in this dry year was hotter

than most will ever see. At first light, even the guns sounded different as we opened fire on early flights of the many species of teal. Muffled and quieter, as though somehow swallowed by the vastness of the landscape, unlike the loud whopping booms over the small, controlled, reed-rimmed waters you shoot in most parts of the country, where flocks are controlled under the influence of corn by both outfitters and farmers' harvest. At Rio Salado, you are one-on-one with a guide, and I very quickly came to appreciate being a sole shooter, not crammed in a blind with other gunners racing to shoot first and ringing my ears. I knocked down more than three dozen silver, Brazilian, spotted and ringed teal each of the first two mornings without having to wonder who shot them. A red shoveler in hand felt like some kind of greater cinnamon teal, just a magical bird for a waterfowl nut.

"This is a real duck hunt for real duck hunters," host Martha Ciafonna emphasized repeatedly throughout the hunt. By that, she meant many things, like hiking in waders for wild-

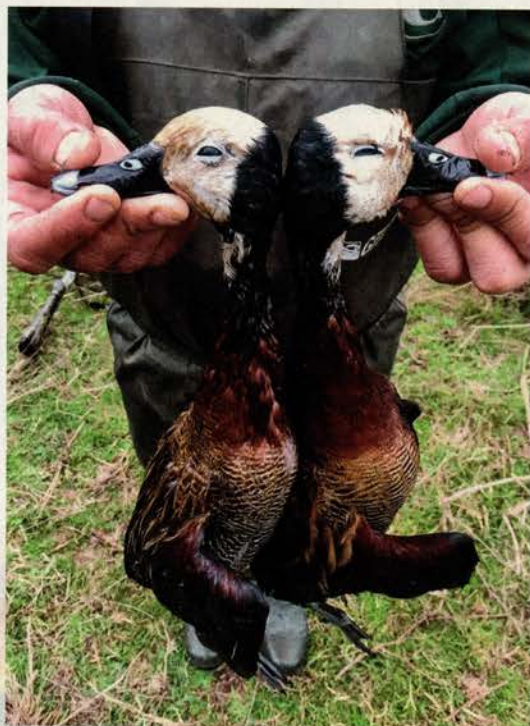
lying birds, not stepping from the truck into the blind. Most years, hunters here are hauled around in sleds drawn by horses for miles through the waters. Nothing wrong with those traditional Estancia country duck hunts further south—there is certainly something to be said for getting off a plane and getting right to it with that evening's flights and

dense flocks of fat corn-eating Rosey-billed Pochards and yellow-billed pintails.

But Rio Salado is duck hunting as adventure. The duck hunting is a big part of it, but it is only a part of it.

It was late July, and the cruel hand of a drought had reached for the heart of this country, wrapping around the wetlands and squeezing out most of the water. This would hurt our duck hunting a little, but we would ultimately shoot the SB3's about five times more as a result of the drought. Roads long muddy and submerged firmed up, allowing us to access vast fields that had not been shot over for doves for years because reaching them in wet season was all but impossible.

It wasn't quite Cordoba's rivers-of-doves-through-the-sky, but it sure as hell wasn't Texas, either. We banged away with glee, building piles of hulls and running case after case of the light loads of dirty Argentina ammo through the Benellis with no problems. If the guns can run these weak, fouling loads it is certain that clean, powerful, U.S. waterfowling loads won't fail to cycle the iner-





tia actions. It was intriguing to see everyone hit a rhythm and quickly start upping their kill rate, dropping one or two hundred apiece after just a few hours. Hunting the non-stop flow of eared doves was absolutely worth making the trip, ducks or no.

With a kind, quiet, face and demeanor, my guide Titu spotted incoming birds.

"Atencion! En frente. Atencion! Atras! Mas Adelante! Antes, antes!" he'd say. Attention, in front! Attention, out back! Behind you!

What a perfect warm up, and we'd need it.

Titu is about as ranch-hand strong and capable fellow as you'll meet. He spoke no English, but my fractured SoCal Spanglish enabled us to stay on the same page, with plenty of gesticulating. Whether whacking a tree down and lashing a hog to it or hacking willows to build a natural duck blind in minutes, he wore an easy smile and was into the hunting big-time. One night excursion saw him thrust his hand into the muddy boiling waters of a dark canal to grab a huge dying capybara by the leg, dodging the giant teeth of the world's largest rodent, and hauling it bleeding and flopping into the boat with one arm.

This right after we had just dodged a caiman, the giant blunt-nosed South American alligator, so big it



stretched nearly all the way across the canal. The "cappy" had leapt into the water slightly too late to avoid another cut-down kitchen-sink cartridge from the Benelli. I was just amazed at the performance of the home-grown buckshot junk loads.

"Is it hard to get regular shotgun slugs in this country?" I asked.

"No," one of the guides said.

Well, okay then...A different kind of duck hunt. A wild west nutria shootout one evening with the SB3s had everyone in camp grinning like they'd gotten away with something. We rounded the corner of a road one day and I was aghast at the sight of two capybara, which can top 100 pounds, sitting in the grass like some kind of super-nutria, a bizarre creature straight from a Dr. Suess book.

We had not expected all this other action, not even the doves. Ramsey had spoken in emotional superlatives for years about the ducks in

Rio Salada, capturing my imagination with tales of vast waterfowl country where you could sit on a point in a marsh and kill as many of these non-migratory ducks as you could on a hunt with a bait-slinging outfitter further south.

