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They push through so quickly, their migration is fluid. Miss a day or two and the best teal hunts of the year **could pass you by.**

— Ramsey Russell, Page 59





# The Kickoff

Glory days are now for teal hunters. BY JOHN GORDON









A SLIGHT NORTHERN breeze came and went in the early light. There were a few gusts at times mixed with lulls when the air returned to still and sticky. The hunters hurriedly deployed the final decoys with shooting light bearing down on them. Sloshing back to the blind, a simple affair built two days before from t-posts and hog wire, the hunters found their guns and gear and readied for action. There was a smell lingering between them, drowning out the aroma of rice and mud. It smelled like turpentine mixed with sweat, out of place in the humidity and heat of September. Wait, this is a duck hunt?

Welcome to early teal season! It's the kickoff, the beginning of it all, ushering in another waterfowl season around the United States. September means big ducks and geese are open in Canada, but to the south the only ducks legal are the little rockets, blue-winged, green-winged



and cinnamon teal. They travel early, they travel far, and they travel fast. Heading for wintering grounds in South America and Mexico, these ducks are fun to hunt and great on the table.

Veteran teal hunters know the fun in store and can't wait for another September and the chance to bring in another season. Founder and owner of GetDucks.com, Ramsey Russell, travels the world in pursuit of waterfowl. He's hunted and shot teal around the globe, exotic species such as silver, cape and Brazilian teal included, but he still enjoys teal

hunting at home in Mississippi. Russell also makes short trips to Louisiana and Texas to hunt with friends in the two largest teal migration staging areas in the U.S.

"The start of hunting seasons in the south begins with doves. Soon after though, the teal season arrives and it's duck season all over again," Russell said. "You start working on blinds, running the rivers, fishing the lakes and everyone is seeing blue-wings here and there as early as August. Those sightings get your blood pumping for the return of migrating ducks. Around that

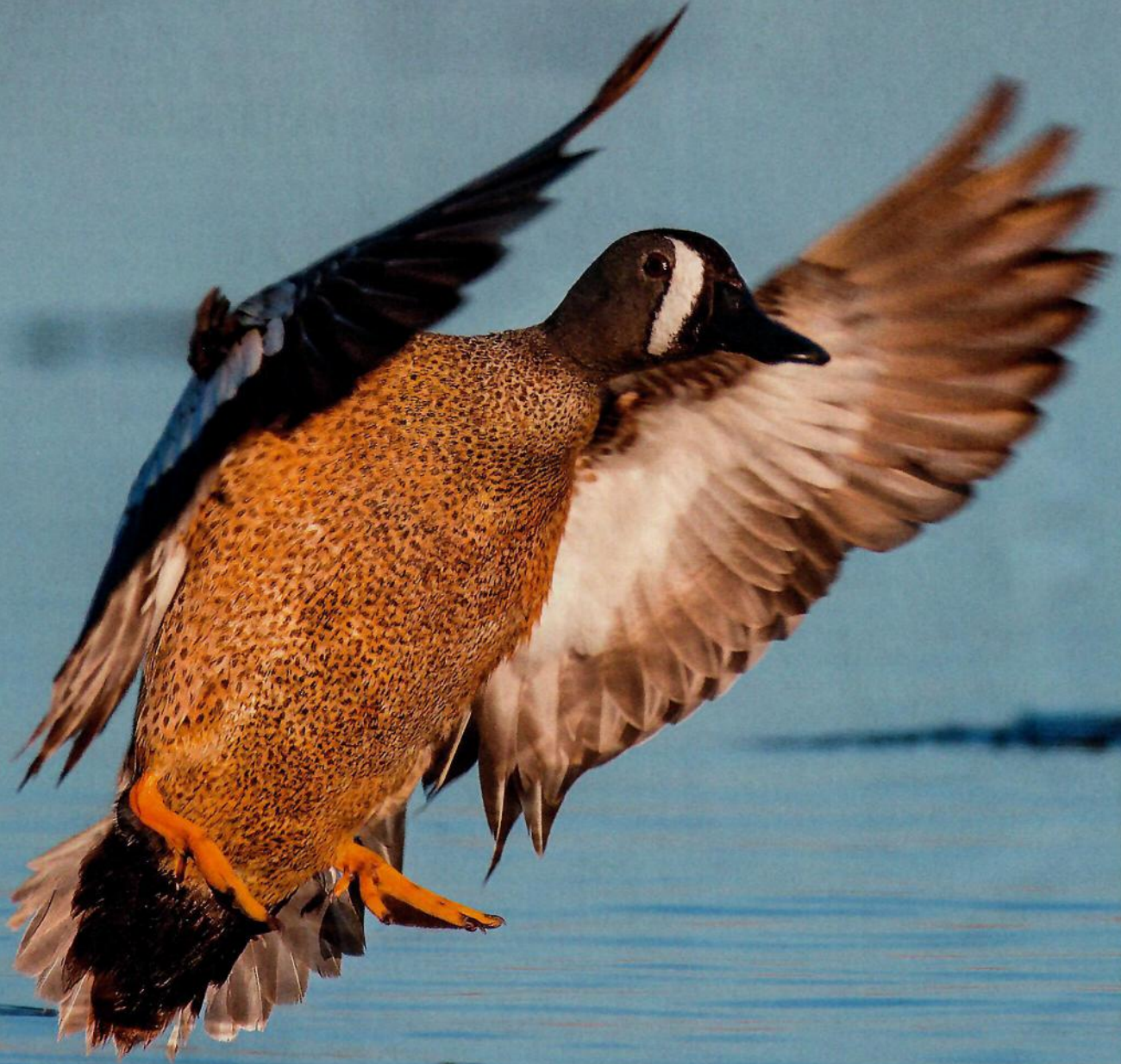
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THE BEGINNING





