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It's Always Duck Season Somewhere

Ramsey Russell pursues waterfowl to the ends of the earth

BY OLIVER HARTNER

Many waterfowlers limit their hunting excursions to places within driving distance of their home. A smaller cohort chases the migration within the borders of North America. But an elite few travel beyond continental boundaries, and if they have hunted ducks in corners of the globe barely discernible on a map, there is a high probability they were in the company of Ramsey Russell.

Since 2003, Russell has built an adventurous life around his passion

for waterfowling with the phrase "It's duck season somewhere" as his guiding mantra.

Before gallivanting around the globe in search of ducks and geese, Russell grew up in Greenville, Miss., a part of the state's Delta region known for its waterfowling opportunities. He didn't find his way to hunting until his early 20s, but he read stories about hunts in other parts of the country that seemed exotic to him.

"When I was in high school sitting in study hall — some called it detention — I'd read books and

magazines about hunting snow geese in Texas. Reading those stories inspired me, and when I had a little money in my pocket after getting to graduate school, I went to Texas on a goose hunt and thought it was amazing. That's what planted the travel bug," Russell says.

He finished his postgraduate education at Mississippi State University and took a job as a forester with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which provided him with enough disposable income to expand his hunting horizons.

Russell booked a

duck hunt in Canada, but he quickly realized it wasn't a first-class trip when the guide showed up hungover and more than an hour late. His disappointment in the experience inspired him to return to Canada with a plan of his own.

Instead of going through a middleman, Russell established direct contact with an outfitter in Alberta. He invited three friends to go with him; the following year, 10 more joined the group. After one of the hunts, he was pulled aside by the outfitter and asked >



Ramsey Russell
with cinnamon
teal in Peru

to become a booking agent for hunting trips.

"I was just a hunter who wanted to hunt," Russell recalls. "I asked him, 'What the heck is a booking agent?' and he said, 'Well, you book hunts and bring clients, and I pay you a commission. It's essentially what you're doing right now except you're not getting paid to do it.'"

"I was a federal employee with a budding career and wasn't necessarily interested in a side hustle, but he made a compelling case," Russell says.

He began building his side business by joining several duck hunting forums and posting about his hunts. He also created the first iteration of Getducks.com. Russell kept booking hunts in western Canada, then learned how to expand his offerings after a canceled trip to South America.

"I booked an Argentina hunt through a taxidermist down there to try it out, and it was great," Russell recalls. "The following year, I couldn't get in contact with him when my friends wanted to go. So, I called the outfitter directly, and when he told me that many of these booking agents were fly-by-night, I saw a business opportunity to do things better."

Russell used every hour of his annual leave that summer to build out his book for hunts in Argentina,

"When we're out there together for hours at a time, we might not speak the same tongue, but we share the common language of duck hunting."

— RAMSEY RUSSELL

Uruguay and Peru in South America. One of the outfitters he still uses in Argentina asked to meet with him after his hunt, and from this meeting, a unique business opportunity was presented.

The owner of that outfitter brought a notebook with him. He said, "'We've worked with clients from France, Italy and other parts of Europe. But I want you to tell me precisely how American hunters want things to go,'" Russell recalls.

In essence, what he told him was, "We want the ducks to present themselves, and this requires certain techniques and practices they didn't know how to execute."

Through this hybrid booking-consulting model, Russell provided more value to the outfitters. As a result, Get Ducks grew more profitable, and the hunts became

more exotic. In 2008, he considered leaving federal service to pursue his passion as a full-time career.

"My father-in-law was a CPA and my brother-in-law was a banker, and they told me the numbers looked good," Russell says. "Then I called in a favor and got among the big boys at Dallas Safari Club ... (who) saw I was offering something unique."

The following week, he walked into the office and declared, "I have seen the future, and this ain't it."

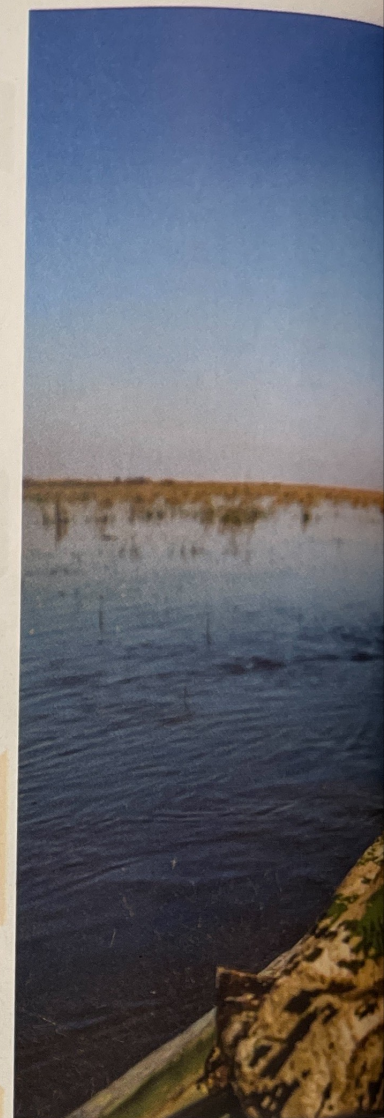
"I ended my career in federal service, put all my chips on the table, and I haven't looked back," he says.

