

Fowl Weather

For many waterfowl hunters, often including myself, once big game season rolls around, waterfowl hunting takes a backseat as hunters get focused with filling their moose and deer tags. Also, the weather tends to take a turn this time of year, making waterfowl hunting less appealing to some. Unfortunate as the timing may be, as gun seasons are opening for moose and deer, some of the best water fowling is yet to come. Large numbers of migrants are making their way south, and can offer some great shooting opportunities. I do more field hunting geese than anything else, and I would say that the opening weekend for moose is one of the best weekends to hunt geese, with hordes of birds flying about.

Along with migrating geese, large flocks of northern ducks are moving through, providing some of the most exciting shoots you can get all fall. Having dozens or even hundreds of mallards flying about is quite the sight from your blind!

Now for those that are not serious waterfowl hunters, and those that may not have a great deal of gear, this can be a prime time to get out and experience some exciting waterfowl action. While hunting fields out of a layout blind with dozens and dozens of decoys around you is great, it is not necessarily required to kill ducks. A hunter with a camo jacket and a shotgun can kill ducks this time of year, providing opportunities for everyone.

One simple and effective method of harvesting ducks without much gear is jump-shooting ponds. This time of year, with large numbers of birds migrating through, you will be hard pressed to find a beaver pond that doesn't have some ducks or geese in it. During a recent moose hunt, every pond I passed had anywhere from a couple ducks to a couple dozen on them, and I watched ducks and geese

come and go throughout the morning and evening. These small ponds were nothing special, just small beaver ponds on the edge of cutovers or along small bush roads where I was moose hunting, and would be excellent places for a simple hunt. Jump shooting ducks can take two forms; the first and most obvious is sneaking into a pond that you think may hold ducks or geese, and when you get to the edge and spook the birds you get some shooting as they lift off. The other option that I have had some decent success with and map provide you with some more shooting opportunities still has you sneaking into the pond, and jumping the ducks off the pond, but not shooting them as they leave. If you have a decent number of birds on a pond that take off on your arrival, odds are that they will slowly filter back to the pond. The advantage of this is that if a dozen birds get up and go, they will most likely return in smaller groups, coming in over the next half hour or hour to return to their pond. Your strategy here is simple; put up the birds and let them take off, then find a good hiding spot on the edge and wait for their return. You will likely get more shooting opportunities as they come back individually or in small groups that you would have getting one volley of shots off at the whole group.

As far as finding ponds for this type of hunt, most hunters will have an idea where some beaver ponds may be, likely from hunting an area for grouse or big game. If you don't have anywhere in mind, using a resource like Google earth can be a great way to locate small ponds and wetlands in close proximity to logging roads and trails, and you can spend a day exploring, walking into a variety of ponds.

One important thing to consider before you start shooting ducks on a pond is to ensure that you can retrieve them.

Whether you have a dog, a small canoe or float tube you can use, or a pair of chest waders. I like to also bring along a long extendible pole to give you some more reach, and even throw a packable fishing rod in just in case the waters too deep to reach your birds. You need to be cautious shooting large ponds without knowing if you can get them, as you shouldn't be shooting birds that you aren't positive you can retrieve, and it's not a lot of fun gearing down to your shorts and wading or swimming out to retrieve a duck late in the fall!

Another option for these ponds or wetlands is setting up a small decoy spread, even having as few as a half dozen decoys can work, and try decoying some birds in. Hunting in the morning or evening when birds are either moving to feed or moving back to roost is ideal, and this again can be a simple approach for those without much equipment. Having a small canoe tucked into the edge of a pond is a good idea, for either retrieval or even to shoot out of, hidden in some reeds or along the pond edge. When decoying ducks, beaver ponds can be good, but so can small lakes or rivers, and finding a lake with wild rice growing in it can be an exceptional place to setup.

Paddling creeks and rivers and jump shooting ducks can also be a blast, especially during this time of year when birds are usually quite abundant. Find a river or creek you may have seen ducks on in the past when hunting or fishing, or again just explore and see what you find. This type of jump shooting can be done independently or with a partner, and can be quite effective. If you have a hunting partner, take turns with one paddling and the other up front shooting. Slowly make your way down the river, with the shooter in the front at the ready, as ducks will often erupt out of the weeds or cover along a riverbank, or fly along the river

itself. As you paddle down you usually get plenty of shooting action as you go. When doing this, ensure only the person in the front has a loaded gun, for obvious safety reasons. This kind of hunt is incredibly exciting, and often offers explosive action. Even paddling lake shorelines can be good, especially when there are lots of weeds for cover, or wild rice growing along the shoreline holding feeding ducks. If you are solo, I keep my shotgun laying across the canoe in front of me, and quickly transition from the paddle to the gun when I see a bird. If doing this, it may be a good idea to have a spare paddle in the canoe in case you drop the paddle in the water with the excitement. Also, wearing a pfd is wise when doing this type of hunting, especially since you will be moving about and shooting out of a canoe; I have a camo inflatable pfd that's perfect for these scenarios.

As far as equipment goes, a 12 or 20 gauge shotgun is perfect, and must be loaded with non-toxic shot, like steel shot. When targeting ducks, I shoot 12 gauge 2 3/4 or 3" steel shot, in a #2 or #3 load, and for geese I shoot a 3" BB load, all out of a modified choke. If you are going to be jump shooting small ponds, or out of a canoe down a small waterway, even changing to an improved cylinder choke can be a good idea, reducing your effective range somewhat, but increasing your pattern for close shots. As far as Licences are concerned, you need your Ontario small game licence, as well as a Federal Migratory game bird permit, available at the post office.

The beauty of hunting waterfowl during this time of year is it gets you out in the field, exploring new country, and can also be doubled with or added into a grouse, big game, or even fishing trip. It can be a lot of fun, a great new experience, and best of all is more time spent in the outdoors.

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