

HOPKINSVILLE ATHENAEUM SOCIETY

Sorry Tales from the Duck Blind

January 7, 2016

Presented by:

James G. Adams III

Mr. President, Mr. Cavanah, and fellow members of the Athenaeum Society:

As many you know, I am a fan of sports. But, for reasons that are unbeknownst to me, there is one sport that tops the list. The subject matter at hand involves numerous conditions that are both undesirable and sometimes downright foolish. Waking up early: Check. Expensive: Yes. Cold and wet: Absolutely. Unsuccessful, more times than not: Double check. No, this paper is not about attending Kentucky football games, although the aforementioned list would equally apply. My subject sport is duck hunting, and this paper is entitled *Sorry Tales from the Duck Blind*. The focus of this evening is two-fold. First, I hope to enlighten you with some of the antics I have learned of, all in the pursuit of duck. Second, this paper is in the nature of self-examination, to investigate why I have a passion for hunting ducks.

Some of you may be duck hunters, so I apologize if this initial discussion is redundant. In order to understand duck and also goose hunting, collectively known as waterfowling, you must understand the biology of the fowl. Ducks are generally divided into two categories puddle diver ducks. The difference in the anatomy is inherently tied to how they feed. Puddle ducks primarily consume submerged aquatic vegetation and cereal grains in shallow water between six to 10 inches. Puddle ducks feet are placed at the center of the body for a better balance that is suited for walking, while divers are placed at the back of the abdomen to swim efficiently while submerged, much like a penguin. Puddle ducks “spring” into flight when flushed with a nearly vertical takeoff that helps them escape predators that might give chase in the shallows. Divers’ takeoff is more akin to a 747 jet, but they have less need to escape land predators they spend more time in open water. Between the two species, hunters generally prefer to target puddle ducks primarily because they are better table fare. Also, mallards are the most responsive to calling, which is one of the highlights of the sport.

All ducks migrate, some further than others. The grasslands of prairie pothole region of the Dakotas is the key breeding and nesting grounds, which explains why preservation organizations like Ducks Unlimited invest in preserving habitat in those regions. Other key summer grounds are the northern boreal forests of Canada. After nesting and raising their brood in these summer jaunts, the various species of ducks begin their southern migration each fall. The timing of the migration is different for each species, with blue wing teal starting in late August through September, while some hearty mallards may delay migration until their food supply is shut off by snow and frozen water. Winter grounds range from costal marshes of the Carolinas, west to the heartland lakes and rivers and south to wetlands along the Mexican coast. In some years, the migration is staggered as ducks trickle down the flyaway. In other years, a strong winter storm will trigger a “grand passage” where thousands of ducks and geese will head south. Migrating waterfowl average around 50 miles per hour during a migration, but riding a 50 mph tail wind from the north, migrating mallards are capable of traveling 800 miles during an eight-hour flight. Massive winter weather fronts are the dream of most waterfowlers as the wave of new ducks are hungry after a long flight. On those mass migration days, the new ducks will readily make the final turn downwind and sail into a carefully placed spread of decoys.

These sorts of massive weather fronts also have been known to claim the lives of the hunters. In one infamous example is the Armistice Day Blizzard of 1940. On that date, many duck hunters ventured out in southern Minnesota to hunt in slack waters along the Mississippi river. The forecast called for a weather change but the day began with unseasonably warm temperatures in the mid-60s. Many hunters ventured out and were simply unprepared from the magnitude of the approaching storm. The mild conditions soon began to deteriorate but the duck slaughter was in full force, as most hunters fulfilled a limit. By the time the shooting stopped,

the hunters soon found themselves trapped in a massive blizzard with a 50 degree drop in temperature. Some sources reported sustained winds of 50 mph with gusts up to 80 mph. Many hunters took shelter on small islands on the Mississippi river but the 5 foot waves began to overcome their encampments. Of the total 145 deaths from the storm, many were duck hunters who froze to death when the single-digit temperatures moved in at nightfall. Even with modern weather forecasting, several duck hunters die each year, usually due to hypothermia after capsizing in frigid water. You may recall the tragedy of four teenage boys who capsized in three to four foot waves on Kentucky Lake back in January 2009; only one survived.

