

DIVERS WITH DAD

The author looks back on his first big-water hunt and lessons that last a lifetime by MICHAEL FURTMAN



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I turned my back to the icy spray splashing over the bow. Dad quartered us into the waves, tacking this way and that as we made for a peninsula two miles down the lake. He had wisely told me to put on my rain gear before we left the landing. Kim, our Lab, sat stoically in the bow, nose working but drenched. I kept my back to the bow until I felt the lee building from the peninsula, only then turning to see our destination looming against the dark sky. Jutting out from the pine-studded shore, it tapered to a low, rocky beach, with just enough brushy vegetation to hide two duck hunters and a big black dog.

As we slowed to a crawl, I asked my dad why he had chosen this spot, especially given the rough ride. “Divers are different,” Dad said as the old six-horse putted along. “You need to give them room. And they don’t like trees.”

He explained that divers like open water much more than puddlers do, and that you can’t be tight up against a forested shore. If that’s where you set up your spread, he said, they’ll fly well outside it. If they set down at all, they’ll slide onto the water well out of gun range.

Dad had introduced me to duck hunting in shallow wild-rice lakes, where the bag was mallards, teal, and wood ducks. Sure, we’d take an occasional diving duck, but they were not our main target. As he taught me about divers that day, I noted that placing the decoys was a whole different procedure. First, we put out a dozen and a half single blocks in sort of an arching bunch, each with a much longer anchor line than I was used to, because the diver lakes were deeper. Then I fed a string of a dozen decoys over the gunwales, each block on a dropper to a stout cord. Once the inshore anchor bit bottom, we backed up the boat until the whole string was tight, and then we dropped the outside anchor. Dad said that more decoys would have been better, but that’s all we could fit in our small duck boat.

I asked why the droppers were 18 inches long. “They have to be long enough for the dog to swim over the main line,” he said. “A dog tangled in a gang line is a dead dog.” Decoys out, we motored to shore and unloaded our gear. “You and Kim stay here. I’m going to run the boat down the shore and hide it. When I’m back, we’ll build a blind. Make yourself useful and gather up as much deadfall and other vegetation as you can while I’m gone.” And that’s just what I did.

OPEN WATER, OPEN SHORES

That morning was an awfully long time ago, but in all my years of diver hunting in the upper Midwest, my dad’s warning about them not liking trees has rarely proven wrong. Sure, you can pass shoot the occasional diver from a forested shore or point, but if you want them to decoy, you need some space behind you. How much? That depends on the species and how finicky they are on that particular day. Ideally, I like nothing taller than

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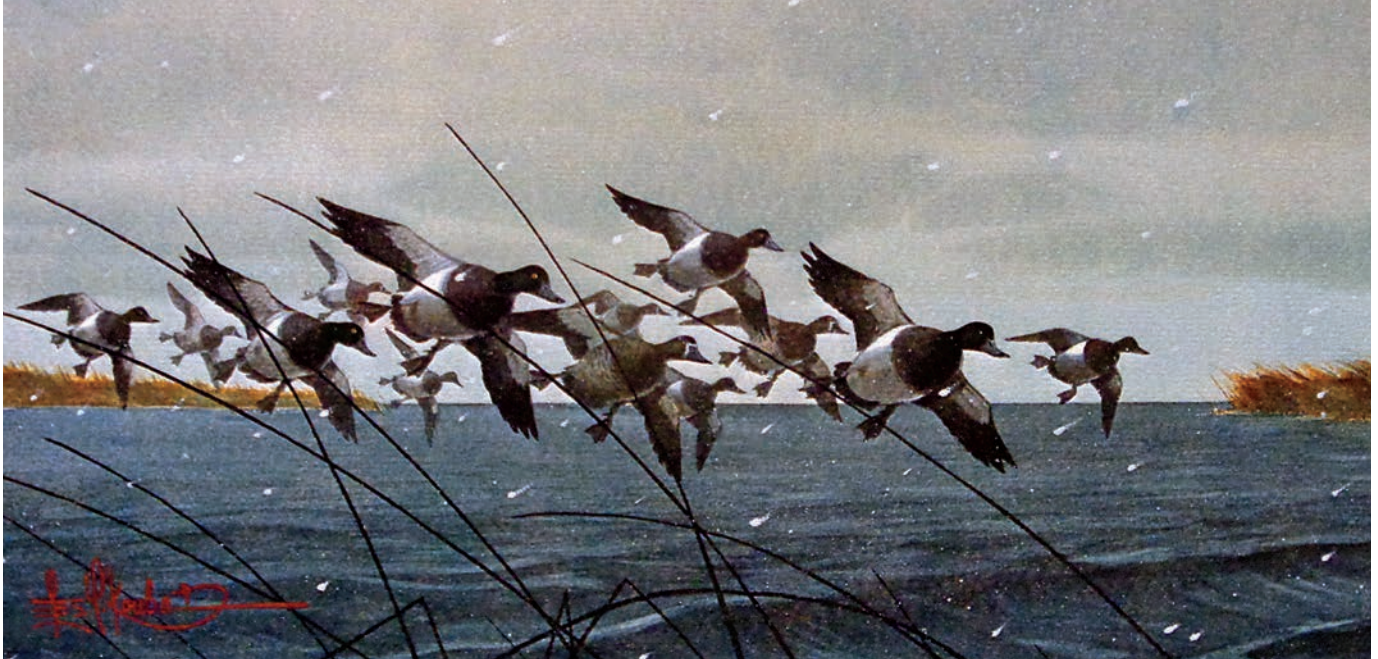
reeds, cattails, or prairie behind me for a hundred yards, but 50 yards will do in a pinch.