time of year something in the wind changes and you know it's coming."

Russel knows the key to successful teal hunting is being there. "When I worked as a US Fish and Wildlife biologist, I'd save up time off so I could hunt all the teal season days,"

For all their fast migration, blue-wings are typically widely dispersed in September. They can be found in Canada and Mexico on the same day. "A few years back I was up in Saskatchewan hunting in mid-September," Russell recalled. "I was duck

blue-winged teal are the most continentally dispersed duck there is that time of year."

Teal hunting is not only a good time for adults to get back in the field, it's the perfect scenario for taking kids to the blind. Kids are going to get wet and the warm conditions of September make that fact much easier to deal with. Nothing can turn a young hunter off faster than being cold and miserable. Teal hunts tend to be quick and fast paced, perfect for hunters with underdeveloped attention spans.

Early teal season is different from regular duck season in several ways, but there are some similarities. Don't leave the calls at home, teal are responsive to calling. Teal hens are almost mini mallards in the way they sound. They string together fast paced and high-pitched quacks mimicking laughter. Several dedicated teal calls are available on the market, but regular mallard calls will work. Constricting the air flow

## "Those sightings get your blood pumping, and that time of year something in the wind changes and you know it's coming."

he said. "In Mississippi, those teal are on the move, coming in and heading south again within 24 hours in many cases. They push so quickly; their migration is very fluid. Miss a day or two and the best teal hunts of the year could pass you by."

hunting on a small pothole pond and shot a couple of blue-wings. I wondered if I could shoot a limit of all blue-wings so I started waiting on them and passing on bigger ducks. They kept coming and I soon had a full limit in hand. No doubt that



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into the call raises the pitch and with practice that machine gun sound is reproduced easily.

Someone who knows a lot about calls and calling is Rich-N-Tone television producer and World Champion duck caller Jim Ronquest. He lives to persuade emerald green-headed mallards down through timber openings into chip shot gunning range. But that's not all he does, chasing teal around in September is an annual event.

