

brucemasterman@telusplanet.net

Conservator

Autumn 2002

Word Count: 742

Seasons of the Marsh column- Autumn 2002

By Bruce Masterman

A heavy curtain of fog enveloped the marsh on this early October morning.

The day had started rather inauspiciously. The drive from town took longer than usual, with the mist making the van's headlights almost useless. I narrowly missed a mule deer doe that suddenly materialized on the gravel road.

Then, after loading the 12-foot rowboat with shotgun, decoys, extra gear and my sometimes-faithful dog, Belle, I stepped into the water to push the craft into deeper water. That's when I discovered the leaky waders I'd vowed to patch - but hadn't - were filling with icy water, chilling my feet to the bone.

After we got underway, I soon realized my navigational skills were somewhat lacking. The fog obscured the distant farm light I usually used as a guiding beacon. Guided only by instinct, I pulled the oars steadily and aimed for the far shore.

Amazingly, over the next hour, with unseen ducks whistling by overhead, I rowed in a complete circle, returning to the parked van. This happened not once, but twice.

Finally, I opted to hug the shoreline while seeking a thick patch of bulrushes a few hundred metres to the east. Several minutes later - and now well into legal shooting time -- I stopped at the first promising-looking spot and tossed a dozen mallard decoys and one floating fake Canada goose into a crude S-pattern. Then I backed the boat into the bulrushes and poured tea from the Thermos.

I didn't see the first ducks come in, but Belle did. Her whining alerted me to a trio of mallards just as they vanished into the fog. Belle looked quizzical, as if wondering why I hadn't shot.

Raising the cup of steaming Earl Grey to my mouth, I looked up just as a hen and drake pintail skimmed over the decoys and disappeared. I quickly gulped down most of the tea and picked up the battered old pump gun.

Naturally, the action promptly stopped. Nothing flew for the next 20 minutes, at least not anything we could see. Belle perched on the plywood bow seat and watched intently, cocking her ears at the sound of ducks flying or splashing down beyond our view. The mist defined our world, reducing visibility to an area the size of my backyard.

Suddenly, a distant sound caused my heart to quicken and Belle's tail to thump against the aluminum gunwale. A lone Canada goose was approaching. I strained to glimpse it through the haze but couldn't see a thing. Then, all was silent and I assumed the goose had gone elsewhere.

Just as I reached for the teacup, the goose broke through the cloud, set its wings and coasted toward the decoys 25 metres away. I lifted the shotgun and fired. The goose landed with a splash.

Every hunter hopes and strives for a clean, quick kill, the ultimate culmination of this tradition-steeped autumn ritual that only those who do it can ever fully understand.

So when the goose started swimming away trailing a broken wing, I felt my heart sink. In a flash, Belle was in the water after it. The wounded goose quickened its pace and soon vanished in the fog.

Her black body cutting the still grey water and using her tail as a rudder, Belle followed the bird into the gloom. For several long minutes, I saw and heard nothing. Several more ducks flew into the decoys, but I sat motionless, knowing it would be wrong to shoot when my last shot remained unresolved.

I started calling Belle's name, and blew the comeback command on the whistle she almost always obeys. The sounds faded into the mist, just as Belle and the goose had done.

As I prepared to pull anchor and head off in search of her, I was stopped by a slight splash beyond the decoys. Paddling out of the fog like a ghostly vision, Belle churned the water with her front paws as she slowly paddled toward the boat. Breathing hard and sputtering, she was exhausted.

But as I praised her no-end while removing the dead goose from her mouth and helping her in, the fatigue seemed to lift.

A few minutes later, so did the fog. The hunt was over.

We didn't need any more birds on this day. Belle had done her job with perfection, even as I'd been less than so.

"Let's go home," I told Belle, rubbing her head.

She didn't argue.

END