Why? While mallards, pintails, and other puddle ducks can parachute into a spread and climb back up rapidly if they don’t like what they see, divers slide into a spread like a baseball player stealing second base. With their short wings, they aren’t built for rising quickly, and since they usually come in quite low, they want an exit in front of them.

Those stubby wings also mean they can’t leap into the air like a puddle duck. They need open water on which to run before they can gain flight. Combine that with their feeding preferences, and you can see why you need to hunt some fairly open water. How open? Unless you’re hunting for ring-necked ducks, which are more comfortable than other divers on smaller waters, you’ll want a ducky-looking lake of 150 acres or more.

No matter how you slice it, you’re probably going to need a boat to hunt divers—to get to the right spot and to place decoys.





On many of the smaller lakes, you don't need a specialized boat, just a safe one. But on the really large waters, you need a watercraft designed for heavy seas. The Great Lakes, Gulf of Mexico, and coastal marshes of the Atlantic fall into that category, but so do giant inland lakes like Leech Lake in my home state of Minnesota, Lake of the Woods on the Minnesota-Ontario border, Devils Lake in North Dakota, and the pools of the upper Mississippi River—any of these can rival the Great Lakes and coasts for both ducks and rough water.

TAKE 'EM ON THE FIRST PASS

It was a gray dawn on that first diver hunt. From our makeshift blind I peered out over the decoys, noting that we had set them in the shape of a comma. The dense curve of decoys was directly in front of us, and the gang line—comprising mostly the brighter, whiter drakes—stretched out from one end and led directly downwind. Dad explained that the plan was to have the divers follow that long string in and then set down in the pocket behind the curve of single blocks. This set, and similar ones that looked more like a C or V, were the way we always set decoys in the years that followed.

"Here's how it's going to work," Dad said, sipping on a cup of thermos coffee. "When we see them, keep your face down. I'll tell you when to stand. We'll take 'em on the first pass if they're in range."

Which is just how it worked out. Thirty or so bluebills were rapidly winging their way up the lake, maybe 40 yards above the water, all in a tight bunch. As they turned, the stark-white bellies of the drakes stood out against the gray sky. They'd seen the decoys and they were coming. Dad calmly set down his coffee and grabbed his Model 12. I reached for my shotgun too.

The 'bills were still outside the gang line but heading toward it when Dad told me to stand. I was shocked. If these had been mallards, they'd have flared well out of range. But the chesty bluebills brazenly barreled in, losing altitude, oblivious to us. At 20 feet above the water and halfway down the gang line, they swung toward the individual decoys.

My gun was already shouldered when Dad barked, "Now!" We both emptied our shotguns. I really don't know if I was responsible for any of the ducks that fell. If I did hit one, it probably wasn't the one I was aiming at. Used to shooting slower incoming dabblers, I doubt that I had led these swift bluebills by anywhere near enough. But there were three ducks down. We sent Kim to work.

With two drakes and a hen in the blind, and a happy dog, I asked Dad why we stood up so soon. "Maybe it's because they're usually so low to the water, or maybe it's because they're



"TRUSTING BILLS" COURTESY OF ARTBARBARIANS.COM

focused on the decoys, or maybe it's just that they don't care, but you can get away with a lot more when you're hunting divers," he said.

