



COLD WATER CALAMITIES

An exploding boat engine, a receding river, muck-filled waders, a car in the water—and no mallards: Ahhh, it's another duck hunting trip.

BY CLARKE C. JONES | ILLUSTRATIONS BY KENNETH CALLICUTT



I used to be a duck hunter—back when I was younger and not very analytical. Then, I began to think about what exactly I was doing on my hunting trips. Or maybe I begin to consider what my hunting trips were doing to me. Duck hunting is supposed to be a sport where the hunter uses his mastery of stealth and deception to bring a duck to the dinner table: You sit, wait and shoot, then carry home the bounty. That's never quite the way it was for me. For some reason, I never seemed to fire a single shot and yet managed to suffer just about every indignity that can afflict a luckless hunter. There was rarely a trip that didn't end with me bloodied, bruised and bone tired—and unencumbered by dead ducks.

Every duck hunter has his routine—and his stories. A typical duck hunting trip for me involved the following: I would wake up at 2 to 3 a.m., then drive for an hour or longer to meet a friend who knew of a beaver pond or swamp we could use for the morning. We would drive together to said location, unload gear—insulated gloves, wool hat, flashlights, semi-trained dog, decoys and shotguns—then put on hip boots or waders, depending on the depth of the water.

So far, so good—but it was usually at this point (the beginning!) when my excursion would start to unravel. For one thing, my hip boots were never high enough when I walked into a beaver pond, and my waders were always an inch shorter than they should be. Just getting around was an ordeal. Covered in multiple layers of clothing and my insulated camouflage hunting coat, I waddled zombie-like in the pitch-black, pre-dawn hours—holding a flashlight and shotgun, attempting to restrain an over-eager retriever determined to run in the direction opposite our destination, my decoy bag catching on every low branch. Typically, I was not the one who knew where we were headed. I followed my hunting companion, which meant that my face frequently met tree limbs snapping back from my partner's passage.

All of this exertion inevitably caused me to perspire a lot. At first, I welcomed the warm feeling on what was usually a cold,

damp morning. However, on a duck hunt, one is supposed to stand or sit motionless for long periods—be as quiet as possible. If you're standing knee-deep in frigid water, in a cold drizzle, that warm feeling does not last very long at all. The warm sweat quickly dissipates, leaving you shivering like a 10-year-old boy at his first cotillion. By that point, there was usually ice-cold water inside my waders, seeping through a hole I'd failed to patch at the end of last season.

The final insult of a duck hunting morning would come next: the urgent morning call prompted by the coffee I'd consumed an hour earlier. While I relieved this internal dilemma, the one and only flock of ducks I'd see all morning would come flying by—low and slow—about nine feet over my head. Opportunity lost.

On my last duck hunt, I had every hope that most of these pitfalls might be avoided. First, it was to be an *afternoon* hunt in January, so no waiting for my hunting partner to show up at some greasy, out-of-the-way convenience store at 4 a.m. I've learned that there is a distinct difference between waiting for someone who is five minutes late at 4 a.m. and waiting for someone who is five minutes late at 4 p.m. The five-minute wait at 4 a.m. is filled with anxiety: Did he forget we were to meet? Am I at the right place? Is this the right day? Did he say 5 o'clock? There would be no tripping over submerged tree roots

and falling face first in a swamp, my waders filling up with icy water; no waiting for ducks that never come because your partner's out-of-control dog is splashing around looking for a stick for you to throw.

That's because I and a guest had been invited to a duck shooting club. We would be hunting from a comfortable, covered water blind. My partner and I had only one duty—attach a small outboard motor to a 14-foot johnboat waiting at the boat ramp. Once that was accomplished, we'd motor to the blind about a half-mile upriver, set the decoys from the boat, dock the boat under the duck blind and sit patiently—well protected from the elements.

At least that was how it was explained to me.

My only concern was that we would be borrowing the host's outboard motor. I'm not the kind of person to whom you want to lend things—unless you want a new version of whatever it was you've just lent me. It's not that I don't take good care of things; it's that every object, whether it be a handmade bamboo fly rod or an anvil, has a good chance of being ruined while in my possession. I didn't know the cost of an outboard motor, but it wasn't in my budget under the heading of "Free Duck Hunt."

