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—The Arkansas Duck Hunting Magazine—



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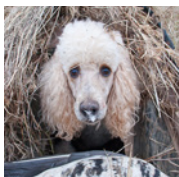


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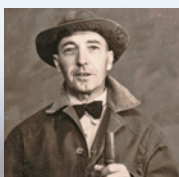
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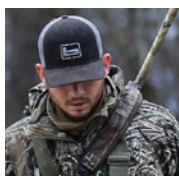
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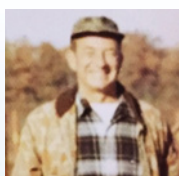
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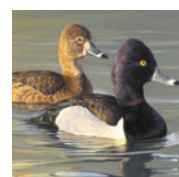
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Cover art, "Gunning the Bottoms," 36 x 24, oil painting by James Smith. For a reproduction, contact the artist at BrettSmith.com.



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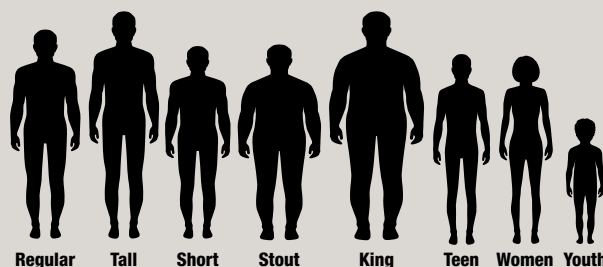
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From the Managing Editor



I've lost track of the number of issues of *Greenhead* I have helped produce here at Arkansas Business Publishing Group. Memory may be the first casualty of age, but rather than go back and count issues I prefer to dwell on the winning streak of publishing industry awards our duck hunting magazine has put together.

One of the many behind-the-scenes players making *Greenhead* so successful has been Brent Birch, who in title has served as editor but in reality has been hunting industry expert, institutional memory and all-around go-to guy. Brent's expertise and contacts within the sport (he knows people who not only hunt but are talented enough to photograph and write about the experience) are invaluable.

For proof you can just read this latest issue, another award-winner in my humble opinion, and take my word that it's not me but Brent who knows the science behind modern waders or which photographers shoot the best duck dog photos.

And if *Greenhead* leaves you hungry for more duck hunting literature, and for further proof of Brent's expertise, you might want to check out *The Grand Prairie: The History of Duck Hunting's Hallowed Ground*. Dropping in September, the 350-page book is the brainchild of Brent and Witt Stephens and details the colorful past of Arkansas' hunting mecca.

With the valued cooperation of the Museum of the Grand Prairie in Stuttgart, Brent has used the resources accumulated in his 40 years of duck hunting experience to pull together the photography and writing talent to make history come to life. Historic photos, some never before seen in print, and the words of the many influential people who helped shape the region, make *The Grand Prairie: The History of Duck Hunting's Hallowed Ground* a can't miss for lore-loving waterfowlers. It is available to order at www.ArkansasGrandPrairie.com.

The book's contributing talent includes Dwain Hebda, Greg Churan, John Gordon and Kenneth Keiser, who are *Greenhead* veterans and some of whom signed up again this year.

In this, the ninth (Brent tells me) annual issue, Hebda nails a pair of profiles on conservationist Jody Pagan and the LaCotts family, which has produced a long line of duck guides and duck club managers. Speaking of duck clubs, Gordon talked to the experts for his tale of the ins and outs of building and managing a club.

Brent pulled together a loving tribute, in the words of those who would know, to the wisdom of fathers who have passed on hunting knowledge to their kids. Brent also breaks down the latest old-is-new-again trends in hunting apparel, and don't miss his tale about one special gun that just may have mystical properties.

Not so ordinary duck dogs appear in our pages, along with entrepreneurs both traditional and cutting edge, executives sharing tips and stories, a wildly successful shooting program teaching gun safety to young hunters and all the nifty new gear your credit card can handle.

Art director Dean Wheeler is responsible for the eye-pleasing nature of our effort, which includes on the cover an original painting "Gunning the Bottoms" by acclaimed wildlife artist Brett James Smith. Check out his work for sale at www.BrettSmith.com.

We thank our advertisers, without whom we wouldn't have a magazine, and we thank all of you hunters and loyal readers, without whom we wouldn't have an audience.

Good luck and safe and happy hunting this season,

Todd Traub
Managing Editor

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Funny, you don't **look** like a duck dog.



DOGS COME IN SO MANY different shapes and sizes it's sometimes hard to believe they all belong to the same species. That's true of hunting dogs as well. Despite their unique, non-traditional appearances, these off-the-beaten-path breeds were born, and often bred, to hunt. They may look like they just came from the Westminster Kennel Club show, but their smarts and big hearts put them on the same level of hunting prowess as our beloved, more traditional Labradors.

THE STARE (this page, top) The sharp-eyed Jack Russell Terrier and (facing page) the Standard Poodle know their way around the rice fields and wetlands. ABOVE PHOTO BY BLAKE FISHER, FACING PHOTO BY DALE SPARTAS









BITE SIZE (*left*) Our Jack Russell Terrier almost appears guilty here, but if retrieving ducks is wrong he doesn't want to be right. Lively, independent and clever, the Jack Russells were bred for fox hunting 200 years ago, but clearly this little guy has had success branching out. PHOTO BY BLAKE FISHER

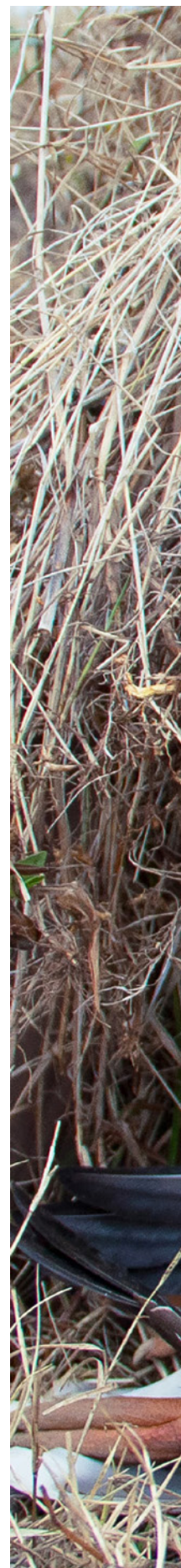
IN ITS ELEMENTS (*this page, top*) It's the perfect day for a hunt as far as our Wirehaired Pointing Griffon is concerned. Don't let the ice and damp fool you, an unkempt look is natural for this hardworking, outgoing canine that is renowned as "the supreme gundog." PHOTO BY DREW PALMER

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED (*this page, bottom*) All of our beautiful breeds retrieve, hopefully, but we've included one that has "retriever" in its name as well as its job description. The Golden Retriever is one of the more traditional waterfowling dogs in our lineup, but it would be a crime to leave out these pups whose loyalty and devotion make them ideal as guide dogs for the blind or as search-and-rescue animals. Goldens just want to help. PHOTO BY MATT STAGNER



ON POINT (*this page, both photos*) If you're up for a little exercise you'll have a willing partner and teammate in the German Pointer. Long-haired or short-haired, the pointers are friendly, smart and willing to please. The dogs are known for their boundless energy and a look often described as "aristocratic" and "noble." TOP PHOTO BY CHRIS MONROE, BOTTOM PHOTO BY TED WELLS

PERSONAL SPACE (*right*) Despite a regal, well-groomed image earned as a dog show mainstay, the Standard Poodles love outdoor play and frolicking in the water. The dogs are intelligent, trainable and have instincts for the hunt. That includes, apparently, a nose for camouflage. PHOTO BY DALE SPARTAS







JACKPOT This Boykin Spaniel brings in the prize for its sharpshooting owner. The Boykin, state dog of its native South Carolina, is one of the smallest of the retrievers but is a born water dog. The Boykin is known for its curly coat, and its size and friendly personality make it a good companion for children. PHOTO BY BLAKE FISHER



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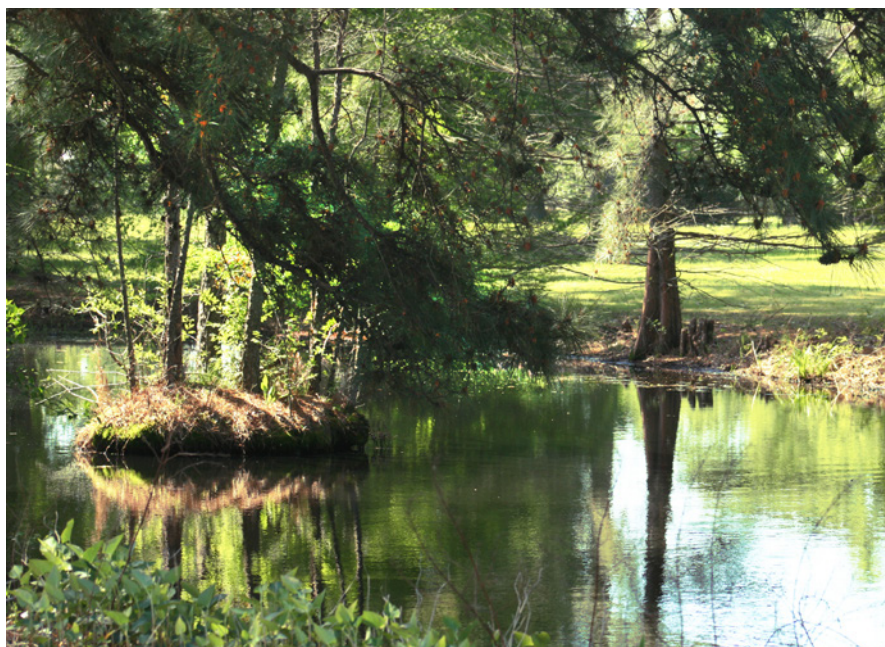


the club scene



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How is a club created? Take
a closer look at clubs old
and new to see how they
come together.

By JOHN GORDON



When the lodge on Jacob Wallace's original duck club burned, he and his partners turned the former Pines Golf Club, near Clarendon, into the Back 9 Duck Club. The existing clubhouse, bodies of water and irrigation made for an ideal site. PHOTOS BY JOHN GORDON

A

brisk north wind greeted the hunters, remnants of a strong cold front sweeping across the prairie the day before. Soon shooting time would arrive as streaks of morning sun colored the eastern sky. With clear, cold, fresh ducks in the area, anticipation for a good hunt ran high among the group. Chattering mallards could be heard crossing high and low. Yodeling specklebellies sang out while rising from the roost. It was a good day at the Back 9 Duck Club.

Nestled just outside Clarendon, the Pines Golf Club was built in the 1960s with funds provided by a government grant. It was the place to be in the 1970s; the pool there attracted folks from miles around. But the years passed and the club fell into disrepair, eventually being put up for sale. It's a nine-hole tract with clubhouse, cart barn and driving range. Pretty standard for any golf course. Two things make it ideal for a duck club headquarters however — a creek running along the eastern boundary that annually fills with ducks and a location in the heart of Arkansas duck country.

Enter Jacob Wallace, a lifelong duck hunter with a love for Arkansas and its great waterfowl hunting. He first discovered it tagging along with a family friend in 2001 at the age of 13. By the time he could drive, he was traveling from his native South Carolina to hunt the WMA's and federal refuges open to public hunting. Wallace's personal favorite is the White River Refuge, which he still hunts today when conditions are right.

As good as the public hunting was, though, Wallace found himself searching for private lands in order to escape the crowds. He formed his first club several years ago near Clarendon and leased more than 2,000 acres of croplands holding thousands of ducks every season. He built a lodge and everything ran smoothly.

The golf course property came on the market in August, 2017, and plans were made to make an offer. He and his club members continued to operate from the old facility near Clarendon until disaster struck and the lodge burned down in January. The focus then shifted in full to acquiring the golf course property and converting existing buildings into suitable lodging and storage facilities. March came and Wallace and his partner Bill Crawford closed on the Pines. The Back 9 Duck Club was born.

Soon work began on transforming a golf course into a working duck club.

"It's scary how perfect this property sets up for a duck club," Wallace said. "Irrigation is already run to every corner so anything can be leveed to hold water, including the driving range. We no-till planted it in corn to have great waterfowl habitat right behind the converted clubhouse that is the main lodge. Even if we never hunt it we can watch ducks and geese use it during the season."