While it is convenient to think that the men were foolish, I've made my own share of poor decisions that might have ended badly. After heading out for a solo hunt on New Year's Day a few years ago at Lake Barkley, an uneventful afternoon became quite the adventure when my boat motor refused to start. Realizing I had about two hours of daylight left and unable to locate my cell phone, I started the three mile trek back to the nearest boat ramp. In order to save time, I navigated the mouths of several LBL bays on the old road beds that are hidden below the lake. It was quite the experience trying to inch along the road bed in chest waders while cautiously trying to avoid the wrong step into deeper water. Fortunately, I made it to the ramp just as the last crappie fisherman of the day was loading his gear. The kind man generously gave me a ride to my vehicle parked some five miles away. Five minutes delay, and I would have been in a serious situation. As an aside, unknown to me I had my cell phone the entire time, it had just fallen into the boot of my waders.

My own history with waterfowling began with a series of trips to Southern Illinois with my father back in the early 1990s. The Old Man had joined a group of guys in a lease out of Marion called Grassy Lake and the sought game was Canada geese. I should point out, that

those same goose hunting hotspots no longer harvest many geese as there has been a fundamental shift in goose migration patterns over the past 20 years. Back on point, my brother and I were young adolescents and eager to spend time with our father, so I think he had the courage to drag us along for a few hunts. We'd start the mornings on Alumni Avenue with smoked sausage and biscuits. I don't know exactly when we would get up, but I think it was somewhere in the ballpark of 2:30 a.m. Already packed, we would load up the truck and begin the two hour haul to the club.

Upon arrival it was a quick check in at the lodge – basically an oversized storage shed – and a short hike to the goose pit. Surrounding the pit was a spread of hundreds of decoys, all designed to mimic a flock to coax the geese leaving the nearby refuge to within gunshot range. On one of these early hunts, it was so foggy that the decoys hardly mattered. I cannot in words begin to explain the thrill of a young teenage boy, a bit cold and slightly wet, having the opportunity to be one of the guys. Between the dirty jokes and coffee talk, someone would yell with excitement upon hearing the feint sound of a distant flock. At that moment, it was like Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as the Ode to Joy chorus rallied the oncoming flock with boisterous hail calls. As the flock approached, the lead caller would direct everyone to back down to more realistic sounding clucks and moans. Then the flock would start to drift and our leader would signal for everyone to hammer the birds with a comeback call. This is not crescendo, but an immediate fortissimo that is like begging and pleading in order to correct a drifting flock. With the geese back in line, the callers would work down the routine back to the clucks and moans, and finally with the subtlest calling of feeding grunts and one-note clucks. Then out of the fog they appeared. Directly in range, our leader gave the command: "Take em!" From the shooting deck I sprung managing to disengage the safety on my Remington 870 youth

model. Managing what I thought was aim, I fired twice in the vicinity of a goose. My target flew away unscathed. But, I had fared better than my brother, as he never managed to take off the safety. Fortunately, the men in the group were veteran shooters and five geese were folded.

Some of the best things that happened on these formative hunts, were things that had nothing to do with the actual hunt. The guys once laughed about a comrade who had managed to find himself incarcerated for DUI, only to be bailed out just in time to head to the goose pit. Routinely, we would stop by Cracker Barrel before our return trip. Everyone loves a good hot breakfast, but it's that much better after a cold morning in a goose pit. It was a running joke amongst the group to see how many eggs Lindsey Adams might order. Typically it was by the dozen. Before duck or goose hunting, I never was a coffee drinker, but I quickly caught on and found it delicious and a perfect way to break the chill and drowsiness from an early morning start. Some people ease in to coffee with a heaping dose of cream and sugar, but not me. None was available, and so I have taken my coffee black from day one. In all of those moments, I was hooked.

If you ask most any serious duck hunter where they would prefer to hunt, the answer will probably be flooded green timber. The popularity of public timber hunting in the state of Arkansas is so popular that it leads to a number of instances of reckless behavior. Disagreements over shooting another groups swing ducks or setting up too close occasionally leads to blows. Non-locals and out of state'ers (not so affectionately called OOSERS), have been known to find sugar in their gas tank or slashed tires. To prevent hunters from sleeping overnight in their boats to hold the best spots, Arkansas has a rule that hunters may load their boats but cannot leave the launch area before four o'clock a.m. As a result, in some of the most sought areas, particularly on opening morning and most weekends, a twilight "boat race" ensues as the hunters leave in a

frenzy to be the first to the prime hunting spots. We learned from Mayor Hendricks that a picture may not be worth a thousand words, but I submit that no words can express to you the condition of human stupidity in the same light as the video I am about to play for you. Please keep in mind a few things as you watch an opening morning Arkansas boat race. First, the ditch the hunters are following into the main tract of woods is no more than 15 to 25 yards wide. Second, the boats that seem to stall after the frontrunners is a result of the fact they are grounded because the first group pushed too much water out of the ditch. Third, a number of these hunters are probably still buzzing from celebrating the return of duck season with good buddies just a few hours ago.

