

THE GRAND PRAIRIE

Experiencing the richness of Arkansas waterfowling

by Worth Parker
photographs by Lee Thomas Kjos

WE ARE BUT WATER GIVEN FORM by flesh and bone. Some divine spark distinguishes our species, imbuing within us a purpose beyond mere survival. But in the end, we are primarily water, and water will always find a way back to itself. For some of us, that primal truth demands specific acknowledgement upon the vastness of the salt, in the shadows of the timber or on the cool coves of the lake. Across all of them are found the ducks.

Nowhere is this truth more evident than upon Arkansas' Grand Prairie, an area comprising more than 900,000 acres of hardwood bottomland, grasses and wetlands. Found in the east-central portion of the state, it's a riparian dreamland within the broader Delta, and it has been home to ducks—and duck hunters who understand its charms—for hundreds of years. As Brent Birch wrote in *The Grand Prairie: A History of Duck Hunting's Hallowed Ground*: "There are places where one can hunt mallards in flooded timber. But not like in the Big Ditch Bottoms. There are places you can shop for waterfowling gear. But not like Mack's Prairie Wings. There are places you can hunt ducks on public land. But not like Bayou Meto Wildlife Management Area. I don't know anywhere else where anybody pays \$6,000 an acre for property worthless for anything other than hunting ducks."



Despite that, when my friend Radcliff Menge, founder of hunting clothier Tom Beckbe, called and invited me to Stuttgart, Arkansas, I had a litany of reasons I could not go. I was wrapping up a 27-year career in the Marine Corps. Travel was difficult in the age of COVID. Most critically, that my wife was practicing law in the front room of our house while our daughter was attending school via a web camera in our kitchen left me unsure how to sell the notion of a week spent hunting some of the most exclusive flooded timber on earth. But Radcliff, a man who started a hunting clothing company as an excuse to spend more time afield, was not. He wrote, "I hate to say anything is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but this is pretty close. I'll put it this way: I've never been invited on a trip like this and don't think I will be again anytime soon." As an added enticement, Radcliff told me we would be hunting with eminent waterfowl photographer Lee Kjos. Cast in that light and with the immediate support of my wife, I got past my concerns. *It was the Grand Prairie after all.*

I first heard of Stuttgart, Arkansas, as a boy, well before I ever put on a pair of waders. But there are things one knows about a place only by

being of it, and my own pursuit of ducks had been limited to the salt water of the Atlantic Flyway. Fortunately, Scott and Jason Perry are of Arkansas waterfowling in the richest sense. Having spent years developing the iconic waterfowling equipment and clothing brands Duxbak, McAlister and Mountain Khakis, both brothers love the places and the ducks they hunt with an equal passion—each as happy to call in a flight of greenheads to simply see the ducks land and burst off the water as they are to hang birds from a game strap. That pleasure drives the generosity of spirit that characterizes true sportsmen, and the Perrys surround themselves with the same kind of hunters. Through their kindness, Radcliff, Lee and I spent three days eating delicious meals, wearing and testing bespoke waterfowl gear, and hunting with men who hold deep knowledge of and clear love for the habitat, habits and pursuit of ducks, particularly mallards.

Coming at anything for the first time is humbling. More so when you join men at the peak of their pursuit. But as I've grown in life, what I do has become secondary to the kind of people with whom I do it, and I find a quiet joy

in standing amongst people who have applied the kind of care, focus and discipline to the passion required to become expert. Scott Perry's ubiquitous friendships within the duck hunting community gave me entrée to three of the Grand Prairie's most legendary private duck clubs: Ernest Bartlett's Poor Boy's, Joel Whicker's Two Rivers and Witt Stephens' Screaming Wings. The clubs are exclusive, but the men who own them take a clear pleasure in sharing them with guests and club members. After three mornings spent amongst them followed by afternoons spent hunting speckle-bellied geese with Grand Prairie authority Brent Birch, I expect I am spoiled for anything else.

Unlike the immensity of the marsh in which I've always hunted, flooded timber is intimate, almost spiritual. The sun rises, light edging upward, fire consuming shadow. Filtered by the twisted limbs of oaks, the sun slices through the trees surrounding a duck hole as if through the glass of a cathedral, dappling black water and revealing the red and yellow of last fall's leaves through thigh-deep tannin like old stories revisited. And then come the ducks.



▲ Previous spread: The author with a morning's flooded-timber bounty. Above: Lee Kjos's Lab, Cap, waits patiently for ducks to drop into a hole.

◀ Grand Prairie authority Brent Birch placing specklebelly silhouettes in a flooded field.

In an ice-rimed hole called El Chapo at Two Rivers, the whistle of wings heralded the ducks' arrival before I could see them. I looked up—half in expectation, half in wonder—at the sheer number of silhouettes against the purple-gray early morning light. The insistent chattering of the call followed by the splash of a mallard arriving too early to shoot assured me that the work it had taken to be there would pay off. As the surrounding timber increasingly brightened into relief, I watched ducks plunge through shadow into steam struck golden by the sun. Our guns spoke, sending two mallards pinwheeling into the water as others danced through the timber like fighter jets dodging flak, wings hammering the air, heads thrust forward, the entireties of their bodies speaking the purest expression of their intent. At times they seemed to come in waves, as if they meant to overwhelm us by sheer numbers. One greenhead splayed his wings, dropped his feet and flew directly at me. I shouldered my gun, only to be reminded that there is nothing louder than the click of a firing pin falling on an empty chamber. The indignant quack of that single mallard, seemingly thrown back at me over his shoulder as he escaped, brought a smile to my face. We limited almost before first shooting light was a memory, then remained, calling for the sheer joy of watching ducks drop through the timber, wary and focused, like parachutists behind enemy lines, the sound of silk flapping in wind.





