

# Wild Rice, Wild Ducks

IN MINNESOTA'S NORTH WOODS, YOU CAN  
ALWAYS FIND DUCKS BY LOCATING  
THEIR FAVORITE FOOD

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL FURTMAN

**I**drove my pickup to the highest spot I could find on the gravel road's shoulder, climbed out, and stood on the tailgate. From there I could see the eastern edge of the lake through binoculars. A band of wild rice, tall and tawny, rimmed the water's edge. In the rice, dark forms swam, tipped, and dived. Ring-necked ducks mostly, but a few wood ducks as well. As I was about to step down from the truck, a wedge of ringbills slid in from above the trees. They plunged headlong into the rice, vanishing beneath its stalks.





Hunting ducks on his home state's wild rice lakes is an October tradition for author Michael Furtman.

The creek leading to the lake (wild rice almost always grows where there's slow-moving water) was narrow but passable by canoe. I had no idea what the lake's shoreline would provide for cover, but could see that golden tamaracks grew within yards of the water, indicating a bog. It could be a wet hunt. We'd know for sure soon enough. Our scouting done, my Lab, Bella, and I returned to the cabin.

Well before dawn, we were back at the creek. The night had been cold enough that ice had formed along the banks. It had rained on our way back to the cabin the evening before, and that morning the straps and ropes holding the canoe to the truck were frozen solid. One knot proved so stubborn that I had to sacrifice a cup of coffee from my thermos to warm it enough to free the canoe.

There may be drawbacks to hunting alone, but sometimes solitude is a blessing. And so it proved on that morning. There was no talk. No competing noise. Just the dog and me and the creek, moon, and stars. We slipped into the canoe and slid into the silent darkness, up a path struck straight down the creek by the setting moon. Bella quivered with cold and excitement, snuffling the air for scent while I paddled. As the creek widened into the lake, rice stalks reared up, clicking against the paddle as I swung it forward, catching it on the backstrokes. Once through the rice, I paused in open water to feel the breeze. It was on my left cheek. I made for that bank.



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There were ducks on the lake. I could hear the chortling of feeding birds, a splash now and then. We eased along the rice's edge, loath to turn on a headlamp for fear of pushing every duck from this small lake. What I could see in the light of the moon and stars was that this was the kind of place my father would have loved.

In a year of plenty, some Minnesota lakes are so choked with wild rice that the water can't even be seen. Dad did not like hunting such overgrown places. For one thing, you could barely pole a boat or canoe through it—forget about using an outboard. Props simply wound a rope of rice stalks within minutes. The other thing was, with an expanse of rice spreading to the horizon, the odds of the ducks coming anywhere near you—or even seeing your decoys—were slim. That's why my father preferred hunting a lake with a rim of rice. "Set up on the edge of that, with decoys just outside and a few within, and you'll get the birds," Dad had said. "Mallards will drop right in, and wood ducks too. Even ringnecks. But bluebills and redheads want to swim into it, or buzz the edge. They need open water outside the rice."

A distinct band of wild rice grew around much of the small lake's perimeter. The rice was mixed with reeds, but there was plenty of open water for birds that preferred it. The rice band was the perfect width—20 or so yards out from shore. Decoys could be placed just outside it to gain the birds' attention and inside it to close the deal. And that's just what I did.

Beaching the canoe proved a chore. A floating mat of vegetation ran to the water's edge, and beyond that the lake was essentially bottomless. When Bella leapt from the canoe, she nearly vanished into the muck. I eased the bow in, walked gingerly the length of the canoe, and stepped "ashore"—breaking through the sphagnum moss and nearly vanishing myself. Struggling and sweating, I eased the canoe onto the bog, bow first between small tamarack trees. I covered the bow and stern with well-grassed camo material, slipped into the bottom of the canoe



"IF WILD RICE  
GROWS THERE,  
DUCKS WILL  
COME."



**A persistent aquatic grass, wild rice grows in clear, shallow water and is an important food source for migrating redheads and other ducks.**

using a life jacket and thwart as a backrest and a boat cushion as a seat, and called Bella back inside. Time for coffee.

In this land of 10,000 lakes, a migrating duck could plunk down just about anywhere and get a wet butt. This may seem like a good thing to you, dear reader, but I think you see the problem. Being in the right lake when the birds come through can be a crapshoot—unless, of course, there is something downright ducky about that lake.

