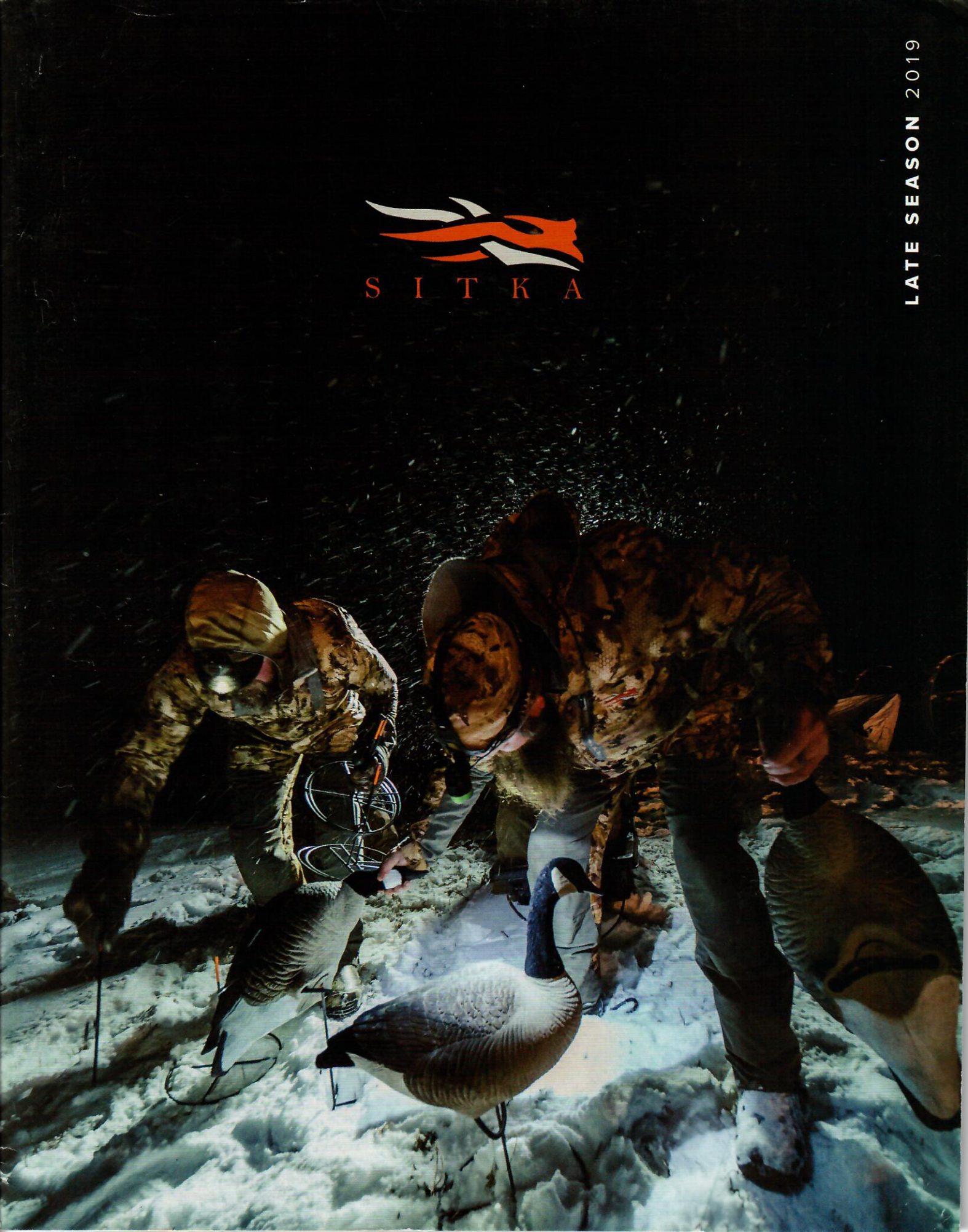




LATE SEASON 2019



The
**EXPERIENCE
COLLECTOR**





*Story by Michael R. Shea
Photos by Brett Seng
& Jake Latendresse*

Life is Short, Get Ducks.

Ramsey Russell spent his 16th birthday unconscious at an ICU in Jackson, Mississippi. His dog—he loved that dog—had scratched up the inside of his parent's garage. He touched it up with some oil-based paint, then cleaned the brushes with gasoline. The water heater kicked on. Sparks ignited fumes. The explosion brought in fire departments from across the county.

"Your son is going to die," the doctors told his parents. "If he lives, he'll lose both legs and one arm." The Russells talked to a funeral director.

A few days after he turned 16, Russell was flown to a burn center in Galveston, Texas. This is where he remembers waking up, wrapped from head to toe like a mummy. Painkillers inhibit skin growth, so he laid in that hospital bed completely still as they unwrapped him and scrubbed away the dead and dying skin. He went into his own special pain cave. A quiet place inside; the hill where he hunted doves with Grandpa. Then it occurred to him. He had missed dove season.

Russell didn't die. And he never missed another dove season.

After more than 70 surgeries, he beat the 92 to 8 odds that the doctors gave him. He earned a B.A. and Masters in Forestry at Mississippi State and worked for the federal government. But the second really big event in Russell's life happened in a goose blind in Alberta. It was his third year at the place. By word of mouth, he nearly filled the outfitter's season with Mississippi boys looking to shoot big honkers. The outfitter called Russell out to the barn one evening and asked him to be his exclusive booking agent. Russell asked him, "What's a booking agent?"

Soon he booked out Alberta two years in advance. He started a website: getducks.com. He added Argentina to his list. He joined Dallas Safari Club and breathed the rarified air of markhor hunters. Soon he was opening adventure duck hunts around the world—for species most mallard hunters never heard of. Hunts in Azerbaijan, Peru, Russia, Sweden, South Africa.

"I realized," he says, "that I'm living a second chance. I didn't formulate this plan. It just happened. No half measures. That's been my approach in business and life."

No one else sells six continents of duck hunting. He travels 150 to 200 days a year. Homebase is Brandon, Mississippi. Hunting, Russell says, was something he did with his grandfather and, while laying in the burn unit, it's where his mind went. To the family, the friendships, the stories, the connection with the natural world, a world greater than oneself. The best duck hunts in the State of Mississippi, his grandfather used to tell him, happened at Dixie Bottom Farms. Many years after his accident, after his grandfather passed away, he bought some dirt to start a duck club with a few friends. When they got the old blue-lined map, it was marked B.B.B.—the initials of his grandfather's friend and the owner of Dixie Bottom. Russell and company call their club Willow Break. There's a 1,000-square-foot plywood room there that Russell calls home.

"If I'm not traveling, I'm here," he says. "We spend Christmas here, Thanksgiving, the important days, the best days, we spend them at camp. This is where my best friendships are, my oldest friendships." The walls are covered with six continents of photos and birds. Before big hunts there's a potluck. Club members bring a dish, share stories, catch up on family and on hunts. "I'm not a collector of species," Russell says, "I'm a collector of experience. This life is short. It can end in a flash." No one knows that better than him.



