



COLD BAY:

A waterfowler's supreme
adventure beckons from
the farthest north.

ULTIMATE ALASKA

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SCOTT HAUGEN



“LET’S GRAB YOUR gear and get to the lodge, Audrey has lunch ready and the afternoon tide is going to be perfect for brant,” encouraged Jeff Wasley as I reached out to shake his hand. No hellos or small talk, which is what I love about hunting with this man.

In less than three hours from the time our plane touched down in Cold Bay, Alaska, my dad, Jerry Haugen, and I were laying comfortably in a two-man layout boat, a few dozen strings of black brant decoys bobbing in front of us. We were in about a foot of water, surrounded by over 40,000 acres of eelgrass.

“It’s low tide now, and once it starts rolling in, the brant will be coming back through here to feed,” instructed Wasley, as he organized gear in the big boat. Making sure our anchors were solid in the layout, Dad and I climbed in.

“You guys good?” Wasley confirmed, knowing we were. “I’ll be back in 30 minutes with the local biologist and his son, then we’ll switch out; you guys should be done



by then.”

As Wasley sped east through Izembek Lagoon, back to the boat launch, Dad and I sat in silence. A dropping sun was at our back, and barely a breath of wind moved on this sunny afternoon.

In the distance a faint resonance of crashing ocean waves could occa-

sionally be heard, but only for a few minutes. “What’s that?” Dad asked, inquisitively gazing southeast, into the bay, trying to locate the source of an eerie sound that overpowered the ocean waves. Birds. “Get ready, here they come,” I smiled.

The horizon line was filled with black brant, and not just a few of

them; they were noisy and coming our way. Wasley told us on the way out this was the most brant he’d ever seen this early in the season, and how a noticeable number of birds kept showing up each day. Thousands upon thousands of brant were on the move with the rising tide, and all of them were funneling by our setup on the way to feed, just as Wasley assured us they would.

It was my 77-year-old dad’s first time hunting out of a layout boat, and the sturdy, roomy, Ghost 2 Man was perfect for him. He had plenty of room to move, swing and shoot, and never once felt confined or off-balance, and his shooting proved it. Dad fired four shots and had his three brant, then it was my turn. Once the shooting started, we couldn’t keep the brant out of the decoys, and it only took a matter of minutes until we were done.

Awaiting Wasley’s return, we just

“That was unreal,” dad piped over the boat motor noise. “I’ve never **seen anything like that!**”