In the ensuing 15 years, Get Ducks has grown to offer domestic and international hunts, with Russell logging between 150 and 200 days of travel annually — with some years climbing as high as 300 days on the road.

Russell and a local guide on the way back from a duck blind in Azerbaijan.

He chases the migration from Canada to Mexico throughout the fall and winter, then changes hemispheres and hunts south of the equator during the Northern Hemisphere's spring and summer.

Within a given year, his hunts may take him from the edge of the Arctic Circle to the southern islands of New Zealand. Getting to many of these foreign and remote >





An active volcano looms over a duck blind in Argentina; Ramsey and his retriever, Coop, with Barrow's goldeneye ducks in Alaska.

GETTY IMAGES; JAKE LATENDRESSE (3)

places under normal circumstances can be challenging, but when you add the logistics of waterfowling to the mix, it takes a practiced guide to keep things running smoothly.

Russell recounts a trip to Mongolia when he and a client were sequestered at the airport in Beijing.

"I presented the paperwork for our firearms to airport security, but they didn't process them correctly, having never seen such a thing before. They pulled us off into a room and there were a bunch of police, and everyone was yelling at each other."

Fortunately, Russell had stashed copies of the documents in each piece of luggage. This allowed him to produce the papers again so their translator could sort things out with law enforcement. Almost 12 hours later, they were able to continue their journey.

"Traveling to these places can be very daunting, and you've got to be able to roll with the punches and be prepared for anything," he says.

Sam VanHook, who met Russell when both were with U.S. Fish and Wildlife, has accompanied him on several of his adventures. They've hunted in Argentina, Mexico, Canada and the Netherlands.

"When I hunt in a foreign country, I want the hosts to be

legitimate and safety minded, and Ramsey ensures that," VanHook says. "You know when you're hunting with him that everything is going to turn out right, even if there's a complication."

Ian Munn was one of Russell's professors during his graduate studies, and they've since hunted together in South Africa, Russia, Canada, Mexico, Argentina and Uruguay. Munn says Russell and his wife, Anita, "have an incredible eye for detail, and it's comforting to know that they're supporting you on these trips if something goes wrong."

One of the reasons Russell started on this journey was to live life to the fullest and to hunt game in places where he could be transported — if only for a little while — to a time before mankind made its mark upon this planet. "And that's getting more difficult to find in the year 2023," he says.

"Ducks were around a long time before we were, and I want to find them living as they did before our species was here," he says. "Before agriculture. Before civilization."

During his quests to find these places, Russell has seen evidence that humanity and the natural world are on a collision course that threatens both our species and the wildlife

making their home in the habitat.

"Our connection with nature has been severed, making it hard to see the damage we're doing to the ducks if you're not a hunter or get outdoors very much," he says. "Conservation organizations like Ducks Unlimited and Delta Waterfowl are holding what I like to call the 'thin green line,' but that line is thinning out."

Russell uses his podcast, *Duck Season Somewhere*, to discuss these matters and document waterfowling culture. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but at this rate, waterfowling won't be around in 20 to 30 years if we don't do better," he says.

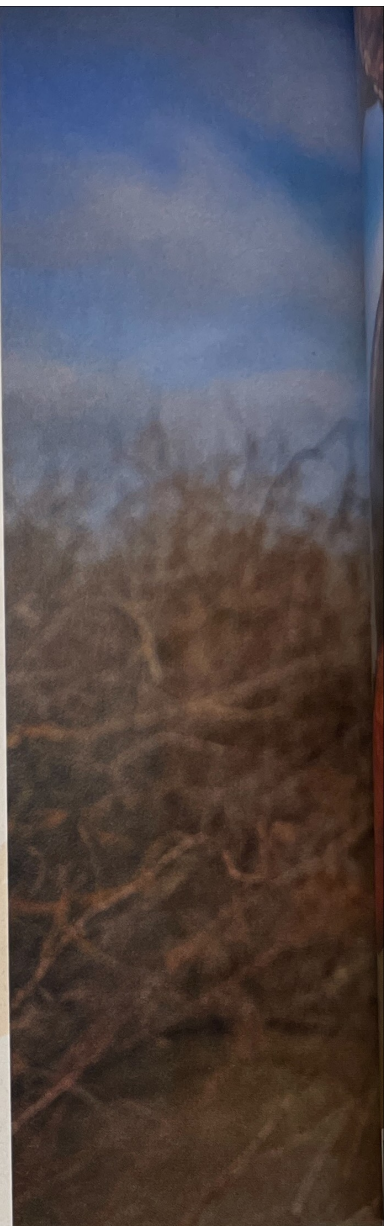
Russell values the unique cultural experiences of the places he hunts as much or more than the game he harvests.

"So much of what I love about going to these places has nothing whatsoever to do with pulling the trigger. I love getting off the beaten path and completely immersing myself in the culture. My life is like walking through the pages of an old school *National Geographic* magazine, but instead of a camera, I'm packing a shotgun and waders," he says.

Without the aid of a translator, Russell often spends several days

hunting and staying among rural native tribes of people who lack plumbing or electricity. Still, he insists the language barrier rarely presents a problem because of the common love for waterfowling.

"When we're out there together for hours at a time, we might not speak the same tongue, but we share the common language of duck hunting. And that makes up for a lot of the things that might get lost in translation," he says. ■





Ramsey in a marsh between the Pacific Ocean and the Atacama Desert in southern Peru and with a family of herders in the Andes.