Fortunately, waterfowl are drawn to wild rice like bees to nectar. Wild rice really isn't rice but an annual aquatic grass. It is native to North America and grows mostly in the



states and provinces around the western Great Lakes. It produces a dense, long, highly nutritious seed cherished by native people, gourmands, and ducks. And blessedly, Minnesota has more acres of it than any other state. My dad taught me that it





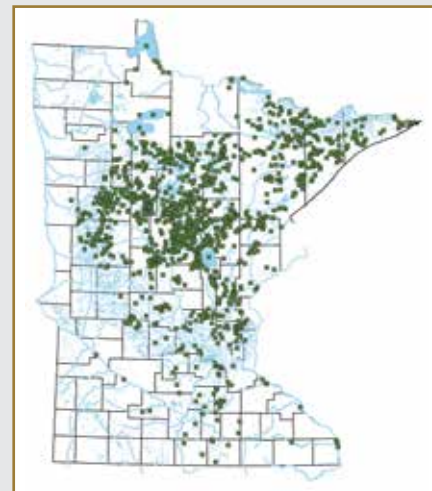
## MINNESOTA'S WILD RICE LAKES

Minnesota has more acres of wild rice than any other state. Beds of this persistent annual grass are found primarily in the forested north-central region of the state. Wild rice grows in shallow waters usually less than three feet in depth, and requires good water quality and clarity. It prefers lakes with inlets and outlets with gentle current, and also grows in slow-moving rivers. This dependence on moving water can be the downfall of wild rice if water levels rise at the wrong time during the growing season, especially in June, drowning the crop.

Ducks Unlimited partners with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and several bands of Ojibwe (for whom rice is culturally important) to help manage this resource for the benefit of ducks and people. This program is an integral part of DU's Living Lakes Initiative.

"We are enhancing wild rice stands for ducks and people in the fall, which benefits migrating ducks in the spring too," says Jon Schneider, DU's manager of conservation programs in Minnesota. "Wild rice lakes provide important seed and aquatic invertebrate food sources that ducks need as they migrate through Minnesota to northern breeding areas. Wild rice also improves the quality of waterfowl breeding habitat in Minnesota's shallow lakes."

In partnership with the Minnesota DNR, which provides state wild rice harvesting license proceeds to help fund this cooperative effort, Ducks Unlimited technicians annually monitor and manage the outlets of more than 100 wild rice lakes covering over 27,000 lake acres. DU's work involves keeping wild rice lake outlets free of beaver dams and other obstructions that might alter water levels and hinder wild rice plant growth. Some of these flowages need to be cleared three or more times a year, depending on beaver activity. This is backbreaking work, but the results are



MAP: MINNESOTA DNR

**Minnesota's wild rice lakes (in green) are concentrated in the north-central part of the state.**

worth the effort. Indeed, some wild rice stands are now producing double the crop they grew before they were actively managed.



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is delicious to ducks. My mom taught me that it is delicious *with* ducks.

Most hunters I know associate ringnecks and mallards with wild rice. However, I learned long ago that there isn't a duck, goose, or swan that isn't attracted to it. Puddlers tip up in the shallow water for fallen seeds, and divers probe the edges



of stands for rice swept deeper by wave action. Geese swim among the stalks, plucking remaining kernels, and swans use their long necks to forage at the roots. It is a veritable waterfowl smorgasbord.

It was a fair dawn, with little wind and a few morning clouds that would soon burn off. As the sun birthed above the horizon, frost glistened on every tree, bush, and stalk like wet diamonds. The tamaracks burst into the color of golden flames, but flames that dripped with dew. Whatever ducks had been on our end of the lake were no longer visible. Perhaps I had alarmed them as I struggled to hide the canoe.

But soon there were ducks in the air. Pintails came first. Their presence startled

**Waterfowlers can expect a mixed bag while hunting in wild rice, as the author and his Lab, Bella, demonstrated on their hunt last fall.**

me—not only because I wasn't ready, but also because they are not a common duck in that part of Minnesota. Uncommon or not, they knew what rice was and glided into another stand across the lake, ignoring my decoys and my plaintive pintail whistling. Bella gave me a dirty look.

A few mid-October wood ducks *wheeled* past us, wise to the game and unwilling to play. Then, not long afterward, a flock of redheads saved the day. The ducks flew in low and fast out of the sun to our left, no





doubt from the much larger lake a mile east. They swung around the trees to our right, then strafed the outside decoys.

Picture this. Blue and gray skies. Rice the color of amber. Tamaracks ablaze in orange and gold. Pines and spruce looming dark and green. And then the rusty redhead drakes painted across it all with shades of black, white, and gray on their breasts, bellies, and wings.

I brought the shotgun to my shoulder and folded one of the drakes. Bella, for all her patience, was rewarded with a cold swim. The scene repeated itself almost exactly 20 minutes later as another flock of redheads bore down on the decoys. That second time, a hen fell. Then for an hour there was not a duck to be seen. Finally, a flock of ringnecks warily circled the lake—and circled and circled. Uncharacteristically cautious for ringbills, they looked as if they would never, ever land. I finally took a passing shot at a trailing drake and got lucky.

And then we were done. Oh, we stayed longer. There was more coffee to drink and a gorgeous day and lake to admire. But there were no more ducks, until (of course) I decided to pick up the decoys.

Floating in the canoe surrounded by rice, I plucked the decoys one by one from the lake. As I did, a brazen bunch of ringnecks flaunted their speed mere yards above the water, took a rapid tour of the lake, and then skidded into a little cove that I had been unaware of until then.

My eyes followed the birds and I could see that in the cove there was wild rice. And in the rice there were ducks. I remembered what my father had said many years ago: "If wild rice grows there, ducks will come."

I guess that holds true for duck hunters, too. 🦆

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