

Canvasbacks

UNDER Prairie Skies

IN POTHOLE COUNTRY, THERE IS NO GRANDER
QUARRY THAN KING CAN



BY MICHAEL FURTMAN

THEY CAME LOW. THEY CAME FAST. THEY WON.

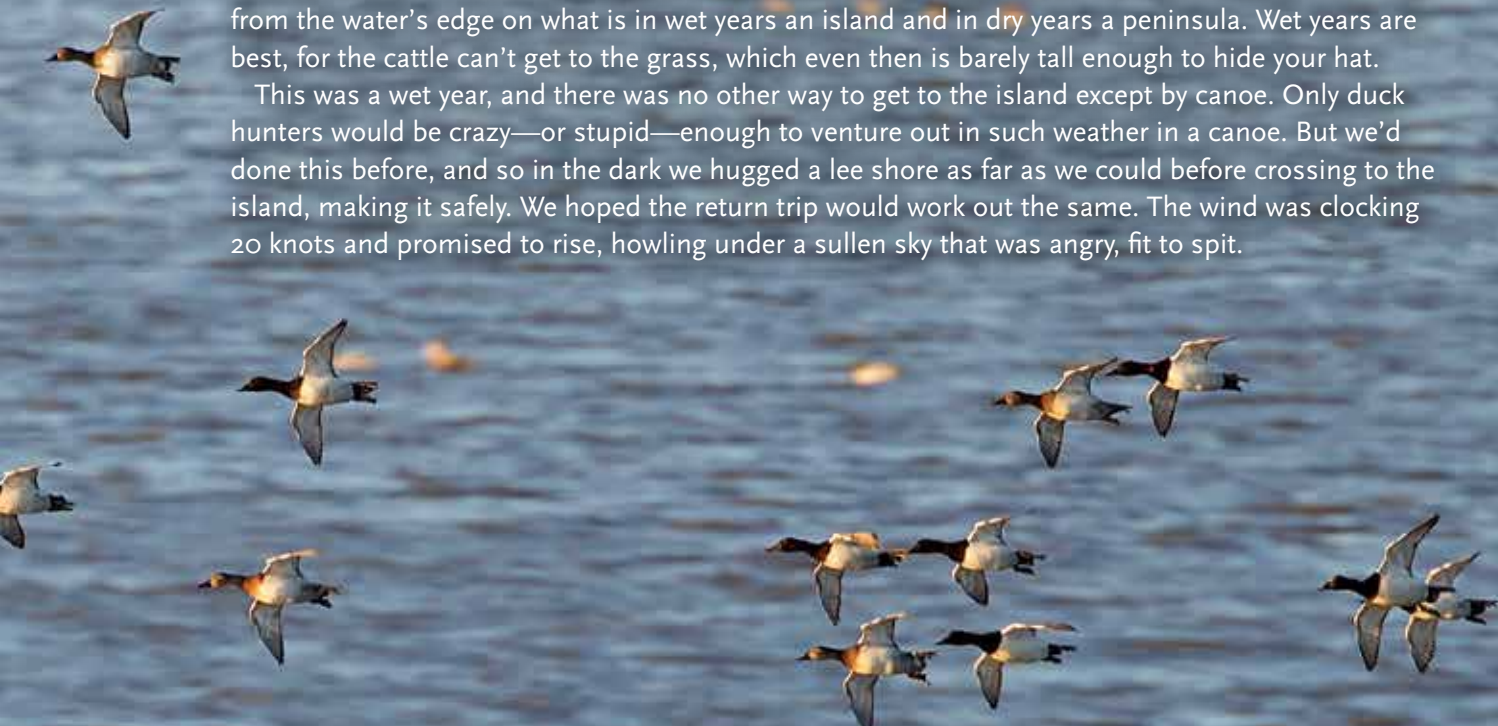
We were lying flat on the ground with our heads toward the howling wind. From this vantage the gray water beyond our feet looked more like a storm-tossed sea than a prairie lake. Foam flecks blew from wave tops and decoys dipped into troughs in between. “Looks like something out of that old movie *Victory at Sea*,” said my hunting partner Shannon, his voice barely audible above the wind.