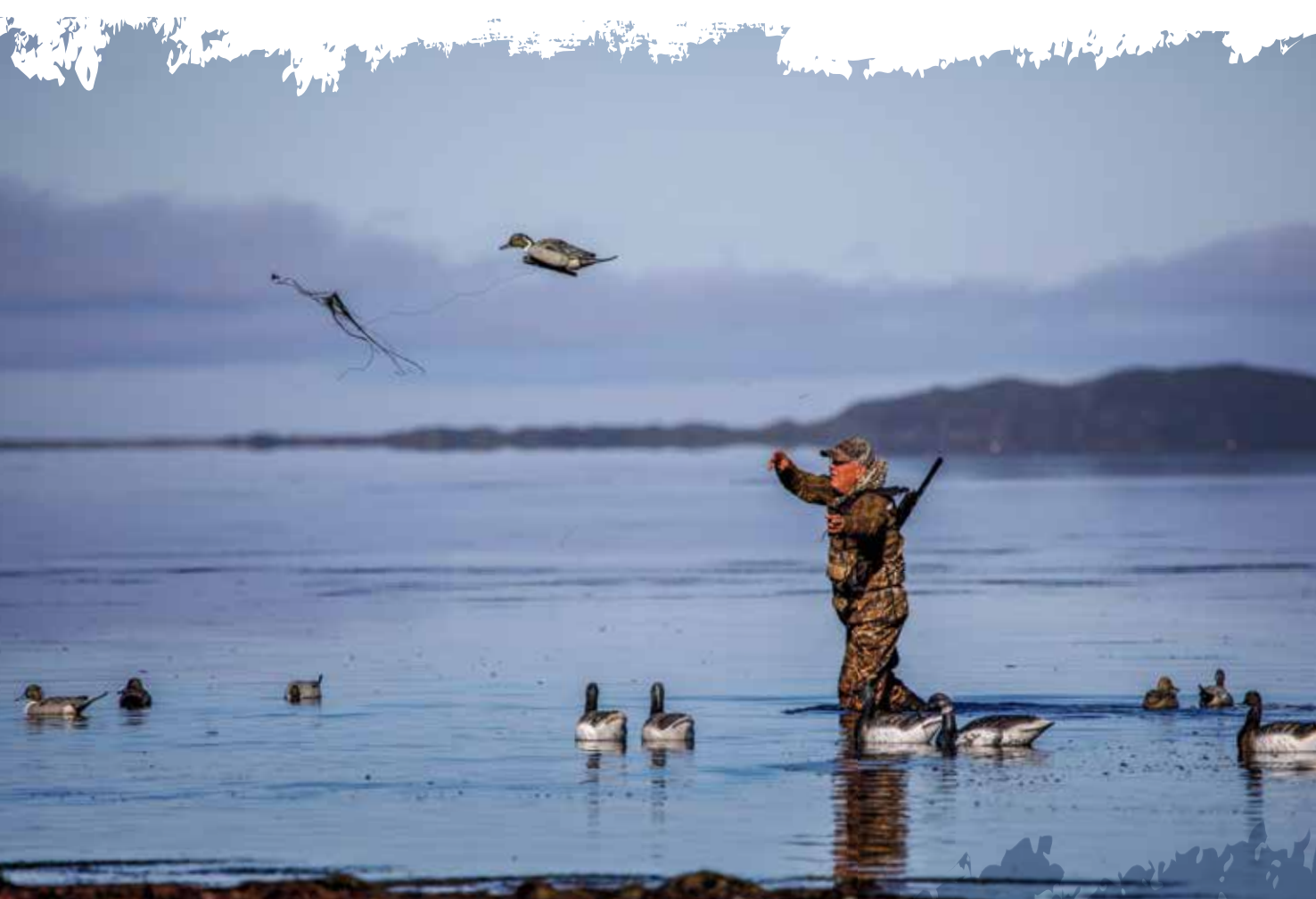
sat back, relaxed, and watched in awe as tens of thousands of brant serenaded us. “That was unreal,” dad piped over the boat motor when Wasley pulled up next to us. “I’ve never seen anything like that!” he chimed.

Saying hello to the new biologist at Izembek Lagoon, and his son, a formal introduction could wait. “Swap places, Scott and Jerry, get in this boat, we’ll go get your birds and head for cover.

Before we made it far, more brant

spilled into the decoys, smack into the lap of the hunters. It didn’t take long and two more limits were secured.

It was early September, and on this day of travel, Dad and I hadn’t even planned on hunting, but that’s how Wasley rolls. Jeff Wasley is the owner of Four Flyways Outfitters (www.fourflywaysoutfitters.com 608-385-4580). 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. Wasley is also one of the best, safest, boat captains I've ever been with. Because he can access prime stretches of Izembek Lagoon, this opens up a great deal of remote waters where you'll never see another hunter.

I'd hunted with Wasley before, both in Cold Bay in November, and in January on Saint Paul Island, where we chased king eiders and more. 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 hunt with Wasley. That's when I decided to pull the trigger, and bring my dad with me.

I love hunting brant, as they decoy unlike any goose I've seen. They're also my favorite eating of all waterfowl. I used to live a semi-subsistence lifestyle in the remote Alaskan Arctic, in the tiny Inupiat Eskimo village of Point Lay. Every year during the last few days of August, string after string of brant continuously winged by the village, traveling the Arctic

and this is the best I've ever had," my dad made clear. Our trip was off to a great start, and with five days remaining, we hit the sack early.

The tide was perfect to hunt from shore the following morning, which I was eager to do. Hopping into Wasley's boat, we headed across the lagoon, but our progress was slowed by dense fog. Coming to a secluded

It was the best waterfowling we'd experienced, **anywhere in North America.**

Ocean shoreline from their nesting grounds to Izembek Lagoon. Ever since that time, in the early 1990s, I yearned to hunt these birds where they staged on Izembek Lagoon.

