

HOT TIMES *in*

BRANT, DUCKS & MORE IN THE ALASKA WILDS

With no place to hide on a bare, sandy beach and a skein of sea ducks heading my way, I simply sat down as low as possible and tried to remain motionless. I clutched my 20-gauge side-by-side in hands painfully numb from the frigid temperature and watched as the ducks bore down with a stiff arctic wind at their backs. When they were within range, I raised and fired—and though my first shot was behind, my hurried second shot was true.

The common eider dropped into the icy Arctic Ocean near shore, and I easily reached out and picked up the bird. I was hunting a narrow spit of sand just north of the Inupiat Eskimo community of Barrow, Alaska. It was 1973, and that was the last duck I shot until arriving in Cold Bay last October for a week-long goose and duck hunt.

A tiny community of 70 hearty souls, Cold Bay is at the furthestmost tip of the Alaska Peninsula and is surrounded by the 350,000-acre Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. Near the middle of that sprawling tundra and pothole-lake wilderness is the 150,000-acre Izembek Lagoon, a brackish body of water adjacent to the Bering Sea where one of the world's largest known stands of eelgrass is found. Pacific black brant are the top waterfowl attraction on the lagoon, and 98 percent of the world's population of the birds comes here each fall after leaving breeding grounds in Alaska's high arctic and Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. As table fare, these smallish geese rival the most expensive cuts of beef you can buy.

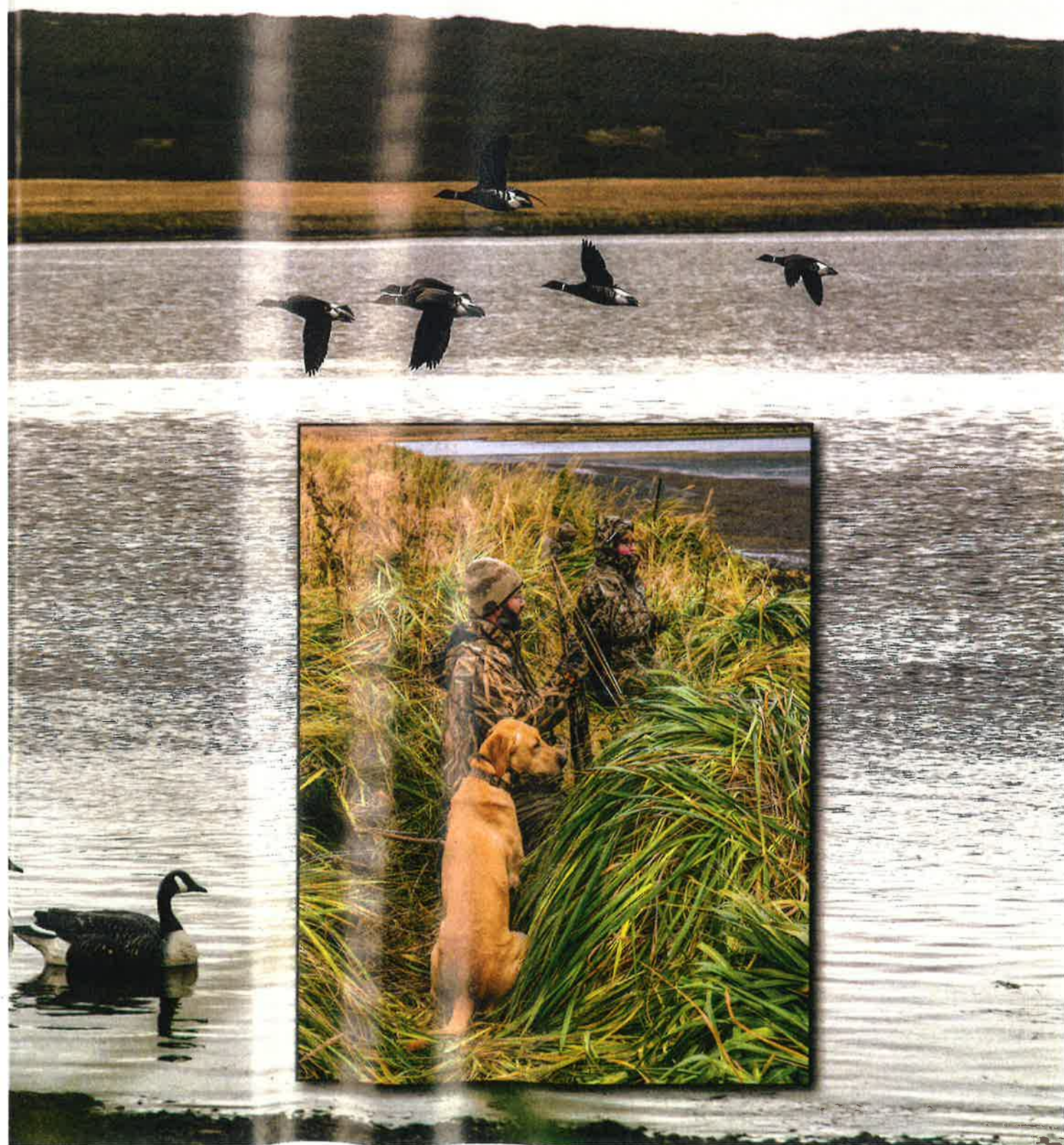
Eelgrass is important to Pacific black brant because of the birds' reliance on it to put on weight for their late-October migration to Baja, Mexico. Amazingly, these brant make the trek from the Izembek Lagoon to Mexico in one 50- to 60-hour flight, and they use up all of the reserves of fat and energy they have gained to that point. Suffice to say that brant hunting on the lagoon is world class—and the hunting for cackling geese and sea ducks is nearly as good.

