

The Great Ruddy Duck Chase

Travis McDaniel
Retired Fish and Wildlife Service (1960-1994)

This is a recount of a story by Travis McDaniel while manager at Wapanocca National Wildlife Refuge in 1960. Mr. McDaniel was going out to various locations around Wapanocca Lake to check duck traps when he decided to chase some ruddy ducks and ended up flipping the boat he was in when he realized he was coming up to the turn to where the first trap was. He recounts what he did to get back to the clubhouse and to get dried off before was overcome by hypothermia and before his wife and kids came back from shopping.

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I was the manager at Wapanocca in 1962 when we acquired the first tracts of land that established the refuge. Except for hunting and fishing, there weren't too many other things to do for outdoor entertainment or excitement in the delta. Two of the things I did for excitement on the refuge were driving the Korean War era open jeep as fast as I could down the narrow levees and through the winding woods roads, and running the 14' aluminum Jon boat, with the 10 horse Johnson, wide open through the narrow twist and turns of Wapanocca Bayou out to the open lake.

One cold and windy Saturday morning in January, I was going out to run the duck traps which were scattered in various locations around Wapanocca Lake. The boat often had rainwater in the bottom and, as everyone knows, the standard routine was to pull the drain plug and let the water drain out as the boat was underway. I had pulled the plug and was headed up the beautiful, narrow, cypress lined bayou towards the lake - wide open. It was a clear day and, although quite cold and windy, I was dressed warmly in my insulated coveralls. It was a great day to be alive.

When I got to Little Lake, the first open water portion of the lake, I saw there was a rim of ice around the edge of the lake an inch or two thick. I also saw a bunch of ruddy ducks jump up in front of the boat and begin their laborious attempt to get airborne. As any wildlifer knows, ruddies and other diving ducks have to run along the top of the water for some distance before they can get up enough speed to fly. This was too good an opportunity to miss for a little excitement. I just couldn't resist. I fell in behind a few of them, still going wide open. Half flying and half paddling across the top of the water as fast as they could, they tried desperately to get away.

Normally, when pressed, divers can eventually get far enough ahead to dive and escape their pursuer. I was pressing these ruddies hard, however, and they could never get far enough ahead to dive. I had cut three or four out of the bunch, like a quarter horse cuts out a calf, and was right on their tail. I was almost on them when I realized I was about to past my turn off into where I had my first duck trap. Giving up on the great ruddy duck chase, but without cutting back on the throttle, I shoved the outboard handle hard to the right for a 90-degree turn to the left. It's always been a puzzle to me how your mind seems to go blank in an accident.

The next thing I remember was gulping for air as I came up out of the icy water! The ammunition box containing my banding tools was floating a few feet away, as was my binocular case, a boat paddle and seat cushion. I was standing in water about waist deep near the edge of some willow bushes. Broken ice chunks were bobbing on the water. The boat was upside down a few feet away. I grabbed up all my equipment, flipped the boat over and pulled on the start rope to try and start the motor again - knowing there was no way it was going to start. Naturally the drain plug fell out of the boat when it flipped. I knew I had to act fast before I became so numb from the cold that my hands wouldn't work. The water was right at the freezing point and the air temperature was in the 20s.

I pushed the boat towards the buttonbush and willows and took the motor off, wedging it as best I could in some limbs above the water. Then I raised the bow up on some willow limbs as high as I could reach and, pushing from the stern, shoved the boat as hard as I could up out of the water and into the willows. That got most of the boat out of the water, but not all. The last foot at the stern was still in the water. I broke off a dead willow limb and shoved it into the drain hole as tight as I could. I then pulled the boat off the willows, rolled myself over into the half swamped boat and began to paddle for the other side of the lake and high ground.

The stiff wind was blowing hard against me and I wasn't making much progress. I was also getting colder by the minute. After ten minutes of this it was apparent I needed to try something different – I was getting nowhere. As hard as it is to believe, I had actually been warmer when I was in the water. So, about half way across Little Lake, I slid over the side of the boat and into the water again. Holding onto the stern of the boat, I began to wade the chest deep water and push the boat to the other side. As hard as this was, I was making better progress than when I was trying to paddle. All I had to do was stick it out, and I could make it.

When I eventually got into the cypress trees on the other side of the lake, and the water became shallow enough, I tied the boat to a tree and abandoned it. Leaning on my paddle, I made my way through the cypress and willows swamp towards high ground, about 500 more yards to the west. When I finally made it to the high ground and the narrow dirt road near our boundary, I was about a mile from the clubhouse. Although by this time my hand and feet were totally numb, I wasn't about to go out on the highway for help. If I could help it, I wasn't going to let anyone see me until I was out of this mess. My hands were so numb I couldn't pull off my hip boots to drain the water out. The best I could do was to roll them down to the knee and raise my foot to let some of the water drain out.

I made up my mind to jog the whole way back because I was afraid I might be overcome with hypothermia if I stopped. I was in good shape, still carrying less than 200 pounds on my 6'2" frame, and figured I could make it if I didn't let myself stop. After what seemed forever, I somehow made it back to the office in the clubhouse. My wife, Joyce, and the kids were still in West Memphis shopping. If I was lucky, I could get inside, get the small gas heater in the office going, and hopefully be thawed out before she got home. She'd never know what happened.

At first, my hands were so numb I couldn't turn the door knob to open the door. Eventually, however, I got the door open, found the matches, and tried to light the heater. But, my fingers were so numb I couldn't make them work enough to strike the matches. Using my mouth to hold the wood matches, and run them against the striking portion of the box, I was finally able to strike a match. I used up about half the box however, before I could successfully shift the match from my mouth to my hand and onto the gas jets before it went out. At long last I got the gas on and after another painful half-hour got all my wet clothes off. If you've ever thawed out your fingers after nearly being frost bitten,

then you know how painful that can be. I was eventually able to get out of my wet clothes and into some dry ones. An hour or so later I heard Joyce's car in the driveway.

"Well, we're back from shopping. What have you been doing all day while we've been gone?"

"Oh, you know, just regular refuge stuff," I lied.

I didn't let Joyce know what happened, but I did have to swallow my pride and get my maintenance man, Franklin Robins, to help me get the boat and motor from the lake. That experience didn't cause me to completely give up chasing ruddy ducks whenever I got the chance, but I did learn not to turn a flat bottomed aluminum boat quite so hard when you're going wide open. They have been known to flip!

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