



Waterfowling's Life List

A rundown of must-hunt destinations

by Gary Kramer

GEOGRAPHY WAS ONE of the few subjects that I was good at in grade school. I recall in fourth grade spinning the globe and wondering what it would be like to travel to far-off places like Africa and Argentina. Never did I imagine that years later I would visit many areas around the world in pursuit of waterfowl with a camera and shotgun.

These days I often am asked about my favorite waterfowling destinations—those places that I would recommend for a hunter looking to travel. Following is a short list I came up with based on the quality of the hunting, the interesting bird species and the overall experiences.



Argentina

When it comes to international duck hunting, Argentina has no peer. Ducks are abundant, species diversity is high and hunting pressure is low. Typically there are only two hunters per blind and a bird boy who sets out the decoys, does the calling and retrieves the birds.

Even though ducks are found throughout Argentina, one region stands out: Buenos Aires Province, specifically an area southwest of the capital city. Not only is the hunting world class, but access is easy. Most clients from the US arrive in Buenos Aires in the morning and are transported to the hunting area in time for lunch and an afternoon hunt.

One thing I especially enjoy is the variety of

ducks, with up to 13 species available. Among these are the "big" ducks: rosy-billed pochards, yellow-billed pintails, white-cheeked pintails and Chiloe wigeon. Add a potpourri of teal—speckled, ringed, silver and cinnamon—plus Brazilian ducks, three species of whistling ducks, red shovelers and a couple of other species, and you have the ultimate smorgasbord. The duck season is May, June and July.

I have hunted in Argentina more than two dozen times, and two of my favorite *estancias* are San Martin and Monte Laguna, both operated by Alejandro St. Antonin of Four Seasons Adventures (01154-911-6444-2379; 4seasons.com.ar).





Alaska

Among all of the waterfowl in North America, the king eider has become the Holy Grail of hardcore duck hunters and waterfowl collectors. And if that is your goal, know that the hunt will be expensive, arduous and not for the faint of heart. More than 20 years ago a king eider became my quest, and I traveled to Kodiak Island in the dead of winter to shoot one. It took five days and I saw only two mature drakes, but I managed to accomplish my goal.

Since then a location has emerged where bagging a king eider is virtually guaranteed. But it is nearly 800 miles from Anchorage, smack dab in the middle of the same

waters made famous by the TV program “Deadliest Catch.” That’s right: Alaska’s Pribilof Islands, in the Bering Sea.

The hunting takes place in December and January, when the weather is cold and windy and the seas rough. The up side is that the plumage of king eiders is prime. Kings are drawn to lines of custom-made decoys behind boats when weather permits or from shore when conditions are rough. Other species available are harlequin ducks, long-tailed ducks and white-winged scoters. Hunters stay in a comfortable lodge on St. Paul Island. The hunts are booked by Ramsey Russell’s Get Ducks (866-438-3897; getducks.com).

Canada

The prairies of Alberta are important nesting areas for ducks and major staging areas for waterfowl moving south from Alaska and northern Canada. Often referred to as North America’s “duck factory,” Canada’s prairie provinces produce nearly half of the ducks harvested in the US.

At first this part of Alberta appears to be little more than a vast expanse of cropland. Closer inspection reveals fields of wheat, barley and peas, grain elevators, farmhouses and small settlements scattered throughout the flat to gently rolling terrain. Woven into this tapestry are numerous wetlands, rivers and native grasslands. All told, this landscape provides some of the best waterfowling in North America.

The best hunting is



typically from September 1 until early November. This is primarily field hunting for ducks and geese out of layout blinds. Huge flocks of mallards and Canada geese along with some pintails and white-fronted, snow

and Ross’s geese zero in on the wheat and pea fields. There also is some hunting on potholes and lakes for puddle ducks and divers.

While there are numerous outfitters in Alberta, I have the most

experience with Black Dog Outfitters (780-662-3436; blackdogoutfittersalberta.com). The operation is run by former Ducks Unlimited biologist Blaine Burns, whose lodge is near Beaverhill Lake.



Uruguay

When I made my first trip to Uruguay, in 1989, this small South American country was a little-known shooting destination. Today it is a destination with international acclaim. I recently enjoyed my eighth trip to Uruguay and found the action just as good as it was 25 years ago.

Several regions of the country offer quality mixed-bag shooting for doves, *perdiz* and ducks. In these areas ducks generally are hunted on stock ponds or in small

wetlands. In contrast, the town of Chuy, on the Brazilian border, is the center of a rice-growing region rich in wetlands. This region supports the largest wintering concentration of ducks in the country.

Similar to hunting in Argentina, shooting is over decoys and each pair of hunters is accompanied by a bird boy. Ringed teal, Brazilian ducks, rosy-billed pochards, yellow-billed pintails and both fulvous and white-faced whistling ducks are the most common species.



The hunting is in wetlands or flooded ricefields, often with a backdrop of palm trees. The duck season runs from May through August.

Several miles from Chuy is La Lagunita, a new

first-class lodge located on a cattle and farming operation. Uruguay Safaris is owned and operated by Eduardo Gonzales and booked by Trek Safaris (800-654-9915; treksafaris.com).

Iceland

About the same time North American waterfowl leave their breeding grounds and head south for the winter, an annual migration from Greenland and Iceland sends hundreds of thousands of waterfowl across the North Atlantic to Europe. In September and October, before the long crossing, many of the birds use Iceland as a staging area. While there is some duck hunting, it is the goose hunting that draws the most attention. The primary species are greylag geese, with a mix of pink-footed and at times barnacle geese. Most shooting is over decoys in barley fields from pits or natural cover.