Arriving at the tiny airport in Cold Bay in late afternoon, hunting partner Ryan Schmidt and I found our guide, Jeff Wasley of Four Flyways Outfitters, waiting for us. Jeff had us back to his home, where we got to know each other and enjoy



COLD BAY

JIM McCANN





a great meal cooked by his wife, Audrey. After dinner we talked about gear and dogs and what we might expect the next morning. Ryan and I were tired after the long trip from our homes in Fairbanks, so we turned in early.

In the middle of the night I awoke to the sound of sleet and 40-mph winds rattling the window and figured Jeff would call off the morning hunt. Not a chance! The wake-up call came early, and we were heading out.

Jeff is tough and will hunt waterfowl in any kind of weather. He has lived in Cold Bay since 2002, and after several years working for the federal government studying waterfowl on the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, he left and started his outfitting business.

That morning we were joined by Jeff's brother, Rob, and Rob's wife, Kristin, who were up from Wisconsin. Rob is nearly as fanatical about waterfowling as Jeff, and Kristin seemed to thoroughly enjoy hunting with her husband. We drove to the end of a dirt road along the tundra, and then reluctantly left the warmth of the truck and stepped out into the wind and rain.

A 1½-mile trek in waders along well-worn bear trails brought us to our destination along the lagoon, where Jeff put out a long line of plastic brant decoys on the mud and shallow water. We spread out and hunkered down in the waist-high grass to get out of the wind and wait for the tide to come up and float the decoys.

Along for the retrieving was 10-year-old Annie, a yellow Lab with the type of experience that other retrievers only dream about. She was a sweet dog that remained focused on the skies but was perfectly willing to snuggle during quiet periods.

Even before the tide was high and the decoys properly afloat, flocks of brant and Taverner's cackling geese began winging by to check out our spread. When a group of cacklers flared over the decoys, Rob's shotgun spoke and a goose splashed into the ice-cold water.

The shooting picked up steadily, and the pile of brant, cackling geese and green-winged teal grew quickly, making up for the bad weather. The most important part of the day's take was the two-bird limits of Pacific black brant for each hunter.

In the many hours we persisted the wind hardly let up, and the rain, hail, occasional snow and even sunshine made for an interesting mix of weather. Although chilled to the bone, we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves until it was time to pack up and return to the truck. Admittedly, the pack out was not a lot of fun, but at least we warmed up.

Since the Izembek National Refuge is also home to large numbers of willow ptarmigan and Ryan had brought his English setter Sitka, Ryan and I did some upland hunting in between waterfowl trips. Again we found ourselves following well-worn trails made by brown bears, and eventually we came upon one huge bear that was out hunting as well. (Thankfully, the bear wanted less to do with us than we did with him.) Sitka found several coveys and pairs of birds each time we went out, and Ryan and I were able to take all of the ptarmigan we desired—which was less than the 20 birds each of us was allowed.

Every day we saw bears, bald eagles, red foxes and thousands of ducks and geese. In addition to the brant





Bird hunting around Cold Bay can mean fast action for waterfowl—such as harlequin ducks (right) and Pacific black brant (below)—as well as ptarmigan (above).



and cacklers, we saw pintails, teal, mallards, bluebills, wigeon, mergansers, buffleheads, harlequins, black- and white-winged scoters, emperor geese and common eiders. While boating on the lagoon, we constantly came upon families of sea otters and occasionally saw harbor seals.

