

THE BOYS OF  
**RIO SALADO**

THE GOOD OLD DAYS  
OF WATERFOWLING STILL EXIST



LEEKJOS

# A

**AGE, EXPERIENCE,** or maybe just eccentricity, for as long as I've known the Mayor and Ira, it's never been about body count nor has it ever been about ego. These boys are slow-smoked, Southern-fried, old-guard timber, so it's all devils and details. Process. Playing a game of precision inside an already endless game of waterfowling possibilities. Make no mistake, these two would sooner not squeeze unless everything's come together just right in their mind's eye. But when it's perfect, they'd have a tough time not pulling up on the last duck in existence.

As with any book jacket around long enough to collect the dust of time, evenings in duck camp nowadays are less about that day's hunt and more about bourbon-soaked memories of places long past. The conversations always look backward, theirs to the southern theatre of old Missouri and mine on Minnesota's northern big water and the Saskatchewan prairie. No one questions that things have changed, and though we may not all agree on exactly why, no waterfowler who's paying attention can deny North America's bird migrations just aren't the same. What we wouldn't give for Doc Brown's DeLorean and a one-way ticket!

Wherever you go, the bond between hunters transcends cultural differences and overcomes language barriers.





**FAST-FORWARD** a few months. The three of us are 6,000 miles and change from home and halfway into a questionably controlled, 10-mph sideways slide through a slurry of greasy South American mud that a few months back had been a perfectly serviceable gravel road. It's the kind of frozen-in-time moment where a guy's having very holy thoughts and the voice in his head repeats a somber prayer: "If I'm gonna go today, please kill me on the return trip, Big Guy. We've all been waiting to see a place like this since forever."

That place is Rio Salado, and the guy who clued me in on it is none other than Ramsey Russell, the Dos Equis man of waterfowling. We'd met in the Mayor's camp a few months back. I was on assignment, and as is common with old souls, there was an electric kinship. The man just gets it. During one of our post-hunt reminiscing sessions, Ramsey just flat-out blew our doors off. "You boys really want to see what duck hunting looked like 100 years ago? It's out there. It's a long ways away, and I'll show you in July. Buenos Aires." Clearly, Ramsey was living up to his well-deserved reputation for sussing out massively unknown waterfowl locales.

Now, it's easy to know what a few of you are thinking. Argentina? Baiting birds to keep them around? Thanks, but no thanks. At Rio Salado it's the complete opposite, and except for a guide, the experience was more akin to a DIY hunt out of your past. Just as Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula gives us a picture of what Alaskan fishing looked like a century ago, Rio Salado is a duck hunt on the Louisiana coast in the 1800s or the Susquehanna Flats at the turn of the last century. Stark. Desolate. Still steeped in what used to be.

**Resources are few in Rio Salado, so hunters craft what they need from what they have on hand—like this handmade duck call from an empty shotgun shell.**



**PICTURE** a 74,000-acre sprawling wetland no more than a foot or two deep surrounded by all the right agriculture—wheat, corn, soybeans, and sorghum. For perspective, that’s double the size of the Minneapolis city limits. Here, you see 14 species of birds go about their days as if the shotgun had never been invented. That’s

a very different Argentina and Uruguay than the ones I’d previously seen, with an equally different Mayor and Ira than I’d ever known. In that week, alongside our buds Fonzie and Dougie Fresh, we were all 25 years old again. Wide-eyed, full of stoke, back to the kids we used to know. It’s that kind of special—*The Sandlot* special.

There are no easy rides delivering you to prebuilt blinds resting within easy shooting distance of a bait pile. You access the marsh on foot; good waders are a must. It wouldn’t be out of the realm of possibility to see a horse towing a hand-laid glass skiff with you, your guide, and a day’s worth of gear. Together, you formulate the plan. You chop sticks

and leaves. You build your own hide and sit beside each other in shin-deep water, and if the birds aren’t buying it, you move until you’re in them. Just like hunts used to be, as sweaty and roll-up-your-sleeves gritty as Argentina gets—a wild time in a wholly wild place where an airplane and a truck ride to camp really are some sort of time machines.







