

▲ ROYAL GOOSE ADVENTURE: ALASKA AFFORDS A SHOT AT AN EMPEROR

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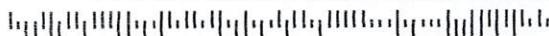
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A photograph of several Emperor geese decoys on a dark, sandy beach. The decoys are arranged in a line, facing right. They have white heads and necks, and bodies with intricate black and white patterns. Their legs are orange. In the background, the ocean waves are visible under a cloudy sky. The title 'THE EMPEROR'S RETURN' is overlaid on the image. 'THE' is in white, 'EMPEROR'S' is in white, and 'RETURN' is in a bold, gold-colored font.

THE EMPEROR'S RETURN

After three decades of closed seasons, a father and daughter draw rare tags

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DR. CHRIS NICOLAI

Emperor geese are birds few people hear about, and even fewer ever get to see. Yet they are the current waterfowl conservation success story, albeit on a rather quiet scale. Conservation-minded folks often refer to the 1918 to 1942 closure of wood ducks as a primary example of harvest regulations saving a species.

However, little fanfare has been placed on a different, rare example of a long closure. I would have expected more celebration of the recent opening of the emperor goose season after a 32-year hiatus, which started in 1986 when I was 13 years old. Events like this simply don't happen often in a hunter's lifetime.



A Special Place

The Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in western Alaska is arguably the most important breeding waterfowl real estate in the United States, and as a waterfowl biologist, it's long been a special place to me. Black brant, greater white-fronted geese, true cackling geese (which I refer to as "minimas") and emperor geese all breed there, and experienced severe population reductions through the mid-1980s. This resulted in harvest restrictions for all four species, including a closed season for emperors.

I was lucky enough to obtain a four-month volunteer position on the YKD to work on spectacled eiders in 1997, where I was exposed to the increasing populations of minimas and whitefronts. I ended up working on the YKD for the next 15 years on a number of projects, including finishing up a master's degree and Ph.D. on nesting brant.

Emperor geese nest in the same areas as the other goose species, so they were seen constantly. We counted their nests and eggs, and captured many emperors as part of banding operations for minimas and brant. Occasionally, I was part of projects which nest trapped, banded and collected blood samples from emperors. But people could only dream of hunting them.

Life-Changing Lotto

That changed in 2017, when fall harvest by Alaska residents was opened with the



Grace Nicolai made her own emperor goose decoy for the special hunt.



release of unlimited tags and a quota of 1,000 birds. It was repeated for the 2018 season, and news spread quickly that an additional 25 tags would be offered to non-Alaska residents.

My daughter, Grace, who was 11 years old at the time, had been on three waterfowl hunting trips with me to Cold Bay, Alaska, starting at age 5. Therefore she already had the required license when the application period for non-resident tags opened, so I submitted applications for both of us in December. In early February 2018, we found out that we were two of the 268 applicants who'd applied for the 25 non-resident tags — and incredibly, we'd both drawn. Wow!

Adventure Prepping

Grace is the oldest of my two daughters. She banded ducks with me when she was 6 months old, and a few weeks later, joined me for a simple wood duck pass-shoot. She shot her first cottontail when she was

6, and her first flying duck at 7. She has always been small for her age, and even to this point, a .410 is the only shotgun she can hold and swing without strain.

HABITAT

Delta Waterfowl works with provincial partners in Canada to shape agricultural policy and deliver incentive-based programs that conserve critical breeding duck habitat.

Luckily for us, we have a retired dentist friend, Ken Taber from Stillwater, Nevada, who has had a long hobby with reloading .410 loads for kids to begin their target shooting skills. Furthermore, he also has been exploring alternative options with No. 8 steel pellets, No. 9 Hevi-Shot and No. 10 tungsten super shot. With these loads, Grace has shot a lot of ducks, geese, turkeys and even a tundra swan during the

past six seasons. She started with a single shot, and has moved up to a side-by-side, both of which had their stocks shortened.

However, we needed decoys! I really like hand-carved decoys and I've been carving them since I was 12 years old. What fun is it to simply drop some cash and have boxes delivered to your front steps? And, by the way, there are no commercial emperor decoys available.

I've encountered emperors while hunting brant at Cold Bay, and surmised that they could be drawn in with a good number of silhouettes and some floater decoys. Given that, Grace and I started drawing patterns on sugar pine we milled from a tree in the nearby Sierra Nevada mountains. Grace got working on a floater decoy, while I worked on eight more. We have a carving friend nearby, Michael Nesbit from Quincy, California, who invited Grace to work in his shop, as he had some kid-friendly tools. We took all nine of the completed floating decoys to the Pacific Flyway Decoy Show in Sacramento in July 2018 — it was fun to inundate a decoy show with nine emperor geese!

Given we do an annual family hunting trip to Saskatchewan in which both my daughters miss two weeks of school, we needed to settle on a date that would satisfy



HISTORY

Delta Waterfowl founder James Ford Bell bought property in 1925 at Manitoba's famed Delta Marsh, where he then created the Delta Waterfowl Research Station.

Grace's 6th-grade teachers, but also reduce the potential for shooting pin-feathered emperors (not ideal for taxidermy). We settled on Thanksgiving break.