And indeed it did. Except that there was only a hundred yards of open water before us, and beyond that lay a swale of native prairie grass, ripped by wind. We were tucked into layout blinds mere feet from the water’s edge on what is in wet years an island and in dry years a peninsula. Wet years are best, for the cattle can’t get to the grass, which even then is barely tall enough to hide your hat.

This was a wet year, and there was no other way to get to the island except by canoe. Only duck hunters would be crazy—or stupid—enough to venture out in such weather in a canoe. But we’d done this before, and so in the dark we hugged a lee shore as far as we could before crossing to the island, making it safely. We hoped the return trip would work out the same. The wind was clocking 20 knots and promised to rise, howling under a sullen sky that was angry, fit to spit.



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SCOTT FINK



The first flock of canvasbacks combed their belly feathers on the prairie grass as they scraped over the rise. Maybe that's why we didn't see them until they had spread their great gray leathery feet and skidded into the bouncing decoys, a few landing hard as they hit waves. "Well, they won that round," Shannon chuckled.

We have hunted together for years, always holding to this simple rule: If a duck gets into our decoys without us getting off a shot, no matter how poor the hunting has otherwise been, that duck is safe. It wins. And we grin.

We made up for it the next round. After watching several flocks skirt the tip of the island, Shannon had slid his blind farther to that end. It worked. The next bunch of cans barreled past his old 870, and when they did, a bull took a load of hot steel. In the crazy clamber skyward, the flock flared over me, and I took my drake. It thunked into shallow water just feet away.

"Mike, I need the dog down here!" Shannon yelled. I sent Bella, and humped down there myself. Cans are big. Cans are tough. And they die hard. His drake was making a beeline for the far shore, rowing with its wings and huge feet.

It's a good thing that Bella was young. I lined her into the waves and she strained to close the gap, disappearing in the troughs and bursting through crests. At a hundred yards, we could barely make them out. Just a black head nearing a red head. Then just a black head. Then no heads. Then a black head surfacing, red head in its grip.

"Helluva dog, Mike. Helluva retrieve."



CANS DON'T DIE UNDER BLUEBIRD SKIES

The first canvasbacks I ever saw were racing the whitecaps of Lake Winnebigo's dark waters. I was probably around 14. My dad and I were hunting bluebills and we were tucked into the west bank of this giant northern Minnesota lake. Frankly, I don't even recall whether I knew at the time that there were such things as canvasbacks. Bluebills and the occasional redhead I'd gotten to know well. But when these first canvasbacks zipped past—far out of range—I knew I was seeing something special.

I shot my first canvasback on nearby Bowstring Lake. It was late October and it was cold. Low clouds, strong winds, flecks of snow filling the air. Ducks traded on that wind, and some were cans, the white backs of drakes brilliant even in the gloom. I wanted one. I wanted one badly. But they teased us. 'Bills came. A few didn't leave. The canvasbacks, however, seemed determined to see me freeze to death.

As I moaned about the cold, my dad turned to me and said, "Cans don't die under bluebird skies, son." He knew his ducks and duck hunting, at least so far as how it was in northern Minnesota. The only time canvasbacks appear there in autumn is when they are driven off the prairie by a cold front. He associated cans with cold.



The author and Bella with a beautiful bull canvasback taken on a North Dakota pothole.



JIM THOMPSON

And I would too, until I started hunting the prairie, where sometimes, if you've lived a good life, cans do die under a bluebird sky.

We held out for as long as we could, but eventually Dad suggested we hang it up. We began to get ready to pick up our motley bunch of cork, papier-mâché, and wooden decoys. And that's when they came.

I remember that I shot at a drake. What fell was a hen, but it was a canvasback—big, bold, and beautiful. When Dad took it from the dog and handed it to me, I was astounded by its weight. Since that day, I have been fascinated by this species. And why not? Canvasbacks have a special aura about them.



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A DUCK APART

Found nowhere else in the world but in North America, and breeding primarily in the Prairie Pothole Region, canvasbacks are unique. Because of their specific breeding habitat requirements and narrow range of food preferences, they have never been a numerous species. In 2007, their best year since waterfowl surveys began, their breeding population was estimated to be only 864,900 birds. For most of my life, the number has been more in the range of a half million. If the population falls below the management objective, the season for canvasbacks is closed. In other lean years a one-bird bag might still be allowed, but the season might be shortened.

