

Flight

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**Keen predator hunter
The daring who do**

Judgment at Cold Bay

Izembek Lagoon is 330,000 acres of National wildlife refuge halfway down the Aleutian Chain in Alaska. It is a staging ground for millions of birds on their migration from the Arctic to points south. Home to one of the largest natural eel grass areas in the world it is also home to almost the entire population of Pacific Brant geese (last count 150,000) many of which migrate to Mexico and back each year, but a significant number remain all year round. It is perhaps the best place in the world to see Pacific Brant, Seller's eider, Empire geese and cackling geese the miniature version of the Canadian goose we are so familiar with here.

Just going there has been on my bucket list for years, when the opportunity arose to go to hunt ducks and geese and do a little salmon fishing on the side I asked DU's favorite legal professional if he would care to join me. Strangely he accepted at once.

We flew from Anchorage in a twin engine Saab, to Cold Bay. Cold Bay has an all-weather runway long enough to take the largest Jumbo jet and the US Air Force's largest planes. It is also home to a listening site run by the US Government, you can't miss it as it sits on top of the largest hill just out of town pointing, one assumes towards Russia which is only a comparatively short distance away. Cold Bay has a permanent population of about 56 people which doubles during the hunting season and interestingly, a lot of the locals like to take their winter vacation in New Zealand and Australia.

We were met at the airport by Jeff, owner and head guide and his crew Mark and Scott (aka Scooter) from Four Flyways Outfitters. All the locals were in T-shirts; personally I found it bloody cold. Taken back to the lodge and shown our accommodation twin share rooms with a lounge dining area and two bathrooms. We were the first guests for the season and there were in all four of us, two others Rob and Bob a father and son duo, for the first week. Jeff suggested we get in a hunt before dinner, which is just what we did, picking up a boat



Happy hunters: Graham Gurr (left) and "the Judge" David Smith.

and decoys, we boated to a point a few miles from town and arrived to find Mark, Scott and Rob had gone by car, walked in a couple of miles across untracked land and had the decoys already for us when we arrived.

Laying out on the beach and covering ourselves with dead eelgrass we lay back and waited for the Brant to arrive. All the decoys both the silhouette and floating full body decoys were Brant so I assumed that's what we were here for. Brant was one of those species I have always wanted to hunt, it turns out at the beginning of the season they are as hard as early season parries. Some reassuring calling by the guides and they just came straight into the decoys. We had a couple of hours of regular flights and all of us ended up with at least two and some three (a limit) Bob stole the show shooting a double-banded bird.

Back to the lodge for dinner. Audrey, Jeff's wife, did the cooking and mighty fine it was too, limited by the lack of fresh vegetables she managed to turn out superb meals every evening along with desserts. All goods come into Cold Bay by air or barge, the barge comes

every two and a half weeks and the fresh veg lasts about a day. Potatoes US\$0.40 each! Milk US\$10 a carton. Wine and beer about double the price you would pay in Anchorage. The local pub was open three nights a week, and was the social hub of the town, the Judge and I went twice and I think if we had gone to all three open evenings would have met everybody that lives there - as it was we seemed to meet most of the local inhabitants. Rose the lady behind the bar made sure of that.

A couple of days later we were heading out to a more distant location, everything revolved around the tides and the weather forecast. We set off in two boats a Zodiac and an aluminium hulled whaler, one of the things I discovered is that the majority of the Izembek Lagoon is only a few feet deep at low tide most of the eelgrass beds are out of the water and navigation is done by using the shifting channels, which change from year to year. So a 30-minute ride in a straight line may take a couple of hours using the channels at low tide. Jeff is the only guide service using boats on the lagoon so in the whole week we only saw one other boat.

Our destination turned out to be towards the Pribilof Islands, which are out on the Bearing Sea. A wide river came into the lagoon and as soon as we were in sight of it we started to see bears, 10 before we even landed. One mother and three almost full grown cubs was going to defend her patch of estuary where the salmon were running against all intruders, and came across the estuary towards us. Jeff shouted at her "Hey Bear" Go away Bear" and similar type comments which did the trick, first we saw the cubs rush off into the scrub and finally when they were out of sight the sow turned and ambled after them.

