

DUK'S LAST HUNT



BY RUSSELL WORTH PARKER

The five of us, four men and a dog, surged and throttled our way across the vastness of the Chesapeake Bay as if shouldering our way through a crowd. Speed dictated by the whim of the water, we surged forward, then decelerated as if the oncoming waves were people to whom we yielded enough space to pass.

Our guide, Captain Josh Bourne of Wingman Guides, left the Marine Corps after more than a decade to follow his passions where salt meets sand and marsh. Wingman is a family operation. In the fall and winter Josh and his father guide hunters, fueled by Josh's mother's cooking, in pursuit of duck and Canada geese on the Chesapeake's Eastern Shore. Summers see them guiding offshore fishing charters out of Virginia Beach.

Much of my life has been spent in the Intracoastal Waterway or upon the open ocean. For three years I lived in Hawaii, seeking tuna and marlin beyond the horizon, the world reduced to deep blue in all directions. I have made a career as a U.S. Marine, by repute at least, a "Soldier of the Sea." But this was my first time on the Chesapeake and until that morning, I had no real understanding that a bay could be big water. His eyes on the coming rollers, hands on the throttle and wheel, Josh warned us to hold on as we ground up the face of oncoming waves and slid down the back.

We'd risen early, barely within shouting distance of sunrise, and

savored biscuits holding slabs of smoked goose. Washed down with strong coffee, it was enough to clear the fog left by my late arrival, a conversation with a good friend that stretched past midnight, and sleep made fitful by anticipation of an early morning. We departed the dock in dawn's shadow, two boats packed with hunters and shotguns and dogs, bedecked in the grays and tans of the dormant marsh. Now, the sun danced off the turbid slate of the bay, wind and tide churning up grays and greens dappled with golden sparks as our boat split off to set anchor against an island and establish our blind.

The men in our boat all shared the common bond of military service in hard places. Perhaps more than that, we shared a common love of water and wind, the simple faith on display in plaintively calling a passing flock of mergansers, of the heart-swelling pride found watching a beloved dog push through cold water on a hard retrieve. Josh set the decoys. Chris, the friend common to us all, worked with his dog Duk, readying him for the day ahead.

Duk is a golden retriever, almost auburn, his best seasons behind him. His protégé, a puppy named Gus, waited at home and would soon begin training to follow in Duk's pawprints. Chris said the day would be Duk's last hunt, and I felt honored to be with them both. But for now, Duk visibly ached to get to work. A low, anticipatory whine escaped his muzzle as Chris uncased his shotgun. Watching them both, I could not help but

reflect upon the timeless pairing of man and dog. It's a relationship born of honest need, a wordless promise to serve one another in ways of which each is incapable in the other's absence. A dog brooks no insincerity and offers none. Every communication is the truth because for a dog there is no percentage in a lie. And thus, Chris and Duk entered the Chesapeake's January cold water together, every hand signal, every correction, every look back for guidance a sincere mutual communication of the kind humans often find so daunting: I love you. I am dedicated to you. I will provide for you.

Decoys bobbing in the shore lap, boat swathed in raffia, we settled in to wait. Josh called across the wide expanse of water and a trio of bufflehead soon turned our way, coming left to right in parallel to our blind. I was the least experienced hunter by a wide margin, and the men in the boat gifted me with the first shot. I tracked the bird as he flared low and close, his partners having seen something they didn't like and turned away. I squeezed the trigger of my 12 gauge. The duck tumbled so quickly it seemed a single action rather than a sequence, just a blast and a pinwheel of black and white and splashing water. Duk came to his feet as Chris told him it was time to work. His nails clicked on the deck of our boat as he danced in anticipation, moving to the bow and pressing his nose against the obstacle formed by grass and net. Impediment cleared, he sprang into the water, beelining for the duck floating amongst his own plastic facsimiles. On return, after dropping the duck, he took a short victory lap upon the island to which we'd appended ourselves and then settled in to wait for more.

Though we saw hundreds, maybe thousands, of ducks, there would not be much shooting. Black clouds of duck roiled in the sky above the water across which we wistfully looked, but it was late in the season and the mass of ducks were wary, dancing well outside of range of No. 4 steel shot. Another bufflehead and a canvasback made an appearance, joining us in the boat, courtesy of my boat mates' shooting and Duk's work ethic. That we only shot one duck per hunter was of no matter to me. I am not an obsessive hunter, planning each year around migrations and shooting seasons. I was there because I simply can't not be. I can't countenance the death of a way of life that binds man and nature and dog in a way that deeply respects all three.

I could not contemplate Duk's last hunt without thinking of that broader parallel. It's no secret that hunting is broadly on the decline. Waterfowl hunting is no different. When it goes, it will not be a sudden death. It will be a long, quiet fade, a fraying of a centuries-old cultural fabric eventually so holed and faded as to be unrecognizable and unrecoverable. My presence in that blind was both ironic evidence of the truth of that statement and its refutation.

In the professional parlance, the term is "R3: Recruitment, Retention and Reactivation."



Conservation of a species to protect our opportunities to hunt is intuitive to most hunters at this point. Perhaps conservation of their fellow hunters is a less familiar concept, but it is exactly what must occur. Hunters must give of their time, of their resources, of their secret spots, to ensure the survival of the way of life. They must look for unlikely, or unfamiliar, new hunters who may not look or think or vote similar to the majority of us. My uncles ensured I sat in a deer stand or a duck blind as a teenager. Life got in the way and I found myself middle aged with my guns gathering dust in a cabinet. Then Chris invited me hunting and I accepted.

Chris did for me what all hunters must do if hunting is to survive. He increased the population, both recruiting and reactivating a hunter. It was Duk's last hunt. In that there is sadness. It was my first hunt in 30 years. In that there was hope.

As I write this, it's a year since that hunt. What of retention? I'm headed back to the Chesapeake with Chris this week. And Gus, last year's puppy, is coming with us. 🐾

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