LAND RUSH

Wallace's initial plans include building a levee around the eight-acre range and renovation of the three-bedroom house on the land. The golf carts will be gone and the barn set up for duck club storage.

In addition to the land at the site, more than 2,000 acres of croplands will be leased and available for hunting to the 20 club members. A unique feature of the club is the creek on the east side of the land that played havoc on the golf course when it left its banks and flooded the swimming pool, much to the inconvenience of the former members. That creek floods a wooded brake, however, and it holds plenty of ducks.

"I have seen ducks in large numbers on that creek ever since I have been hunting in this area," Wallace said. "That is what attracted me to the place initially. That creek ensures we will have ducks on the Back 9 club property. Sure, you can enhance any piece of land to potentially attract ducks. It sure is nice however to have an established draw already in place."

Many Arkansas hunting properties are brokered through Lile Real Estate in Little Rock and the Back 9 land is no exception. Company president Gar Lile is an avid hunter himself and has sold many tracts over the years, large and small. He not only brokers sales of duck hunting land but develops them as well by enhancing the landscape to make it more attractive to wildlife. Lile said hunting property demand is skyrocketing and many of these places will become duck clubs.

"Demand has increased tenfold for a place someone can call their own," Lile said. "Twenty-five years ago, there were only a handful of people looking for a dedicated duck hunting property. Those numbers have really increased in the last 10 years as hunters have embraced the idea of having their own place."

Supply and demand have sent property values soaring, as land is a limited resource. And much of this property is low lying land that would have little value if ducks didn't migrate south for the winter.

"Land that cost as little as \$500 an acre 20 years ago is now selling for more than \$1,500 to \$3,000 per acre," Lile said. "And the historic areas have reached astronomical prices, into the millions of dollars."

LOOK TO THE LODGE

Northwest of Clarendon lies Des Arc, another duck hunting town on the White River. This area is home to the Double Drake Hunting Club. The club was formed a little over five years ago and offers exceptional deer hunting as well as waterfowl. Shawn Fecher is a founding member and gave a look inside the process he and other members undertook to make this club a reality.

"Myself and several buddies started hunting around Des Arc about ten years ago," Fecher said. "We leased land in the area and hunted it with success. The years passed and we decided to build a place of our own. We signed a long-term lease with the farmer for 1,000 acres of diverse land. We have a variety of places to hunt, from timber to [Conservation Reserve Program] moist soil grass impoundments and willow breaks. And we purchased 80 acres so we would own some land and have a home for our lodge."

And quite a lodge it is. The importance of where hunters gather for fellowship can't be overstated at any hunting club. This is where so many memories are made. Where sons and daughters learn about the hunting tradition. Where great meals are shared. Where college football teams are cheered during crisp, fall afternoons. The lodging is what brings a club together. Shawn and his fellow members put a lot into theirs, creating a nine-bedroom and nine-bath home for members and their guests.

"The area that the lodge occupies is in the floodplain," Fecher said. "We had to bring in 65 loads of shell to bring the building up enough to stay dry in a flood."

Fecher also said that every effort was made to use local contractors for lodge construction. That is an added benefit of the duck club, a boost in the local economy. Thousands of hunters in Arkansas every season means millions of dollars in business revenue.



The lodge is the centerpiece of a duck club. Second only to bagging ducks, the good food and fellowship the lodge provides are what make a hunt worthwhile. The Double Drake is tricked out with nine bedrooms and nine baths, and a little rustic decor for good measure. PHOTOS BY ANGELO FELIX

FAMILY AND FRATERNITY

Further north near Jonesboro sit the headwaters of the L'Anguille River, basically a confluence of ditches at that point. The river is a tributary of the St. Francis and is approximately 110 miles long. Where the river begins there is an old farmhouse, the headquarters of the L'Anguille Lounge Duck Club. Legendary waterfowl hunter and taxidermist Pat Pitt formed the club starting with a solitary rice field blind in 1992. Pat has hunted ducks and geese around the world but his favorite spot is still the Lounge.

Pitt started hunting Arkansas in 1971 after moving to Memphis from east Tennessee for college. The reason was simple, that's where the ducks were.

After hunting different areas for 20 years, Pitt started looking for a more permanent location. The reason was simple — his two sons were old enough to hunt with him. The boys had already taken their first ducks, now Pitt would indoctrinate them in the duck hunting fraternity.

Northeast Arkansas was close enough to their home in Olive Branch, Mississippi, and the crowds that frequented parts farther south such as Stuttgart had yet to invade Poinsett County. Pitt leased a pit blind and secured a place to stay from the farmer. Another Arkansas duck club came into the fold.

The club is still going strong 26 years later. The membership is up to 18 and Stephen and Patrick Pitt are accomplished hunters with families of their own. This past season, Patrick introduced his daughter Mary Claire to duck hunting and Stephen took his son Reid to a pit for the first time.

"I didn't realize how fortunate I was growing up with a place to hunt like this," Stephen Pitt said. "I just thought everyone had a duck club to go to. As I got older, I appreciated what my dad built for us more and more. The camaraderie and friendship I have experienced over the past 26 years is priceless. And to be able to pass it along to my son is incredible."

Pat Pitt has six to nine pits available every season.

"We have kept two of our original pits all these years and have rotated others in and out depending upon production," he said. "And of those two, only one is hunted every year based on the crop in the field. We only hunt those pits when they are in rice."

In 2012, Pat Pitt expanded on the farmhouse they had been leasing.

"We had outgrown our accommodations and decided to build onto the house," he said. "We added around 300 SF and made the house more comfortable. A new great room was built along with a new kitchen. The old kitchen then became the mud room and the old living room was converted into a bedroom. It's a lot more livable now and that's important to myself and all the members."

MORE THAN DUCKS

South of Jonesboro along Highway 1 sits the town of Wynne. Southwest of the town is Oldham's Duck Club, started in 1994 and still growing. Jamie Oldham is the founder and his story is unlike the beginning of most clubs.

"My dad bought the property because he loves to catch crappie," Oldham said. "It has a 60-acre lake that is full of them. I would come over and fish with him in the winter. It didn't take me long to notice all of the ducks falling in on the back side of the land. That got me thinking that this place has a lot more potential than just fishing."

Indeed it did, and Jamie formed the club with five close friends. The membership has grown to 18 and the club is still very much a work in progress.

"This place looks nothing like it used to," Oldham said. "Everything is leveed now and has stainless steel controls with valves to control the water levels. The original 60-acre lake now has an 84-acre lake beside it. Both of the lakes are extensively managed for trophy largemouth bass, crappie, catfish, and bream. We have a cabin, dog kennels that can be cooled in summer and warmed in winter, storage barns and a separate bunk house. It's been a labor of love for sure."



Pat Pitt (left photo, standing, with son Patrick to his right) turned a lone duck blind in a rice field into the L'Anguille Lounge Duck Club near Jonesboro. Pitt has hunted in choice locations around the world but as his sons Patrick and Stephen (pictured with Stephen's son Reid, right photo) grew older, Pat wanted a more permanent location and chose his spot at the headwaters of the L'Anguille River. The farmhouse serving as the club lodge has been expanded and made more comfortable. PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEPHEN PITT



Founded by Jamie Oldham, Oldham's Duck Club, near Wynne, started as a fishing destination before Oldham realized the property, with a 60-acre lake, was popular with ducks. PHOTOS BY JAMIE OLDHAM AND CODY GRISANTI

In addition to the 300-acre main property, Oldham has several thousand acres in the surrounding area to hunt. Conventional leasing means contacting the farmer, negotiating a price and paying for the land for the season. At Oldham's, a more old-fashioned approach is taken.

"Area farmers would rather fish than hunt, I have learned. And they are willing to trade hunting rights for fishing rights on my place," Oldham said. "It's a winning situation for both of us. They gain access to great fishing and I and my members get to hunt quality land. It's as easy as that."

Oldham's is a year-round club, an attractive bonus many clubs can't offer. In addition to fantastic fishing, club members are welcome to come any time and just hang out and enjoy the place.

"We have at least four planned get togethers at the club every year," Oldham said. "These are normally crawfish boils and cookouts. Guys bring their families and dogs and have a good time. Speaking of dogs, we are building a technical pond so members can tune up their retrievers in the offseason for hunting and hunt test purposes."

The club also holds a fishing tournament on the lakes every May to benefit St. Jude's Children's Hospital. Oldham believes in building more than just a duck club; it's a family-oriented destination.

It doesn't take a Rockefeller's wealth or rocket scientist's knowledge to build a duck club. It does take planning, perseverance and passion to bring it all together.

Whether you buy or lease property, hunt green timber or rice ground — or hunt deer and catch fish in addition to waterfowling — all quality clubs have the same thing in common. There is an individual behind the scenes who took a vision and made it reality.

Here's to the duck clubs — may they always be a part of Arkansas' waterfowl hunting experience.

Before You Buy

Ownership or membership in a duck club helps waterfowlers skirt around problems like private land access, expensive leases or over-hunted public areas.

But there are things to know before coughing up the chunk of money needed to buy your own tract and build or remodel your own lodge:

1 YOUR LIMITS / Land in the heart of a duck hunting mecca can be pricey — green timber near Stuttgart can go for more than \$6,000 an acre and rice field land can go for more than \$4,000 an acre. Know what you can pay, shop around and don't buy more scenery than you can afford to look at.

Maybe it's fewer than 10 acres and a pond, but with proper effort the property can be massaged into an attractive stopover for ducks. Cut, plant, irrigate and plant food plots until you have a four-star hunting hole.

Also, consider buying close to home if possible because ...

2 IT'S ALL YEAR / Monthly payments don't stop at the end of duck season and maintenance waits for no one. Levees won't patch themselves and roads and trails need clearing. Fixing up a property can be rewarding, however, and it keeps the hunting juices flowing in the offseason.

3 IF THERE ARE DUCKS / Unless you know the area where you are prospecting for property, find a local guide or expert or an agent who knows the market, knows hunting and knows the local scene.

In addition to consulting local experts, scout properties yourself, as thoroughly as possible, while the season is under way.

4 WHERE THE MONEY IS / A club owner can recoup some of his or her outlay by selling timber or leasing farming rights.

Also look into things like the Natural Resources Conservation Service's wetland reserve easement program. If the land qualifies to be placed in a conservation easement, owners can receive technical help and cost-share funding.

5 HOW PARTNERS HELP / A limited liability partnership with friends is a way of combining resources while also enabling the group to buy more and better land.

It could be a strain on a relationship, but sitting by the fire and watching football after a successful morning hunt is a reward that most partners will find worth the initial stress.

Some Information for this story was provided by WildfowlMag.com

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Veteran Conservationist Jody Pagan Finds Formula That Keeps The Ducks Coming

By DWAIN HEBDA

Jody Pagan leans forward on the lunch table, his brawny arms folded in front of him. He squints.

For the past hour, Pagan, conservationist and duck habitat expert, has been holding court about his career in the business and the stories and details have flowed out of him with ease. But the question before him, the one that hangs in the air like a stray pinfeather, has momentarily put him on pause.

Have you yet to build the perfect project?

After what feels like a long time, Pagan shakes his head, releasing a slow grin that sidles up one side of his face.

"I'm working on it," he says.

Pagan's answer reveals the sheer preposterousness of the suggestion; it's the ultimate Catch-22.

His perfectionist streak when it comes to building duck habitats makes Pagan the last guy who'd confess to any project being beyond the reach of improvement. But to look at him and see the glint in his eye, you know it's crossed his mind with each challenge overcome and each project completed.

No, he's not there yet, but he's getting a little closer every time.

"When I get to the end of [a project] I say no, it's not perfect because I always want to do something better," Pagan said. "I've been in every mud hole in the Mississippi Delta. We go in, we grind, we fix the levees, we put new pumps in, we put new gates in. Well, we think that day, 'Hey, we're done. It's perfect.' There is no perfect."

PERSONAL PASSION

Don't think for a second that Pagan is tortured his Taj Mahal still eludes him despite decades spent honing a reputation as the foremost duck habitat expert and builder. As the old saying goes, "Shoot for the moon; if you miss you'll land among the stars," and as so-called near misses go, Pagan has built and rehabbed some dandies.

