

Rosehips, Geese and Size 2 Boots

Malaise toward hunting is a rare sensation for me in the fall. The foliage is brilliant, days are crisp, and hunting season is in full swing, but this fall I dare not dwell on hunting, and consequently, a faint palor has settled over me. You see, my wife is overseas and I am a full time dad to Eva, a blonde 4th grade momma's girl and a 3-year-old firebrand named Antonia. Sure, the intense dad/daughter time is a real delight but that is year-round. The air is full of distractions but none worse than the skeins of small-race Canada geese and arctic-nesting White-fronted geese I see pouring into the fields surrounding Edmonton. But I dare not let my mind wander fully away from suppers, laundry, hair clips, lunchboxes, violin lessons, and homework.

This all changed today though when Dad and Daughter decided to go work over the geese before the weather gets really cold. The idea for Antonia's first goose hunt actually came from her. She has been bugging me to go fishing so I asked her if going hunting would be an OK substitute. She gave one quick arm pump and said "Yesssss . . ." Well, why not? The weather is in the mid 60's, the geese don't return to water until 10:30 am which would give me plenty of time to drop Eva at school, load the dog, waders, baby and dekes and dash out to shoot a favorite day-roost that was holding 300 geese last week. Some of big sister's camouflage clothes, crank down the tabs on an old camo hat, dig out a good set of ear plugs and some size 2, red rubber knee boots and we were in business.

It is not generally a problem to carry my gear in to a hunting spot. Wear the waders, the Cabella's decoy bag balances 9 geese decoys & a few ducks, the shell bag and shotgun sling nicely, but adding a 35 lb squirming 3-year old who insisted on bringing a stuffed animal put me over the top. In desperation, I dug out a few bungee straps and converted her big-wheel stroller into a rolling duck wagon with Antonia down in the midst of it all. I clipped Dixie, my 65 lb black lab to the front and she quickly got into sled dog mode to help pull the buggy through the knee-high fescue.

We have had a lot of rain this summer so the last 100 yards were a two trip ferry through knee-deep water and mud. Only two early season Wigeon were on the pond when we got there but the innumerable fresh goose tracks in the shoreline mud told me the geese had been here a couple of hours earlier and would undoubtedly be back mid morning after field-feeding on wheat and peas.

I settled Antonia into a small nest made of my camo jacket and decoy bag in a low thicket of verdant snowberry and scarlet wild rose while I set the blocks. An eerie quiet held to the pond initially so we entertained ourselves picking the drooping crop of rose hips and eating snacks (critical addition to this kind of trip). We were having a discussion about how loud the shotgun would be, why we wore earplugs, and what each of my goose calls was for when a quartet of teal buzzed us. I never even went for the gun as they were in and out of the decoys

before I could reach. Fifteen minutes later Antonia said “Look Daddy” as a family group of silent White-fronted geese were tucking hard into the decoys. The first two were on the water before I killed one of the adults directly above



those that had settled. Dixie held and I turned around to see what Antonia’s reaction would be. She was grinning from ear to ear saying “We got him!” THAT was encouraging. I should have thought about a double or triple but easy does it.

Later I broke down a wigeon that still had some life in him when Dixie put him in my hand. It was time for a surreptitious cervical dislocation and some discussion about how quickly and neatly birds die and how their muscles can twitch a little bit. – whew this is not exactly easy but Antonia was still undaunted.

The next swirling mass of feathers to invade our spread was a jumbled mix of 75 geese including some local large-race Canadas, which I avoided for reasons of weight (12 lbs each!) and having killed enough earlier this year, arctic race migrant Canadas, looking for all the world like flying squeaky footballs, and my beloved White-fronted geese – Specks, the best eating waterfowl in our flyway. I neatly killed a small Canada and barely brought down a young Speck. Dixie,

appropriately keyed on the distant and low-swimming Speck and brought a very lively goose into the blind. That one I secured under my leg, and gently broke his neck while Antonia was preoccupied with his pale webbed feet.

Later I had to stand up, shout and walk up to get a duck in the decoys to fly. It flushed and I folded him up - another errant Wigeon that had shushed onto the water amongst the decoys. About then Antonia said "My dad, we have enough ducks now." with a certainty that allowed no room for discussion. I calmly agreed with her, after all, this was her hunt, but every waterfowling intuition in my possession said the big shoot was still to come. We had only been at this for 1 hr and 45 minutes, which I guess is a long time for a 3-year old, so the shotgun was unloaded and cased, the last juicebox shared and she wandered around making a bouquet of foxtail barley stalks at the water's edge. While wrapping the goose decoys lines and as Dixie systematically hauled out the last of the old styrofoam Herters duck decoys, I caught movement on the horizon. Line after line of geese were headed our way. I was torn between just standing there and smiling and dashing for my cased shotgun. It would take them five minutes beating against the wind to reach us. What the hell, I had about as many geese as I could carry so Antonia and I walked to the top of the island and stood in the taller shrubs to watch them yelp, wiffle, and cup in on hard popping wings before skidding onto the water. Somewhere between 300 and 500 geese landed, 1/3 of which passed within shooting range. Dixie was shaking like she had palsey. What a sight to leave with. Of course we bumped them all as we departed but there was no other way and they didn't leave badly scared so they will be there another day.

After Antonia and I split the last chocolate dipped doughnut, we planned the duck supper for the evening. While I drove and sipped cold coffee, Antonia lolled over sideways in her car seat with Dixie curled at her feet and they both slept all the way home. Supper tonight will be good and meaningful but the trophy of the day was that big smile and "We got him!". Who knows, maybe I will actually have a hunting companion in amongst my flock of girls and maybe when she is 17 it will be me snoozing while she drives her tired old daddy back to town.

Lee Foote
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