



Freelancing

THE PRAIRIES

THE AUTHOR SHARES VALUABLE LESSONS
HE'S LEARNED FROM DECADES OF PURSUING
WATERFOWL IN THE DUCK FACTORY

“I’m ready to hang it up, Shannon. What about you?”

After nearly four hours in the duck blind, with nary a shot fired and the day turning out better suited to sunbathing than to waterfowling, I’d pretty much had enough.

“Yep. Let’s bag it. It’s after 10. Nothing much is going to happen now,” my longtime hunting partner replied.

I gave my black Lab Wigeon her release command, and she began running up and down the shoreline, glad to stretch her legs. Gun unloaded and waders hitched up, I splashed into the slough to begin picking up the decoys.

“Mike! Get back in the blind. Now!”

I hit the whistle, and Wigeon’s butt soon hit the beach. Diving into the blind, I jammed shells into the old A-5 and only then squinted into the startling blue North Dakota sky. Mallards. Dozens of flocks—with



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dozens of birds in each. Like the Army Airborne, they were parachuting down from great heights, and we were huddled smack-dab in the middle of their drop zone.

It was raining greenheads.

The hunting was epic. We didn’t call. We picked only drakes. We’d rise, shoot, send the dog—and repeat. Finally, we each searched for a pintail to round out our bag. Once that was accomplished we sat and marveled, guns unloaded, as more ducks dropped into our spread.

What the heck had just happened?



An abundance of dabblers and divers offers a mixed bag of hunting opportunities.



Author Michael Furtman has been hunting the prairies for nearly 40 years.

Lesson #1

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Saskatchewan, Manitoba, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota—I've hunted ducks on the prairies of each. I've made trips on opening day, and been stuck in blizzards late in the season. In more recent

as gadwalls and shovelers will also remain, and depending on the weather, a few more birds will be drifting in with each north wind.

There have been years on the prairies when the first

and scaup appeared in abundance. Along with those came bunches of mallards, pintails, green-winged teal, and wigeon. Such a grand array of species will test any waterfowler's ability to identify birds on the wing, a task made more difficult by the fact that this early, and this far north, young-of-the-year drakes are just beginning to sport adult plumage.

essential with each passing day. Ducks may have a brain the size of a grape, but they use every bit of it.

Don't forget that this is the north country. Shorter days and longer, colder nights mean that prairie wetlands will eventually begin to freeze. When they do, ducks that prefer the small wetlands, which freeze first, will depart, leaving primarily mallards and pintails as the main puddle ducks, and scaup and redheads as the leading divers. These species will key on larger bodies of water that are slower to freeze. Areas with an abundance of small wetlands—now mostly frozen—will have few ducks. At the same time, reservoirs, lakes, and rivers will grow in importance to ducks as well as to duck hunters. During the early season, you may be able to get by without any type of watercraft, but later in the season some sort of boat will be necessary. Unless, of course, you're field hunting.



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years I've stuck primarily with North Dakota, but my advice will apply to any state or province in the Prairie Pothole Region. Deciding when to go depends a great deal on what species you'd like to hunt.

If you want to see the greatest variety of ducks, you should head out during the first week or two of your destination's hunting season. Early migrants, like blue-winged teal, will still be around. Other locally produced ducks such



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few days of the season were balmy, and teal swarmed like bees. And then by the end of the week and on the heels of a north wind, the bluewings were all but gone and flights of canvasbacks, redheads,

As things progress through the middle of the season, some of the less hardy ducks will have moved south. That fact, combined with the reality that the remaining ducks have been hunted for several weeks, can make the midseason a bit of a challenge, even in the famed Duck Factory. Lingering ducks will seek more remote waters, which are still numerous in some areas. While scouting is important at any time of the season, the effort grows more

Lesson #2

FIELDS FLUSH WITH MALLARDS

I freely admit that I'd much rather hunt over water than on land. That said, if greenheads are your cup of tea, and any other duck except a pintail or two just doesn't cut it, field hunting is often the way to go, especially late in the season.

Mallards and pintails start to gather in huge feeding flocks as the weather chills, usually roosting on the nearest (and generally large) body of unfrozen water they can find. The challenges presented

by this type of hunting are numerous. First, you must locate concentrations of these ducks, which means you'll spend a lot of time driving and glassing. Then you need to discover where they're feeding. Finally, you have to track down the landowner, which is not always easy.

Hunting on land means you'll certainly be hunting private property. While the prairie states and provinces have a wealth of public lands open to hunters, these areas are maintained as wildlife habitat with grasses and wetlands—not grain. If you're intent on field hunting, you're going to have to do a lot of phone calling or door knocking to find out who owns that grainfield full of mallards. Fortunately, once you do figure out who owns the land, you'll find that most prairie farmers are generous and will usually grant hunting access.

Field hunting takes large spreads of decoys, and over the years I've noticed more and more trucks hauling big trailers stuffed, no doubt, to the gills with decoys and layout blinds, even early in

the season. It takes a crew to put out and pick up those large spreads. Since I like water, and don't like crowds, this style of hunting is not for me, though I've done it enough times to know just how rewarding it can be, if you're willing to put in the effort.



JIM THOMPSON

Scouting is key to finding large concentrations of waterfowl on this vast landscape.



Every one of these potholes is used by ducks during some part of the year.

Lesson #3 — POTHOLES SMALL AND LARGE

The Prairie Pothole Region is full of—yep, you guessed it—prairie potholes. Some are small enough that you can toss a rock across them. Others might more rightly be called prairie lakes. Every

The one with ducks.