Waterfowling is a frustrating endeavor that cannot be eliminated by simply spending more money. Consider a friend of mine who took a duck hunting trip to North Dakota to hunt the famous Devils Lake. The lake is actually a basin that is fed by rains and melting snow but has no actual distributary. Consequently, the lake level has swelled in the past 15 years flooding thousands of acres of cropland and small towns. Being located in the heart of the “duck factory,” Devils Lake can offer excellent duck hunting. In preparation for the trip, the hunters purchased a brand new hunting boat complete with a top of the line mud motor. A mud motor is basically an oversized lawn mower engine mounted on a U-joint or belt drive connected to the drive shaft. The advantage is that the motors do not have fragile lower units like regular outboard motors and do not rely upon a water source to cool the engine. As a result, a mud motor can push a full size boat at full speed in about five inches of water. When the skeg strikes a log or rock, the entire unit bounces off impediments and right back into the water. It really is a perfect set up for most any duck hunting situation. In addition, the rig was equipped with a luxurious custom built blind that turned an ordinary jon boat into a floating hide away, complete with heaters and a stove.

Armed with this new rig at a price tag approaching \$25,000, the party drove almost 20 hours to Devils Lake. Of course, Murphy's Law prevailed, and the brand new motor would not go past idle speed. After trying to string together make shift hunts for a few days, the hunting party returned to Kentucky. Not a single shot was fired.

So, the question remains: why am I, and countless other men (some of whom are presumably decent) attracted to the sport of duck hunting? Perhaps you are thinking that the answer is rooted in aspect of men returned to their roots; free spirits on a grand adventure to be in the presence of Mother Nature while harvesting her bounty. That is certainly partially true. The calm serenity of dawn and dusk, a boy and his Labrador, or a post-hunt fire in a cozy cabin, are all emotions countless wildlife artists have attempted to capture. If you are familiar with paintings by Terry Redlin or similar artists, then surely you can appreciate his romanticized rendition of the waterfowl hunting.

Or perhaps it is the camaraderie. Legendary outdoor writer Gordon MacQuarrie created the semi-fictitious entity the "Old Duck Hunters Association, Inc." as the vessel in which the narrator and his hunting partners examine their friendship. MacQuarrie's writing still is filled with grandeur as he anticipates the hunt, as illustrated by this passage: "[t]he dusk of late duck season was hurrying westward across the sky and slanting snow was whitening the street gutters as I turned into the automotive emporium of the President of the Old Duck Hunters' Association, Inc." He goes on, "[t]here I found [Hizzoner], thoughtfully kicking a tire on an august and monstrous second-hand car, soon to be taking the Association on its final expedition of the season." MacQuarrie's classic trilogy, *Stories of the Old Duck Hunters*, certainly captures the essence of the deep friendships forged within the sport. Of course, when a duck hunter speaks of

his close friends, it is not just two legged friends, but the four-legged hunting partners that become family.

While nostalgia for old traditions, friendships, beautiful scenery, and good dogs, all play a part in allure for this sport, I have concluded that perhaps the underlying reason that duck hunting distorts rational men into a frenzy is one thing in particular: the toys. Isn't it true that we are all just big kids? I suggest to you that a duck blind is nothing more than a tree-house for grown men. I am not aware of any other endeavor where grown men purchase so many gizmos and trinkets that are beyond imagination. I am almost embarrassed to admit the amount of duck hunting toys used in the hunting club of which I am a member. There are robo ducks, vortex ducks, swimmer machines, ice eaters, and others, all of which are hard wired by professional electricians to the control box stored in a cozy pit blind that comfortably hunts 10. In fact, it is rather shocking that all of the modern sporting goods stores, like Dicks or Academy Sports, are all built in the same trade dress that was first created by Toys-R-Us. Maybe they should say, I don't want to grow up, I want to be a duck hunter instead.

In closing, I hope you have learned something about the wonderful sport of duck hunting. If I could retire tomorrow, and more importantly my wife promised not to leave me, I assure you that I would spend all 60 days of the season afield. While this is my personal guilty pleasure, I am sure many of you find the same interest and joy in other things. I hope you might share a few stories, and what makes your interest frustrating, yet so rewarding. Thank you for listening, and good night.