For dinner that first night, Wasley grilled up some brant. "I've eaten a lot of ducks and geese in my life,

creek mouth seven miles from where we'd launched, Wasley navigated purely by GPS. As he killed the motor, the sounds of ducks, geese, and brant filled the air. We saw hundreds of birds, but thousands more loomed in the fog, out of sight.

"Let's grab the decoys and walk



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that way about 100 yards,” Wasley pointed. The water was only ankle deep, and the tide, still running out. “You guys take the decoys over there, I’m going to stash the boat before we run out of water,” Wasley continued, firing up the motor.

Along the edge of a sandy shore, we set out duck, brant and Canada goose decoys. Another hunter joined us that day on her first brant hunt, and Wasley hunted too, a welcome luxury for a full-time guide.

By the time the tide started rolling in, the fog had lifted, and visibility was crystal clear. The blue sky shined, snow covered peaks loomed large, and waterfowl could be heard screaming in all directions. Dad tripled on the first flock of brant to coast into the decoys. Soon, the biologist had her three brant, also a triple from one flock, then I decided to start shooting. Not wanting it to end, I picked one brant from the next three flocks, and Wasley followed suit when I was done. But the action didn’t stop there.

Over the next two hours the four of us would each take limits of puddle ducks and Taverners. A four-person limit of eight ducks, six Canada geese and three brant each meant the barrels were blazing, and that we had more great eating meat for dinner. Early season waterfowl in this part of Alaska is as good as it gets, in terms of both hunting and eating, and we devoured what we could each day, fresh.

We were up early the next morning, but this time instead of hitting the lagoon, we grabbed our fishing rods and headed out for some silver salmon fishing in a tiny, remote stream. Catching a five-fish coho limit

was easy, and fun. I’ve caught coho in many places throughout Alaska over the decades, but this limit was one of the largest I’d ever seen, size wise, with a couple silver slabs tipping the scales to nearly 15-pounds.

For lunch we had fresh salmon, and got some fish brining for the smoker, which we’d eat while bird hunting the next day. “Who wants to go fishing again, in a different place, for Dollies?” Wasley smiled before we finished lunch. Most folks would want to take a nap, but not Wasley, and not Dad and I, either.

Soon we were rigging fly rods with small beads, and hiking along a remote, crystal clear stream. Dad

caught a beautiful Dolly Varden on his first cast that landed smack behind a pair of spawning chum salmon. I was so enamored with watching hundreds of spawning chum salmon in the shallow creek, I barely wet a line for the first hour. I was happy with a few gorgeous Dollys, and Dad quit after landing and releasing 47 of them.

At daybreak the next morning we headed to a different place on Izembek 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 perked over his engine, pointing through the fog, ahead. Killing the motor, soon we were silently drifting by more than 100 walruses that had hauled out onto a sandy island. In my 29 years of living in and traveling throughout Alaska, this was the first

time I’d laid eyes on a pod of walrus.

I’d seen the odd one here and there, I’d even tried eating them a few times, compliments of my Inupiat hunting and trapping partners of the Arctic who relied on them as a staple in their diet. I’m not going to lie, they tasted terrible; I much prefer eating seals, bowhead, and beluga whales; sea mammals I often had access to when living in and traveling through remote villages of the North Slope.

One winter I trapped over a dozen Arctic fox off a walrus carcass that had washed up on the beach of the Arctic Ocean, right before freeze-up. That carcass stayed there for months, and was turning into a productive trap site until a polar bear tore it apart.

Floating by the big toothed pin-nipeds with Wasley and Dad was mesmerizing and brought back some unique memories I’d lived over the years in Alaska. It was a moment I didn’t want to end.

That morning culminated with more limits of ducks and cacklers, all of which aggressively dumped into the decoys. That afternoon we were back in a small river, catching limits of silver salmon and letting several others go.

Dad and I still had three brant to go to reach our possession limits, and two each on limits of ducks and geese, and we went out in style. Hunting from shore the final two mornings, again every bird we shot was on cupped wings, committing to the decoys. We ended up with three collared and banded brant, and Dad even got one with a rare web band. The little tag was so fragile and worn, it was impossible to retrieve any data from.

Loading the decoys and birds into the boat on the last morning, we thanked Wasley for such a glorious week. “Don’t thank me yet, it’s not even noon, we have a lot to do,” Wasley smiled as he revved the motor and sped across the bay.



