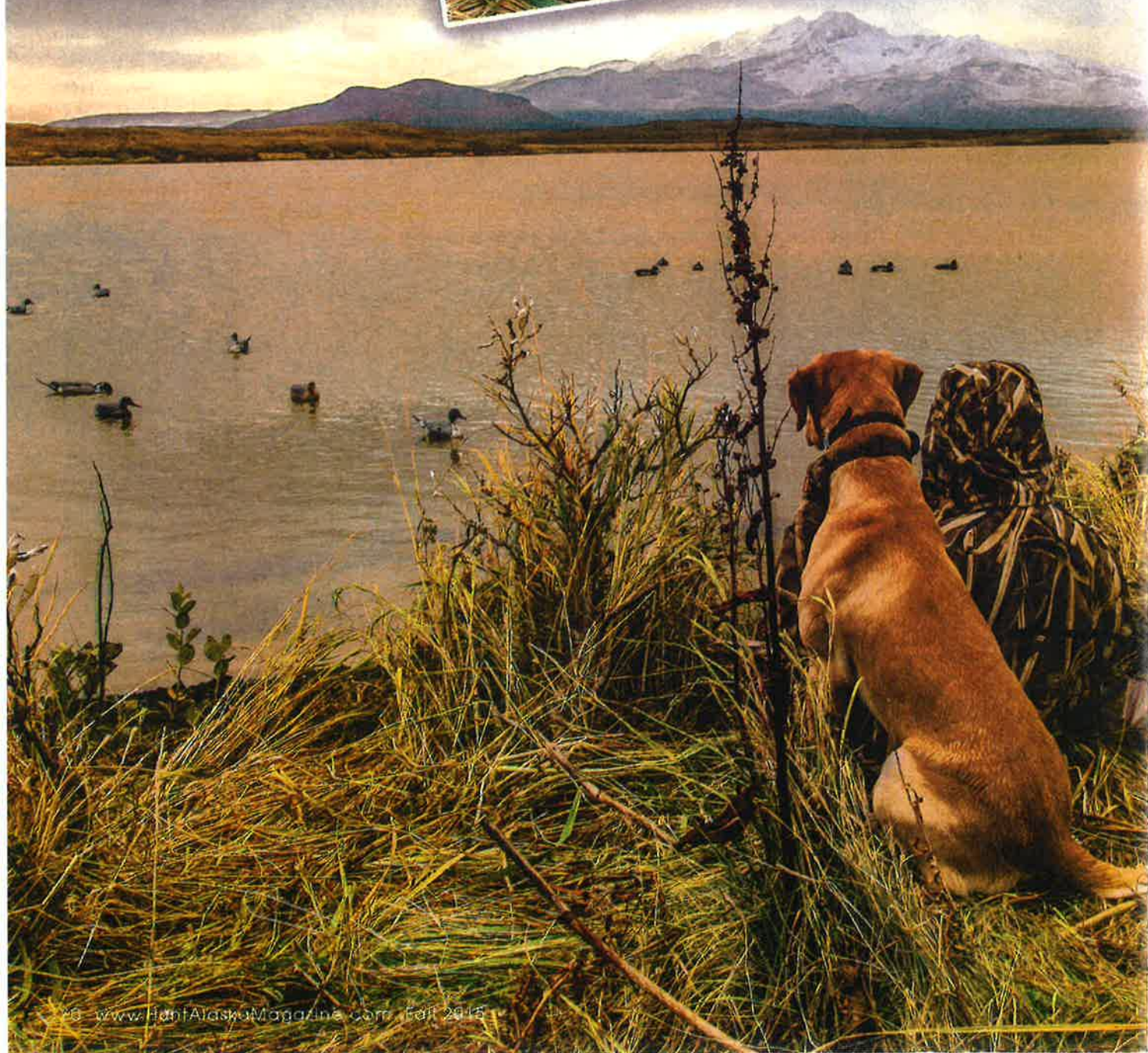


# Cold Bay



## *A Small Town with a Big Waterfowl Problem*

*Story and Photos  
by Jim McCann*





Set-up and awaiting the day's first flight alongside Annie, a magnificent yellow Lab. At right, the start of another great day; wading to deploy the decoys, and finally our group of happy hunters offer a typical day of shooting at Cold Bay.





