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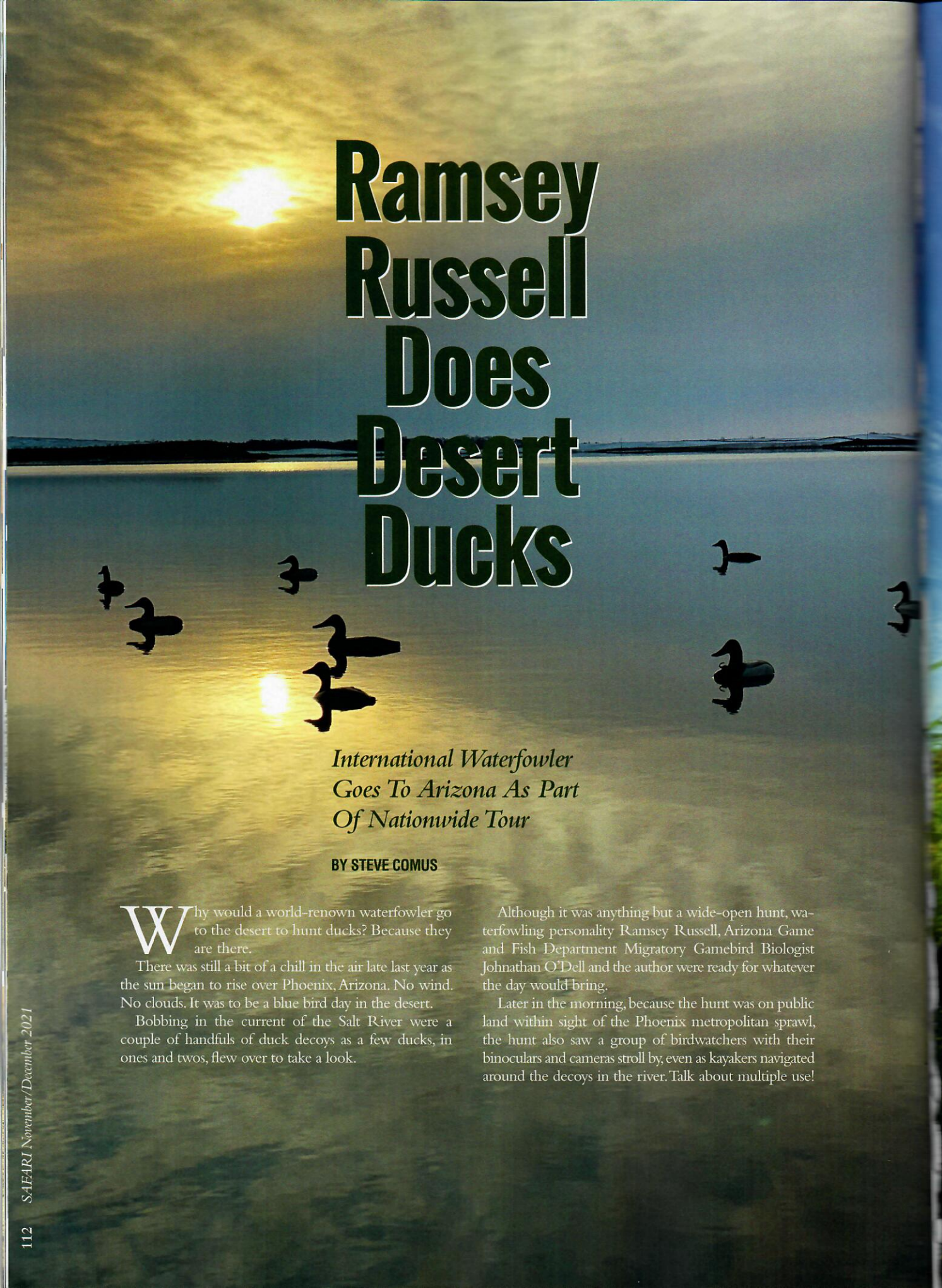


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Ramsey Russell Does Desert Ducks

*International Waterfowler
Goes To Arizona As Part
Of Nationwide Tour*

BY STEVE COMUS

Why would a world-renown waterfowler go to the desert to hunt ducks? Because they are there.

There was still a bit of a chill in the air late last year as the sun began to rise over Phoenix, Arizona. No wind. No clouds. It was to be a blue bird day in the desert.

Bobbing in the current of the Salt River were a couple of handfuls of duck decoys as a few ducks, in ones and twos, flew over to take a look.

Although it was anything but a wide-open hunt, waterfowling personality Ramsey Russell, Arizona Game and Fish Department Migratory Gamebird Biologist Johnathan O'Dell and the author were ready for whatever the day would bring.

Later in the morning, because the hunt was on public land within sight of the Phoenix metropolitan sprawl, the hunt also saw a group of birdwatchers with their binoculars and cameras stroll by, even as kayakers navigated around the decoys in the river. Talk about multiple use!