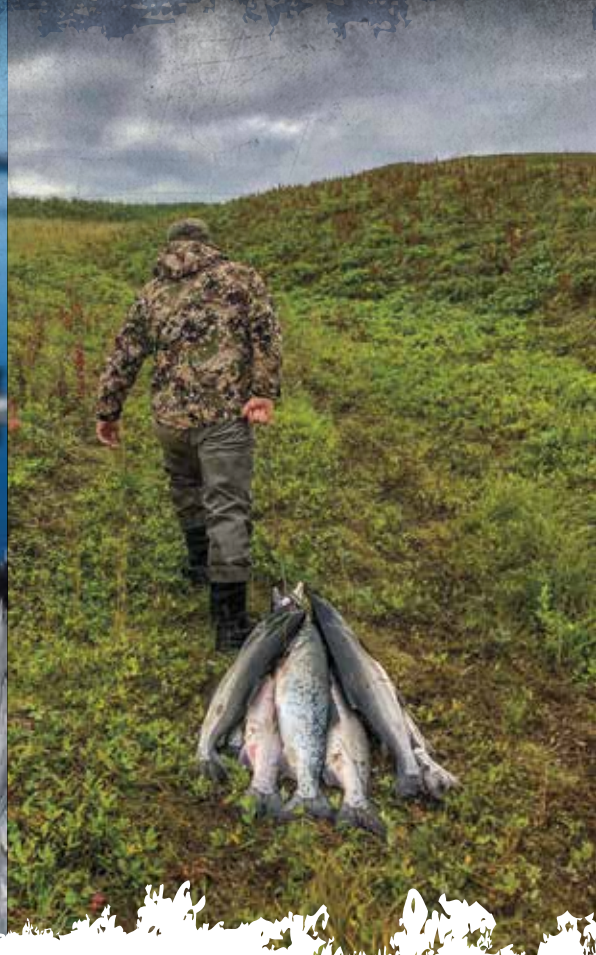
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Soon Dad and I were scouring a secluded beach for glass floats, a highly prized item that many Alaskan's relish in finding. Japanese glass floats were once used by fishermen in many parts of the world to keep their nets afloat. No longer used, many glass floats are still afloat in the world's oceans, mainly in the Pacific, and one of the best places in the world to find them is Izembek Lagoon. Following storms, many floats are uncovered on the sandy islands where they may have been buried for decades. Dad and I found a few floats, but following a bad November storm one day with Wasley, three of us found over 500 glass floats, a collector's dream.

Loading the boat on the trailer, we started to thank Wasley, again. "Not so fast, it's not even dinner time," Wasley smiled. "Grab your camera, the wind is perfect for some pictures I know you'll want to get."

Soon we pulled up to a secluded lagoon, a place I'd not been to before. "There they are, and if you sneak through that tall grass along that

creek, I bet you can get right up on them," Wasley winked, rolling down the window of his suburban to watch the action unfold.

Stalking to within camera distance of over 1,000 emperor geese, all roosting on a mud flat, was a true highlight of this adventure for me. Eight hundred and some photos later, I was headed back to the rig. This time I thanked Wasley with a firm handshake that likely failed to convey just how much we appreciated all he'd shown Dad and I during our week together.

It was the best waterfowl hunting we had ever experienced, anywhere in North America, and was the most Alaskan adventure we could ask for. To do all we did, in such a brief time, was something I never thought possible. To top it off, we saw 11 brown bears, including a couple giant boars fishing in rivers we fished and in bays where we had the duck and goose decoys spread out on. One afternoon I spent nearly two hours stalking and getting to within camera range of two adult bears that wrestled on the

tundra, a mesmerizing moment, to say the least. Cold Bay is one of the premier destinations for trophy class brown bear hunters, and the land is thick with these bruins.

A week of hunting, fishing, watching wildlife, and oh yeah, hunting ptarmigan an hour before heading to the airport to catch our flight home, made this a trip Dad and I will never forget. Alaska offers the earliest general waterfowl season in the country, opening September first here, in Game Management Unit #9. Get there, and let Jeff Wasley take it from there. 🦞

»» Scott Haugen was a full-time author and TV host for 18 years. He and his wife recently moved back to Alaska, most likely to establish residency so they could hunt emperor geese. Learn more at:

www.scotthaugen.com