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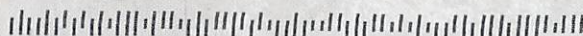
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Technical Talk

Izembek Waterfowl Extravaganza

Story and photo by Scott Haugen

When the words Alaska and hunting are mentioned, minds typically envision big game. But Alaska is home to some of the world's best waterfowl hunting, and when it comes to Alaskans hunting ducks and geese, it's one of the most under-utilized opportunities and resources. If you want to get into hunting, gearing up and heading out for waterfowl is one of the best ways.

True, reaching areas where prime duck and goose hunting exist isn't always easy, or cheap, but neither is accessing most of Alaska's big-game haunts. Bottom line, it just comes down to whether or not you want to bird hunt, and knowing what's out there might just convince you it's time to pick up the shotgun and hit the marsh.

I've been fortunate to waterfowl hunt much of Alaska, from Barrow to the Panhandle, and in a few places in between. While many destinations are species-specific hunts, there's one place that has it all.

Last September my father, Jerry Haugen, and I traveled to Cold Bay to hunt with good friend and outfitter, Jeff Wasley. I've been fortunate to hunt with many avid waterfowlers over the years and Wasley is among the best of the best. A former waterfowl biologist, Wasley's passion for duck hunting is contagious. His knowledge of the birds he hunts, and the land where he makes his living, is unmatched. Even throughout the Lower 48, Wasley is regarded as one of the best waterfowl outfitters in the country, and tops when it comes to Alaska. What's more, he's one of the best, safest boat captains I've been with, and the only licensed outfitter who can take clients hunting on Izembek Lagoon via boat. This opens up a great deal of remote access where you never see another hunter.

I've hunted with Wasley before, both in Cold Bay in November, and in January on Saint Paul Island. Each time Wasley shared stories of the early-season duck and goose hunting on Izembek Lagoon, it made me want to go. Then one of his clients shared a video with me, one they'd taken on a prior early-season, fall hunt with Wasley. That's when I decided to go.

The day Dad and I arrived we'd planned on taking it easy. But when Wasley picked us up at the Cold Bay airport, he informed us the brant decoys and two-man layout boat were loaded and ready to go. "We have a perfect tide this afternoon, and I want to get you guys into this one place," Wasley shared.

It was the second week of September, and Wasley kicked off the season with a bang, getting all his hunters their possession limits of ducks and geese during the first week of the season. "The number of brant in the lagoon right now is incredible, about the most I've seen this early in the season, and more keep coming every day."

I love hunting brant, as they decoy unlike any goose I've seen. They're also my favorite eating of all waterfowl.

Soon, we had three strings of brant decoys out, and Dad and I were lying side-by-side in the roomy layout boat. Once the tide shifted, wave after wave of brant started moving. The horizon was black with flocks of geese, and their sound was deafening as they approached. Shooting our three-bird-each limit happened quickly; too quickly. Wasley joined us and got in some shooting himself, a rarity for a guide.

Before we knew it, we were back at camp,

feasting on fresh, grilled brant for dinner. "This is incredible, the best eating birds I've ever had," smiled my dad, a waterfowl hunter of over 65 years. This was his first brant hunt in Alaska, though he'd hunted them in California and Oregon.

The following morning the tide was right to hit the shoreline. Hopping into Wasley's boat, we headed across the lagoon, coming to a secluded creek mouth about seven miles from where we'd launched. Here we set out duck, brant, and Canada-goose decoys. A biologist joined us that day and in only a few hours we all had our limits. A four-person limit of eight ducks, six Canada geese and three brant—that's a lot of action, and some great eating meat. Early season waterfowl in this part of Alaska are delicious, about as good as it gets.

The following morning, we had a change of pace and headed out for some silver salmon fishing in tiny, remote streams. Catching a five-fish coho limit was easy, and fun. Later that day we hiked a small, crystal-clear stream and caught and released numerous Dolly Varden on soft beads.

We also saw our share of brown bears on this trip, 11 in all. Another morning found us heading to a different place in the lagoon in search of ducks and geese. As we motored across the semi-foggy bay, Wasley smirked. "Oh, man, do you smell that?" The stronger the smell grew, the more curious my mind became as to what it was. I figured it was a dead whale. "Walrus, lots of walrus," Wasley noted. Soon we were silently drifting by more than 100 walruses that had hauled out onto a sandy island. Of all my years of living in and traveling throughout Alaska, this was the first time I'd laid eyes on a pod of walruses. The big-toothed pinnipeds were mesmerizing to watch, a moment I didn't want to end.

That morning culminated with more limits of ducks, geese, and brant, all of which aggressively dumped into the decoys. It was the best waterfowl hunting Dad and I had ever experienced, and perhaps the most "Alaskan" adventure we could ask for.

Fishing, hunting, wildlife viewing, and searching for glass floats on the beach, made this a trip Dad and I will never forget. Alaska offers the earliest general waterfowl season in the country, opening September first. If you want to experience the action, it's waiting for you, all you have to do is go.



For signed copies of Scott Haugen's best selling book, *Hunting The Alaskan High Arctic*, send a check for \$38.00 (FREE S&H), to Haugen Enterprises, P.O. Box 275, Walterville, OR 97489, or order online at scotthaugen.com.



Scott Haugen and Jeff Wasley with a day's limit of puddle ducks, Canada geese, and black brant. Early-season waterfowl hunting doesn't get any better than this.