Ramsey Russell is one of the best known international waterfowlers, and he just keeps on adding to his lists of places he has hunted successfully.

Russell is best known for his Duck Season Somewhere podcast and website GetDucks.com. He also has been associated with SCI for years, many of them as an exhibitor at the SCI Convention. He will be in booth 1059 at the 2022 SCI Convention in Las Vegas.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to sweep across the world this past year, Ramsey set out on an ambitious tour that saw him bagging birds in numerous states as he worked ever more closely to his goal of hunting waterfowl in all states, as well as a host of foreign countries.

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One stop was in Arizona, just outside Phoenix.

"I do duck hunts all over the world. I have my own bucket list. Right now, one of my goals is to hunt in the local regions around the country that I haven't hunted — different species, different hunting styles, etc.," Ramsey explained.

Desert duck hunting turned out to be a lot more fun than Ramsey initially had imagined.

"I really enjoyed Arizona. People don't think of the desert for waterfowl, but it can be a great place to hunt. When you find water in Arizona, you find ducks," Ramsey explained.

When Ramsey talks about doing a hunting swing around the country, he ain't whistlin' Dixie, so to speak.

"This swing — so far this year, I went to Texas during the teal season, then Iowa, Wisconsin, North Dakota, Montana, Utah — north, southeast and west of the Great Salt Lake, Arizona — Salt River, then southwest, then New Mexico along the Rio Grande and then Roswell for sandhill cranes," Ramsey noted shortly after leaving Arizona.

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“Then I’m going to hunt Mississippi, Arkansas, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, North Carolina, Georgia and Alabama,” he said. “After Christmas I’ll hunt California and Oregon — about 27 states in all.”

Ramsey explained that in the past he has hunted a lot of these states for other things, but not waterfowl.

“By late January, I will have hunted in 44 U.S. states — picked up 10 new ones this year. Next year, I hope to pick up the others, except Hawaii. Also, I want to hunt swans in all of the 10 states where it is legal,” he said.

Ramsey took his dog Char along on all of those hunts. Just during the fall months alone, Char had hunted with Ramsey in 11 states, having retrieved 22 species in the process. By the end of the completed tour, she had picked up 28 North American waterfowl subspecies, plus coots, sandhill cranes, pheasants, doves, pigeons and quail.

During the Salt River hunt, Ramsey discussed waterfowling with O’Dell,

migratory gamebird biologist for the Arizona Game & Fish Department.

“One of the unusual things about waterfowl in Arizona is the diversity of species that winter here. It is actually incredibly difficult to shoot a bag limit of the same species of duck in a single day,” O’Dell said. “One minute you can have mallards or green-winged teal flying by and the next, you’ll have redheads or scaup landing in your decoys. It really makes for fun outings every time because you never know what will come next!”

As Ramsey discovered during his whirlwind swing through The Grand Canyon State, there are some real gems awaiting those who hunt there.

“Arizona is also kind of a secret destination spot specifically for Mexican ducks and cinnamon teal in full colored plumage,” O’Dell explained. “We are the northern range for Mexican ducks and never really get cold enough for them to fully migrate out of the state during winter. Plus, a good number of cinnamon teal migrate into the state for the later part of the season. It’s hard not to send every duck you harvest here in January to the taxidermist!”

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Ramsey Russell

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And Arizona continually focuses on ways to improve wildlife numbers and their habitat.

“We’re getting ready to start a long-term wood duck nesting box project in the Camp Verde area to help increase their numbers. Wood duck habitats in the West look very different than they do back East, and they are very few and far between,” O’Dell noted. “The upper and middle Verde River is some of our best. The problem has been that our riparian trees (such as cottonwoods and sycamores) don’t get cavities in them the way the eastern hardwood trees do. The wood ducks use these cavities for nesting and that has been what has kept them from growing into very robust numbers here. So, by planting these nesting boxes next to the rivers, we’ll increase their ability to nest and grow.”

Arizona also is involved in projects that affect the entire flyway.

“We also have several ongoing projects within the Pacific Flyway looking at specific species. Things like putting GPS transmitters on sandhill cranes and cinnamon teal to understand migration movements as well as identifying important wetlands and waters in that annual migration. Or banding arctic snow geese on Banks Islands to identify where in the flyway their harvest occurs.

“Then we have a long-standing partnership with Ducks Unlimited Canada and their ongoing work in the prairie pothole region of Alberta and Saskatchewan which is the ‘duck factory’ of North America where a lot of the ducks we see are born and raised. And we work on habitat improvement projects around the state every year,” O’Dell explained.

Yes, the best reason for hunting ducks in the desert is because they are there, even though decoy setups and tactics may be quite different from those used in other places. 🐾