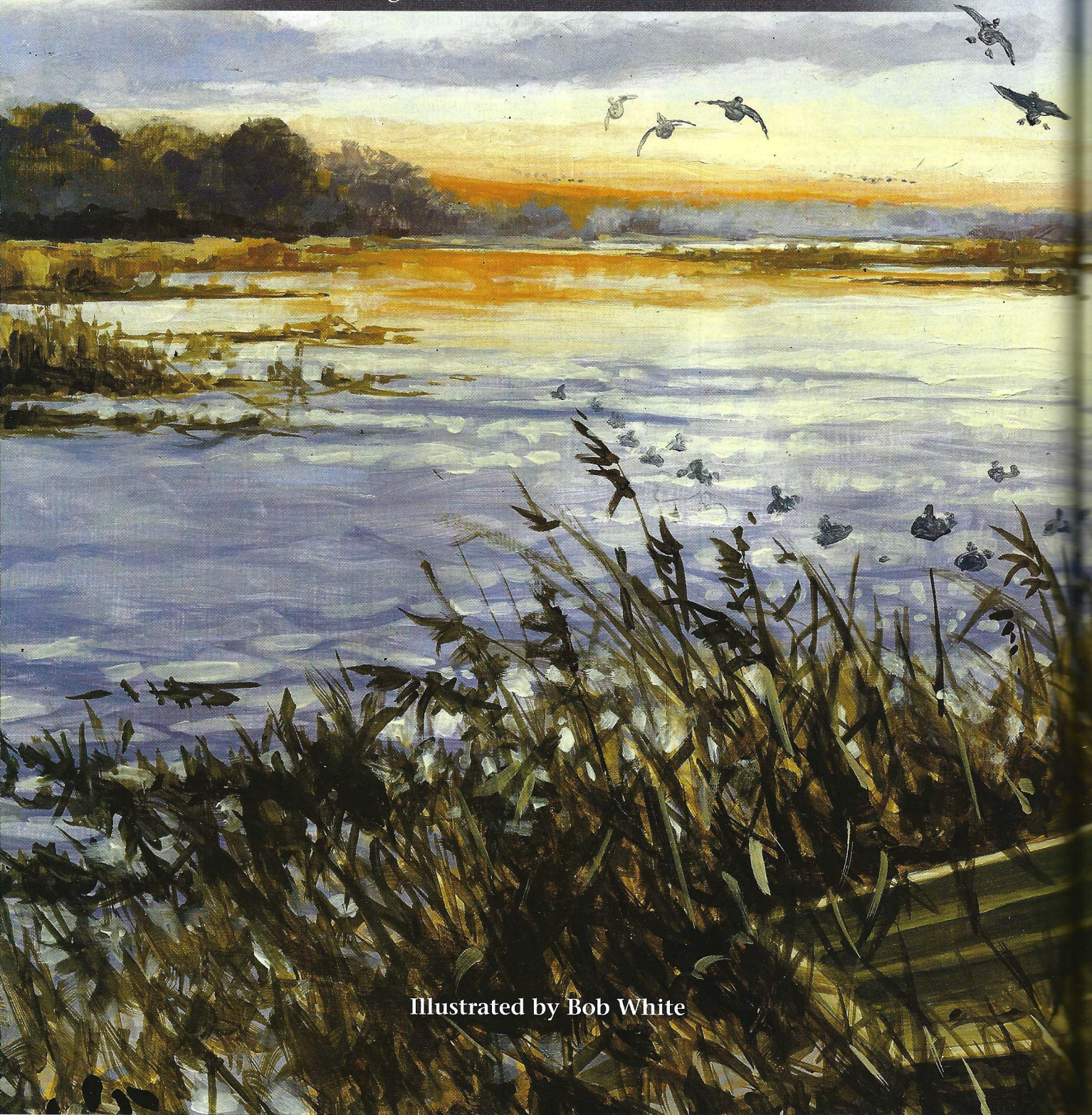



By Michael Furtman

# *Diver Dawn*

*Diving duck hunters are born not made*



Illustrated by Bob White



**B**luebills hung from the basement ceiling water pipes, two to a bent coat hanger, like socks on laundry day. In the corner, my father's World War II-era military camp stove roared beneath a bucket of water and melted wax. Like factory workers on an assembly line, men in a row were picking and dipping the ducks in wax or peeling wax from birds that had already cooled. At the end of the line were my mother and me, knives and shears in hand, gutting and cleaning the ducks over the old double laundry tub.