We dropped the decoys on the tide edge and backed into the long grass along the shoreline. The tide was coming in and had the decoys floating within a short while.

The first to decoy were the Brant, Jeff called them as they flew past and most groups would



The adventure continues

turn into the decoys and give us a chance at a shot. Green wing teal were also trading up and down the shoreline, problem was they flew so fast the first thing you knew about them was watching them depart, sometimes though they would turn and fly right back over the decoys.

As the tide came in it was moving a lot of other birds, the honkers (Canada geese) need fresh water to drink unlike Brant who can process salt water, so as the tide pushed them off the eelgrass beds they would fly inland to feed and drink. Mostly they flew behind us, which required a swift about face to get a shot. I had placed myself with a large rock to act as cover and a backrest so I would be more comfortable, turning around became somewhat of a chore. In the end I moved a couple of yards so I could shoot behind which was just as well as three honkers passed right behind just after I had moved. Bob got one then the Judge got one and I managed to scratch down the last one as they sped by.

They turned out to be cacklers, the smallest of the Canada goose family, there are two types of cackler one slightly smaller than the other with a shorter bill. I took a picture with a green wing teal to show just how small they were. I would have liked to have it mounted but Jeff said we would probably get a better one for mounting by the end of the week. Turned out to be the only one I got all week.

We returned to the same spot a couple of days later and after shooting our limits of Brant hiked up onto the tundra where we set up a couple of hundred windsock decoys and lay in the tundra waiting for the geese to come to us. It almost worked, there were plenty of geese flying but in the end we only got one that Bob shot between us.

Another location we hunted was right out towards the Bearing Sea a spit of land with a short stream, again the salmon were running past in their hundreds possibly thousands



Brant Geese: At rest on quiet sea.

mostly chum (dog) salmon. The first day we were attacked by hordes of pintails and mallards, so many that we all ran out of ammo, we almost all limited out that day I think we were two ducks short. Limit is eight ducks each and there were five of us shooting. Plus three Brant geese. We went back two days later with enough ammunition to start a small war, but the sun shone and while the Brant flew the ducks had mostly gone elsewhere.

We ate the Brant as we got them, they are easily the best eating goose I've ever tasted, Jeff did a number on the grill and made jerky with some, and we took the rest back to Anchorage and gave them to a friend who lives there, he agrees they taste fine and was more than happy to take ours.

The other reason we were in Cold Bay was the salmon fishing, the weekend we arrived it was the local salmon fishing derby, so all the

locals were out fishing, it is a huge community fundraiser, and a lot of people come in just for that weekend. Cold Bay also has one of the more famous (notorious) DU Fundraisers in Alaska, people fly in for that one just for the dinner and associated activities.

We had over the week four sessions salmon fishing, the first we went to a small stream on the edge of town you could jump across most of it and not get wet. Some of the salmon in it though would have difficulty turning around, they were as long as parts of the stream were wide. Under overcast skies and intermittent rain we used spinning rods to catch some salmon. The judge and I kept one each and we ended up eating one of the fillets for dinner a couple of nights later.

I mentioned to Jeff one evening that the weather was looking good, he said to give it five minutes and it would have changed. We are used to four seasons in one day here in New Zealand. Cold Bay can have four in one hour!

Our other salmon fishing was done on Russell Creek; the locals have taken the road right to the best pool on the river so it is easy access for them. The Judge and I fly fished, where as most of the locals used spinners.

To say the fishing was good would be an understatement, it was superb, in three sessions totalling only eight hours of fishing I landed 21 salmon, most were silver salmon (best eating) but also pinks (aka Humpies) and chum (aka dog). Both the Judge and I lost a whole lot more.

In fact our last session was the morning of our departure and we managed to get two hours in before we had to go back and check in at the airport for our flight back to Anchorage.

The Judge's judgment on the trip was, "Bloody marvellous, where shall we go next?" Personally I'd go back tomorrow anyone want to join me?

