

Waterfowling

in Wild and Wonderful

By Mike Peters

To say that it was an unusually warm January would be putting it mildly. In fact, it was downright balmy, with temperatures going into the 70s. West Virginia had experienced several weeks of unseasonably warm temperatures and plenty of rain to go along with it. Earlier in the duck season, all the wetlands, ponds and lakes had frozen up solid, which is pretty typical for this area. But warm temperatures and rain gave me new hope in getting a few more days afield before the late duck season closed.

One of my associates and I were conducting the annual mid-winter waterfowl survey close to my favorite hunting grounds. After work, I was able to see what was hanging out at one of my hunting spots. In addition to the usual large number of geese, I was quite surprised to see a half dozen black ducks and even some ring-necked ducks. The chance to swing my

barrel on some ring necks was too much temptation. I just knew the next day might be the perfect opportunity to do so. A cold front pushing through northern Pennsylvania (bringing ice and snow to that area) would hopefully push more ducks south to our warmer clime.

As usual, the morning came way too soon, but I was ready. I loaded all the typical gear into the truck the night before, including all my cold weather clothing. It's an hour drive to the wetlands, so I always wear the minimal amount of clothing to reduce overheating and sweating. I parked further away than normal from where I set up my decoy spread, because I knew the geese would be nervous and I didn't want to risk flushing them before shooting time.

The recent rains had caused the water in the wetland to be high and above the normal level. A slight



Happy hunters watch a retriever bring back the harvest.

Photo by WV Dept. of Commerce/Steve Shaluta

breeze stirred the warm air. The overcast sky hinted of rain. It was so warm that all I needed was the clothing I wore for the drive there — a T-shirt and a long sleeve shirt. It was turning into a perfect duck hunting day and all was going well. I finished setting up the decoys and the blind, just waiting for shooting time to arrive. I enjoyed the peacefulness of the wetland, just me and the lab, anticipating the morning hunt as thoughts of killing my first ring neck ran through my head. I was tempted to sip some coffee from the thermos, but I was way too hot already, kicking myself for not bringing my canteen of water.

Then it happened. My solitude was broken by the arrival of another hunter. His headlights shown down on me and my setup. After a short pause, the car proceeded down the lakeshore. I feared he would attempt to approach the lake where the geese were

roosting. The calm gaggling of the geese, which I had been hearing all morning, soon turned into nervous alarmed honking. I knew what had happened, and three minutes before shooting time, skeins of geese were winging their way off to an unknown destination.

Usually this meant goose hunting was over for the day. It's a resident population that experienced hunting pressure early in the season, so it doesn't take them long to react and fly away. Their return to this roost — if they return — is normally way past shooting hours. My hope to bag one last goose for the season flew away with those birds.

But the calling did not fade into oblivion as usual. I continued to hear honking and it seemed as if the

sound was approaching. It was shooting time when the first couple of geese returned, but they were too high, too far away, and unresponsive to my calling. In the meantime, the ducks began their morning flight around the lake just as the sun started peeking over the ridge through the cloud-laden skies. Nothing was responding to my calls. Then a single, lonesome goose came into view. I gave my usual call sequence and the bird responded well, until it alighted in the middle of the lake. I was pretty sure the other hunter was messing with the birds. But some convincing calling reassured the loner, and in no time it was winging its way towards me.

At this point, I think it's important to mention that to say my shooting abilities were lacking would be an overstatement. Even though I had spent 14 years afield pursuing waterfowl, my shooting ability had never caught up to my talents in locating and calling birds, setting decoys, and building blinds. No matter how much time I spent shooting clay targets, my shot-gunning skills just lagged behind. To make matters worse, I had just replaced my wooden stock and forend with a new synthetic wetlands camouflage set. I planned to concentrate more on my shooting and attempt to lead the birds more.

