

Waterfowl hunting on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Rob Barto

As the snow starts to fly and the weather turns foul, it's time to dust off the over-under, mend the decoys, practice calling, start retraining the faithful Lab, and get out to enjoy some of the excellent waterfowl hunting opportunities on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. The Refuge is home to some of the finest duck hunting available by vehicle or short boat ride on the Peninsula. The Chickaloon River flats, Tustumena glacier flats, and the inlet and outlet of the Kenai River at Skilak Lake can all provide the diehard waterfowl hunter with ample places and opportunities to enjoy the last hunt of the year.

The toughest place to access is the Chickaloon River flats located on the northern edge of the Kenai Peninsula. Whether you take the three-hour drive out Mystery Creek Road, use four-wheelers along the beach from Captain Cook, or fly in with a friend, the Chickaloon flats can provide some excellent early and late season shooting. Mystery Creek Road is a long 36 miles, following the Enstar gas pipeline to Turnagain Arm. At best the road is marginally drivable; a four-wheel drive with good tires is a must, and a shovel, come-along, jack, cell phone, and overnight gear are highly recommended. If you have a four-wheeler, the best option is to start from Captain Cook State Recreation Area at low tide, follow the beach to the Refuge boundary, and hike from there. Hunters are reminded that the Refuge is closed to off-the-road vehicles; if not licensed through the State DMV, it's not allowed on the Refuge. Aircraft are a final option for reaching the Chickaloon flats. There are three landing strips on the flats, which are described in our aircraft brochure available at Refuge Headquarters.

Once you have made it to the Chickaloon flats, what kind of hunting can be expected? Both pass shooting and decoys can be successful on the flats. Decoy hunters typically set up on little ponds and sloughs near the Chickaloon River. Pass shooters tend to walk out onto the flats and hunt with the tide change. If you decide to try your hand at pass shooting, remember that the flats can be very tricky to navigate, and always keep your eye on the incoming tide. I speak from personal experience of having to swim across a slough that had been dry when I crossed it not 15 min-

utes earlier. During the fall hunting season all types of ducks use the flats, along with Canada geese, sandhill cranes, and occasional snow geese.

If you are looking for a spot somewhat easier to access but with limited hunting pressure, then try heading across Tustumena Lake to the glacier flats. These flats are located on the east side of Tustumena Lake, about an hour boat ride from the Kasilof River boat launch. The hunting on the flats can be excellent because hunters further south are pushing the birds out of the Fox River drainage. You can expect to find a variety of dabblers as well as divers using the flats. Most hunters that I have talked with in this area prefer to jump hunt rather than setting up decoys.

Folks hunting the Tustumena flats, as always, should be mindful of the presence of brown bears. Glacier Creek on the northern edge of the flats is home to a fairly large salmon run in the fall, as well as a good concentration of brown bears fattening up for the winter. As with all glacial lakes, the wind on Tustumena Lake can be fierce and unpredictable, so pack your survival gear and be prepared to spend an extra day if need be.

Two good spots for hunters that don't want to spend time boating across Tustumena Lake are the inlet and outlet of the Kenai River at Skilak Lake. You can reach the inlet by boating eastward around the corner from Upper Skilak Campground; the outlet is best reached by boating westward from Lower Skilak Campground. In either case you'll find a good variety of ducks. Waterfowl hunters are reminded that hunting is restricted to the south shore of the Kenai River.

Hunters who use the Kenai River below Skilak Lake will typically have a little better luck because fishermen moving up and down the river tend to keep the birds moving even on the calmest of days. Hunting both above and below Skilak Lake is best done with decoys placed in marshy areas. Many diving ducks use these areas, but mallards, teal, and widgeon will also fill the bag, if a hunter has patience.

Now that we know some of the places with good hunting, let's quickly review the basic regulations that govern waterfowl hunting. Bag/possession limits are as follows for the entire Peninsula: ducks eight per

day, 24 in possession; sea ducks, 10 per day, 20 in possession; dark geese four per day, eight in possession; white geese three per day, six in possession; snipe eight per day, 16 in possession; and sandhill cranes two per day, four in possession. Lead shot may not be used or possessed while waterfowl hunting, so be sure to clean out your jacket from the grouse hunt. Successful hunters must leave a fully feathered wing or head attached to the bird for species identification. Shotguns must be capable of holding no more than three shells total. Motor boats cannot have their motor running; all forward progress must be stopped prior to

shooting from a boat. Birds cannot be intentionally harassed for the benefit of the hunter. Finally, baiting is not allowed at any time for migratory birds. Additional regulations can be found in a pamphlet available at Refuge Headquarters, Alaska Department of Fish and Game Headquarters, and at local sporting goods stores.

Rob Barto is a law enforcement officer on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.