It’s All My Husband’s Fault...

I HUNT DUCKS

by

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HOW IT ALL STARTED

IT'S ALL MY HUSBAND'S FAULT I hunt ducks. Once the reality sunk in that I really wouldn't see him all winter that first year we dated, I knew something had to change moving forward. I wasn’t foreign to hunting or being in the outdoors, but ducks were foreign territory. That next year he agreed to take me a handful of times. I complained. It was cold. I couldn’t tell ducks from birds. I couldn’t tell hens from drakes. It was a long road…but he was a great teacher.

I may have complained and it may have been foot-and-hand-numbingly-cold but one thing was for sure, I was overwhelmed at the jaw-dropping beauty. That first time I stood in the marsh of old rice fields and felt the rush of wings fly over head against a morning sunrise made me want to stay there all day. Add the extra bonus of getting to watch our Lab, Moultrie pick up ducks, and I didn’t want to miss a minute.

So, after a season of complaining but loving the experience, I finally gave in that waterfowl gear really might not be scam and actually worth the investment. I searched high and low to find some solid women's waders and a jacket that would truly fit me. My first hunt in proper gear was absolutely incredible. I know that sounds so silly but when you don’t know, you don’t know. That second full year of duck hunting, I went as much as I could and wanted to learn all I could—beginning with duck identification and sounds.

There’s a certain rush and excitement that comes with waking up earlier than everyone else, putting in the boat in sheer darkness, finding our place in public water, setting up and sitting back to enjoy some coffee and laughs while waiting on shooting time. The most magical symphony of sounds begins to play in such a fantastic order. The owls are still hooting and have often flown right overhead of us, the wood ducks will take their early flight before shooting time whistling by and depending on where we hunt, we’ve even watched doe walk just along the land parallel to our boat. The sun begins to rise and paint the sky ridiculous shades of all colors. And it’s just me and my little family devouring it all, together.

After that next season rolled around, I almost wore my husband out wanting to go every weekend and sometimes twice a day. His wheels started turning….

OUTERBANKS

ROBERT HAS HUNTED ARKANSAS and North Dakota and seen many more ducks than I could imagine and he really wanted me to experience something similar. As our second wedding anniversary was coming up, he pitched the idea to take me on my first out-of-state hunt. The hunter in me was pumped and said yes immediately. The wife in me then drew the line on spending half the trip hunting, the other half enjoying our anniversary.

We had grand notions of a beautiful trip along the Outerbanks Ferry system in winter and reaching our cottage in Nags Head but Hurricane Sandy had other plans washing out most of the southern OBX roads including the bridge just south of Nags Head. We felt lucky our little cottage was still in shape for our arrival!

Prior to our trip, we cleared our dogs with the guide we’d be hunting with. While our guide had two experienced Chessie's of his own, and was open to using our dog, you could tell he had doubts as I’m sure any experienced guide does when hunters want to use their own dogs. But Robert really wanted to see what Moultrie, our then three year old Lab, would be able to do in the Pamlico Sound. Meanwhile, Samson, our first Boykin, was 15 months at the time. Although I was wary to use them, I stood in the marsh of old rice fields and felt the rush of wings fly over head against a morning sunrise made me want to stay there all day. Add the extra bonus of getting to watch our Lab, Moultrie pick up ducks, and I didn’t want to miss a minute.

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We limited out both days and overall brought in 8 different species. Our evenings were spent cleaning divers to pack for the freezer. We finished the second day with Robert dropping a bull of a drake Surf Scoter as I shot a drake Common Scoter. We set these two aside for our guide completely mystified and wanting he tell him what he could do with the poped chain, but not without giving Moultrie a soft-whispered “atta boy” for taking care of matters. He hunted like a champ the rest of the day while Samson comfortably curled into my shed jacket liner in the bottom of the boat and kept watch of our collected ducks.

Sarah Neill, Samson, Robert & Moultrie ready comfortable with the sounds of guns, we also wanted to take him for the sheer exposure, length of hunt, etc.…. We met our guide along a dirt bank to venture out into the Pamlico Sound.

We helped set up the boat blind we’d be hunting from and Moultrie was led to the dog platform at the back of his boat. We can’t really say we were one-hundred percent comfortable with him being completely separated from us, tethered to the platform by a chain lead, and told he’d be sent by the guide, but we went along with the set up as it wasn’t our boat and there really was no other way for Moultrie to have visibility to mark dropped ducks.