"Growing up in duck country, everyone always looked forward to teal season," said Ronquest. "Not only do you get to go duck hunting again, but it's cool to see the other early migrants. Flights of shovelers, pintails and maybe even mallards are around in September. In Arkansas, now we are seeing specklebellies arriving on early fronts. Watching all those ducks and geese flying gets your blood pumping!"

Ronquest believes in sticking to the same hunting principles he applies in the regular season to early teal. "Teal can come in big bunches with lots of targets moving fast," he said. "Pay attention to the line of fire, make sure everyone is safe with their guns. The only good hunt is one where everyone comes back in one piece. Teal may not be as wary as late season mallards, but they still

can spot something out of place. Hide well, be someplace they want to be and leave an opening in the decoys where they come right in front. Don't skip attention to detail."

Retrievers are a big part of the hunt for Ronquest and his hunting partners. Teal season is a good time to work a dog, especially a young prospect. Please remember to keep high standards, hunting is not the place for training, it's the place where they gain experience. Put the gun down if needed and focus on the dog's performance, don't let bad habits begin. Also, be aware of the surroundings and what could be waiting in warm weather. Snakes are out for sure and some locales are alligator infested. Know the hunting area well before taking a dog into a potentially bad situation.

Teal decoys are readily available from a variety of manufacturers. They are small and easy to deploy; six dozen take up about the same amount of space as three dozen big ducks. Shallow water Texas rigs are perfect for a teal set as most hunting locations water depths will be a foot or less. Early season teal are not fully plumed so many hunters use hen decoys for more realism and there are all hen teal packs sold by decoy makers. It's not a critical detail though, teal are not picky

about decoy selection. Adding in a few shoveler and pintail decoys is a good idea, their size and white on the drakes adds visibility to the set.

Sometimes a great teal location is so shallow that conventional floating decoys don't work. Ohio native and duck nut and National Sales Manager for WILDFOWL, Jim McConville smashes teal every season on the south shore mud flats of Lake Erie. Floating decoys laying on their sides flare more birds than they attract, so he makes his own teal silhouettes. And he does something else that's a throwback to waterfowling's past.

"Up here near the big lake, teal feed in the same areas as shorebirds, searching for crustaceans," McConville said. "That means mud and very shallow sheet water, not enough to float a decoy. We use homemade silhouettes and once we harvest a few birds we turn those into decoys. My father and grandfather did this too using wire and rubber bands to turn a dead duck into an ultra-realistic decoy. I carry 8 to 10 wire coat hangers to the blind and insert the wire right behind the teal's bill for support. Secure the wings with rubber bands wrapped around the body and the decoy is made. Scatter them out right in front of you, it's amazing to see teal spot them and bomb right in!"





McConville is located much farther north of the hallowed teal hunting grounds of the south. But they still get plenty of birds blasting through every year. "Every year we mark the beginning of the teal migration with the arrival of Mon-

We have two things that really hurt and help our teal hunting success, full moons and north winds. Plenty of teal may be around and will disappear overnight in those conditions. But they can show up too so paying attention to the weather and scout-

a hurry. Watch the weather with a hawk's eye and be ready to hit the fields or marshes on short notice. It's always a good idea to save up vacation time for early teal season if possible. There's only 16 days to work with and missing the year's best hunt is probable if hunting is not an option.

Steve Biggers owns and operates Rocky Creek Retrievers in Brenham, Texas. He loves to train dogs and he loves to hunt ducks, especially teal. His guiding operation near El Campo, TX, has become famous for unparalleled teal hunting. Biggers works hard for many months to ensure habitat conditions for those 16 days on his leases are second to none. His hard work has paid off: Hunters from as many as 11 states are regular teal hunting clients.

"Goose hunting used to be the big draw in my area. People came from around the world to hunt snows and specks on the middle Texas coast," Biggers said. "Now there are com-

"We use homemade silhouettes and once we harvest a few birds we turn them into decoys."

arch butterflies in August moving south from Ontario," he explained. "Once we see the butterflies, the teal scouting begins. Our season typically starts the first Saturday following Labor Day and normal years see plenty of teal around for the opener.

ing is crucial."