## Diver Dawn

Outside, a genuine Minnesota November gale howled. Inside, down floated in the air. So did laughter. My dad's face was ruddy red from the day's weather, as was my oldest brother's and those of the other men who had just returned from giant Lake Winnibigoshish. Neighbor Jeff Nelson was there, a die-hard duck hunter, and a couple other men whose names I no longer remember. Also in the disassembly line was our parish priest, Father Hayden. He had arrived, I suspect, to inquire why my dad had not been at services that morning, and was now pressed into duty, feathers and duck lice clinging to his black clothing. Most adults had a glass of brandy at hand, including Father Hayden.

I was too young for the brandy. And I was too young to hunt bluebills. But not too young to catch the fever, especially as I listened to stories of how the 'bills had ripped across the white-foamed waves into their decoys, and how Kim, our first black Lab, made retrieve after retrieve and patiently sat ice-coated between flights. I paid attention as the men chided each other about missed shots or complimented each other on great shooting. I ached to be old enough to join them.

My late father believed that diving duck hunters were born, not made. "Anyone can hunt mallards," he told me one brisk morning. "Guys who don't even much like to hunt can get used to sitting in a comfy blind and shoot puddle ducks. But you have to be born a diver hunter. You have to really, really love to hunt ducks to deal with frozen outboards, rough water, and the hard work it takes to hunt divers."

If you agree with my dad, I'm guessing you grew up near the ocean or in country with big, windswept lakes. Your tutors were men not afraid of open water, rough seas, penetrating cold, or driven snow. They watched to see if you shied away from the work of setting out dozens and dozens of decoys—or more important, from picking them up with numbed hands. Men who taught you the importance of hunting clothes made of wool, who didn't have much use for duck calls, and who kept survival gear in the boat. They measured how far to lead a duck in yards, not feet. They showed you the value of a no-quit-in-it dog. They revealed where the ducks went—and why. Eventually they let you handle the tiller, maybe even run the boat out alone to chase a crippled bird. Finally, when your schooling was done, you believed as they did, that mallard hunting was largely for sissies.

Flapping-wing decoys? They would have bust a gut laughing.



**T**he day finally came when I was old enough to hunt divers. I spent a sleepless night in the Sears canvas tent—awake not because of the cold, which was considerable, but from excitement. Well before dawn, Dad cooked eggs and corned beef hash on the old military stove. And then we walked down to the shoreline, me in my too big, patched hand-me-down hip boots, toes stuffed with newspaper to make them fit. Dad shoved his 1946 Old Town boat (which I sometimes still use) into the lake, tugged the handle of the six-horse Mercury outboard, and roared us into the darkness, reeds and wild rice stalks hissing along the wooden gunwales. Kim sat in the bow.

I remember coming out of the protected bay and rounding a point in the dark. Waves from the open lake slapped against the side of the boat, spray dampening everything. It was frightening and exciting. And when we reached the point where we were to hunt, my father began tossing decoys over the side. I helped by unwrapping the anchor lines from each cork decoy.

The ritual of setting decoys, of hiding the boat crossways in the cattails (we would hunt from it), of making sure anything colorful was hidden under burlap sacks (there was no camouflage in those days) was explained patiently, thoroughly, by my father. And when that first hot cup of belly-warming liquid (coffee for Dad, cocoa for me) was poured while we waited for dawn, I was trembling with cold and anticipation.