When the divers started coming in, we never looked back. As the first ducks dropped, Moultrie didn’t need the guide to tell him anything and also figured he tell him what he could do with his chain. He immediately popped the chain and leapt into the Sound. Without ever having exposure to long-line decoy rigs, he swam a perfect line to our ducks and returned without a tangle leaving our guide completely mystified and shaking his head. We apologized for his popped chain, but not without giving Moultrie a soft-whispered “atta boy” for taking care of matters. He hunted like a champ the rest of the day while Samson comfortably curled into my shed jacket liner in the bottom of the boat and kept watch of our collected ducks.

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THIS PAST SEASON, MY HUSBAND and I were drawn for our first state draw hunt. We were drawn for Bear Island East on the last Saturday of the first split. While a decent cold front had recently moved in, we opted not to take dogs in lieu of the alligators that can share these impoundments.

We randomly drew for our blind and based on our location, we were the last drop off of the morning with maybe 15 minutes until shooting time. We hurriedly loaded the aluminum boat with decoys, our bags and guns, and were fortunate to not be in a deep impoundment, waist deep at its highest. We waded as quickly as we could with all our gear and were zinged by ducks overhead the whole way. It was an unreal feeling of knowing you needed to hurry and set up but feeling like you just might shoot your limit if you hurried down then and there.

Needless to say, the heart was racing at this point, the sun was cracking on the horizon and ducks were circling everywhere. I think out of all our hunts, this was the first time I was as exhilarated and jacked up watching the sky swirl in anticipation like our dogs. Once the initial nerves calmed and we jointly opted to bypass all the early flying teal, we had a moment to regroup and get into better spots in the field.

I've only hunted out of state once and it was for divers. There have been several hunts where we've ditched the boat and hunted in old rice fields, on the marsh shore, in flooded black water timber or on the shores of Lake Moultrie, but this girl hadn't had the opportunity tounker down in the smart weed and wigeon grass in the water and have decoying ducks coming right my face before. And the moment I sat back and let it all take place, I popped up and dropped my first Shoveler for the day in one shot. Robert, set back behind off my right side, was just as excited watching it all unfold.

The Shovelers kept pouring in until a mixture of Gadwall starting to show. A group started cupping up to drop in our spread and I took two shots on a bull that was on the edge of my range, and Robert backed me up with a third shot. He was still crippled at best when he hit the water and started toward the grass 30 yards opposite of our spread. Without even discussing incoming birds or Robert's staying to shoot, I threw my gun over my back and took off after him. And that was some work. Luckily it remained hip deep without any pockets to fall into and he gave me a run for my money trying to beat me to that grass edge to hide. I got across just in time to grab him as he was heading in and being the bull he was, was definitely injured but more on the lively side of crippled. Not a stranger to wringing a duck neck, I wrung. But he lived. I yelled out to Robert across the field, "He's not going down." I carried him back the whole long way I came and luckily my husband was able to step in where I fell short.

The entire experience made me so grateful for the times we do hunt with dogs and how they'd laugh if they could have seen me struggle. We ended the morning just shy of a 2-person limit and I can't wait until we get drawn again.

CARRYING ON...

IN BETWEEN THE MORE MEMORABLE occasions are the everyday hunts spent with close friends or family. All the sunrises and sunsets on different bodies of water, the boat breakfasts, the laughs, the kills, the misses, the slow days—they're all better than any winter day spent indoors. They're a step back in time along our gorgeously, uninhabited waterways. For me, they're also a step into the sacredness of this traditionally male-dominated sport.

I can say with confidence I've made my husband proud of what I've learned, how I hunt, and the goals I continue to set. More importantly, I've made myself proud in something I enjoy. I also can attest to the fellow duck hunters who don't know what to do with me or are basically afraid to hunt with women and all their unknowns. But the close friends we hunt with regularly and whose boats I've earned welcome seats in, I don't take it lightly. I don't expect to be driven on a smooth boat ride to some welcoming place and be told when to pull a trigger. I stand just as deep in the mud of an 8’ low tide to lift the boat out of the muck. I back trailers, unload boats, drive boats, spot lights and throw decoys. And I take just as much responsibility in the safety of whom I hunt with as I know they do with me. While there's always a factor of secrecy, honesty and integrity in where we'll be hunting, there's also a priority of safety and I will not be the hunting partner that can't get us back to the landing in the event of an emergency.

A lot of duck hunting can be learned but if I've really learned anything, it's that drive and responsibility are fine-tuned long before the hunt and they mean more to me than how many ducks you may kill next season. I know I'm not alone or some rare breed, because I've met other women who hunt with the same mind-frame. And I know there are more waiting to be given the shot—steel shot that is.