That point cannot be overstated when early teal hunting seasons open. As Ramsey Russel stated earlier, the teal migration is extremely fluid, and a slight change in conditions will put them on the move in



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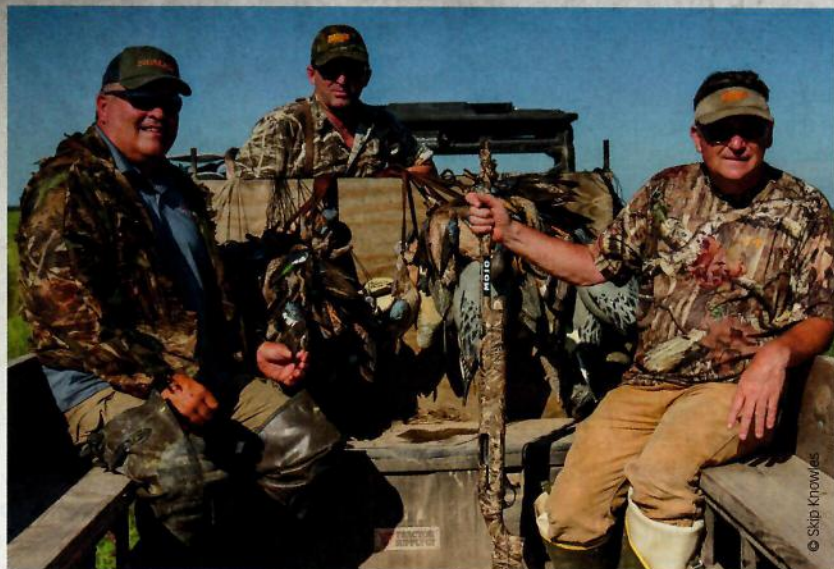


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paratively few geese wintering here but the duck hunting remains strong. What draws teal here by the thousands is a lot of second crop rice and a lot of fresh water. Teal rely on plenty of high protein food sources

before they continue south into Mexico and South America. We have the buffet ready and waiting for them to arrive.”

The key to staging a ton of teal is their water. Biggers knows this fact

as well as anyone. “We have some small ponds with moist soil grasses, but most of our teal water is big. I’m talking 70, 150, 200 acres of shallow fresh water that draws and holds teal in huge numbers,” he said. “And we manage our hunting pressure on that water. Typically, we have 250 acres we don’t hunt for the first seven days, hunt it on days eight and nine and rest it again. That lack of hunting pressure keeps teal around for two to three weeks instead of blowing them south in a hurry.”

Open chokes and little gauges are well suited for teal hunting. A 20 or 28 gauge loaded with steel or other non-toxic 6 or 7 shot is a great combination for fast flyers at short range. Wide open patterns are a good choice as ranges for decoying teal are often 25 yards or less. Try skeet or improved cylinder for impressive results. The smaller gauges are fun but your faithful 12 bore duck slayer will still do the job with gusto.





Spinning wing and water motion decoys are very much at home in a teal spread. MOJO founder Terry Denmon, who provided many photos for this story, hunts teal around the globe and uses his products in every location. "The real key to teal attraction in the early season and beyond is grabbing their attention," said Denmon. "Many mornings at first light, when teal are most active, there is a real lack of wind. Those calm conditions mean decoy spreads need some help to be noticed. We will deploy up to eight spinning wing decoys on big waters and up to four on compact ponds. Add in some water ripples and a teal can't resist all that commotion and will come to take a closer look."

MOJO built their first spinning wing teal decoys in 2002 after teal hunting took a big leap in popularity. Before then, teal seasons consisted of nine days total with a four-duck limit. Blue-wing and green-wing



populations increased dramatically over the long-term average in the early part of the 21st century and have only grown since. Now 16-day seasons with six bird limits are the norm and the "glory days" of teal

hunting are here. Get some light-weight gear, some bug spray for sure, grab the gun and dog and get after them!