In those days, bluebills came like clockwork to Minnesota, riding on frigid north winds, spawning a generation of devoted diving duck hunters. For many of us, duck hunting and bluebill hunting were one and the same. On that morning, I learned just why that passion ran so deep.

The wind had picked up with the rising sun. Tatters of iron clouds streamed across an otherwise blue sky, each cloud unloading its burden of moisture, flecks that were more than rain and less than snow. With the bluster coming mainly over our right shoulders, the bluebills would come from in front and to the left, my father said. And so it unfolded, the ducks

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appeared as distant specks at first, approaching from far out over and above the gray lake, then, as if being reeled in like fish, dove toward our decoys, dropping altitude as they came.

"Don't shoot until I tell you to," my dad said, repeating what he'd told me many times on the drive up. "The boat will rock when we rise, so we will stand up well before we shoot. The cattails will hide us. They'll be looking for a place to land, not watching us. And make sure your footing is good before you shoot. Take your time. Now go ahead and put a shell in your shotgun."

I pulled back the handle of the old bolt-action Marlin—a behemoth with a 32-inch barrel—inserted a shell, and slid the bolt forward and down. I felt for the gun's wrist, found the trigger guard (the one my sheet-metal-worker father had made because the used gun had come without one) with my right forefinger, and clamped a death grip on the Marlin's forearm with my left hand. Blood pounded in my ears.

"Remember to pick *one* bird," my dad whispered. "Near the rear of the flock. Don't forget to lead."

Low over the water the broad-chested bluebills winged brazenly toward the decoys. At times I could barely see them through the whipping cattails. But I could hear their whistling wings.

"Get ready. Stand up. SHOOT!"

One gun thundered. Mine. Of the 30 or so bluebills that had raced over the decoys, one remained behind, floating feet up, white belly to the sky, gray legs wiggling. My dad had not fired. He had watched.

And just before he sent Kim to retrieve, he smiled at me and said three words that I will never forget and that made my teen heart skip.

"Nice shot, son."

**D**uck hunters—at least successful ones—are like elephants. They never forget.

Years later, Shannon Tompkins and I were tooling around the North Dakota prairie, scouting the innumerable potholes for ducks. As we topped a rise, a large wetland—a lake really—shimmered in front of us, and in its middle, riding the waves born on the ever-present prairie wind, bobbed a large flock of divers. Bluebills, mostly. Maybe a thousand. And redheads too. There was also something white along the lee shore.

Looking at the lake, I had a feeling of *déjà vu*. Something about it told me I'd been here before, but I also knew that Shannon and I had never hunted this spot in the decade we'd spent prowling

the prairie together. While I searched my mind for the reason it seemed familiar, Shannon searched the far bank through binoculars. "Mike," he said in awe and with reverence. "All that white? Those, brother, are canvasbacks. And nearly all drakes."

*Canvasbacks. Rafts of them.* The memory came flooding back. In 1989, at the inauguration of the Chase Lake Project of the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture, one of the first habitat restoration projects under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, I had toured this part of North Dakota with two U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service waterfowl biologists. One was Ron Stromstad, a North Dakota native who now works for Ducks Unlimited. The other was a retired refuge manager, the late Leo Kirsch. Despite his frail health, Leo wanted to show us his country, and after his wife bundled him up against the cold October day, we piled into the government truck and bounced out onto the prairie, heading southwest from tiny Woodworth.

"How'd you young fellas like to see more damn canvasbacks than you've ever seen in your life?" said Leo in his gravelly voice, grinning. "Drive. I'll show you."

It had been a dry decade on the prairie. Some lakes were bone dry. Leo pointed to one. The bottom was as cracked and lined as a bedouin's face. "This is famous South Lake," Leo said. "It's hard to imagine now, but Old Doc Melzer delivered a baby somewhere nearby in the 1920s, then stopped and shot a sack full of canvasbacks here. A homesteader told me that in the old days he could hear the roar of ducks getting off the water from two miles away."