Except for the small amount of private land in and around Cold Bay proper, the surrounding 315,000 acres makes up the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. In the middle of all this wilderness is 150,000 acre Izembek Lagoon, the place where dyed-in-the-poly-pro waterfowl hunters call heaven.

Fellow Fairbanks resident Ryan Schmidt traveled to Cold Bay last October after having spent another delightful September hunting upland birds in the Interior over his English Setter pointing dogs. No stranger to waterfowl hunting, Ryan admits he hadn't hunted ducks or geese for some time, preferring to instead follow those pointing dogs through aspen woods

or out on subalpine tundra, but when he heard of the bounty of Izembek Lagoon he didn't hesitate to make arrangements to fly into Cold Bay to hunt a different kind of feathers out on the saltwater.

Ryan met his guide, Jeff Wasley, at the tiny Cold Bay airport and immediately began his friendship with a fellow who has spent his whole life in the study and the pursuit of waterfowl. Jeff is consumed by everything to do with waterfowl. The Duck Commander has nothing on this fellow! He came to Cold Bay in 2002 to work for the government, studying, counting, mapping, banding and in the end learning the entire area so well he has become perhaps the most

knowledgeable expert on the entire refuge and each of its many wildlife inhabitants. Eventually Jeff left his government work and started his own business, Four Flyways Outfitters, and he's been guiding waterfowl hunters in pursuit of their dreams since.

On day one of his magical week of waterfowl hunting with Jeff and the group, Ryan awoke to the sound of sleet and a wind gusting to 40 mph, shaking the windows of his room, and he wondered if perhaps they might not go out hunting that day. But staying at home is not an option for Jeff Wasley, so after consuming hot coffee and a sumptuous breakfast prepared by Audrey Wasley, Jeff's lovely wife and partner, the intrepid crew piled into a Chevy Suburban. Along with Annie, Jeff's magnificent 10-year-old yellow Lab that has lived a life the envy of all other Lab's, they headed out into the wind for a day of hunting.

Arriving at their destination the fun was about to begin. Not the hunting, but the two-mile walk across the rolling tundra in that blasted wind...and rain...and hail. Following what most referred to as "brown bear highways," the group finally arrived at a point where waist-high grass covered the area and provided concealment to hunters wanting to hide from sharp-eyed geese and ducks, adding needed cover from the inclement weather as well. The tide was on the way up and soon floated the long line of black brant and "cackler" decoys. Soon the first flights of brant would appear out of nowhere and come jetting in toward the decoys. Brant are typically very accommodating to hunters and decoy well, and within short order Ryan and Wisconsin hunter Mark Vander Zanden each had one brant down and only one more to go to fill their two-bird daily limit.

Jeff's brother Rob, and Rob's wife Kristin, visiting from Wisconsin, had chosen the same week to visit and hunt. Rob, a forester, is nearly as fanatical about waterfowl hunting as his brother Jeff, and Kristin, a nurse practitioner, seems to enjoy the time out hunting with her husband and is a crack shot with a 12-gauge "duck gun." Over the ensuing hours, still in inclement conditions of high wind, rain and hail storms, and some flurries of snow, everyone shot limits of brant as well as several cackling geese and green-winged teal. The fabulous dinner that Audrey had waiting for the hunters that evening made memories of the day's conditions fade quickly, and sleep came easy for everyone that night.

The next morning found the crew of hunters walking across the tundra in the dark toward a freshwater lake where duck decoys were quickly spread out and hunters found hiding places in the tall grass near shore. Just after daylight a sow brown

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## If You Go

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Although the sun does shine in the Cold Bay area, don't

expect it often, or for long. The weather can be nasty, but waterfowl hunters expect this, and some even relish it. Only the best of clothing and equipment is recommended, and Jeff will gladly send you a list of preferred equipment prior to your departure from home. Don't skimp on proper foul-weather waterfowl hunting gear, especially later in the season. Lots of fleece, poly-pro and wool clothing, hats and neoprene gloves are items best not left at home.