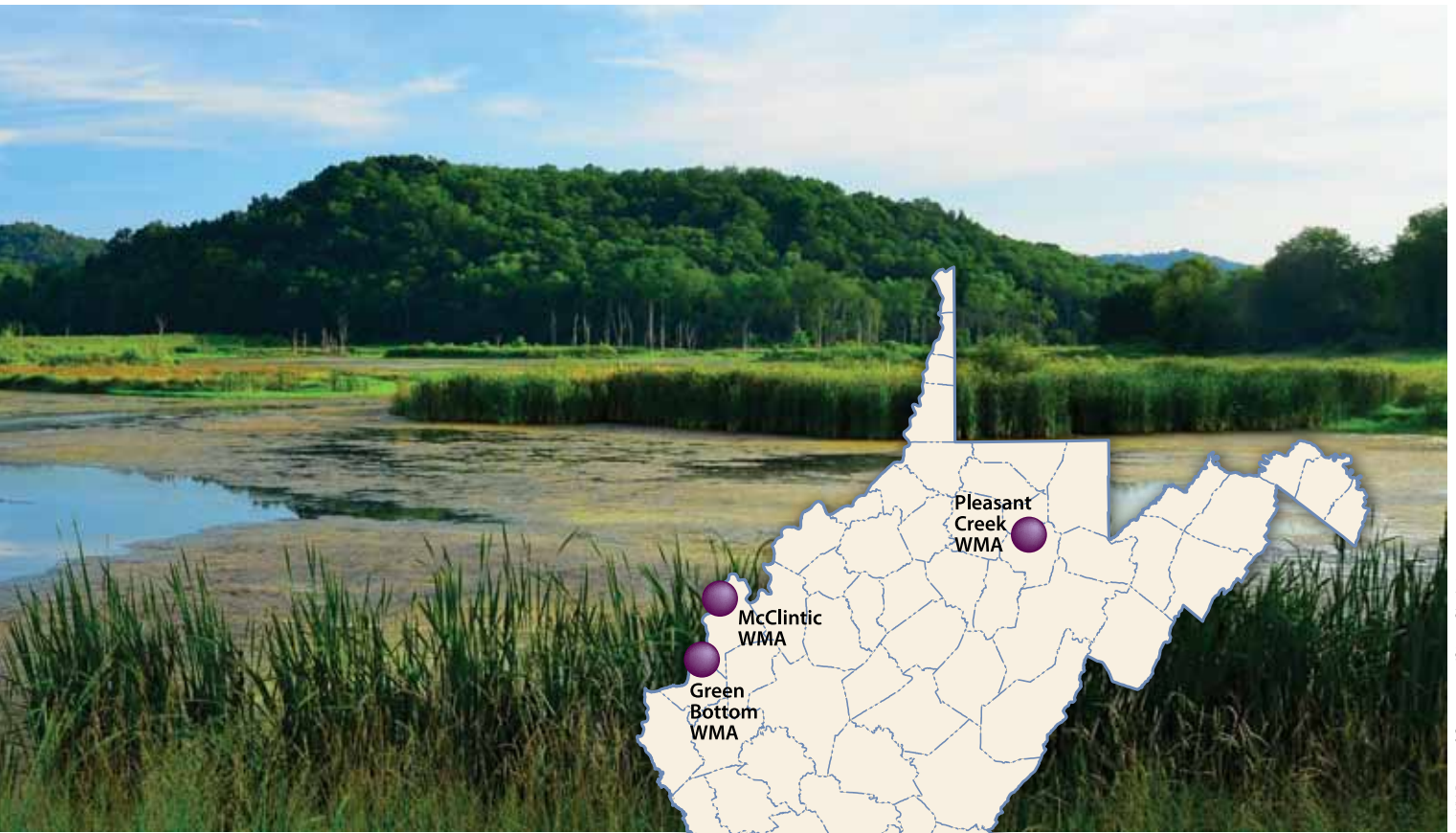
As the goose cruised past, the single report from the shotgun yielded great results. With a longer lead, the bird dropped to the ground dead. Unfortunately, the lab didn't have any interest in retrieving the bird. After sniffing the bird a couple times, she seemed to decide that the person who shot the bird should go get it. I might have expected this behavior earlier in the season, but not this late. I chalked it up to the dog having a bad day.