Pagan has worked his magic from Argentina to Saskatchewan, Louisiana to Wyoming, the Carolinas to many spots on the famed Arkansas Grand Prairie. He talks about each job like it was kinfolk — the trouble this one gave him, the pride that one instills in him. He knows them intimately, for his is an intimate business; in effect, simultaneously courting Mother Nature and Mother Earth.

Most days they take him in, other days they turn him out.

"I think it's just a God-given gift of passion," Pagan said. "I've always thought that God puts you in a place to do a task. How cool is it to get to put destroyed stuff back together?"

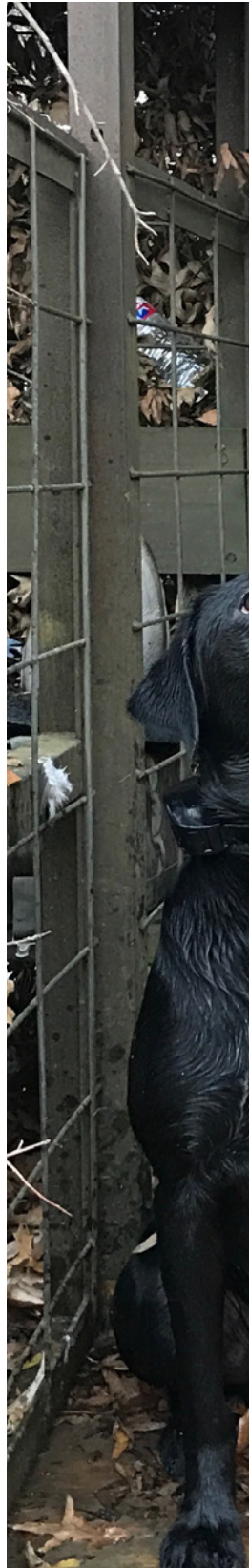
"I would say I have an unruly passion for the work. It would be that simple. I love it."

Pagan was born to a farm family in the tiny town of Strong, the only child of Joe and Annett Pagan. Growing up in a close-knit family in a close-knit community meant Pagan had ample opportunity to draw the best qualities from the people around him.

From his dad, he took an unflagging work ethic, from his blue-collar uncles an aptitude for building things and, from age 5, a foundational love of duck hunting, also fostered by his dad, that would eventually bring everything together.

Jody Pagan's know-how as a conservationist once led him to an agency job in the nation's capital. But it was at Five Oaks Hunting Club where he learned how to devise a habitat that drew ducks in the kinds of numbers hunters crave.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FIVE OAKS WILDLIFE SERVICES





CHANGING ECOSYSTEMS

Pagan graduated from the University of Arkansas-Monticello and worked as a biologist for nearly 10 years with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service. He ran the Wetlands Reserve Program and worked his way up to Assistant State Conservationist before taking an ill-fated flyer on an agency job in Washington D.C.

"I stayed up there eight months, in and out," he said, the bile still fresh in his voice. "I was the lowest lifeform in the agency and I'm like, 'I've gotta live in this dungeon besides?'"

"But that wasn't what bothered me more than anything. I'm a very personable kind of guy and I would get on that Metro over there and I would ride down to the South Building and I'd be like 'Good morning.' Folks would not look at you, they would not talk to you. And I'm like, man, there's got to be a better thing to do."

That thing turned out to be Five Oaks Hunting Club, the legendary outfit in Humphrey, owned by George Dunklin. Dunklin was interested in bringing on someone who would revolutionize the club's ecosystem, something Pagan was more than happy to oblige.

The catch was, this was no academic exercise. Dunklin was in the business of duck hunting and Pagan's new thinking about food sources and water management had to serve a practical end.

"What changed my career — and this is why some biologists can't get over the hump — is when I went to work for George, we had to kill ducks every day," Pagan said. "I had to have the science, but he also tasked me with how to figure out how that would let us kill ducks every day. Now I'm not saying kill the limit every day; I'm saying we needed to provide as good an opportunity on the last day as the first day."

Pagan's strategy of graduated flooding and shorter flooding timetables was not in widespread use, but these tactics, along with broadening food sources, nurturing trees and creating inviolate resting areas had an almost immediate impact. For almost 11 years, Pagan perfected his tactics while keeping one of the most exclusive hunting clubs in Arkansas flush with waterfowl.



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"The greatest opportunity George ever gave me was to play with it every day," he said. "If you're a biologist and you don't get to do that every day, what we did at Five Oaks, then all you know is what's in the books. Well, there are things that will throw you a curve ball and if you're not adaptive you will die in what we're doing."

Two years ago, Pagan launched Ecosystems Protection Service, of which Five Oaks was his first client. Since then, he has traveled over two continents to build and rehab hunting ecosystems.

"I've had the opportunity to work on the oldest club in Arkansas. It's in Hempstead County, called Grass Glades. That was incorporated in 1897," Pagan said. "I've worked in Argentina and South America a little bit. They dropped me off on the Corianthus River and I'm sitting there and guess what? Many, many variables are the same: Don't over hunt. Perfect water depth, perfect smorgasbord buffet of food."

LEGACY OF KNOWLEDGE

Despite a stellar record to back up his methods, Pagan says his efforts are wasted when practices aren't kept up after a renovation. He's seen former jobs empty of ducks within a few seasons because the owner didn't follow the formula.

Pagan's success has allowed him to more closely scrutinize potential clients.

"At this stage of my career, I don't want to burn any more energy on nonproductive projects," he said. "I mean, we only got so many days on the planet. Let's be productive. And that's why I really love doing the public groundwork. I built one last year where the Bayou Meto stretch is, 1,400 acres, 700 acres of waterfowl habitat. Got two more to build this year. Those jobs make a significant difference."

Pagan has also taken steps to solidify his best work for future generations, by training others to correctly maintain and manage habitats. It's been a difficult process, not for lack of apt pupils, but because it divests him of something he's held close for so long.

"It's the only thing that I think ever held me back because I'm real possessive about a project," he said. "But those engineers that I have to do my work, I'll put them against myself or anybody in the world. So instead of me being the only ship, what I'm trying to do is multiply myself with different managers."

"I'm training one guy in Louisiana, I'm training a guy in Kansas. I'm training the guy down at Five Oaks, because what can I really leave? I can leave with a sack of money, but I need to leave with my intellectual knowledge being my legacy."



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my Old Man

Woodsy wisdom from duck hunting's best teachers

By BRENT BIRCH

Let me preface by saying I never refer to my dad as “my old man.” Mainly because I’ve never really viewed him as “old.”

I had been sitting on this idea for a couple of years, while friends would periodically share knowledge or experiences gained from duck hunting with their dads. Good buddy Greg Churan would frequently start his fatherly anecdotes with “My old man,” so the duck hunting dads out there shouldn’t take offense and can hopefully appreciate the message.

Fathers and sons duck hunting is a subject covered many times, including a time or two in *Greenhead*. There are decades’ worth of paintings and countless photos capturing father-son moments in the field. A majority of waterfowlers were introduced to the sport by their fathers and, if not, a father-like figure played a role creating a passion for the sport.

My dad and I have hunted together for 40 years, give or take. From the old minnow ponds near Keo to Crocketts Bluff to Geridge, there are numerous memories of good days, bad days, funny events, scary episodes and everything in between. I didn’t appreciate many of those moments at the time as I was too young and too worried about how many ducks we shot and how fast. But looking back, I can savor what a time we had and the realization of how fortunate we’ve been to spend those times together.

I easily picked up the passion for the sport based on being lucky enough to tag along with my dad at an early age. The ability of the guides at Crocketts Bluff to work wads of mallards from little tiny specks in the sky

down to the decoys was mesmerizing. My dad is a good caller, really good, but he didn’t ever hold me back from learning how to work ducks through experience (that’s not the same as calling at ducks mind you).

A little coaching and lot of trial and error got me pretty handy with the call before I hit junior high; same with shooting, decoy placement, how to play the wind and so on. Eventually our hunts became a collaborative effort, master with apprentice. We still spend a healthy portion of the evening before or the morning of a hunt deciding how we are going to fool those ducks the next day afield.

Now I’m fortunate enough to do the same with my two sons, Reid and Fuller. Fuller is a full-on duck hunting addict. Everything else in his world goes on hold during duck season unless that whole “school and education” thing gets in the way.

Reid tends to juggle duck hunting with his active social calendar, and he’s away at college a portion of the season, but he still enjoys his time at the duck club.

My sons’ world moves pretty fast; there isn’t much patience for slow hunts or downtime around the club. I sincerely hope they realize sooner than later that these days aren’t guaranteed going forward.

Duck hunting has a level of fragility to it — given things we can’t totally control like habitat, weather and water — and so do we as humans. In a world of instant gratification, please let it slow down just a tick so you can enjoy and learn many of the little things about this sport that come from time with Dad.



Gardner Lile

Little Rock

There is a special bond formed between a father and son when duck hunting, scouting and during all the work that goes into getting ready for duck season. Working with someone well before the season all the way through “cleanup” you get to spend a lot of time together, which creates a strong relationship. It was also rewarding as I was growing up to see the hard work you put in prior to the season pay off during the season.

Some of the best memories I have from duck hunting are hunts when it was just myself, brother and Dad. They weren’t the best hunts from a numbers perspective, but the quality of the time shared together made them great hunts.

One hunt I will never forget was just Dad and myself, and I had forgotten my waders at home. The best solution we could come up with was for me to wear his rain pants and seal them off to my rubber boots with duct tape. Thankfully it didn’t take long for us to get our ducks that morning.



Garrett (left) and Gardner Lile (right) flank their father Gar, whose inventiveness once saved Gardner from a complete soaking.



“

From the old minnow ponds near Keo to Crocketts Bluff to Geridge, there are numerous memories of good days, bad days, funny events, scary episodes and everything in between.”

Bob (left) and Brent Birch still enjoy the evenings of planning that precede a successful hunt.

Richard Shelton

Monticello

Duck hunting with my dad meant everything to me and still does. Looking back, all of my best hunting memories involved my dad. To say he had a passion for the outdoors would be putting it mildly, and in turn he passed that right along to me and my younger brother. We've chased ducks, deer and turkey together since we were little boys and continue to this day.

The main tip my dad passed along to me was "Hunt all day." If we went, odds are Dad was staying and grinding it out.

It never really made an impression on me until a hunt in the White River when I was around 14 years old. We had been hunting ... most of the morning and had a few ducks, but for the most would label the morning extremely slow. While motoring out to the truck, we went through a hole we frequented quite a bit and Dad looked down at his watch and said, "It's only 11, why don't we throw the decoys out here and hunt until noon?"

My brother and I agreed to set up for another hour. At around 11:30, the prettiest bunch of mallards numbering in the 30-50 range began to work us and fell through the trees all the way to the water. After shooting 10 out of the bunch, a light went off and I realized what my dad was wanting us to see. Sometimes you have to stick it out for a little while longer to reap the benefits of a good day afield.

One more thing I have learned is maintain your equipment. Dad was always strict when [I was] borrowing anything of his to venture off on my own. Be it a four-wheeler, boat, or decoys; he



Hunting all day with (left to right) Richard Shelton, father Dick Shelton, Braxton Shelton and his father Joe Shelton.

has a certain way they were to be used and returned ... and he meant it. My dad knew there was nothing worse than tangled decoy lines or a boat that wouldn't start and he didn't want those things to hinder a hunt.

At age 63, my dad is still the first one up in the morning at camp. Due to hunting the public ground in the White River Bottoms, that is typically in the 2 a.m. range. He routinely walks a mile or more into the public shooting grounds chasing ducks and turkeys. I hope to be as active when I reach his age and continue our traditions with my children.



Clay Carter (left) learned from his father Eddie (right) that cleaning game is vital and wasting it is to be avoided.

Clay Carter

DeWitt

As a kid, hunting with my dad was an all-time occurrence. We were either chasing ducks, deer, squirrels or anything else that moved. We have had a lifetime of hunting memories together that will never be forgotten. We work together year around always getting ready for the next season. Today, as a grown man, I've come to realize just how special those early mornings and late nights were. Even though we've shared a lifetime of hunts together there will be a day that my dad and teacher will be done teaching me everything he knows.

I will always be grateful for just being able to spend time outdoors. Probably the biggest tip or trick my dad passed along was if you took time to kill it, take time to clean it and never waste game. And he definitely lives off the mantra that if you put enough blood and sweat into something it will eventually pay off. I've seen this come true time and time again.

