

Waterfowl hunting evokes early memories, creates new ones

by Rick Johnston

It is difficult to express in words the thrill of hiding in a thicket of riverside grass as 100 mallards circle warily overhead. That a grown man can be transported in an instant back 40 years in time and 2,000 miles south to an Illinois cornfield to a first hunt is almost otherworldly. But such is the magic of waterfowl hunting.

The smells of my grandfather's leather hunting jacket and the rich Illinois loam were as real on that November morning in 1999 as they were in 1959. The "whoosh" sound of 100 pairs of wings is a sound and experience like none other and blends in my mind and spirit with all the truly special moments of my lifetime.

I recall being head down in another Illinois field some years after that first hunt; there were at least 10,000 ducks, mostly mallards circling overhead. I never fired a shot that evening, but it remains my best duck hunt of all. The vibration of those thousands of wings was like being at the center of a tornado.

On the Kenai Peninsula, the annual waterfowl migration and hunting is much less a part of the popular culture than is big game hunting. But even so, I see many young hunters experiencing similar very special mornings in the company of a parent, friend or grandfather.

By definition, waterfowling is always more about the experience than the harvest. This can be particularly true at many fickle Kenai Peninsula waterfowl hunting areas. Yet year after year, I find the same waterfowl devotees on Opening Day at the Kenai River flats, at Skilak outlet in late November, or hopelessly stuck in a Mystery Creek Road mud hole, all in pursuit of ducks and geese. And it's common for them to have a wide-eyed youngster like me in tow. The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge has long been known for its resident wildlife, and it was concern for the habitat of the peninsula moose that led to the establishment of the Kenai National Moose Range in 1941. Somewhat less known, but equally important, is the refuge's contribution as a nesting and resting place for migratory waterfowl.

The Chickaloon estuary remains an important wa-

terfowl staging and feeding area, although somewhat diminished by subsidence after the 1964 earthquake. The importance of the Chickaloon and other refuge areas was recognized in 1980, when the Kenai Moose Range was renamed as the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, and its purposes were broadened to include conservation of fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity, including waterfowl.

Many refuges within the national wildlife refuge system, such as Horicon Marsh in Wisconsin and Yukon Delta in Alaska, were established primarily as resting and feeding habitat for migratory ducks and geese. To non-Alaskans, the national wildlife refuge system, whose symbol is the "Blue Goose," is probably more widely recognized for waterfowl than for big game, fish or other wildlife.

Good duck and goose hunting opportunities can be found at several locations on the Kenai refuge. Several species of ducks nest on refuge lakes and marshes, and an early season refuge hunt can be rewarding and include a wide variety of species. One late September morning at the outlet of Skilak Lake, two of us had a limit of ducks comprised of seven species, mostly young birds of local nesting origin.

The Skilak Lake outlet is always a great place for wildlife observations, even when the duck hunting is only so-so. One November day several years ago, I watched a goldeneye drake roll and tumble to the water from 30 yards in the air to elude a pursuing falcon. It was an incredible site. Skilak outlet is also a good place to see trumpeter swans, loons and other waterfowl feeding and resting before their journey south, not to mention an occasional brown bear or river otter.

In many ways, hunting on the peninsula is more about timing than location. Hunting in Alaska and Canada is far different from hunting farther down the flyway, where entire subcontinental populations of ducks and geese are concentrated along single river valleys. Migratory waterfowl populations coalesce into a great river system with many northern tributaries feeding into increasingly bigger streams and fi-

nally into a bigger river.

In the old days, waterfowlers would refer to a huge concentration of ducks and geese moving through an area as “A Grand Passage.” I observed “A Grand Passage” once in eastern Illinois. I must have seen a half million ducks fly over in a single day. Such a site is never to be forgotten, nor easily repeated.

Here on the peninsula, we are relatively close to the source, and we see only small flocks staging for the migration south.

In mid- to late September, it is not uncommon to see 10,000 to 20,000 pintails and mallards feeding in the tidal guts of Chickaloon Bay, most of which are gone by mid-October. Concentrations of 30,000 ducks or geese at Chickaloon are rare and occur only when very bad weather at Portage and Turnagain Arm briefly blocks migrating groups passing over the Kenai Peninsula.

One day, a large group of Canada geese was flying over. My small daughter asked me which direction they were going, to which I replied, “northeast.” She further inquired why the geese weren’t flying south like they’re supposed to do. In fact, it’s rare to see flocks of ducks or geese flying south over the peninsula. It seems that here, most migrating waterfowl are flying north and northeast, heading primarily for Prince William Sound, via routes through the Kenai Mountains, and then to the Gulf of Alaska or to routes over British Columbia.

Although many refuge hunters prefer to jumpshoot ducks, I have always preferred to hunt over a large spread of decoys. Knowing how to call ducks or geese certainly doesn’t hurt either, yet calling seems less critical here. Many Kenai hunters who would call further south prefer to let the decoys do most of the work, calling only briefly to attract distant flocks.

Anybody who has ever hunted late-season mallards at the Skilak outlet knows that these often-hunted and “educated” birds can be as wary as an East

Coast black duck. Their wariness can render calling and other tried-and-true methods totally useless.

A well-known Kenai River guide used to put his ordinary decoys and blind in one location, then move several hundred yards away and put out a single near-perfect decoy. He would then hunker down in the low natural vegetation by his lone decoy. The “educated” flocks of mallards would pass up his primary decoy spread and land (fatally) in the near distance by his gem decoy.

A successful hunt on the Kenai generally requires an early start, using decoys and building a good blind, as well as planning for tidal changes that can send flocks of ducks closer to decoy spreads. Good hunting can often be found when a cold snap freezes many of the lowland water bodies and leaves open water on the larger lakes and the Kenai River. A few ducks per lake displaced after freeze-up can amount to hundreds concentrated in ice-free areas. These open-water areas can be good hunting through late November.

Although refuge duck hunters of recent years have been well-informed about migratory waterfowl hunting regulations, it never hurts to re-read the migratory bird regulations, shooting hours and refuge access regulations. Common violations are forgetting to obtain and sign state and federal migratory bird hunting stamps, using lead shot, shooting before legal shooting hours, and shooting migratory waterfowl while under power.

For more information on the fall migration, hunting on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and migratory bird hunting regulations, contact refuge headquarters at 262-7021.

Rick Johnston is a ranger/pilot at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and is by some accounts a waterfowl hunter and poet. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.