◀ Joel Whicker works his magic on mallards circling in the Arkansas sky.

Though I went to the Grand Prairie for ducks, the seeming inability of the hunters we met to not extend the utmost in generosity resulted in Radcliff, Lee and me hunting specklebellies over two afternoons. In both layout and panel blinds we waited beside huge fields—one flooded, one not—in which we planted a host of decoys. Hunting specks is ambush hunting at its most elemental, requiring keen camouflage, patience and an attentive stillness. Lying in the blind, warmed by sun and layers of grass and burlap, lulled by wind and the residual effect of 4 AM wake-ups for mornings spent standing in cold water, I entered an almost Zen state. Then Brent Birch, our host for both hunts, hissed, “Be still. Don’t move,” before expertly offering the plaintive burble that is the specklebelly call. I was suddenly, starkly awake. The birds circled, calling in kind, one turning almost inverted as it briefly passed into my field of view, limited as it was by the overhang of the blind. At the explosive intersection of arriving birds and emerging hunters, Lee’s lifetime spent shooting both shotguns and cameras was particularly evident. With a 20-gauge over/under, he rag-dolled one speck with a 40-yard trailing shot, a testament to his capability as a shooter and the performance of the BOSS-brand copper-plated shot to which he introduced me. My admiration for his shooting was only exceeded by the performance of his Labrador, Cap, waiting quietly in his own blind until sent after fallen birds—one retrieve a mile-and-a-half round-trip epic through a muddy field that later pulled hard enough at my waders to leave me breathing hard when retrieving our multitude of decoys.

To truly understand hunting the Grand Prairie, one must comprehend it is a story of understatement and quiet pride of place. Arkansas’ duck camps are to the Grand Prairie what quail

plantations are to South Georgia. Thousands of acres of carefully managed hardwood bottomland stand in place of longleaf pines and wiregrass, but the passion inspired by the ducks and the honor accorded the camps by their stories are no different. The duck hunters I met treat the lineage of their clubs with the kind of veneration one accords a fine gun handed down from a beloved elder. History matters on the Grand Prairie. There are but three constant topics of discussion in an Arkansas duck blind: the way it used to be, the way it is now and why. “The ducks are learning

Arkansas’ duck camps are to the Grand Prairie what quail plantations are to South Georgia.

to become nocturnal” or “There’s no snow in the north yet” or “They’re just not getting off the reservoirs.” For three days I heard nothing but apologies and, “You should’ve been here yesterday.” But every day seemed just right to me, because that quiet Arkansas pride manifests as a generosity and kindness that comes from being raised in a place where those qualities still matter.

Arkansas waterfowling is “Stand over here where I am; you’ll get a better shot” or “What shells are you shooting? Try these; they’re the best I’ve found” or “Y’all come back tonight; I’ll

feed you.” Hunting the Grand Prairie is drinking strong coffee before most of the country has turned over twice in their beds and donning waders still damp with yesterday’s water. An invitation to a duck camp means lying back against a bag of decoys, gazing through a barren canopy at a black velvet sky pinpricked with light easing to blue on the horizon as a ditch boat’s howl momentarily rends the silence of the bottoms. Flooded timber means occupying a blind outfitted with bunks and a stove or simply stepping into the lee of an oak, waist deep in water stained the color of black tea, as geese erupting from a nearby reservoir call so loudly as to obviate a hunter’s whisper.

The entirety of the Arkansas experience is sensual. It is the almost eerie bugle of specklebelly geese reminiscent of elk in the Colorado Rockies. It is the end-of-day burn of constant wind against exposed cheeks. It is white-feathered bellies turned umber by the rising sun; the iridescence of greenheads; the impossible blue of a wing. It is the yellow of dead grass giving way to pale pink in the setting sun. Orange and red on awakening timber. The improbable perfection of the Grand Prairie—born of water and wind and mud and feather, of wet dogs and the smell of gunsmoke—poses an eternal question perhaps answerable only by divinity. Standing at the edge of a slough so wide as to be a lake, sheltered under the limbs of an oak and waiting for shooting light, I thought, *These*

ducks are not among friends but people who love them deeply just the same.

There are some things in this world that cannot be manufactured quickly or cheaply, among them a firm handshake and a heartfelt thank you between new friends or a well-made drink handed off by an old one. But for that we take nothing with us when we go, save the sum of who we are, who we have been and how we have lived. That makes spending time in pursuits that matter all the more meaningful. Slowly and deliberately, we hunters develop the satisfaction of mastery wrought through experience and hard work. We earn the authenticity inherent to knowing the truth of our pursuits: that the great sadness in our passion is that its object must die to fulfill both of our purposes, its fleeting beauty surviving in the stories of the hunt. If we are lucky, we find the warmth of friendship born of common passions and common experiences in the cold, the water, the wind. These things are still real on the Grand Prairie. They are the things of which friendships are born, and they lie at the heart of why I will return. 🦆

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