I'm lucky enough for my dad to also be my best friend. We train dogs and plant food plots all summer just to have places to spend time together during the winter.



I'm lucky enough for my dad to also be my best friend. We train dogs and plant food plots all summer just to have places to spend time together during the winter."

Ben Wellons

Roland

Duck hunting trips as a kid with my dad are my most cherished memories today as an adult. Like many, I will never forget shooting my first mallard duck with my dad at an early age — but even the years before I was old enough to carry a gun, I remember the early morning boat rides and standing on a log in flooded timber with my dad and watching huge groups of mallards work down through the trees. It was a mesmerizing site and so impactful to me as a kid.

It means the world to me that my dad would take the time to share the sport of duck hunting with me, and fortunately we still are hunting together today — going on 30-plus years of hunting together.

We have developed a great tradition going on 20 years with my dad and close friend Sheffield Nelson hosting an annual, father-son duck hunt. The hunt includes my dad (Bill Wellons) and my brother Bill and I; Bill Parkinson and his boys Bill Jr., Ben and Dan; Robert Lewis and his boys Garret and Mason; and Jimmy Green and his son Matthew.

This father-son weekend is one of the hunting trips I look forward to the most each year. But here's the catch — this trip is not about how many ducks we shoot, it's about so much more. The life lesson my dad and Sheffield have shown us over the years, through this trip, is that it's really about the relationships we have with each other. It's about sharing a great meal together. It's about laughing and telling stories. It's about witnessing God's creation together. And it's about building lasting memories with fathers and their sons.

Each hunting trip is different, but my dad always enjoys being with me and sharing an experience in the field together. We always eat a big breakfast together, no matter what. One unique thing about my dad that I remember from childhood is that he carried a really old Yentzen duck call and I always thought it sounded more like a kazoo than a duck. ... Love you Pop.



(Left to right) Bill Wellons, Ben Wellons, Mason Lewis, Sheffield Nelson, Garrett Lewis, Robert Lewis, Bill Parkinson, Sr., Dan Parkinson, Bill Parkinson, Jr., Ben Parkinson.



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Clothes Call

High Tech, Old-School Apparel Options Favor Today's Hunter

By BRENT BIRCH

DUCK HUNTING HAS AND LIKELY ALWAYS WILL BE A GEAR GAME. Check any old photo of mid-1900s duck hunters and you will catch a glimpse of the good looking, functional garments of the time period. Apparel technology has evolved immensely but the need for dependable, durable garb to handle the up and down Arkansas winter will always exist. Manufacturers have come and gone (and some have come back again) but waterfowlers are uniquely particular about their clothing — some because of the performance, some because the current trends have followed two different paths and the duck hunter's preference for one or the other is quite strong. The choice seems to boil down to technical versus retro.

Clothes Call



Cutting edge camouflage patterns are being coupled with a variety of weights to advance the state of comfort and wearability in today's coats. A functional hat tops off the look. Some hunters like to mix and match their patterns. PHOTO BY BLAKE FISHER

Technical apparel has made great strides thanks to the innovations of companies like Sitka, Drake, Banded and Natural Gear, among others. Technical apparel focuses on the function with modern designs, water-resistant materials and more gadgets than one could think are possible on a coat — cutting-edge, camouflage patterns coupled with varying weights to handle wild weather swings.

While the high-tech gear options have expanded, some tried and true brands are sticking with their focus on waxed-canvas type garments that deliver a vintage look. Filson, Avery's Heritage Collection as well as the return of Duxbak are fleshing out the more traditional waterfowler look with a renewed, modern twist on hats, jackets, pants and bags.

The ode to the 1940s-1960s look has been a big hit with duck hunters not quite ready to embrace the modern styles. Muted browns and greens are the norm, although Filson has recently partnered with Mossy Oak on some camouflaged gear for 2018.

TWO SCHOOLS

Although I own several coats and accessories made by some of the companies noted, I personally don't have a strong preference one way or the other as I appreciate the look and feel of both styles. The decision on which to wear on a given day depends on the day. Some work better on windy days, others better on rainy days and so on. Some days, the decision is simply based on the look.

But I have found my lack of allegiance is an anomaly.

Some hunters mix and match brands and patterns, but a majority either like the new stuff or go retro, not both. Trapper Padgett, an Avery Pro-Staffer from Lonokey, is firm in his approach to apparel.

"Modern apparel companies are constantly changing and trying to adapt their product to fit and conform to all weather conditions and also meet the needs of every hunter," Padgett says. "The emergence of the 'new old school' companies like Avery or Filson aren't having to modify or conform because it's already been done. The sweet spot has been found.

"This is the reason I love my Avery Heritage gear because it fits me and it fits the hunter who hunts a few days or a few months. I wear it every day in any condition and it meets and exceeds anything I need it to do or any conditions I'm in. From Canada to home here in the Delta, I'll have my heritage gear on."

Anthony Bourne, co-owner/founder of the *Real South Hunting* television show is a big fan of the technical-type gear. "We at *Real South Hunting* have been blown away by the Sitka Waterfowl gear and how well you blend in with any terrain," Bourne says. "From those big Arkansas rice fields to standing in the green timber you just won't find a more versatile pattern. We started with just a few pieces of the Waterfowl Marsh/Field and Timber patterns and plan on using much more, including waders, this season.

"It is difficult to put into words how well Sitka performs compared to the other brands. It is by far the best you can buy to keep you warm, dry and hidden when those big fat greenheads have their landing gear down."

ABUNDANT OPTIONS

The waterfowling apparel market is crowded with brands trying to gain market share through various angles. Innovations in materials, camo patterns and functionality have taken the game to a new level. The competitiveness within the industry equals a higher performing garment for the duck hunter. Deciding on which brand and style is the hard part as hunters are presented with more and more choices.

Arkansas-based Natural Gear, known to many as “NatGear,” has also stepped up its apparel lines with the release of its new Cut Down jackets, pants and accessories. Long known for its innovative camo pattern that often appeared on other apparel brands, NatGear has not only improved its clothing but has also released a new camouflage pattern for field hunters.

NatGear Chief Operating Officer John Adams said the new lines are tailored to today’s hunters: “With our long history of being a mainstay company for duck hunters across our state and the country, we have enhanced this Cut Down line with that customer in mind; full ergonomic cuts and features that fit and perform great in the day-in, day-out hunting style that many waterfowlers participate in now.”

Duxbak’s reemergence has run parallel to Avery’s launch of the Heritage line, and Filson’s rededication to waterfowling creates a surplus of garments based on the vintage waxed canvas/cotton/tin cloth material of yore.

The Duxbak brand holds a special place in the hearts of hunters in the 40- to 70-year-old range. As one of the first lines of apparel dedicated to the waterfowler, memories of its trustworthy jackets, hats and shirts with the recognizable logo abound.

Longtime Arkansas duck guide Omar Driskill “laid the best dog I ever had to rest outside my bedroom window wrapped in my favorite Duxbak coat in 1983. Still have my cap today.”

FIT IN WHERE YOU GET IN

With the crowded market, the vintage brands have expanded their line of products beyond coats, pants and headgear.

Filson has been in the travel gear game quite awhile but Duxbak and Avery Heritage have each released a series of versatile bags and gun cases for travel or use in the field. Despite their rugged construction, these bags are probably too nice to drag out to an Arkansas County pit blind but perfectly packable for a trip to your favorite hunting lodge.

Drake Waterfowl Systems out of Mississippi is launching a new line this fall specifically tailored to the hunting environment. Titled the “Guardian Elite Series,” Drake’s



For 2018, Banded's popular Red Zone waders come in kids' sizes. PHOTO BY BANDED

Watertight Wonders Making A Splash

By BRENT BIRCH

These ain't your grandpa's Red Ball boots.

Apparel company Banded Holdings officially changed the game in 2015. Based in Rogers, the design team at Banded went feet first into the wader world with an innovative idea of what a wader should be. Long gone are the days of leaky rubber boots and bulky neoprene as the Banded waders more than deliver on comfort and practical functionality.

Developed using Banded's proprietary — get ready — Super Hydrophobic Evaporative Development System (SHEDS) waterproofing material, the Banded Red Zone waders truly act and feel like you are wearing a pair of overalls.

Upon the product's launch, the lack of bulk and addition of mobility sent duck hunters on a mad scramble to get a pair. Since they splashed onto the scene over three years ago, Banded has greatly improved the waders' boot and seams as well as introduced its premium Black Label line. Smaller sizes are now available for women and kids as well.

But, as it usually goes, someone has a good idea and competitors soon follow. Drake, Sitka and a few others have developed their own lines of breathable waders to give Banded a run for its money. While each features materials migrating away from the previous gold standard, neoprene, innovations have raised the level of wader quality.

Drake's new Guardian Elite series features a lightweight but warm boot, no-buckle shoulder straps, and it works at being more durable than any wader on the market. Drake has been a leader in functionality and the new waders feature plenty of effective

pockets for gear. A selling point for Drake will be the four size models — short and slim, regular, stout and king — giving just about any body type a nice fitting wader.

In July, Sitka introduced a wader system, Delta Waders, that has been in research and development the past four seasons. The eye-popping price tag north of \$800 per pair of Delta Waders has caught a lot of hunters' attention, but the details help justify the premium price.

The wader, made in the U.S., is designed to be what Sitka calls “serviceable” from top to bottom. If you punch a hole in the boot, don't patch it or trash the waders. Simply send the waders back to Sitka and they can put in a whole new boot. Faulty zipper? Ship the waders back and they can replace it.

This is an entirely new thought process on wader construction, given that they typically find their way to the dumpster once something gives out. Leaky patches just don't last long term and hunters are forced to buy a new pair every few seasons depending on how hard they hunt.

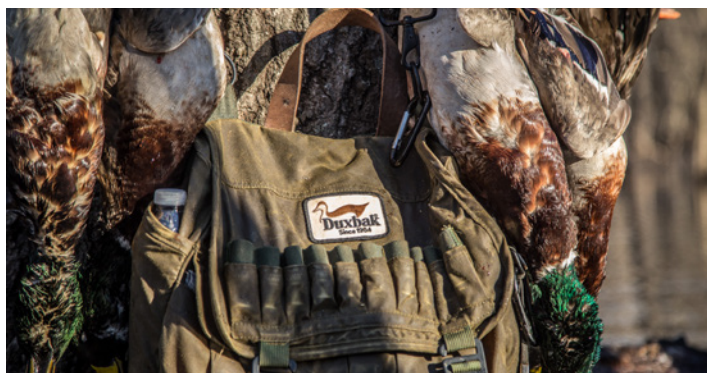
Sitka markets the Delta Wader as the last pair a waterfowler should ever purchase. It will be interesting to see how this plays out over time.

As with modern hunting apparel, waterfowlers are beneficiaries of the competition among wader manufacturers providing new technology, durability and comfort.

Any duck hunter can attest that leaky waders have and will continue to ruin hunts as long as there is water to stand in.

The progress of these innovative companies is lessening the opportunities for soggy socks and frostbitten feet. And we as hunters are thankful for it.

Clothes Call



Industry competition means higher performance wear for hunters. The challenge is deciding among the brands and styles, as hunters are presented with more and more choices. Patterns and functionality have shaken up the apparel game for the better.

PHOTOS BY (clockwise from top) NATURAL GEAR, DUXBAK, JAKE LATENDRESSE/LATENDRESSE MEDIA COLLECTIVE AND FILSON



Vintage looking apparel appeals to some hunters' sense of nostalgia, while modern wear appeals to those who want to be on the cutting edge of fashion. But whatever the look, the technology and materials used are taking comfort and functionality to a new level. PHOTO BY BANDED

new line includes different features and functions for hunters depending on their chosen environment. The series includes apparel for flooded timber, field/layout blinds and boats as well as a flexible 3-in-1 system that will remind waterfowlers from the 1980s of the Columbia line of 4-in-1 jackets. It's a definitely different take that leans more towards clothes being equipment rather than simply apparel.

ADVANTAGE: DUCK HUNTER

Thanks to the volume of choices and quality found in waterfowling apparel, duck hunters are in the proverbial catbird seat.

Perhaps like no other time in the history of hunting has the duck hunter had so many quality, functional clothing options at various price points. Hunters desire gear that is dependable and works in the weather duck season presents.