**THE RELATIONSHIP** between you and the staff is special, too. Some folks like to rub elbows with camp owners and guests—and there’s certainly nothing wrong with that—but the crew I roll with has always felt more at home around the guides. And make no mistake, they’re not Bird Boys here. They’re brothers from a different mother.

I felt it the moment I met Checo, Rio Salado’s veteran guide. He noticed me appreciating the way the light bent off flank feathers while holding my first yellow-bellied pintail. Within minutes, he’s showing me phone pics of his family duck hunts and we’re trading duck calls. There was a pride of place and admiration for birds in his enthusiasm. His images read more like family history. Living proof of what he and his dad, granddad, and siblings do when they’re not working. Like us, they hunt ducks because they can’t not hunt ducks. They hold the entire act as sacred, and dudes like this have a way of making your time at Rio Salado more like hanging out with long-lost relatives. Despite the language barrier, words become an unnecessary formality. They know a fellow hunter when they meet one, and their familiarity, skill, and understanding of the local waters make it more like they’re welcoming you into their own home. In a very real sense, that’s exactly what’s happening.

For those of us who also feel like we were born a hundred years too late, Rio Salado confirms we’re not wrong. The numbers of birds stuffed into what equates to 115-square-miles will test the computational abilities of your brain. Here, among unspoiled wetlands and lush grasses, you truly have the chance to stop and picture the staggering bird densities North America once held. So many birds are in this place, and they’re seemingly everywhere. Among them, the famed Rosy-Billed Pochard in stunning numbers, Black-Bellied Whistling-Duck and Fulvous Whistling-Duck, two species of pintail, four flavors of teal, Brazilian ducks, and more. All are relatively unpressured and playing nice the way you’d wish, call-responsive, a window back into what we once had.

A word of advice to those lucky enough to find themselves in a place this magical: Indulge your idealistic side. Sift through time’s back catalog of your most memorable hunts and find the wide-eyed beauty and the picture of perfect that endeared you to waterfowling. Remember the way those birds worked when fully committed, locked up, and eating it. That’s the special sauce and always will be, and it’s why we come to places like Rio Salado: to see birds act like birds. My crew didn’t come this far for pass shots. We came for the show. Feet down, wings cupped, up close and invading your personal space. That’s what the old days back home were like, and unlike most South American hunts, Rio Salado is more than a shooting vacation. Here, it’s hunting again. **W**

**RIO SALADO TRIPS**  
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**BOSS SHOTSHELLS**

**BOSS SHOTSHELLS**, unmuzzled manufacturers of the industry’s premium-plated, high-density shotshells, opened for business in mid-October 2018. Through a business model unlike any in the ammunition industry, the company is able to give hunters the undisputed, exceptional performance of plated bismuth and tungsten loads at a refreshingly affordable price.

BOSS Shotshells are 100 percent American made and boast weights that are far heavier than steel shot and patterns that are far tighter at distance. Combine that heavyweight punch with the industry’s finest primers and premium powders, and BOSS brings hunters back to the hard-hitting, clean-kill days of lead with zero risk to the environment.

The company’s direct-to-consumer online sales model also brings hunters a true value in the ammunition category. With no middleman retail markups and free shipping on every case ordered, BOSS customers enjoy significantly higher-performing shotgun shells at a fraction of the cost once associated with premium loads.

BOSS Shotshells are available in 2¾- and 3-inch chamberings in 12, 16, 20, 28 gauges and .410 bore with shot sizes from 1 to 7. Additionally, 10-gauge shotshells are 3½ inch only and cost two dollars a squeeze. Each box of copper-plated BOSS contains 20 shells, priced between \$23 to \$31 per box, or \$230 to \$270 per 10-box case. All case orders ship free. Consumers can find the full line of products and accessories at [BossShotshells.com](http://BossShotshells.com).

“Shooting copper-plated BOSS shotshells is like stepping through a time machine back to the good ol’ days of lead. Superior patterns and sinister knockdown power mean far fewer cripples and lost birds than with inferior steel loads. In an apples-to-apples comparison, they outperformed lead while hunting in Argentina. The guide staff—all serious duck hunters—were overheard whispering among themselves about *El Jefe*, the magic duck cartridge from America.” —*Ramsey Russell*