Cans are more susceptible than other duck species to drought on the prairies, the heart of their breeding range. Most ducks suffer during drought years, but many species have populations that nest elsewhere in addition to the prairies, providing a buffer of sorts. Canvasbacks don't have that luxury, and their reliance on

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specific migration and wintering habitats also makes them more vulnerable than other duck species. We've all heard about the large numbers of cans that once frequented Chesapeake Bay, and how pollution destroyed much of the wild celery (an important canvasback food), causing many of the birds to move to less desirable habitats.

Cans face other challenges, too, such as invasive species and degraded habitat in the Upper Mississippi River valley. On the nesting grounds they are the target of redhead hens, which lay their eggs in canvasback nests, often rolling the canvasback eggs out. This dump nesting leads to many canvasbacks raising more redheads than their own kind. In my years as a duck photographer, I've seen many a proud canvasback hen on a July day swimming in a pothole with a nice brood made up, at least in part, of redheads.

Considering all these threats, there's little question that without the work of Ducks Unlimited and its partners, this is one species we'd no longer be able to hunt. And that would be a shame. I love greenheads, redheads, bluebills, and teal, but if there is a "trophy" duck, it's a bull canvasback. Not only is this bold bird with its distinctive sloped head rare to see—it's even rarer to bag.



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TWO-CAN DAY

Whoever coined the rainy-day phrase “a good day for ducks” wasn’t a duck hunter.

Oh sure, maybe ducks will fly on days your wipers are set to the low end of intermittent. But when the wipers slap full speed, it doesn’t bode well for a good duck hunt. Shannon and I know this, and we watched through swashing wipers as a hard rain bounced off the prairie lake like ping-pong balls off a gym floor. “Hand me the thermos,” Shannon said. And so we sat.

It was the seventh—and last—day of our trip to the North Dakota prairie. It had been a good trip, and if we were not to hunt this day, we’d still leave satisfied. But I had one nagging desire that the rain was thwarting—a double on bull cans.

It was 2013, one of those rare years when the canvas-back limit was two per day. We’d gotten our two cans on a couple of occasions, but I’d yet to take a true double—two shots, two drakes, one flock.

That wasn’t the case for Shannon. Three days earlier, on the southwest corner of this same prairie lake, Beowulf (his ancient 870) roared twice, tumbling two bulls into the decoys. Bella pranced back with each drake. “Now I hope you were paying attention to how it’s done,” Shannon said.

His double came on a bright, calm day. My chance, if it were still in the cards, would come on this wet, horribly windy one. When the rain let up a tad, we hustled to get set up, then hunkered against a small rise and watched as decoys nearly flipped in the strong wind. Two hours out, we’d taken a couple of redheads, a wayward wigeon, and a lone mallard. Not much else was flying. Maybe it was time to call it a hunt.

“Mike! Low. Your side. Cans!” Shannon warned.

Barreling in at a 45-degree angle from left of the decoys they came. My chance. Through rain-splashed spectacles I looked for drakes. I took one from the head of the flock and sent him tumbling into the waves. As he did, the flock flared, catching the full brunt of the gale. For an instant they kited against the gray clouds. One gleamed

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red and white. I fired as they turned downwind. Those that escaped hit 60 mph in seconds. But my second bull was in the waves, and Bella had some tough work to do.

“All right!” Shannon exclaimed. “I guess you were paying attention!”

I stood holding the one drake that Bella had already retrieved while she bobbed in the waves seeking the second. When she returned with that bird, I hefted one in each hand. They were magnificent.

In that moment it was as if I were 14 again and seeing canvasbacks for the first time. How I realized they were special when I saw them on Big Winni, I don’t know. I knew nothing of their biology, their small numbers. But my intuition then had been correct. Canvasbacks are special.

I set the two drakes down gently in the driest spot I could find, then jacked the last round out of the gun. Shannon would continue to hunt. But as I poured a cup of coffee and gazed over the prairie, I knew there was nothing I could do that day to improve upon the moment. ☺

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