We returned to the blind, bird in hand, and started anticipating the next birds. Ducks were flying but were not interested in what I was offering. A couple of larger flocks of geese circled half a dozen times or so but would not commit. I actually called so much that I got winded and figured the geese had won.



Just as I was catching my breath, a duck from the far side of the lake took to the air and headed right towards me. The overcast sky sprinkled rain. The duck was flying head on and didn't yield any color patterns. In my mind's eye I quickly identified it as a mallard and patiently waited for the right time, focusing on my shooting.

The bird flared as I jumped up. I shot and the bird slightly wavered as the shot passed below and behind the bird. Not enough lead. Concentrate! A greater lead on the bird and a second shot rang out. My spirit sank as I watched it flying away. But a sudden unexpected turn in my direction sent me into a frenzy trying to reload and prepare for a third chance. The bird passed in front of the blind and a single shot set the duck into a controlled rapid descent and me into preparing for a possible fourth shot if needed. Just as the duck was about to hit the water, it turned ever so slightly. Then I saw it — a white finger-like color pattern running up the back of its neck. My first northern pintail!



WV Dept. of Commerce/Steve Shaluta

At Pleasant Creek (pictured above), McClintic and Green Bottom WMAs, the DNR focuses on waterfowl management.

Although I can vividly recall all the intricate details leading up to this climatic point, the rest of the morning is a whirlwind of blurred thoughts and emotions. Harvesting my first drake “pin,” after 14 years of duck hunting, and in West Virginia no less, was a momentous event in my duck hunting career.

When avid waterfowlers dream about duck hunting destinations, I would guess that West Virginia does not make many of their top 10 lists. The truth of the matter is that West Virginia has been described by some as the most “duckless” state in the nation. The low number of duck hunters in West Virginia — approximately 1,500 — is probably a good indicator of this “ducklessness.” To compound this situation, duck hunting in West Virginia doesn’t hold the same “tradition” among hunters as deer, bear and turkey hunting. In fact, when I tell people I duck hunt, the usual response is, “You can duck hunt in West Virginia?” The problem: West Virginia does not

have the wetland habitat to produce, attract and hold large numbers of breeding, migrating and wintering populations of waterfowl that the other 49 states have. To sum it up: being a duck hunter in West Virginia isn’t easy!

Having said that, if a duck hunter keeps his or her expectations in perspective (not wanting to limit out every day), duck hunting in West Virginia can be pretty darn good. Sure, West Virginia doesn’t have endless expanses of wetlands, but we do have some nice areas. The DNR has several wildlife management areas focusing on waterfowl management: McClintic in Mason County, Green Bottom in Cabell and Mason counties, and Pleasant Creek in Barbour County. In addition, other WMAs have lots of potential. These areas combined with a small number of waterfowl hunters translates into high quality areas with little competition. Any one

area usually doesn't get a lot of pressure. Although West Virginia may not have the large waterfowl populations other states enjoy, we do have a great diversity of species. Wood ducks, mallards, green and blue-winged teal, and black ducks are the most common species in the bag.

A plethora of books, videos and TV shows are available to educate the beginning waterfowl hunter. So this is where I'll insert my disclaimer for this article. I am not, nor would I ever consider myself, an expert duck hunter. I am not a "Pro Staffer," nor do I ever want to be. Although there are numerous hunters who have killed more ducks in one season than I have taken during my entire hunting career, I would consider my passion for the sport no less than theirs. I enjoy everything about the sport: seeing the morning sun rise above the horizon, watching the fog loom over an awaking marsh, proudly watching my lab that I trained make a difficult retrieve, successfully working a flock of geese into gunning range.