That you get what you pay for is pretty much true in the world of waterfowling. A lower-end coat works just fine for those 50-degree days that seem to frequent our winters, not so much on those bitter cold January hunts with a big north wind or in a day of rain and sleet. Anyone that wore old army surplus coats and rubber waders in the 1970s and 1980s knows that inferior gear

can make for a miserable morning afield.

Apparel companies are dedicating a wealth of resources to research and development to stay one step ahead of their competitors and make a better product for the hunter. From science-based camouflage patterns to innovative features to bringing back a look with improved functionality from years gone by, the choices are there.

Whether you are a brand loyalist or just going for the look and feel you like across multiple brands, now is the time to improve your head-to-toe apparel to ensure your comfort level afield is more dependable than the ducks.

from Dugouts To Decoys

BASEBALL PLAYERS TURN HOBBY INTO BUSINESS



By MARK FRIEDMAN

BASEBALL BROUGHT THEM together, but hunting made them friends.

Josh Alberius, his younger brother, Nate, and James Teague all played baseball for the University of Arkansas. Every weekend they, along with their friend, then-SEC Network broadcaster Jackson Braswell, would leave Fayetteville to drive four-and-a-half hours to deer or duck hunt.

"We do all this fishing and hunting and stuff, ... and I said, 'Let's go ahead and get a social media page and see if we can't get some recognition for the stuff that we do,'" Josh Alberius said.

Around 2013, they began posting videos and pictures of their hunts on Instagram, but they didn't stop there. The group created a brand, calling it K Zone. It's baseball shorthand for "strike zone," and the group wanted "a baseball, outdoorsy catch to it," Alberius said.

It was a hit. K Zone's Instagram account, [k_zonetv](#), grew from around 200 followers to 10,000 in a couple of months, Nate Alberius said. The Instagram account now has about 27,000 followers and K Zone also has a YouTube channel.

The brand name was copyrighted and Josh Alberius said the group decided to

start selling baseball hats with the K Zone logo on them. Those, too, became hot sellers.

About a year and a half ago, K Zone launched a website, [KZoneTV.com](#), to sell its merchandise and feature hunting photos and videos. Josh Alberius said new designs for hats and T-shirts are coming to the website soon.

Josh Alberius declined to say how much revenue the outlet generates, but said "we sell pretty good amounts of hats, especially when hunting season gets here."

K Zone also promotes products on its social media platforms from the hunting gear and apparel companies Natural Gear and Banded, which provide equipment to K Zone. The companies also use K Zone's videos and photos.

STILL A TEAM

The main focus of K Zone, Josh Alberius said, was to encourage people to become outdoorsmen.

"Because we live in Arkansas and that's waterfowl heaven, I want to make people pursue the outdoors," he said. "I want to really build the industry up."

K Zone doesn't have titles for the four partners. Josh Alberius said he manages the shipments and the websites. He also handles the photography and video editing.

"I don't want to call myself the presi-

dent or the main guy because we don't really title ourselves," he said. "We're a team, and we all work equally."

The partnership carried on even after the group, all of them pitchers, left the Razorbacks. James Teague, 24, was drafted by the Baltimore Orioles in 2016 and remains with the organization at its Class A Advanced level. Josh Alberius, 24, was drafted by the Miami Marlins in 2017 and played one season in their minor league system. His brother, Nate, 21, left the Razorbacks after the 2016 season and transferred to Arkansas State University at Jonesboro.

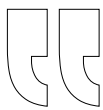
Nate Alberius hopes to be drafted by a major league team next year or to play for an independent professional team.

Braswell is now the communications and volunteer center manager at United Way of Northwest Arkansas.

DIAMOND DAYS

After graduating from Little Rock Christian in 2012, Josh Alberius played his freshman and sophomore years at Arkansas as a shortstop before converting to pitcher.

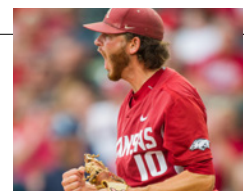
While at Fayetteville, he made sure he set aside time for hunting, even though it meant a drive of more than four hours. Josh and Nate Alberius can remember hunting with their dad as children.

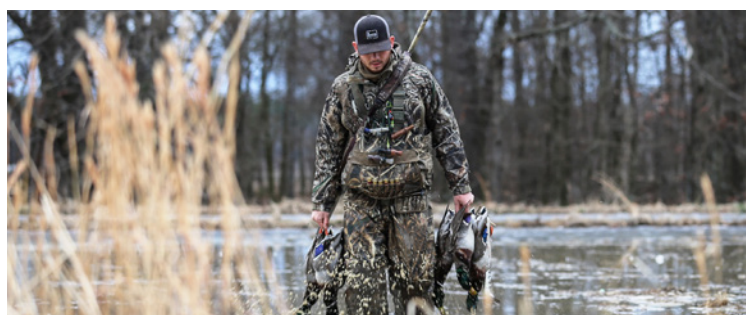


"Because we live in Arkansas and that's waterfowl heaven, I want to make people pursue the outdoors ... I want to really build the industry up."

— Josh Alberius

PHOTO BY WALT BEAZLEY/UA ATHLETICS





Josh Alberius (top photo, far right, and bottom photos) and his K Zone partners turned a love of hunting into a fledgling video/apparel company. But the sport is still fun for Alberius. PHOTOS COURTESY OF NATURAL GEAR (bottom left) AND K ZONE

"My dad's hunted ever since he was a kid, and we've always had duck and deer leases around Arkansas," Josh Alberius said. "So as long as I remember, I've been hunting and been doing stuff in the outdoors."

He said that the hunting and baseball work well together.

"We hunted on the weekends, and then did baseball during the week," he said. "It made a pretty good balance, as opposed to overwhelming myself with school and baseball."

The hunting and down time between pitching appearances gave the players plenty of time to concoct the foundation of K Zone, which has proved to be a hit on campus. Nate Alberius said he began notic-

ing the caps as he walked around campus.

"We went out and put an order in for 100 caps," Josh Alberius said. "Before you know it, two weeks later, they're all gone."

BETTER THAN WORK

The Razorbacks — who reached the finals of this year's College World Series — were already on the upswing when K Zone's creators were with the program, and Nate Alberius said he thinks the brand was initially popular because it was associated with Hogs players and featured quality hunting content.

"There are millions of Instagram pages of people hunting, but when you take a

quality picture or really well-made videos, like we do, and you put it out there, it really attracts people," he said.

Josh Alberius said the work ethic and communication skills he learned playing baseball will help him grow the K Zone brand.

"In the world of baseball, if you're not competitive and you don't have the drive to be the best you can possibly be, you're not going to succeed," he said.

These days, the four outdoorsmen still hunt together as much as they can, shooting videos and pictures for K Zone.

"It is a job," Josh Alberius said. "But you're having more fun with it than if you were actually working."

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DEWITT'S

Big Draw

Webb's Sporting Goods Situated For Success

By MARK FRIEDMAN

Bobby Webb, who quit school in the eighth grade, built a sporting goods store in DeWitt that annually attracts hunters from about 40 states.

The DeWitt native, who later earned his GED diploma, opened Webb's Sporting Goods about eight years ago after first running a combination pawn shop and used car dealership he started in 2006.

He switched to sporting goods, though, after noticing how the bottles of deer scents he put on the shelves sold out quickly.

"Then we starting dabbling in hunting apparel, and it just went crazy from there," said Webb, who co-owns the store with his wife, Alicia.

Webb's decision to focus on sporting goods paid off.

Webb, 47, said sales have jumped 50 percent every year for the past five years. He declined to release sales figures but said this year's sales are expected to be 50 percent higher than in 2017.

One of the reasons for the anticipated growth is that Webb partnered with Havoc Calls of Ethel (Arkansas County) in January. Havoc is scheduled to open a shop inside the sporting goods store by the end of August.

"People will be able to walk inside a sporting goods store and actually watch calls being made," said Havoc Calls co-owner Jeremy Powell.

To make room for Havoc, Webb's is adding 1,000 SF to its building with 12,000 SF of floor space.

Sales are expected to continue to climb next year when Webb's launches a retail website.

Meanwhile, customers continue to flock to the store.

"Last year, the first two days of duck season, I had [customers from] 23 different states buying hunting licenses from me," Webb said.

WHERE THE DUCKS ARE

On paper, it doesn't seem that the store would survive. It's in a town with a population of about 3,300 at a time when brick

and mortar retailers are struggling or closing. It's popular, however, because it's 15 minutes from both the Arkansas River and Mississippi River, as well as the White River National Wildlife Refuge.

"What better place to have a sporting goods store than in the middle of where everybody comes to duck hunt," Powell said.

Webb agreed.

"So we're sitting right in the heart of the flyway," he said. "That's what built my business."

The store's best sellers during duck hunting season are decoys and shells, followed by waders and clothes.

"I've had guys come through here and spend \$4,000-\$5,000 on one whack on a credit card," Webb said.

But it hasn't been easy.

Webb and Alicia put in about 12 to 14 hours a day "to keep things running," he said. "Most people don't understand what it takes to keep a 12,000-SF store fully stocked."

BURGERS TO BUSINESS

When Webb dropped out of school as an eighth-grader, it was so he could work flipping hamburgers at a restaurant in DeWitt.

"I just wanted to go to work," he said.

After that, Webb landed a job as a deckhand on a riverboat, and later was an officer for the Arkansas County Sheriff's Department.

But Webb had always been interested in pawn shops and decided to give it a shot. He didn't quit the sheriff's department immediately "because it's so hard to make a living out of a small business when you first start."

Webb said for about 7 or 8 months he split time between the sheriff's department and the store, which was called A&B Pawn Shop.

"I worked 16, 18 hours a day, if not more, for a long time," Webb said.

After the hunting gear proved to be a big seller, Webb moved the business from a 1,000-SF building to one that's 4,000 SF. It's continued to grow to 12,000 SF.

KEEN ON CUSTOMERS

Webb said another reason for the store's success is the customer service its nine employees provide.

"It's our rule of thumb that if you come in our store, every employee better speak to you," he said. "It goes back to being that hometown atmosphere that we treat everybody equal."

Powell agreed the the customer service is key to Webb's success.

"Bobby's going to talk to you and he doesn't care whether you've got 5 cents or \$5 million," Powell said.

Webb also said he's been able to keep prices competitive because he's a member of Sports Inc., a nationwide buying group for independent sporting goods retailers. He joined that group about four years ago.

"I don't care how bad the economy is, people are still going to hunt and fish," he said.

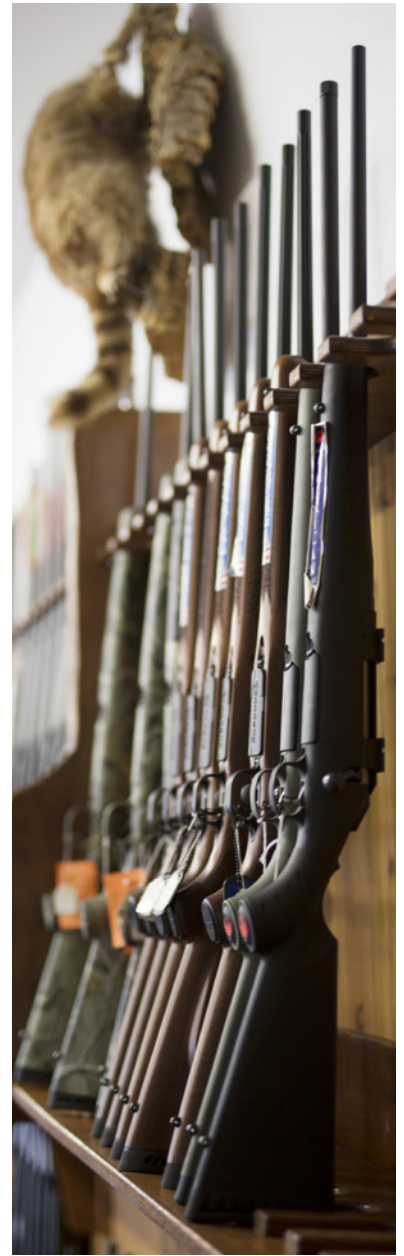
Still, operating a retail shop is difficult in a time when brick and mortar stores are losing customers to online shoppers.

"It's been a tough battle," Webb said. "Any retail is brutal."

He's motivated by the challenge of the business, and is constantly thinking of ways to improve it.

"I quit thinking about the business when I go to sleep," Webb said.