I then contacted my long-time friend Jeff Wasley, owner of Four Flyways Outfitters in Cold Bay, who I knew from our old YKD biologist days. Wasley and I have additionally worked together on raising money for some of my biology projects, black brant fundraisers and collecting data from shot brant. The unique opportunity to pursue a species that hadn't been hunted in more than three decades was coming together.



Grace Nicolai hunts with a .410 that's specially fitted to her small frame.

Conservation Milestone

Opening the emperor season is a conservation success similar to the 5-year closure on the Atlantic population of Canada geese and the 15-year closure on canvasbacks back when I was a kid. However, the gradual population increase of emperors (2 to 3 percent annual growth over the past 20 years) is not easy to explain. Mainly, hunting was closed for sport and subsistence harvests. Yet brant have continued to plummet on the YKD because of nest predation by arctic foxes and changes in the food used by goslings.

Minimas have attained population goals and whitefronts have greatly exceeded them. So perhaps predators have focused less on emperors as the minimas and whitefronts increased. Perhaps a warming climate is helping emperors, similar to benefits experienced by most other high-latitude geese around the world. No one really knows why emperors have steadily increased in the past two decades.

Regardless, the population increase was measured by a number of surveys conducted by the Alaska region of the USFWS Division of Migratory Bird Management. As a biologist, I was interested in Grace learning about those surveys. On our way to Cold Bay, we spent a morning meeting with Heather Wilson, the USFWS pilot who conducts the emperor surveys, and her supervisor, Julian Fisher. Wilson was very interested

in teaching Grace about surveys, and let Grace wear her flight helmet and vest. While visiting the office, Grace also had the opportunity to meet Ronnie Sanchez, the assistant regional director for Alaska National Wildlife Refuges. They inspected Grace's emperor goose decoy and wished her luck.

Graceful Shooting

After finally arriving at the lodge, we spent the first afternoon putting two wooden screws into each of our 30 silhouette decoys. They were not able to be shipped fully assembled.

The next morning, we loaded up our silhouettes and 9 floaters and headed off to a spot where we had seen emperors in past years. A flock quickly came in, and Grace missed with both barrels of her .410 side-by-side.

Within 30 minutes, a flock of four came in. Grace made a great shot on a nice male that fell right where the gravelly shore hit the ocean. Grace called her Mom and Grandma immediately to let them know she got one!

I wanted Grace to shoot her emperor goose first for two reasons. The first was to allow her to claim she killed a species before her Dad. Second, I assumed it would be harder for her to get a bird than for me, but now I had hopes we could get a photo together with freshly killed emperors. Little did I know it was going to be harder for me to get my bird.

Dad's Turn

The next day we set up in the same spot, but hardly any birds came by. It was an easy spot to drive to, so I suspect the locals had enjoyed it multiple times and thus the geese were a bit shy. We spent some time looking at other locations, and came up with a plan for the next day at an area where we would carry our decoys for about a mile.

We found a great traditional tidal spit covered in gravel and sand, the typical set up for brant. Grace got busy setting up the silhouettes, and I set the floater decoys. The tide was low and just switching. At the base of the spit was thick beach grass, which would make the perfect hide.

Once ready, we didn't wait long for the first emperors to make their way to us. What really caught me off guard on the trip was how far along the juveniles were into their molts. Even the juveniles had white heads — usually they are still quite gray. We quickly noticed the only way to really guarantee an adult on the wing was to look hard for the bright pink on the lower mandible (jaw). We allowed many flocks to land and pass by. Many times, we could see an adult, but the flock was too packed together, and I passed them in fear of hitting multiple birds.

Finally, a pair came in and I got ready. Grace is a really good emperor caller using a white-fronted goose call, and she let every flock know the decoys were there. As



Grace Nicolai helped and watched master taxidermist Shane Smith mount the pair of emperor geese.



Grace and Chris Nicolai were exceptionally lucky to draw non-resident tags to hunt emperor geese in Alaska.

they were gliding into the decoys, I could actually see wing spurs on the largest bird, confirming an older gander. I pulled up, shot and we were wrapped up with both our emperors.

Grace concluded the trip with some bonus willow ptarmigan hunts, and even brought home two harlequins. The successful trip went as smoothly as possible, and we'd done it with class thanks to the 100 hours or more spent making our decoys.

Lasting Memories

Once home, we printed out a large 12-by-16-inch photo of our hunt to hang on the wall, surrounded by a collection of our decoys.

But, we still had to get the birds on the wall. Back when the drawing results were announced, a very well-respected taxidermist, Shane Smith from Bridgeport, Alabama, reached out to Grace and me about an

opportunity to work on our birds together.

So in June, we spent three days with Shane, his staff, and his family and friends, and we completed both mounts. Grace helped with washing and fleshing skins and got to select the pose for her bird while watching the process. It was a lot of fun to work on mounts during the day, catch catfish in the evenings, meet new people and experience a part of the country we had never been before.

Looking back, we were so lucky to participate in the first emperor hunt in 32 years. I'm relieved we shot our birds, and thrilled with how we'd achieved it: over our own decoys, with reloaded shells and thanks to Grace's excellent calling skills, all while staying with a good friend. We will cherish the memories displayed on our wall at home. ▲

Dr. Chris Nicolai is a waterfowl biologist and avid hunter based in Reno, Nevada.