On the day of the hunt, I picked up my hunting mentor, Tom, and we drove to a remote area of King William County. It was one of those wonderful duck hunting days—overcast skies with the potential for sleet and rain. "Man kill'n weather is duck kill'n weather," they say, and Tom and I were already talking about who would limit out first as we headed east down Route 360. However, by the time we'd pulled into the old farm road leading to a small shack by the river, where the outboard and the johnboat were kept, the skies had started to clear. The sun and clearing sky gave me a sense of dark foreboding—one I'd felt before while hunting.

"There are two outboard motors in the boathouse," Tom said. "Which one do I take?"

"Just take the oldest and worst-looking one," I replied.

People pick hunting partners for a number of reasons. You want someone with whom you get along, who won't tell the jokes you already know but will listen attentively to your jokes, which he has already heard. I also look for someone who is mechanically oriented, who can fix anything and thereby compensate for my deficiencies in that area.

Tom removed the small outboard motor from the boathouse and said we ought to make sure it worked before attaching it to the boat. His suggestion reaffirmed my ability to pick a great hunting partner. He attached one end of a hose to a gas can and the other to the outboard motor, squeezed the baffle a number of times and pulled the cord to start the engine. The engine failed to start. He squeezed the baffle a few more times and again pulled on the cord. A loud POW! came from the outboard—and as Tom quickly removed the engine's cover, a huge flame shot out of the motor. Tom reached down, picked up a handful of sand and tossed it into the outboard to put out the fire.

I started to wonder how much an outboard engine costs. Undaunted, Tom put the exploding outboard back in the boathouse and pulled out the newer, shiny one. When I asked what in the world he thought he was going to do with the second outboard, Tom, who had never let any financial dilemma I may be facing stand in the way of a good time, answered, "We are here to duck hunt, aren't we? We are about 1,000 yards from a duck hunting heaven experience we may never see again, so quit worrying and grab that gas can. Besides, I think I know went wrong with the first outboard."

I was too busy mentally calculating the cost of two outboards to argue. The second outboard cooperated, so we attached it to the boat, set off upriver to the blind and spread our decoys in the traditional hook pattern, making sure not to splash water on the decoys. (Nothing says "watch out" to a real duck more than

ice sitting on the back of a fake one.) We climbed into the blind to wait for the ducks.

By then the skies had cleared completely. This meant two things: First, our chance of seeing ducks that afternoon had greatly diminished; and, second, it was going to be a very cold January night. The first hour of a duck hunt, you are as vigilant as a WWII air raid warden scanning the skies over London. But soon, your neck begins to cramp and the sun

warms your face and tires your eyes. Boredom sets in. You tell each other a few jokes—but the mixture of cold air and sunlight can put you right to sleep. I know I wouldn't have fallen asleep if Tom had not done so first. What I remember, when I woke up, was Tom saying, "Clarke, we have a slight problem."

Now, nothing ever bothered Tom. If he had been on the *Titanic* after it struck an iceberg, he would have said, "You know, we might get our feet wet." I stood up, looked out of the blind and discovered that the water had receded from around our blind—so much so that our decoys and our boat were sitting in mud.

Picking up two-dozen decoys from a boat at the end of a duck hunt while wet, cold and tired is not a lot of fun. Picking up two-dozen decoys when you are knee deep in leg-grabbing river goo is one of the most grueling



I'm not the kind of person to whom you want to lend things—unless you want a new version of whatever it was you've just lent me. It's not that I don't take good care of things; it's that every object, whether it be a handmade bamboo fly rod or an anvil, has a good chance of being ruined while in my possession.

things I've ever done. After getting the decoys and gear into the boat, we had to slide the boat across the sucking mud to water deep enough to float it. When we reached the water, we both jumped into the boat, pitching it starboard about 30 degrees—losing our dignity and my cell phone in the process.

As the sun began to set and the temperature dropped, we headed downriver to the boat ramp. Tom suggested we be smart about getting the boat out of the water. There came again the dark foreboding—the imminent approach of calamity that I seemed unable to avoid on these “pleasure trips.” “Instead of using our backs to bring the boat up the ramp,” Tom suggested, “why not back the car down the gravel ramp, tie the boat to the rear axle and use the car to pull the boat out of the water.”