Jeff begins his guiding season on September 1, and usually leaves Cold Bay during mid-December only to head for his sea duck guiding operation on St. Paul Island, and later off to his other guiding operation for snow geese in South Dakota. The guy lives and breathes waterfowl hunting. Collectors tend to come to Cold Bay later in the season when the ducks are fully feathered.

bear and her two cubs were spotted on the ledge above the hunters, and each enjoyed watching them scurry away in the opposite direction. The morning was spent shooting green-winged teal and bufflehead ducks, but was interrupted when two young brown bears—referred to as “Blondie” and “Brownie” for their unique coloration—came down the lake edge in search of any spawning salmon that might remain from the strong September run.

The bears' visit caused many tense moments for the duck hunters, such as when “Brownie” went around the lake edge of a point where Kristin was waiting in the grass for ducks to come by. Both Kristin and the bear were equally surprised during this close encounter, but all ended well for both. A short while later one of the bears moved in on Mark Vander Zanden and laid claim to four ducks he had lying in the grass behind him. And a red fox putting the slip on the decoys it thought were a easy meal was quite surprised when it looked up and noticed Jeff and his young yellow Lab, Dakota, only five yards away.

The next day Ryan took his young English Setter, Sitka, out to explore the tundra in search of willow ptarmigan. Sitka was on her game and found and pointed several groups of 10- to 20 birds, and Ryan was happy to send her on the retrieve for a number of them. Again, the hunter and his dog found themselves walking on well-worn brown bear trails and eventually came upon a lone, huge bear out hunting several hundred yards off. But the bears want less to do with us than we do with them and posed no threat to Ryan or his dog.

To add to the mixed bag already experienced by Jeff's guests, a boat trip was made out onto the lagoon to a spot where Jeff knew the hunters would get a crack at gorgeous, fast-flying harlequin sea ducks. Hunters lay out on the rocky beach not far from decoys. Ryan made a sort of pillow of rocks for his head to rest on; both Rob and Kristin elected to not try that. The shooting was spotty, but each hunter took at least one incredibly beautiful harlequin.



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The rest of the week offered more brant and duck hunting in different areas, as well as another trip out onto the tundra for Ryan and Sitka to pursue willow ptarmigan. Great success was enjoyed by all. And each evening Audrey had yet another wonderful meal ready and waiting for the returning hunters. When you book your hunt with Four Flyways Outfitters, make sure you ask, or rather, beg Audrey to make her mouth-watering spinach dip and grilled brant using her special recipe. The way she prepares Pacific black brant will rival the finest cut of beef you have ever eaten. Pacific brant are that good to eat, and this gal is a genius in the kitchen.

The last hunt of the week turned out to be perhaps the most exciting and adventurous. Launching his inflatable Achilles boat in wind and waves, Jeff disappeared around a point with a load of brant decoys and a layout boat strapped to the craft. Soon he returned and loaded up one hunter at a time, only returning once that hunter had gotten their two brant.

Ryan is not a little guy, and getting out of the inflatable boat pitching about in a semi-angry sea and into the kayak-like layout boat was no easy feat. Once inside the layout boat he watched as his guide waved goodbye and motored away, leaving him bobbing on the waves in the wind and rain, tethered to a long line of brant decoys and anchored in place...sort of. But there wasn't any time to be concerned about his current situation as the sky filled with the black forms of brant flying not in regular V-shaped skeins like other geese, but sort of helter-skelter, with no particular goose appearing to be in charge, typical of these black brant. The geese came from all directions, some too high for shooting, others flaring too far out from the decoys and just out of range. But then there were those accommodating brant that set their wings and came in close, too close, and soon a limit of two geese lay upon the ocean swells. Each hunter would later slap high-fives and laugh at the grand adventure of gunning brant from the layout boat out in the middle of Izembek Lagoon.

The week ended too quickly, but great friendships and lifelong memories were created in Cold Bay, a small town with a considerable waterfowl "problem."



*Jim McCann was hooked on bird hunting the day he shot his first ruffed grouse at the age of 12, not far from his home in upstate New York. As a young man he later found himself living in Fairbanks, the hub of Alaska's bird hunting, where he still resides and spends as much of the season as possible afield with his four Brittany pointing dogs.*

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