Bobby Webb (with customer, right, and with family and employees, below right) worked a variety of jobs, including riverboat deckhand and sheriff's department officer, before finding success with his family-run sporting goods store. PHOTOS BY ANGELO FELIX



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Lots of LaCotts

Duck Guide Pioneers Perfect Craft Through Generations

By DWAIN HEBDA



Arguably the first family of Arkansas duck guides, the LaCotts have built a foundation of success through the decades.



There are few families as firmly synonymous with Arkansas duck hunting as the LaCotts. Up and down the family tree, five generations have practiced the arts of guiding, calling and hunt club management straight through to today.

"I can remember going out there as far back as I can remember, going into the woods, Daddy carrying me everywhere we went," said Sid "Deuce" LaCotts II.

"I went to college in Monticello, but I pretty much always wanted to [guide]. And our grandfather, he'd gotten a little older and he was getting kind of tired

of it. When I came back from college, my brother and I wanted to start guiding again and Grandpa said, 'Have at it.' "

The boys' father, Sid LaCotts I, died at 39 from a heart attack while duck hunting, so Deuce and his younger brother Bart learned their trade primarily from their grandfather, Clarence Elmer "Tippy" LaCotts. Every day with him was a living, breathing history lesson about the arts of guiding, hunting techniques and family lore.

"He was great. Very outdoorsy," Deuce said of his grandfather, who died in 2001. "He worked at the post office all his life when he came back from World War II. He and my grandma both worked up there. They both retired from there."



"By now the heavens were literally alive with mallards. ... And seemingly in a trice, ducks began lighting all around us, completely filling the open pools for an acre."

PARADISE FOUND

Deuce, 47, and Bart, 45, who stood out from their six siblings thanks to their enthusiasm for hunting, shared a particularly close relationship with their grandfather, a living legend in duck hunting circles. Tippy took over some family property on Mill Bayou from his father, Clarence Elmer LaCotts Sr., a former commercial hunter who'd guided at Stinking Bay on the White River. Getting the new property up to snuff was no small feat.

"Back in those days you didn't have all this heavy equipment," Tippy told Steve Bowman and Steve Wright in their 1998 book *Arkansas Duck Hunter's Almanac*. "It was quite a job to go out in the woods and make levees that would hold water at a decent level. That's what you called fixing up a place."

As it happened, the limited amount of "fixing" Tippy could do to the 270-acre property was a blessing. Here, just outside DeWitt, Mother Nature had already created the ideal spot of green trees and water upon which man could not much hope to improve. It wasn't long before the operation, billed as "LaCotts' Duck Hunter's Paradise" in advertisements of the day, lived up to the highest expectations.

"It wasn't near as many guides as there are now. Very few people did it," Deuce said. "[Tippy] kind of started that."

Under Tippy's guidance, the operation gained a reputation for some of the finest hunting to be had, a claim aided by one of its most devoted and passionate clients, Nash Buckingham. Buckingham, one of the most famous waterfowl writers of all time, wrote in detail about his hunts with Tippy among the flooded pin oaks in his book *Blood Lines*.

"Take trees," laughed Elmer, "We don't need to go any farther," Buckingham wrote in "Wax and Wane," using Tippy's given name. "By now the heavens were literally alive with mallards. ... And seemingly in a trice, ducks began lighting all around us, completely filling the open pools for an acre."

Tippy himself proved adept at turning a phrase when describing his beloved Mill Bayou grounds, telling Bowman and Wright the ducks there were "thick as gnats in a swill pail."

ON THE SPOT

In the days before Internet, or even television, a destination like LaCotts' lived and died by word of mouth. Aided by Nash's prose, word soon got around and Tippy found himself sought after by titans of the business world, senators and even foreign dignitaries seeking the perfect day's shooting.

Foremost among these guests was Edgar M. Queeny, head of Monsanto Corporation and one of the richest Americans of the early 20th century. Queeny was so taken with the spot he repeatedly tried to purchase it, making Tippy LaCotts one of the only men alive that could deny the billionaire what he wanted.



Five generations of LaCotts have guided hunts and managed clubs in Arkansas. Clearly, hunters male and female have reaped the benefits.



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"He said, 'Let me buy your place and I'll build a clubhouse,'" LaCotts said in *Arkansas Duck Hunter's Almanac*. "I said, 'I just can't part with it.' He called me the last minute before he closed the deal at Stuttgart [for Wingmead, Queeny's fabled hunting estate.]"

The back and forth did give Tippy the idea to build a lodge on the property, which he did with the backing of one of his wealthy clients. Building the place, dubbed the original Mud Lake Club, was something unheard of at the time.

"People around here thought he was crazy for building a lodge just to lodge hunters," Deuce LaCotts said. "That was just insane at the time. Nobody did that. [Hunters] got hotel rooms and [guides would] go meet them at the hotel rooms.

"Anyway, he wanted a lodge and he said, 'I'll build one here by my house and I can watch over it' so that's what he did. He built a lodge right next to his house. It's about five miles from the bayou where they hunted, so it worked out nice."

AT HOME

Today, the original ground has passed from family hands, but the LaCotts name still looms large in hunting circles. A distant cousin, Justin LaCotts, operates an unaffiliated hunting lodge and guide service near where it all began outside DeWitt.

Deuce and Bart have transitioned to the goose guide business and ushered in the next generation — Bart's sons Jon, 19, and Parker, 17, and Deuce's 12-year-old son Sid III (aka "Trey") — to the family franchise.

Although Bart is retired from guiding duck hunters, Deuce still takes groups out for another outfit, always to the areas he knows as home.

"I've taken a million people on their first duck hunt, I guess. Taken a lot of my friends on their first duck hunt," he said. "My favorite place to go is Mill Bayou, by far. It's easy to get to. And I tell you the truth, I've never hunted anywhere else very much. I'm spoiled rotten.

"There's some great places to go but I just know that place so well, so it's easy for me. It's just set up for duck hunting. There's no other purpose for that spot except for duck hunting. That's what God made it for."



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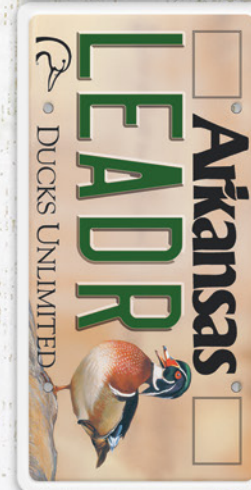
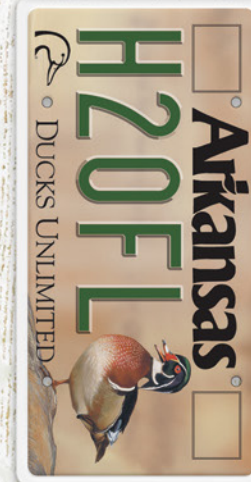
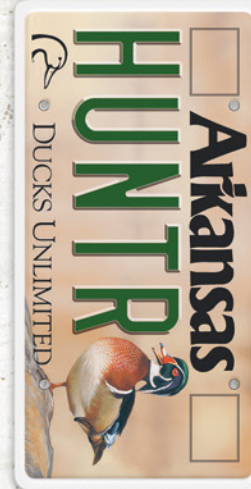
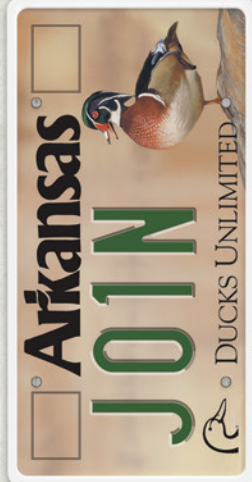
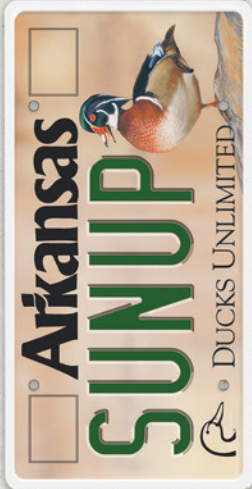
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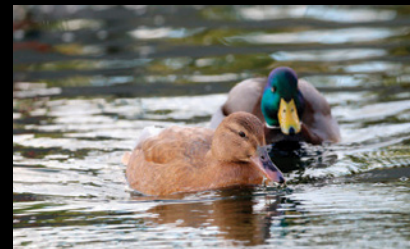
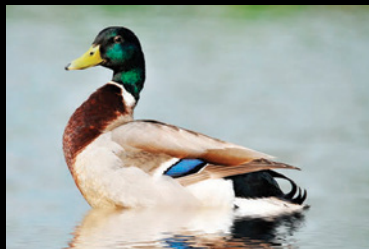
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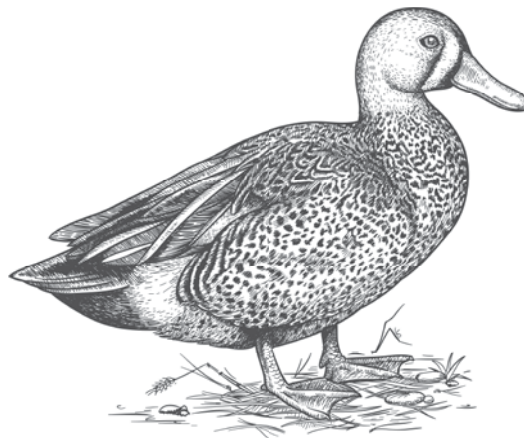
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Q&A

WHETHER CONNECTING WITH THE GREAT outdoors, bonding with family and friends or bagging a limit of ducks while visions of gumbo dance on the brain, nothing satisfies a hunter like a day in the wild. It's the reason for the season, the purpose of the preparation. For busy executives it's a chance to leave the boardroom — or, in the case of the chief executive, the Arkansas State Capitol — and head for the duck blind, grab some fresh air and ease the mind. This year's slate of executives, headed by Gov. Asa Hutchinson, share the moments, tips, guns and gadgets that have made their time afield special.



Asa Hutchinson

Governor, State of Arkansas

Number of days you hunt a season? I generally hunt four or five times during duck season. Sometimes I get to go deer hunting, dove hunting. That puts me about six times a year.

Where do you hunt? Since I've been governor, it's all been in Arkansas. I generally hunt in the Delta, from places around Stuttgart and up to northern Arkansas. I've also dove hunted around Dumas.

Duck calling skill level? I've got a number of duck calls, but I'm not the best. I love it when somebody who is really good at it calls the ducks.

Fields, reservoir or timber? I'll do all three, but nothing beats a good Arkansas timber hunt.

Rainy, nasty or bluebird sky? I've hunted in all three; I do like to see the sunrise.

What type of gun do you use? A Remington 12-gauge pump action shotgun (870). I also have a deer rifle and handgun. The handgun is a Springfield XD 45 semi-automatic.

Favorite hunting story or memory? My best memory is taking my boys out duck hunting for the first time. The beauty of the outdoors combined with the fun of the hunt and fellowship made it particularly special. We have always camped together in the Ozark and Ouachita National Forest and in our state parks but I wanted to make sure they had the added experience of timber hunting in the Delta. There is something special about being in a duck blind as the sun comes up.

What got you into hunting? I started hunting squirrels on our farm growing up but I got more into hunting as an adult. It grew to pheasant hunting in South Dakota, duck hunting in the Delta, dove hunting in south Arkansas and deer hunting all over the place. The love of the outdoors got me into hunting.

Must have in the duck blind? Someone who can actually call ducks. I can't get the ducks to listen to me, but it is a beautiful thing to see them turn and head toward close water.

Best executive duck caller? George Dunklin



The job has kept Arkansas' chief executive, Gov. Asa Hutchinson (left and with grandson Malcolm and son-in-law Dave, above), hunting pretty close to home since he was elected.



Bob Sexton

Partner at Rainwater, Holt & Sexton

Number of days you hunt a season? Around 30.

Where do you hunt? We have a lodge close to Humphrey. So most of the hunting is around Humphrey, Wabbaseka, and Almyra.

Club name? The name of our club is Mallard Grove Hunting Lodge. I've got some great partners at the lodge: Mike Rainwater, Andy Vondran, Jeremy McNabb and Matt Hutsell.

What kind of gun do you use? Benelli Super Black Eagle II, semi-automatic. I've had it for several years and I've grown to appreciate all the scuffs and scratches on it. They all tell a story. I probably won't get rid of that gun unless it breaks.

