



Photo by Todd Steele

Be ready when ducks on pond

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August 23, 2012

North America's waterfowl continue enjoying a run of good years on their nesting grounds, and millions of ducks and geese will be heading to Texas in coming months.

When those birds get here, they'll see habitat conditions much improved from a year ago, when record-setting drought and heat evaporated or damaged wetlands upon which the migratory fowl rely.

The combination of strong waterfowl populations - numbers of some popular species are at levels not seen since standardized surveys of nesting grounds began in 1955 - and decent habitat to support them mean the 2012-13 duck and goose seasons have potential to be outstanding.

But that potential can be squandered by hunters who don't prepare for the coming season or "hunt smart" during the season.

Todd Steele, partner/manager of **Thunderbird Hunting Club**, a private waterfowl hunting club that leases and manages about 20,000 acres of coastal prairie and wetlands in Jackson and Matagorda counties, and a veteran waterfowler with decades of experience pursuing ducks and geese, offers these tips to hunters looking to improve their odds of success this autumn:

Get in shape

"Waterfowl hunting is demanding, physically," Steele said. "Most hunters don't prepare for that."

Carrying heavy loads of gear (decoys, shotgun, shell bag) even a couple of hundred yards across muddy fields, boggy marsh or the other challenging terrain typical of waterfowling while wearing clunky waders is hard work.

So is wrestling boats and ATVs off of and onto trailers, enduring cold, wet conditions, and many of the other activities associated with waterfowling.

"Even if it's just a regular routine of walking, do something to prepare yourself physically." Steele said. "Hunters would enjoy themselves so much more and be more successful if they are in shape."

Get dogs in shape, too

"Don't wait until the last second to get your dog ready," Steele said.

Just like their owners, retrievers need to be mentally and physically prepared for the challenges of the season. That means sharpening skills not used for months.

At least a month before the season opens, begin working the dog every day, concentrating on handling commands and honing retrieving skills.

"Even if it's just five minutes a day, work on basic commands - sit, come, stay," Steele said. "You'd be surprised how many people don't do that. It shows in the field and can ruin your hunt."

Even if the dog has been in the care of a professional trainer, the owner and animal need at least two or three weeks to get reacquainted before going afield.

"Don't think a trainer can just hand over a dog and it'll do great. The dog and the owner need time to get to know each other," Steele said.

Visit the gun range

"One of the things I see time and time again is hunters thinking they can just pick up their shotgun after not touching it since last season and shoot well," Steele said. "They can't."

Successful wingshooting, like hitting a baseball with a bat, demands a high degree of hand/eye coordination. The only way to develop that skill is through practice.

A few rounds of sporting clays over the coming weeks allow a hunter to sharpen the skills - consistent mount, swing and almost subconscious lead calculation - necessary to shoot well.

Steele suggests practicing using "real world" shooting positions.

"If you can, take a stool and practice shooting sitting down or from awkward positions, just like you see when you're hunting," he said. "It'll pay off when the season opens."

The most effective tactic to consistently decoy waterfowl- geese or ducks - is to be precisely where the birds want to be.

"You need to set up exactly where the birds want to land," Steele said. "Not close. Exactly."

Particular places on a marsh pond, flooded prairie wetland, reservoir or field are more attractive to waterfowl than other spots that look, to human eyes, indistinguishable from the place the birds obviously prefer. The attraction might be a concentration of aquatic vegetation, seeds, grain or other forage; offer protection from wind and rough water and a sense of security; or have some other attribute that draws birds to a specific spot.

Scouting is the best way to learn these spots, which can change through the season as conditions change and birds consume forage in ponds and fields.

"Scout, and notice exactly where the birds are sitting. That's where you want to be the next morning, because there's a reason the birds are sitting in that spot," Steele said.

If you can't scout before a hunt, don't hesitate to change location if you see birds consistently working to a specific piece of water or area of a field.

Put some motion in decoys

"If you watch any group of birds on a pond or in a field, there's always some movement. Birds are swimming or stretching or preening or flapping their wings," Steele said.

The typical decoy spread looks like a bunch of statues. And about the only time a group of waterfowl is motionless is when the birds are focused on a perceived threat and about to explode into flight. Motion in the decoys catches the eyes of flying waterfowl, and the birds expect to see it among their brethren on the water or in a field.

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