We continued on, taking too many turns for me to count. When I was thoroughly lost, Leo excitedly told Ron, "Here. Here. Turn here!"

Ron clattered the truck down a grass-choked two-track. We crested a rise and there it was—a silver lake rimmed in hard-stemmed bulrushes. "Look at that, boys," Leo said. "There's 6,000 canvasbacks sittin' out there. And I'll wager, guys, that within seven miles of us, there are 15,000 canvasbacks."

We all watched the great white-backed birds through binoculars. Small groups would get up to stretch their wings, run on the blue waters to gain speed, and lift on the wind to circle the lake. When they turned to the sun, they flashed like mirrors. So bright it hurt my eyes, robbed my breath. Then, tilting downward, they would tear toward the water and set down, their leathery landing gear skiing to a stop.

Leo explained that canvasbacks were what he called "calendar ducks." This, he said, is one of their major migration stops. They came through this same area every year at the same time, largely independent of the weather. Warm or cold, they appeared in

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early October, and after feasting for a week, maybe two, they continued on their way.

As the memory flooded back, I knew that Shannon and I had hit that peak week and had found, if not the very same wetland that I had seen with Ron and Leo, at least its spitting image. I also knew where we would be hunting come dawn.

Now, I'll admit, most hunters don't travel to the prairie to shoot diving ducks. They come to the Dakotas from all corners of America to chase mallards and pintails and gadwalls and teal. Puddle ducks. And to be truthful, that's pretty much what Shannon and I were searching for, too.

But if you're born a diver hunter, you're always a diver hunter, and since the lakes of my home state had been stingy on bluebills in recent years, a diver shoot would be grand. And cans? Well, what duck hunter would turn down the chance to shoot the one bull canvasback the law allows?

I did not have to twist Shannon's arm. A passionate diver hunter, he had cut his teeth on the skeins of redheads that call

the Gulf coast of his home state of Texas their winter home. And so the next morning, in the night's murk and in a canoe laden with the diver decoys I had wisely brought along, we stroked hard across the lake into a strong wind. The weather was brutal. Ice rimmed the lake, and something akin to slush was pelting our faces, drumming on our hats. We found the point we had glassed the day before, and pulled the canoe onto the lee shore and into a dense stand of cattails. Hurriedly we tossed out the decoys in the dark.

Even before the blind was up, the ducks began to pile in. Well before legal shooting time, divers screamed through the decoys. To avoid temptation, we left our shotguns unloaded. We sat and poured coffee. We glanced at our watches. Against the pink horizon, ribbons of birds traced a path above the lake. The dark sky whistled with wings, and we heard the guttural *brttt, brttt, brttt* of talking diver hens. Bella, my black Lab, trembled as they passed.

"Mike. Cans! Two o'clock," Shannon called over the wind.

I checked my watch. It was shooting time. Despite all the advancements in clothing since my father's day, I was already cold and damp. With red hands I grabbed my shotgun, slammed in three shells, and hunkered down. As I crouched, slush from my collar slipped down my neck. I shuddered, then chuckled at the memory of my father's words: *You have to really, really love to hunt ducks to hunt divers.*

The cans were on us now. I picked one drake. Near the rear of the flock. I did not forget to lead.

One gun thundered. Mine. Of the 30 or so cans that had raced over the decoys, one remained behind, floating feet up, white belly to the sky, gray legs wiggling. At the last second, the cans had peeled to the right of the point, giving me the only shot. Shannon could only stand and grin.

"Nice shot, brother!" he said.

I sent Bella to make the retrieve. As I stood, I fixed the scene in my mind. Gray waves. Iron clouds. A no-quit-in-her dog. Ducks that came as if they flaunted death, too proud to flair from a fight. It was, as it had been in my youth, a diver dawn.

Bella slid the red-headed bull into my hand. I held its still-warm body, so dense with down, admired its sloping bill. And as I did, I swear I heard my father's words again. *Nice shot, son. You were born a diver hunter.* ☞