Favorite duck call? Let me start by saying I'm a below average duck caller. I grew up in Lonoke, and Howard Amadon, who made the Hambone call, lived down the street. I was given one of his calls and I carry it with me on every duck hunt. There is just something about the old wooden calls that I like.

Fields, reservoir or timber? While there is nothing quite like Arkansas green timber, I like to mix it up.

Rainy, nasty or bluebird sky? Bluebird sky, but it's got to be cold. Those are my most memorable hunts, very cold, clear mornings.

Favorite hunting story/memory? It's recurring, but my favorite moment hunting is when I'm in the blind with my kids right before the sun rises. As we see the sun start to peek over the horizon it's a great time to remind them that all of this is God's creation. How someone can look at a sunrise and not believe is God in something I will never understand. The cool thing now is that sometimes my 15-year-old, Sam, beats me to the story. I hope that this is a tradition that my children will share with their children.

What got you into hunting? Growing up in Lonoke you grow up in a hunting culture. Once I left I got out of hunting for a number of years. When I started having children, I jumped back into it. I have three children, one girl (Grace) and two boys (Sam and Andrew). I decided if they were going to learn to hunt, they were going to learn from me. So that motivated me and I really enjoy the time I get to spend with them in the blind or just hanging out in the lodge.

If you have children do you take them duck hunting? If so what are some of the highlights from these youth hunts? Yes, they are one of the primary reasons I got back into hunting. One of the best things we do every year at our club is put on a huge youth hunt weekend. We average around 20-25 youth hunting, many of which are new hunters. We do a fish fry the night before with about 80 people ... and we invite all kinds of guests. In the past we've had the *Boomtime with Bob and Archie* TV show come and film; we've had Rick Dunn with Echo calls come speak; David St. John a duck calling champion come do a demo. It's just a fun time. Probably my favorite thing we do every year.

Which Arkansas executive calls ducks the best? In my experience it is not the executives that are the best callers. Truly some of the best duck callers I've hunted with are guys that grew up in some of the small hunting towns of Arkansas and learned from their parents who learned from their parents. They have just been calling ducks their whole life. Some of them are really, really good.

Bob Sexton (with sons Sam and Andrew, right) is a member of Mallard Grove Hunting Lodge, which annually puts on a youth hunt weekend.



Lauren Waldrip Ward

Executive Director, Arkansas Rice Federation

Number of days you hunt a season? Not enough.

Where do you hunt? On the farm in Lee County.

Club name? I guess you could call it Waldrip Farms. Fancy clubs are fun, but I just like to go where the ducks are.

What kind of gun do you use? Remington 870 pump.

Duck calling skill level? This is exactly why I make sure to bring my brother, Nathan, along.

Fields, reservoir or timber? Flooded rice fields, of course.

Rainy, nasty or bluebird sky? Bluebird skies make it easiest to see them coming.

Favorite hunting story/memory? Mallard limits are exciting, but I like to hunt mostly for the fellowship. A lot of that actually occurred after hunts during breakfast at Warrior Hunting Club (in Lee County). I typically gauge the success of a morning by quality time rather than quantity of birds.

What got you into hunting? I wanted to spend time with my dad, Mark.



Lauren Waldrip Ward (center), with USA Rice's Jared Hankins (far left), Brent Birch (left), Greg Churan (right) and her husband, Arkansas Agriculture Secretary Wes Ward (far right). As executive director of the Arkansas Rice Federation, Lauren Ward prefers to hunt the state's rice fields, despite the kind of flooded timber success enjoyed here.

If you have children do you take them duck hunting? If so what are some of the highlights from these youth hunts?

I'm still trying to learn to keep plants alive, so no children yet. Although I remember on my very first hunt when I was 6, the ducks weren't really flying and I was tired of pulling the jerk chord. I was cold and Stanley Reed thought I might like some of his coffee. Dad tried to discourage my consumption, knowing it wouldn't taste like the hot chocolate I was hoping for, but Uncle Stanley insisted his "French Vanilla" would suffice. I spit it out and never drank coffee until college — again, trying to be like Dad.

What is your most unusual "must have" in the duck blind? My cell phone. Whether it's explaining the relationship between rice and ducks or just a simple Arkansas Delta sunrise, the duck blind is the perfect opportunity to tell the story of Arkansas. (Shameless plug: share your hunts using #ArkansasRice to be featured by @ArkansasRice).

Which Arkansas executive calls ducks the best? Ben Noble.

Marshall Stewart

President, CEO Greenway Equipment

Number of days you hunt a season? About every day; around 50.

Where do you hunt? Woodruff County.

Club name? Green Oaks Hunting Lodge.

What kind of gun do you use? Super Black Eagle Benelli semi-automatic.

Favorite duck call? Rich-N-Tone.

Fields, reservoir or timber? Flooded green timber.

Rainy, nasty or bluebird sky? Clear and cold.

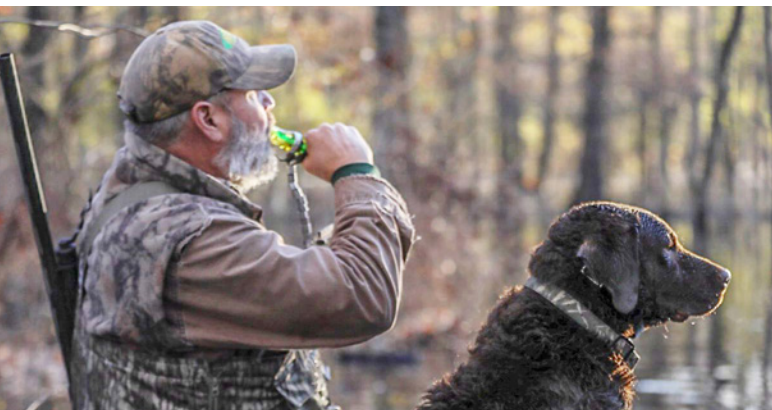
Favorite hunting story/memory? I've grown up hunting my whole life; there's way too many — from kids killing their first duck to the last hunt I had with my dad before he passed. There's a lifetime of memories, different hunts you'll always remember. It's almost a heritage.

What got you into hunting? My dad. I can't remember not duck hunting; he started taking me when I was little. Everyone in the family hunted.

If you have children do you take them duck hunting? If so what are some of the highlights from these youth hunts? Absolutely. Both Maddison (25) and Carson (21) hunt with me and we still have fun hunting together. I even take my future son-in-law, Cameron. And no, I haven't shot him ... yet.

What is your most unusual "must have" in the duck blind? Copenhagen. I don't require much. I travel pretty light.

Which Arkansas executive calls ducks the best? Jim Ronquest (Rich-N-Tone Calls Inc.).



Raised as a hunter, Marshall Stewart still tries to get out almost every day of duck season.

Al Heringer IV

Vice President,
Star Transportation

Chairman,
Arkansas Trucking Association

Number of days you hunt a season?
10-12.

Where do you hunt? Several places, not a member of a particular club.

What kind of gun do you use? Semi Winchester Super-X.

Favorite duck call? Duck Commander.

Fields, reservoir or timber? Fields and timber.

Rainy, nasty or bluebird sky? Bluebird sky.

Favorite hunting story/memory? My favorite memory is getting to take both my boys hunting for the first time.

What got you into hunting? My father took me when I was young.

If you have children do you take them duck hunting? If so what are some of the highlights from these youth hunts? The highlights are the looks on their faces when they see a big group of ducks come in. They love to see the dogs work.

What is your most unusual "must have" in the duck blind? I don't think it's unusual, but no way I am going out there without a good pair of socks.

Which Arkansas executive calls ducks the best? Not sure which one is the best. I am definitely not it. But I call the Hogs way better than I call ducks.



Al Heringer, a former Arkansas Razorbacks football player, admits he is still better at calling the Hogs than he is calling ducks, but he does know the value of hunting socks.

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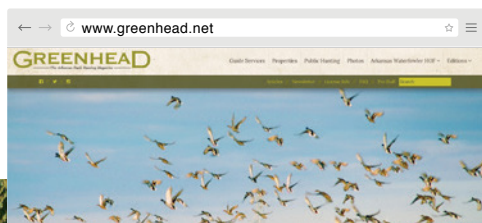
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Kristi Dannelly (left), husband Scott and boys Connor and Cole have seen a lot of sunrises as a family.

Kristi Dannelley

President, Magna IV

Number of days you hunt a season?
8-10.

Where do you hunt? The White River near Tichnor.

What kind of gun do you use? A 12-gauge Remington 11-87 semi-automatic.

Duck call skill level? I'm spoiled by my husband, Scott, who does all the calling.

Fields, reservoir or timber? Timber.

Rainy, nasty or bluebird sky? Bluebird sky.

Favorite hunting story/memory? It's impossible to pick just one. Spending time outdoors with my family watching the sunrise always makes my day. But the time I caught my hair on fire with a blind heater is probably my funniest memory.

What got you into hunting? My husband. His patience is infinite.

If you have children do you take them duck hunting? If so what are some of the highlights from these youth hunts? My two boys, Connor (12) and Cole (9), love to duck hunt. They started at age 2 with toy cork "pop" guns. At 4, they graduated to BB guns. Connor now shoots a pump 20-gauge, and Cole uses a single-shot 20-gauge. Cole's first duck was a pretty, banded wood duck so he was immediately hooked.

What is your most unusual "must have" in the duck blind? A Swell bottle full of hot coffee and raw almonds.



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Ben Noble

Executive Vice President,
Marketing and Sales, Riceland Foods

Number of days you hunt a season? Thirty. Moving to Stuttgart, so I expect this to go up ... for business purposes.

Where do you hunt? Reydell and Ethel.

Club name? One Horse Hunting Club

What kind of gun do you use? Browning A5, semi-auto.

Favorite duck call? Sentimental favorite: Chick Majors (gift from grandfather). Actual use: Rich-N-Tone/Echo combo. Favorite depends on mood (mine or ducks).

Fields, reservoir or timber? Yes. All the above. But timber is favorite.

Rainy, nasty or bluebird sky? Bluebird and cold. But if you can time it right and be set up for snow to start when ducks are in the air, it doesn't get much better. God has to help a lot on that one.

Favorite hunting story/memory? I was in seventh grade. Ducks had found rice fields around Ethel. Local farmer/family friend Monte McKewen and my dad convinced my mother (a school teacher) that it was very important that I stay home and help them with a "farm project" early during the weekday. "Don't worry," they said. "We'll get him to school on time." We limited quickly, but missed the tardy bell. Detention was worth it (for me and Dad).

Close second: Gillett in the late '90s. Berry Farm during Coon Supper week. Close friend and relative Mitch Berry and I are hunting with his father, Congressman Marion Berry. We are in a rice field pit and Marion throws the lid back and watches as Mitch and I unload on a large group of ducks — six shots. Not a feather. Marion's laugh is uncontrollable for a bit until he gathers himself and lets us know how disappointed our ancestors would be in that performance.

What got you into hunting? Birth in Stuttgart. I had no choice.

If you have children do you take them duck hunting? If so what are some of the highlights from these youth hunts? My son is 13 and my daughter is 10. While "lowlights" at the time, the [highlights are the] current stories we share; the most laughs about all include one or more of us falling into the water (me included).



Ben Noble, with son James, can recall being permitted to skip school to hunt with his dad and enjoys passing on the hunting experience to his children, though sometimes one of the Nobles winds up falling into the water instead of wading through it.

What is your most unusual "must have" in the duck blind? My grandfather's coffee thermos. He was a member of "Hardley Able" Hunting Club and while it doesn't keep coffee as warm as it did back in the day, it means a lot for me to have in my duck bag.

Which Arkansas executive calls ducks the best? What I need to say: Riceland's CEO Danny Kennedy. What I actually believe: Brantley Farms CEO Dow Brantley. Who's an up and comer and better than he knows? Dr. Sid Dassinger, Arkansas Children's Hospital.



Ray Green

Partner, Kutak Rock

Ray Green knows from bitter experience the value of having an extra pair of gloves in the blind.

Number of days you hunt a season? Four to eight.

Where do you hunt? I hunt mostly near Brinkley.

Club name? Two clubs. Two Rivers Duck Club near Brinkley and Woodpecker Flats near Des Arc.

What kind of gun do you use? Benelli Super Black Eagle 2 semi-automatic 12-gauge. I use the left-handed version.