"Knew it the first time I ever set foot in Rio Salado—I wanted my ashes scattered in this wetland," he said. "It's 130 square miles of year-round duck habitat that satisfies all waterfowl life-cycle

requirements, an amazing environment that's much more remote, much wilder, than anywhere I'd hunted in the previous decade-and-a-half of visits. Baiting is logistically impossible, but through the skillful art of genuine duck hunting, the shooting is superior. Real duck hunting in a pure, unspoiled environment, where guests enjoy the blinds to themselves. So far off the beaten path you can hardly get there from here, but like everything else in life, the best usually requires a little more effort."

A storyteller, the fast-talking southerner is a treat to have in camp and a force of nature. One minute he'll speak of fooling an airport security dog with a bag of fast food ("I thought I was busted but I reckon that dog liked McDonald's") and the next moment quote Twain: "Quitting tobacco's easy—I've done it a thousand times." When you book a

hunt with *getducks.com*, try to make it one that he's hosting. Fantasizing about adventurous duck hunts years ago, he quit a cushy government job to chase his dream of starting *getducks.com*, and he now helps others chase theirs. He sends waterfowlers to the far reaches of the planet in pursuit of all that quacks.

The Mississippi mad man had slimmed down since I'd last seen him, but his carb-dodging diet was about to snap. We stopped at a small estancia and hung out with the chickens and turkeys and farm



in-distress mouth call and sidled off into the brush. The Benelli was about to collect yet another furry critter on this trip.

I'd called maybe 40 seconds when one of the aggressive native foxes, the gorgeous silver-red *sorros* that swarm this country, came running. Armed only with #5s, I let him close to 15 yards before pulling the trigger. I tried this stunt again closer to the lodge but was swarmed with bird dogs and curious cows, though we saw foxes almost daily in our driving.

My last duck hunt was a slow-motion pass-shooting event on an open pasture, scratching down a dozen or so teal that swung wide of the decoys. After so many memorable duck-killing mornings, at this point in the trip I was content to relax and soak it in, enjoying the flights of *tatos* and giant screamers (*cha-jas*) winging past. If you have

gunsmoke even settled. And, would you believe, we powered downed plates of nutria, so tender, like a cross between squirrel and pork. I'd heard Cajuns will eat them, but hell they will eat anything, and was shocked at how good they taste.

Capybara meat, kabobs galore, and we all groaned about too much food, but nobody stopped eating or chugging Malbec. Also on the table: the monster pig Tim had killed after Titu said we could surely get a "javelina." We of course expected a 30-pound collared peccary when we set out on that hunt, a Texas-sized javelina, and so gasped when we spotted that big razorback lounging on the river bank, the Argentine "javelina." By the time we hiked the carcass out, I wished it had been stateside javelina-sized.

Middle of nowhere, sure. No cell or wireless. Perfect. And if we ever saw other humans not with our party, I do not remember it. But roughing it? Not exactly. Our rustic estancia was painted in the rich reds and greens common down here, comfortable and warm, with a sprawling patio and fire pit in the courtyard where the wine and stories flowed at the end of the day.

After one hunt, in which I doubled on whistling ducks at dawn, I relaxed in a pasture with Titu by a small fire he'd made. Then he looked at me curiously when I pulled out a rabbit-



cats while our hosts split ducks and grilled them, baking big loaves of toasty homemade bread on brick ovens and drowning them in butter as we laughed in the cool damp air and downed bottles of red wine.

Life doesn't get much better than that.

Food is always a huge part of the South American experience. *Milanesa a caballo* (seasoned fried beef). Beef filet at lunch. Duck gumbo in cast iron—*Guiso de pato*. Giant rib-eyes. And sorry, Martha Stewart, but loin medallions from Brocket deer topped the list after we watched the guides finish one off with their flashing *facon'* knives before the





not seen the green metal sheen flash of Brazilian teal drakes turning in the sun it is very difficult to describe. It could leave spots in your vision. Their entire wing is a speculum. A lot of loud shooting would have been almost intrusive to my Zen moment. But less than a half mile away, Josh Ward lucked into the X and killed an

obscene pile of ducks, all over water, which is more the norm here in wet years. Josh deserved it. The day prior he'd been wading out and nearly bumped into a huge caiman, the massive ditch-lizard roiling explosively right at his feet, scaring him to death and barely back. Every day we shot pigeons, some larger than

the teal, a scintillating bonus on each hunt, but it was time to go home.

Earlier in the trip, Tim Joseph had knelt in the cold dark over a fire in the pre-dawn and seen a shooting star, and then another, and then one that lit up the ground and lasted three seconds as it burned an otherworldly line across Orion, the hunter constellation. He could not have been further from his Maryland home. That strange spirit-moment foreshadowed of one of the wildest waterfowl hunts left on the planet, about to unfold.

As we left at daybreak in a spooky fog, a subtle form ghosted across the road like a giant fox, canine but distinctly un-dog like, pausing in the headlights. Someone explained it was a rare, nearly extinct species of wolf. Somehow, we were hardly surprised. A perfect exclamation point at the end of this most extraordinary adventure. (Contact ramsey@getducks.com for this and many other waterfowling adventures).



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