That may seem obvious, but too often I see hunters plunk down in a wetland where I've rarely seen more than a handful of ducks over the years. Some wetlands just have more of what ducks want, whether it's simply an extra sense of security, a protective lee, or favorite foods. And the only way to find those places is to fill up your gas tank and start looking. Scouting is crucial. There will be days when you'll think there isn't a duck on the prairie, and then you'll come over a rise and see a thousand ducks sitting on a pothole that looks like every other pothole to you and me, albeit not to them. For whatever reason, that's where they want to be.

one of these potholes is used by ducks during some part of the year. Some of these wetlands will be on public lands, others on private. And despite the drainage that has occurred over the decades, many thousands of potholes remain. Deciding which one to hunt can be daunting. Which should you choose?

Potholes big and small—I've hunted them all. But I will tell you this: large wetlands tend to offer better shooting than small ones nearly every time. First, they attract a wider variety of both dabblers and divers than do small potholes. Second, even if a flock isn't particularly interested in



DEAN FLASBOK

that pothole, they'll often give it the once-over, working their way around the pond. A nice spread of decoys might close the deal, or at least bring them into shooting range. Third, larger potholes often offer a range of habitats on one body of water—open spaces for diving ducks to raft and feed, shallows along shore for dabblers, and sandbars on which geese and mallards like to loaf. The exception to choosing large wetlands over small comes into play on a truly windy day—and the prairies can get windy. Even some divers will choose a wetland that's smaller than they'd prefer on days when whitecaps foam across the potholes. Keep a few of those spots in your back pocket.

Lesson #4
THE RIGHT STUFF

First on my list of "gear" is my dog. I really don't know how anyone hunts prairie potholes successfully without a dog—or at least retrieves their birds successfully. Most potholes simply are not wadable. Even if the water is only knee deep in front of the blind, it will likely be a boot-sucking quagmire farther out. Some of the least wadable wetlands

are small, cattail-rimmed potholes, which tend to have the most silt. In my experience, potholes that are frequently windswept have fairly hard, gravelly bottoms, but you'd better figure that to be an exception rather than the rule. Bring a dog.

Speaking of wading, if you can't wade, you won't be able to set your decoys out very far from shore. Some hunters will use a small kayak for decoy chores as well as for picking up downed ducks. While that's certainly an option, I much prefer a canoe. For one, it can readily carry more gear. An average 17-foot canoe has enough capacity for three or four dozen decoys, a dog, and two adults. It can also ferry you and your hunting partner swiftly and securely across larger wetlands, often to places that are inaccessible to hunters who don't use such versatile boats.

While you can likely get away with deploying 18 to 24 decoys in some spots on some days, I tend to put out

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A canoe can be helpful for setting out decoys and retrieving downed birds.

four dozen, splitting my rig between divers and dabblers. Rigging them with five- or six-foot anchor cords is usually sufficient, but there have been times I've wished for an extra foot or two. If I'm in the mood to shoot some geese, or if I just want to put out some confidence decoys, I'll set a dozen or two goose silhouettes along the shore and in shallow water.

Don't count on good hiding cover. Although cattails do rim many prairie wetlands, such natural concealment may not be available where you and the ducks both want to be. You might be able to gather enough nearby vegetation to conceal yourself, but that too is never a given. Bring some blind materials with you, even if they're nothing more than a simple PVC or wood frame with some camo netting that you can dress up with local vegetation. If you have a layout blind, consider using it next to the water, if the shoreline allows. Layouts are a great tool for hunting wetlands that have sparse cover.

When everything comes together, the prairies can provide some of the world's finest waterfowl hunting.

Lesson #5
FIGURING IT ALL OUT

With our limits lying next to our blinds, Shannon and I watched as mallards continued to drop into our spread. Giggling like middle-school boys telling raunchy jokes, we marveled as the ducks slipped air from beneath their wings and plummeted into the decoys. A minute or two of swimming among the counterfeits would wise them up, however, then off they'd go with a grunt and a quack. It was quite a show, but with ducks to clean and stomachs growling for lunch, we finally packed up and paddled back across the marsh to the truck.

"Well, I bet that'll never happen again," I said. "I mean, who'd think you could shoot a limit of ducks so late in the morning on a bluebird day?"

Boy, was I wrong. That scene, which occurred two decades ago, has repeated itself so many times in subsequent years that we've begun joking about the "ten o'clock flight," even though it sometimes arrives as early as nine or as late as 11—or not at all. And while neither of us claims to be the brightest bulb on the string, Shannon and I did figure out what was going on.



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I've learned a lot of lessons on the prairie, and there's one more you need to know. Even though the region is famous for its duck habitat and duck production,

hunting success is never guaranteed. I've talked to plenty of hunters who've gotten skunked and were disappointed with their trip. I sympathize. I've been skunked too.

Yes, hunting is hunting, even on the prairies. But when the weather and duck movements align, when mallards fall into your decoys as if drawn by a magnet, or when a squadron of cheery canvasbacks strafe your rig, you too will learn the best prairie lesson: this is as good as it gets. ☞

It's actually pretty simple. Mallards and pintails like to eat waste grain. Along with any geese in the area, these ducks will fly out of the prairie wetlands from their roost soon after daybreak to feed in stubble for several hours. Once gorged with dusty grain, the ducks head to a nearby wetland to quench their thirst and to loaf. The key to finding where these thirsty ducks are going is to scout midday, because that's when the mallards will likely be back from the stubble fields. In a sense, it's the reverse of field hunting; rather than finding the fields in which the ducks feed, you're looking for where they'll go when they're done. With full bellies, the birds often choose wetlands that don't look like particularly ducky spots. That's because they're not interested in aquatic foods. What they really want is a drink, as well as a secure loafing spot on some kind of beach or sandbar. Glass the shorelines instead of the open water to find these ducks.



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