

In the Dawn's

*It's not too early
— in the day, or in the life of a teenager —
for a waterfowl hunt*

“Parker! Time to get up!”

I know, I know — I named my son after a shotgun. Well, I can think of a number of things a lot worse than being named after one of the finest American shotguns of all time. It was the second day of the youth waterfowl weekend, and my son, who missed Saturday's hunt because of school sports obligations, jumped out of bed with very little prodding.

I was about to introduce my 14-year-old son to waterfowl hunting, which I have enjoyed since 1972. Frankly, I don't know which of us was more excited to begin the day. The night before, the preparation of boat, motor, decoys, guns, calls and the rest of our waterfowling

paraphernalia had given Parker a solid jolt of waterfowl fever. Since the “fever” was running rampant through my son, it was more difficult getting breakfast into my boy than it was getting him dressed and out the door.

This was to be our first duck hunt together, and it was to be extra special in that it was youth waterfowl weekend — two days reserved for youngsters wishing to hunt ducks and geese without competition from their adult counterparts (*see sidebar, page 7*). Best of all, since I could not legally hunt, I got to play guide. Actually, this father and son hunt began way before this weekend; Parker and I had spent a great deal of time shooting clay pigeons, and an equal amount of time scouting local beaver

BY

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Early Light



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ponds, as well as some of the larger waters in the area, looking for places that were attractive to ducks.

Heart and Soul

Through our practice shooting sessions and pre-hunt scouting, my son and I were able to share some quality time together: One on one, whether at the range or in the marsh observing the beauty and grace of waterfowl on the wing, our time was well spent. As with any shooting sport, the use of a firearm is integral to success; however, I hoped that the time we spent together would show Parker that the hunt itself is far more than shooting a firearm. In fact,

shooting birds is a very small part of the waterfowler's world. I also hoped our hunt would provide him an opportunity to get to know me a little better — to see what makes waterfowling so special to his old man. Maybe he would begin to understand why it is so important for me to be in a marsh at “oh-dark-thirty.” Unless you are a waterfowler, it is something you cannot explain... you have to be there, and you have to have it in your heart and soul. So far, it appeared that Parker had the desire to become a waterfowler. Hopefully, he had the heart and soul of one as well.

During the ride to our chosen location,

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A N.H. Fish and Game Fisheries Biologist, Richard Tichko enjoys chasing fur, fin and feather with his wife and two sons.

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Satisfied son: Parker with his first two wood ducks.

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Parker was full of questions, a few comments and even some predictions of how the day would unfold. I found myself hoping the day would live up to his expectations. I tried to remind him that in hunting, nothing is ever guaranteed. The only guarantee is that the night will eventually surrender to the upcoming day, and that life will begin anew in the marsh

— and, best of all, we will be a part of it. In fact, in most cases, this is the best part. If he became a true “ducker,” in time, he would grow to understand.

Given that Parker was a new hunter, I did not want to totally downplay the fact that hunting involves shooting and trying to kill a bird. All hunters go through several stages of development during their hunting careers. At first, shooting their firearm and bagging as much game as possible is the focus. However, over time, with experience and maturity, being out in the fields, woods and marsh becomes more important than the need for a limit. I was in Parker’s shoes once, and I can appreciate how important the early stages of a hunter’s development are to someone new to the sport.

It is no secret that hunters enjoy seeing game, and this is especially true for new hunters. During the pre-season, we both saw sizeable flocks of birds where we were headed, so I was pretty confident that we would see some today. However, I have been at this game a long time, and I realize that *seeing* birds does not necessarily mean that there will be *shooting at* birds. However, I hoped one lesson Parker would learn is that in most cases, waterfowling, unlike a number of other hunting situations, will keep a hunter satisfied whether a shot is offered or not. There are very few times that you will go duck or goose hunting when you will not see game. I deer hunt, and I know that you can go days without seeing a deer...but you believe, because you see deer sign. Not so with ducks — you believe because you see them!

I hoped one lesson Parker would learn is that in most cases, waterfowling will keep a hunter satisfied whether a shot is offered or not.

On the Water, the Day Edges In

We arrived at our destination and were pleased to find no other adult and youth team at our chosen spot. I had to admit that this was a good sign, which fulfilled one of my son’s predictions in that we would have the place to ourselves. I reminded him that we needed to launch our boat and load the equipment quickly to ensure that we would be in our hunting site ready in case someone came in behind us. We worked quickly; after a short boat ride, decoys were set, camouflage attached to the boat, shells and gun uncased and Corky (our Labrador retriever) ready and able.