After we'd attached the boat to the car, I put the car in gear and pressed the accelerator. The rear tires quickly threw up all the gravel, leaving only a slick, greasy substrate with no traction. The car would not move up to terra firma but instead slid down the now slick ramp to the river. No amount of pushing or praying got the vehicle moving forward. As the last bit of sunlight disappeared, we were enveloped by darkness, as if a shroud had been placed over us. The air turned bitterly cold, and we were stranded in the middle of nowhere.

About a half-mile downstream, on the other side of the river, we saw lights shining from two houses. We got back into the boat and crossed the river, running aground about 20 feet from the bank. The light from the houses made the mud look black and shiny and ominous. Since we weren't sure what we were dealing with in the darkness, Tom removed his waders. He climbed out of the boat and into the deep ooze, and started trudging toward the bank. After much groaning and struggling, he pulled himself up the bank and walked toward one of the houses while I sat in the boat, making sure it didn't float away.

Now, I believe people who live in remote areas do so because they like their solitude. If you've come home from work on a winter night, have put on your slippers and are sitting in your easy chair by the fire, waiting for supper with libation in hand, the last thing you expect is some surprising knock on your back door.

If you've come home from work on a cold January night, have put on your slippers and are sitting in your easy chair by the fire, waiting for supper with libation in hand, the last thing you expect is some surprising knock on your back door. You certainly aren't comforted by the sight on your porch of a panting, 6'7" man covered in sweat and mud.

You certainly aren't comforted by the sight on your porch of a panting, 6'7" man covered in sweat and mud.

I sat shivering in the dark for what seemed 30 minutes, alternately imagining Tom being shot and wondering how long it might take him to convince a homeowner to come outside and, on a cold January night, help two hapless strangers push a car up a hill. Tom returned, and I winced as he reentered the thick, cold mud and made his way to our boat. I remember thinking how fortunate I was not to be in his boots.

Unfortunately, while Tom had been conniving help—which came in the form of two men motoring toward our car in their boat about 200 yards downstream—the river had receded even farther. Our boat was now sitting in the muck again—and again we had to push it out to where the water was deep enough to float it. The trick was to do that, and clamber into the boat, before finding ourselves completely under water. It is surprising how much adrenaline rushes through your body when freezing water suddenly hits your crotch.

Moments later, Tom and the two gentlemen were trying to push the car up the ramp. I was sure they could have succeeded had they devoted more energy to pushing rather than cursing. After 30 minutes of hernia-inducing effort, our help decided they'd had enough. They'd done their best, to no avail. One man said he'd call for a wrecker when he got back to the house. Good idea, except that we would have to meet the driver about three miles away, where two rural routes crossed at an intersection. We thanked both men and offered them money for their assistance, which they refused. I'm sure they felt sorry for us—even if they did burst out laughing before getting halfway back across the river.

I've found myself in some uncomfortable situations before, but walking three miles in pitch darkness—with wet pants, wet socks and wet boots, with the temperature in the mid 20s—was

one of the most unpleasant experiences I've ever had. Besides the physical discomfort, I was racked by the worry that the wrecker would never find us at some remote, barely recognizable intersection. But the tow man was waiting for us, and he seemed to be in a decent mood for having been called to help a pair of feckless hunters at 9:00 at night. I give the driver credit for the restraint he showed while assessing our comically inept predicament. He did not, however, let restraint or sympathy cloud his business judgment. When you find two yahoos stranded in the middle of nowhere, miles from a phone, in the middle of the night, you can just about name your price. He did.

If you know of a place where the duck hunts start with a sliver of moon descending as a warm morn-

ing fog dissipates over a marsh, and a hazy, cool sun chases the last vestige of night away ... if you know of a place where the feeding chuckle of mallards can be heard close by while the whispering wings of a flock of bluebills buzzes your blind ... if your perfectly trained retriever sits stoically as you rise up to make a double on a pair of pintails that have been fooled by your expertly placed set of decoys, then upon your command leaps forth into the icy water and returns both ducks to hand ... if you know of a place where ducks fly in so often that you'll reach your bag limit by 7 a.m. and be eating a hot breakfast by 8 a.m. ... if you can guarantee all this, and you want me to come share in this rare and wonderful opportunity, call me. I'll give you the address to which you can send the video. ●