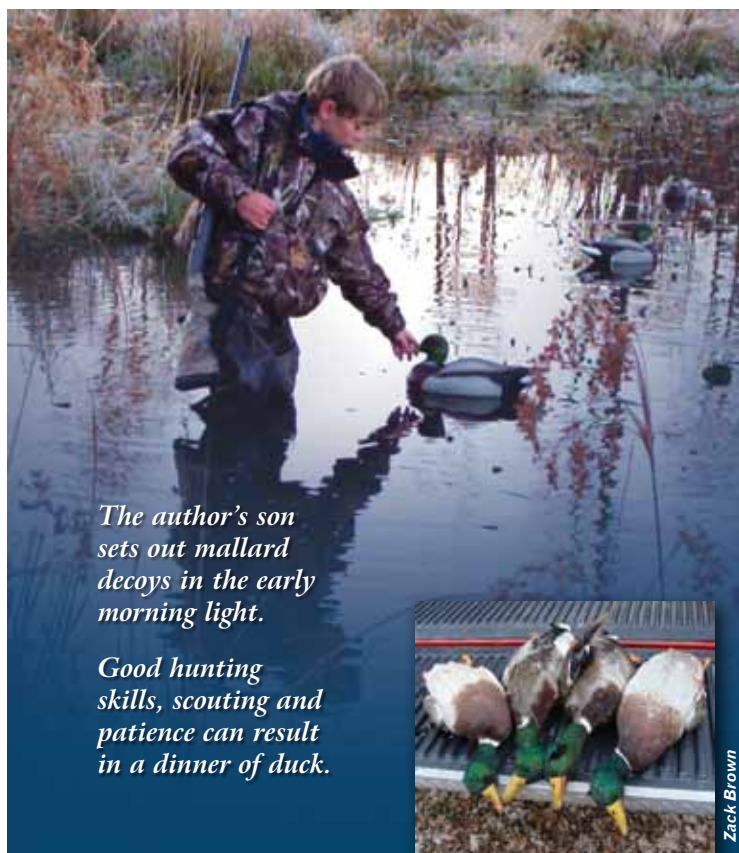
With the above disclaimer out of the way, I will attempt to give some advice for the beginning

West Virginia duck hunter. The early season is good for wood ducks, mallards and teal. Just about any body of water in West Virginia has potential. You don't need large decoy spreads, half a dozen is fine, if any at all. A lot of duck hunting can either be done by pass shooting in which you stand along a travel corridor such as a creek or river and shoot as they fly by, or by jump shooting in which you walk along or canoe a body of water and shoot the birds as they jump up. The bottom line is that you can have all the nicest decoys, be the best caller, have the most expensive gun and elaborate blind, but if you are not where the ducks are, you are not going to get any ducks. I know a lot of folks out there who violate this basic principal. Early morning and early evening scouting is a necessity.

Late season duck hunting is exciting because it offers great potential for harvesting a variety of migrant species. The down side is that small and sometimes even large wetlands and impoundments freeze up by this season. Most hunting will take place at larger bodies of water that didn't freeze up, and at streams and rivers that are either large or have a good current to them. Those small impoundments that froze up quickly will also thaw quickly with a warm period combined with some rain. They can be highly productive, but your schedule needs to be flexible to take full advantage of those opportunities.

Duck hunting in West Virginia might not be as easy as in many other states, but it's an exciting wing shooting sport that can be enjoyed with minimal equipment. It's also a multi-dimensional sport that has many specialty areas including carving decoys, calling-in competitions, making calls, and training dogs to mention a few. I would encourage anyone who has thought about duck hunting and hasn't tried it yet to give it a try here in West Virginia.

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Mike Peters

Zack Brown

The author's son sets out mallard decoys in the early morning light.

Good hunting skills, scouting and patience can result in a dinner of duck.