In the dark, we could hear an occasional quack, as we waited for the first grays and pinks to appear on the eastern horizon. While we waited, I explained why this location was ideal: it offered a suitable place to hide a boat; the wind direction made for a good decoy setup; we had seen birds here before; and the area held plenty of food and cover. All we needed were the ducks.

At the first hint of light, we heard the whistle of wings overhead. “Parker, don’t look up; it’s time to put our face masks on,” was all I was able to get out before the flock of ducks — wood ducks, I guessed — landed in the decoys. “Do not move fast,” I murmured. “If we don’t scare them, we can enjoy the show.” We had a healthy fifteen minutes before legal shooting time, and I wanted to have the birds stay with us for as long as possible. One of the birds called, confirming that the birds were in fact wood ducks. My son was so excited that his hands were shaking. I told him that as long as we moved slowly and did not make any loud, unnatural noises, the flock of “woodies” might stay in the decoys when shooting time arrived.

The increasing light made it easier to see the birds for identification, so much so that another flock passing overhead saw them and joined the ducks already on the water. Five minutes to shooting time, and we had 32 ducks swimming in the decoys. Not bad for my son’s first trip — so far his expectations were being realized.

A Flush and a Shot

I was just going to let Parker know that it was legal shooting time, when two shots echoed up the marsh. The shots startled my son, and he banged his foot against the bottom of the aluminum boat. That was all the ducks needed — they were gone in a flurry! My son looked over sheepishly, as if he had committed some crime. I told him that I

had planned to do exactly what he had accomplished. He looked at me, stunned. I explained that if I allowed him to jump the flock and shoot, the chances were good that he might get a chance; however, it would be one chance. By flushing the flock, yes, they were gone, but they did not fully understand the nature of the threat. Since this location offered both food and cover, they would probably return to this location in an hour or less, giving him the possibility of multiple chances.

Again, there were shots fired from the other end of the marsh. I was able to make out six mallards and a black duck heading for parts unknown. Another pair of hunters was at the other end of the marsh, and I was pleased to know that another adult cared enough to take a youngster out. My son seemed to be getting a little impatient; he asked how soon the ducks would be back. I told him to have faith, he would get his chance soon enough. I no sooner answered than we both heard the plaintive calls of Canada Geese. I did not bring any goose decoys; I now regretted that decision. I grabbed my goose call and told Parker to change his duck loads for some goose loads containing a larger shot size. Maybe I could get them to come take a look. Responding to the call, the flock of 11 geese began their descent; however, not seeing any of their brethren on the water, they flew over too high for Parker to take a shot. As they passed, all Parker could say was “awesome!”

Parker replaced the goose loads in his firearm, and we continued to wait. Sure enough, I spotted a pair of woodies zeroing in on our decoy spread. Parker saw them too, and said he wanted them to land. I told him to get ready, and I called on my wood duck call to add authenticity to the setup. In a flash they landed, and just as fast, my son



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Canada Geese (above) and mallard ducks (below) are popular game species in N.H.

jumped the birds back into the air. At the shot, my son dropped his first duck ever. I yelled, “good shot!” and sent Corky for the retrieve. “Parker, I see that the clay pigeon work is paying off.” He didn’t say a word — he just took off his mask and smiled. I asked, “Are you all done? If not, you better put your mask back on.” I knew that more birds would be coming back.

After the Limit

Another volley of shots rang out across the marsh, and we both witnessed a mallard fall from the sky. I had just remarked that the other team was having some success when we spied a flock of five woodies winging across the marsh. I picked up my call, and like before, the flock reacted and fixed their sights on the decoys. My son fired two shots and another wood duck was brought to hand by Corky. Parker’s shooting was right on, and I complimented him on waiting for them to come in close enough for good, clean kills. We were having the time of our lives. In the next two hours, we had an additional 23 wood ducks land in the decoys. Having filled his daily wood duck limit, Parker turned observer and watched how the birds reacted to the decoys after they landed. It was great fun to call them in, watch them swim around and finally to glide off into the surrounding cover undisturbed.

We were hoping for some mallards or black ducks, but our luck had run out. After sitting in the marsh for six hours, I asked Parker how he was doing. He said he was having a blast, but he could do with some breakfast. With that, we picked up and drove to a local restaurant, where I listened to him recount our adventure over and over.

In the end, the day did not unfold exactly the way Parker had predicted. It didn’t matter, though; he saw ducks, he shot a few, and he spent a day with his dad in the marsh. We both knew we would be back, sitting in the dawn’s early light, waiting for the sights and sounds that fill a waterfowler’s world. You know, maybe he has the heart and soul of a duck hunter, after all.



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