One morning we took one of Jeff's sturdy aluminum boats and headed across Cold Bay. Jeff always seemed to know exactly where and when to set the decoys, and his experience paid big dividends. Enjoying some improved weather, with temperatures in the high 40s, we had a great day—each of us easily taking a limit of brant as well as several cacklers and a few green-winged teal. That evening Audrey prepared grilled brant for dinner, and I must say that Pacific black brant that have been dining on eelgrass are some of the finest gamebirds I have eaten.

The next morning we headed out for harlequin ducks. Arriving at the chosen spot, Jeff set a line of 10 hand-made decoys in the knee-deep water close to shore, and

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then he had each hunter lie on his (or her) back on the rocky beach. It wasn't the most comfortable place to lie, especially with a cold rain falling, but there was enough action to take our minds off of the rocks. Tough guy Ryan made a sort of pillow out of stones so that he could keep his head elevated slightly. The action was slow, with mostly single drakes and the occasional pair flying into the decoys. After several hours each hunter had taken at least one harlequin, and with no one desiring to take a limit of eight, we loaded the boat and headed for town.

The next day we headed out before daybreak to hunt mallards, teal and buffleheads along the edge of one of the refuge's many freshwater lakes. Jeff set out a few small groups of standard mallard and teal decoys, and we hunted down in the grass and waited for the sun to come up. Of course, sunrise in Alaska at that time of year was just before 9 AM.

That morning we had close encounters with a few brown bears and then a red fox that tried putting the sneak on our decoys. At five yards the fox was, to say the least, startled to turn and look into the eyes of Jeff and his leggy 18-month-old yellow Lab Dakota. The fox got out of there pronto, with Dakota hot on its heels.

We shot one drake mallard and quite a few greenwings and buffleheads before two brown bears showed up looking for the last of the spawning salmon that were in the lake. After one nearly bumped into Kristin, we decided to call it quits.

Our last day of waterfowling was exciting, to say the least. I am a lifelong upland hunter and not at all an ocean-going sort, but I was ready to learn from my guide and try whatever hunting methods he suggested. Still, when we arrived at the lagoon at high tide and I spied whitecaps on the water, the inflatable Achilles boat that Jeff had launched appeared a bit small.

Jeff hollered to me over the wind to jump in, and soon we were bouncing across the waves getting doused by sea spray. Eventually Jeff pulled up to a tiny layout boat tethered to a line of brant decoys in the middle of the lagoon. Transferring from the inflatable to the pitching boat was a challenging leap of faith, especially considering that I barely fit in the little craft. Nevertheless, I squashed

down as low as I could and watched Jeff motor out of sight.

Alone on the ocean, bobbing in the waves and getting wet from the salt spray and the rain that had begun, I questioned my sanity. But I wasn't totally alone, because in every direction I could see groups of brant: pairs, six or seven birds together, and some flocks of 20 or more. And then there was the harbor seal that showed up to gawk at me. It was 30 yards away at first, but in short order it popped up at 10. Its big dark eyes stared into mine, and for a moment I worried that the friendly seal might just want to come aboard my tiny craft. I discouraged it by hollering a few choice words and returned my attention to the brant.

I wanted out of that layout boat as quickly as possible and was happy when I spied eight brant that were going to fly directly overhead. Clearly the birds weren't going to

set into the decoys, but they would pass within range. I swung my 12-gauge over/under a bit farther out front and, with two shots, had two dead brant bobbing in the swells. Jeff eventually showed up and retrieved the geese and me, and we headed for shore.

Each hunter in our group had a chance in the layout boat, and each had great shooting. When Rob returned with his two brant, he proudly displayed a

banded bird. It turned out that the brant had been banded seven years earlier. On a previous hunt Kristin had taken a brant that had been banded on Izembek Lagoon 21 years before!

Ryan and I had booked this hunt to learn about waterfowling and to see new country. We accomplished that and a lot more. We already are making plans for a return trip to Cold Bay, where, even though the weather may be cold, the waterfowling is definitely hot.



Inclement weather was tempered by generous bags and exciting encounters with local fauna—like brown bears.

Author's Note: For more information about duck hunting in Alaska, contact Jeff Wasley, Four Flyways Outfitters, 608-385-4580; www.fourflywaysoutfitters.com.

Jim McCann has lived in Alaska for 45 years, having moved there from upstate New York. After 28 years of service, he retired from the Alaska State Troopers as the state's senior criminal investigator. He now spends his days hunting over his Brittanys, fly-fishing, writing and photographing, and he is the author of the book Upland Hunting in Alaska.