Trips begin and end in the capital of Reykjavik, a bustling

city with brightly colored houses, attractive shops and excellent restaurants. When most people think of Iceland, they envision a forbidding ice-covered landscape. In reality, however, the climate is more temperate than the Arctic, with mean January temperatures in Reykjavik only slightly colder than Boston's. The warming influences of the Atlantic moderate the climate in winter, and summers are pleasant but cool.

The booking agent is Lax-A (011352-531-6100; lax-a.net), which offers waterfowling from August 20 to November 20, with early September to late October being prime time. Hunters stay at Aurora Lodge, on the south coast.







Nicaragua

The duck hunting in Nicaragua takes place on the northwest coastal plain, an area dominated by agriculture, grazing lands and freshwater marshes. The fertile wetlands provide food and cover for thousands of resident and migratory waterfowl. San Cristóbal Volcano—still mildly active and emitting plumes of smoke—forms a majestic

backdrop to the tropical wetlands. The nearest town and base of operations is Chinandega, about a two-hour drive from the airport in Managua.

Each morning clients are transported to the edge of a massive wetland where they board airboats and are transferred to dry blinds. Each pair of hunters has a bird boy who sets the decoys and retrieves the birds. With

swarms of teal over the decoys, hunters seldom stay in the blinds much beyond 9:30 AM.

About 85 percent of the wintering birds are blue-winged teal, with the remainder being fulvous and black-bellied whistling ducks (about 10 percent) and various puddle ducks. The blue-wings and other puddle ducks make the long migration from the prairie

provinces of Canada and the Dakotas, while the whistling ducks are resident birds. Hunting is permitted from October through March.

The base of operations is Hotel Farallones or Los Portales, on the outskirts of Chinandega. The local outfitters are Marvin and Richard Townsend, and the trips are booked by Trek Safaris (800-654-9915; treksafaris.com).



South Africa

For many years Africa was viewed primarily as a big-game-hunting destination, with bird shooting seen as a sideline. During the past 25 years, however, wingshooting has come of age, with the best-developed hunting infrastructure being in South Africa.

In South Africa there is excellent waterfowling in KwaZulu-Natal province north and west of Durban. Topnotch goose hunting is available on the Baynsfield Estate, where

the action takes place in cornfields from layout blinds surrounded by impressive decoy spreads. The action is pretty much the same as dry-land goose hunting anywhere, but the quarry is unique.

Egyptian geese, which are medium-size brownish birds with pink bills and legs and distinctive dark eye patches, make up about 80 percent of the bag. The remainder is spur-winged geese, which are large black-and-white birds with reddish-pink legs and bills. Adult male

spurwings weigh 15 pounds and sport large spurs at the joints of their wings, making them unique trophies.

From Baynsfield clients travel about three hours to Fugitives Drift Lodge, north of Dundee. The region is dominated by agricultural lands, with corn, peanut, wheat and dairy farms prominent along with scattered stock ponds, wetlands and native bush.

Most of the hunting here is on stock ponds that vary from a few acres to 100 acres in size. The

hunting is over decoys from shore blinds for up to a half-dozen species of ducks and a few Egyptian geese. The most prevalent ducks are yellow-bills, which are the African ecological counterparts of our mallards. Red-billed teal, which behave more like our pintails, and white-faced whistling ducks are also common. The season runs from the end of May through August. Hunts are booked through Bird Hunters Africa (01127-33-343-1238; birdhuntersafrica.com).

Mexico

The state of Tamaulipas, just south of Brownsville, Texas, has long been a popular Mexican wingshooting destination. Its popularity was spawned by easy access from the US, excellent shooting, the variety of gamebirds available and long seasons. The duck season kicks off in early November and runs until early March.

The vast open waters of the Laguna Madre and extensive shoal-grass beds attract and support about 80 percent of the redheads in North America. Add a rich agricultural area and a series of freshwater ponds, and you have a waterfowl hunting mecca. In addition to redheads, the area attracts awesome concentrations of blue-winged and green-winged teal, gadwalls, pintails and wigeon along with some

white-fronted and snow geese.

The trip is easy: Clients are met at the Brownsville airport and driven two hours to La Finca Lodge, near San Fernando. Much of the hunting is on the Laguna near the seaside village of Carbonera, a 45-minute drive from the lodge. Each group of two hunters and a bird boy are transported by boat to blinds where several dozen decoys are set. There also is hunting on freshwater ponds where pintails and redheads come to drink after feeding in the salt water.

It would not be fair to discuss Mexico without mentioning the concerns regarding violence. From 2006 to 2010, reports of drug violence flooded the media, and 19 of the 20 wingshooting lodges in Tamaulipas closed. Since

2010, however, violence has been absent from Tamaulipas and specifically the San Fernando region. In the summer of 2014, after thoroughly looking into the safety issues, Steve McCain reopened La Finca Lodge. By 2016 five lodges were back in operation. Since the first lodge reopened, there has not been a single incident of violence in this area involving American tourists. La Finca is booked by Trek Safaris (800-654-9915; treksafaris.com). ✈

Having visited 60 countries, Gary Kramer is among the most traveled outdoor journalists in the world. His newest book, *Game Birds: A Celebration of North American Upland Birds*, is a 256-page coffee-table book with 384 color photos covering all 34 gamebird species in North America. To order, visit garykramer.net.