He went on to explain that because they move fast, because they're in a knot, and because you're going to have to really concentrate on your swing and your lead, getting up early and picking out a single duck is a huge advantage. "Any fool can kill a wings-cupped legs-down mallard," he quipped. "It takes skill to tumble a diver."

But why the first pass? What he explained, and what I've experienced in all the years since, is that divers will work their way around a body of water, often several times, before deciding to swing within gun range. Canvasbacks in particular like to survey the whole lake. Heck, sometimes you can eat a sandwich between the time when you first see a flock of cans and when they decide to give your decoys a pass. Given that propensity, you take them on the first pass in range, even if they don't look like they're going to set. And if you drop a duck or two, you keep your eye on the flock. They'll often come right back.

A DOG THAT SWIMS IN CIRCLES

When the next flock of bluebills swung over our decoys, I was more prepared. Dad dumped two, and I nailed one on the first shot. I was slow to swing on a second, and it was heading away when I fired the next two rounds. The bird was hit, but not dead, and when it splashed down it was swimming.

Dad slammed a grouse load into his gun. Those were the days of lead shot. We used 4s on ducks and 7 1/2s on grouse. He leveled the gun on the swimming duck and sluiced it on the water. It was still swimming, but slower.

We sent Kim. She rapidly gained on the duck, but as she got closer, it dived. She stopped, treading water and swimming in a tight circle. The duck surfaced, its bill barely above water. Kim spotted it and started off again. The scene repeated itself four times before she went under with the duck and finally got it.

Dad's advice—which I share with every new diver hunter—is to never, ever shoot at a diver going away. One, their backs are virtually armor plated. Two, even if you do bring one down, momentum will carry it a long way out. That makes for a tough retrieve for the dog, or it may require using the boat. And, on any diver you drop, if it isn't upside down with gray legs waving, shoot it again. In a foot of water, any retriever is going to be able to run down a struggling dabbler. But diving-duck dogs have to swim, often through rough water, to pursue ducks that can dive out of sight.

Today, I carry "swatter" loads of 2 3/4-inch steel 6s in my pocket. It's way cheaper and more effective than using duck loads for dispatching a cripple. Often, the only target you'll have is the swimming duck's head, and that's not very big. The denser pattern provided by small shot is a significant advantage. Have them someplace handy, like a wader pocket, or you might not have time to get to them.

I've been blessed with good dogs. Maybe any dog could become a good diving-duck retriever, but they need a lot of exposure to the game. They learn by doing, and there's not much you can do in training to simulate a duck on the run underwater.



"GOOD OL DAYS" COURTESY OF CHETRESON.COM



"FLAPS DOWN" COURTESY OF ARTEBARIANS.COM

From behind us, the cold air was ripped by a sudden and mighty whoosh. Dad said, "I love that sound, and now you do too. It's something you'll never forget."

A SOUND LONG REMEMBERED

It nearly stopped my heart. From behind us, the cold air was ripped by a sudden and mighty *whoosh*. I hadn't even thought to breathe again when we heard the sound directly over our heads. Then the sound turned into a flock of blue-bills rocketing straight out over the cold, gray lake. Riding a stiff wind, the black-and-white ducks pumped their wings hard just above the waves, then turned toward our decoys on an apparent suicide mission. It was the first time, but not the last, that I heard that distinctive sound.

Clutching my shotgun, ready for my dad's command, I was dismayed to see the ducks change their minds. They turned once more, got the wind at their tails, and sped down the lake in a knot.

Dad, seeing my puzzled expression, said, "Heck, even divers make wise choices some days. We've shot some nice birds today, Mike. And what you just heard was worth the work. I love that sound, and now you do, too. It's something you'll never forget."

And I never have. ☹️

Hand signals help a lot, so polish up your pup's skills. That said, you may not always be able to direct your dog, because often you can't see where the bird surfaces, swimming as it does with just a periscoping bill. That's where a dog's experience comes into play. Low to the water, a dog can see the bird or smell it. With time, a retriever will learn to look around without advancing in any one direction. Field trialers call this "popping," and it's considered a fault. Ha! It's the best thing a diving-duck retriever can do.

Make sure your retriever is in shape for the demands of diver hunting. It takes much more stamina to swim in deep, icy water than it does to fetch ducks in shallow marshes, where dogs can often touch bottom. Condition your dog with lots of long retrieves on large bodies of water.

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