Favorite duck call? The Sassy Susie by Rick Hampton.

Fields, reservoir or timber? Timber.

Rainy, nasty or bluebird sky? Nothing but blue skies from now on.

Favorite hunting story/memory? The stories are the best part of hunting. Most of my good stories are protected by the attorney-client privilege or the rule that what happens in the blind stays in the blind. Years ago, Gary Head, Mike Ackerson, and I were hunting. Mike left the blind

early and Gary and I remained through the freezing cold. After a few hours, we made the decision to leave the blind. Unfortunately, the motor on the boat would not start and we had to paddle through the brushy waters. I took the front of the boat and pushed the branches of the brush apart as Gary paddled. As we navigated through the brush, we both grew colder and more weary. When we were almost through the brush, I bent a green branch very far back as Gary paddled. I called his name and Gary looked straight at me. I let go of the branch and it whacked him straight in the face. He was stunned by the force of the bent green branch. I thought it was hilarious.

What got you into hunting? I started hunting at an early age with my family. The variety of ducks and their plumage is what hooked me on duck hunting.

What is your most unusual “must have” in the duck blind? Two pairs of gloves. At least one always gets wet.

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Trey Reid

Assistant Chief of Communications,
Arkansas Game and Fish Commission

*The Remington 870 pump
is the gun of choice for Trey Reid.*

Number of days you hunt a season? 25-30.

Where do you hunt? I hunt wherever I can find ducks, but I often hunt Bayou Meto WMA, as well as a small lease near England. Because of my role as host and producer of *Arkansas Wildlife*, the AGFC's television show, I'm also fortunate to receive invitations to hunt and shoot video at many great hunting spots across the state.

Club name? Bark Busters.

What kind of gun do you use? Remington 870 (pump), the greatest duck gun known to man. It's durable and reliable to the point that you can use it as a boat paddle or push pole in a pinch and then dry it out and shoot ducks with it. It's also easy to maintain; I once reassembled an 870 in the middle of a Kansas marsh, using gaffer's tape to secure a stripped out magazine cap so I could finish the hunt.

Favorite duck call? My lanyard holds a pair of Elite calls (a Cache and a Freak), an R-N-T acrylic short barrel and a whistle.

Fields, reservoir or timber? I love the flooded timber, but I'm going where the ducks are, whatever the habitat type.

Rainy, nasty or bluebird sky? Bluebird.

Favorite hunting story/memory? I was probably 8 or 9 years old, sitting in a duck blind on a bitterly cold morning. Back then we didn't have all the great gear that we have today, so I was wearing cheap green rubber boots and my feet were aching. After listening to me complain about it for a while, my dad told me to slip off my boots. He unzipped his hunting coat, unbuttoned his shirt, and placed my freezing feet against his ample belly to warm them. That has to be a prime example of unconditional love (or a necessary sacrifice to stay in the blind a little longer).



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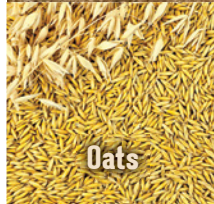
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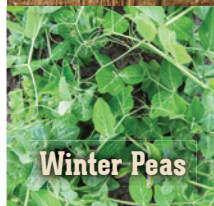
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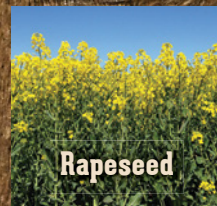
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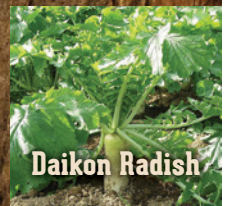
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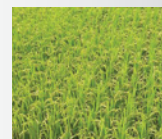
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AGFC PROGRAM HONES
YOUNG SHOOTERS' SKILLS

By TODD TRAUB

Duck hunting is largely a pastime handed down and taught from generation to generation, and that has included the teaching of firearm safety.

There are no minor leagues and there isn't a network of major colleges providing a pipeline of talent.

However, through its wildly successful Arkansas Youth Shooting Sports Program (AYSSP), the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission is helping to groom shooters both accurate and responsible, with many of them taking their sharpened skills back into the fields, woods and wetlands.

"It teaches the kids gun safety and that there's more to it than what you just see on TV," said AYSSP Director Jimmy Self. "From the [Arkansas] Game and Fish standpoint, they're looking at it for the future of Game and Fish as far as getting kids outdoors and teaching them gun safety, and hopefully they will hunt and fish."

The AYSSP is broken into a junior division for grades 6-8 while the senior division is for grades 9-12. Home-schooled students compete in their corresponding, public school age group and must be 15 or older to join the senior division.

The AYSSP's sanctioned sport is trap shooting, and the season runs from Feb. 1-July 31.

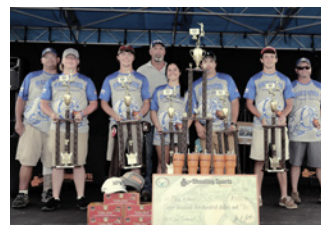
"It's huge to the hunting industry," Self said of the need for sound, safe shooting skills. "Because without it we wouldn't [be hunting]. The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, we thrive off of nature and the natural resources of Arkansas. This goes into any bird hunting, actually any type of hunting, but trap is more quail and dove hunting and duck hunting. Waterfowl."

Self, who has been program director since October, 2017, said the AYSSP has just under 6,000 young shooters, mentored by around 900 background-checked and certified coaches, practicing with shooting teams at ranges around the state, including the Arkansas Game and Fish Foundation Range in Jacksonville.

The teams can be public- or private-school affiliated, they can be church sponsored or a 4H group, Self said.

"We'll start a team with anybody," he said. "All they have to have is have a coach that can pass the background check."

As long as the bore is 12- or 20-gauge, any kind of shotgun action is allowed while release triggers are not. Competition uses trap machines that throw targets at unknown angles and appropriate eye and ear protection is required of all shooters and coaches.



The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission's Arkansas Youth Shooting Sports Program has produced champions and Olympic hopefuls, but at its heart it teaches the competitors and young hunters the safe use of firearms.

PHOTOS BY MIKE WINTROATH/ARKANSAS GAME AND FISH COMMISSION

There are four regional tournaments and one state tournament in June. The top 16 teams from each region qualify for state — 64 juniors and 64 seniors. The program's top three senior teams earn AGFC college scholarships of \$7,500, \$5,000 and \$2,500, plus prizes.

Beyond the state tournament there are The Grand American World Trapshooting Championships in Sparta, Illinois, and the AIM (Academics, Integrity, Marksmanship) Trapshooting Championships, also in Sparta.

Additionally, AYSSP shooters have gone to the Junior Olympics and to the Olympic Training Center.

Self said that all shooters are different — left-handed vs. right-handed, male vs. female, dominant left eye or dominant right eye — so it's important to teach fundamentals but not tinker with a shooter's style.

It's also important not to turn kids away if they are lacking in financial means. Self said, to encourage participation and enhance opportunities to teach firearm safety, the program has about 60 loaner guns for prospective shooters and 15 loaner trap machines for coaches.

"Just because you don't have the stuff it doesn't mean you can't do it," Self said.

Not every AYSSP shooter is an outdoorsman, Self said. Some are just in it for the competition. But for those who do enjoy the outdoors, it's another way for the AGFC to encourage participation and interest.

And whether it's about hunting or competitive shooting, the end result is that participants learn how to properly handle a firearm.

"I stress safety," Self said. "Keep the gun pointed in a safe direction and always know what's going on around you, that is probably the most important thing. To me that's more important than being the best or breaking the targets."

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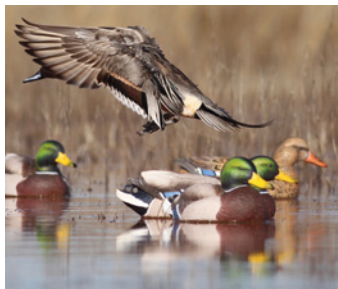
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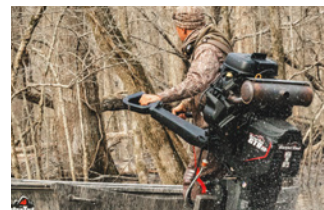


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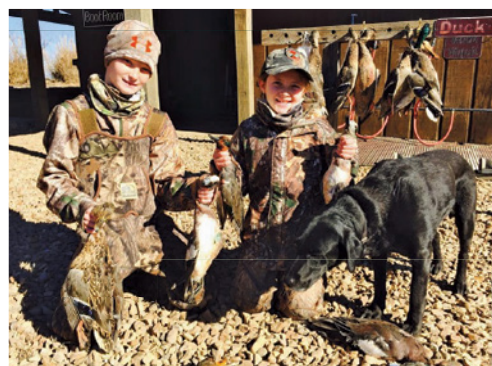
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IN THE HEART OF THE MISSISSIPPI FLYWAY

the final thought

Getting Another Shot

Vintage Gun Brings Family Connection To Life

By BRENT BIRCH

The 2017-2018 season was a special one for me personally.

Not because of some massive number of ducks harvested or exotic places I got to go. Last season had more to do with a person I never met and a gun I had never shot.

My maternal grandfather, Samuel Morris Dodds, passed away before I was born, while my mother was still in high school. He was mainly a rabbit and squirrel hunter but was the proud owner of a 1956 Belgium Browning "Light" A5. The gun had rarely been shot and was mostly a display piece over the years in various gun cabinets. Truly in pristine condition.

The gun had floated back and forth between my mom and her brother who lived in the Dallas area. My Uncle Steve isn't a hunter but appreciated his father's gun and likely tied it to some childhood memories.

After years of shuttling the gun around, my mom and uncle decided it was appropriate to pass the it along the family. Uncle Steve's children don't hunt and with me being the oldest, I got the initial offer from my mother to take possession of the A5.

I wasn't sure what I was going to do with it. I felt it was too nice to cart through the rice fields of southern Lonoke County where I typically hunt. I don't have a gun cabinet for display, just a gun safe out of view in my shop below the house.

Then I had an epiphany that the A5 would be the perfect weapon to take on the various timber hunts to which I get invited. A classic gun for a classic Arkansas green timber hunt. These are typically very "clean" hunts with a short, shallow wade into manicured timber. But the gun wasn't quite ready for prime time.

Last summer, after receiving the OK from my mom, we had various inner parts restored — since the gun hadn't been fired in more than 30 years — and converted it into a duck gun.

To allow the shotgun to handle modern-day steel shot, I purchased a mint condition, 26-inch, Japanese-milled, vent rib barrel with an improved cylinder choke. Some of the inner workings were also updated, including new springs and a new plug.

Now, a new plug doesn't sound too exciting except for what we found when we took the gun apart. Inside the magazine was a No. 2 pencil, cut to length with a twisted bolt cap affixed to each end, serving as the plug for who knows how long. My mother was certain it was some intuitive engineering by her father likely sometime in the 1960s, when she was a schoolgirl.

Eventually it was time to give the weapon a try. Problem is, my timber invites didn't flow in like usual. Weather, water, ice,



Matt Jeter (left) and author Brent Birch, holding his grandfather's 1956 Belgium Browning "Light" A5 refurbished as a duck gun.

schedules and more gave me the impression the A5 would have to wait another season or perhaps debut during dove season.

Then I got a late January invite from my good buddy Matt Jeter to his family's club, Four Forks, on the west side of Bayou Meto. The spot was in an area I had never hunted but still allowed an easy walk to the hunting hole. I do recall walking in with a bit more caution to avoid getting locked up by an underwater limb and dunking the A5 on its first hunt.

After being shot and called at since late September, the ducks didn't hit the decoys as is typical. But they were around and hitting 100 yards or so off the hole all around us.

I settled in my spot beneath a small hole in the canopy and a drake made his way through the thick cover, in range of the A5. One shot, one kill. Nothing remarkable, as he was close, but the first shot out of my grandfather's shotgun was something special.

A quick limit followed. No big wads of ducks, just a lone drake here and there. The thought crossed my mind a time or two that maybe, from up above, my grandfather guided me to that particular spot to shoot a solo limit with his prized shotgun.

Hopefully the timber hunt invites will increase this season and I get more opportunities to run a few shells through the A5. After a 30-year hiatus, my grandfather's gun is back in action, continuing a legacy spanning generations and multiple types of game.

I just hope he keeps sending me to the right spot.

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