

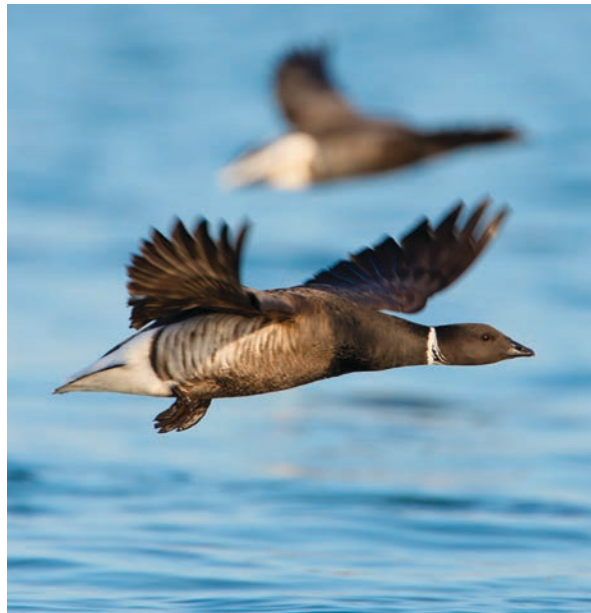
# ***THE BRANT*** ***of*** ***SAN QUINTÍN BAY***

In pursuit of Mexico's tidewater geese

*text & photos by Gary Kramer*







◀ Pacific, or black, brant are tied to salt water and winter along the West Coast.

▶ As the tide recedes, brant fly to areas that have exposed eelgrass to feed.

**T**he Baja California sky was awash with stars and a crescent moon was beginning to set as we walked from the Old Mill Hotel to the nearby dock. Our guide, Tiburon, and his assistant were waiting

for us, and it took only minutes to load our gear into the panga. Pulling away from the dock, we motored past anchored boats and shoreline houses toward the open bay. In the darkness, the forms of my hunting partners, Scott Haugen and my daughter Kelly, were visible sitting amidships. For me, it was an exciting and familiar place and one that had shaped my professional career. For Kelly it was a return trip, and for Scott it was his first time to San Quintín Bay.

In the mid-1970s I studied brant for two winters in San Quintín Bay while conducting research for a master's degree in wildlife biology at Humboldt State University. That education led to a 26-year career with the US Fish and Wildlife Service as a waterfowl biologist and refuge manager. Now, 46 years later, I still get a feeling of excitement and a sense of returning home when I head across the tidal flats in search of brant, the unique sea-going goose.

After 30 minutes Tiburon backed off the throttle, and the boat slid to a stop. "Llegamos," he said ("We have arrived") and pointed to the shoreline and a spot 75 yards ahead. We pushed the boat as close to the makeshift blind as possible, and then waded to the shore and unloaded our gear. The blind was a shallow pit in the sand made of driftwood and salt-

marsh vegetation. It didn't take long for Tiburon and his assistant to put out three dozen brant decoys. Then the pair took off in the boat to wait for the action to begin.

By the time the decoys were set and the guns loaded, the sun was just above the horizon. The morning light revealed a U-shaped bay lined with extinct volcanic cones that was protected from the ocean by two long, narrow sand spits.

Brant respond to tide changes, and the best hunting in San Quintín Bay is generally on the ebbing (falling) tide. As the tide recedes, eelgrass—a submerged aquatic plant that makes up most of the birds' winter diet—is exposed, and brant fly to areas that have it to feed. It is during these periods of movement that a well-placed decoy spread will draw the birds close.

As the tide reached its peak and the sun rose into the cloudless sky, I spotted the first birds. I was still



focused on the distant flock when a pair rounded the point and made a beeline for the decoys. They were on us before we could shoulder our guns and landed in the spread. We left them alone, knowing a couple of live birds would add a new dimension to the setup. Next a flock of eight came in low over the water, their distinct black-and-white plumage flashing like neon signs. I cupped my hand to my mouth and called a soft *Turr-r, turr-r . . . turr-r, turr-r*, and they turned into the wind. When the birds began backpedaling over the decoys, we came up shooting. Three shots rang out, and three brant hit the water. We were only 20 minutes into our hunt.

**W**hile black brant are hunted elsewhere along the West Coast, San Quintín Bay, 190 miles south of the US border, is one of the most important brant harvest areas in the Pacific Flyway. Hunting has been

popular here for more than 70 years, and for much of that time the Bay has been effectively the private hunting grounds of Southern California sportsmen. By the 1980s, the brant of San Quintín had become more widely known, and the area had developed a reputation as the best place to shoot brant in North America outside of Alaska.

Mexican law requires that hunters be accompanied by a registered guide, so we had booked our February hunt through Arturo Malo of Baja Hunting. Malo's hunters stay at the historic Old Mill Hotel, on the northeast side of the bay, and trips include airport transportation to and from San Diego, meals, accommodations, and boats and guides. Hunts are offered in January and February, and gunning is permitted on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays only. With the proper papers, shotguns can be brought into Mexico, but many hunters opt to use guns provided by Baja Hunting.



*It was one of those days when the birds decoyed as if pulled on a string.*



Despite its relative obscurity, brant hunting is a sport rich in tradition and one pursued by a small-but-dedicated group of sportsmen. Since the market hunting days, those who regularly hunt brant are individuals who religiously keep track of the tides, know the habits of the birds, are willing to endure wet coastal weather and often own and maintain boats, motors and decoys for the singular purpose of pursuing these small tidewater geese.

Brant are a species that many waterfowlers have heard about but never seen. The reason is that this unique goose is intimately tied to saltwater environments. There are three subspecies of brant in the world: Pacific, or black, brant (*Branta bernicla nigricans*), which winter along the Pacific Coast; Atlantic, or light-bellied, brant (*Branta bernicla hrota*), found on the Eastern Seaboard; and Russian, or dark-bellied, brant (*Branta bernicla bernicla*), which winter in England and Europe. The most notable identification marks are the small patches of white on the upper necks and the striking white ventral regions on the

otherwise dark bodies. Males and females look alike, and juveniles can be distinguished by white-tipped wing feathers. The underparts of the Atlantic race are much lighter than those of the other subspecies. They are among the smallest of the geese, averaging just more than three pounds.

Brant spend their lives near salt water, nesting in coastal tundra and wintering on bays, lagoons and estuaries. Pacific brant nest in the high Arctic of Alaska, Canada and Russia. They arrive on the breeding grounds by early June and, as with other Arctic-nesting geese, the amount of snow cover is an important factor in determining breeding success. Upon arrival they must have some snow-free ground to construct their nests. If they are greeted by a blanket of white, they wait only a limited time before the females begin to reabsorb eggs. If the wait is long enough, egg-laying will not occur and a complete breeding failure can result. This strategy, while devastating to annual reproduction, enhances long-term survival of the species.

◀ Brant generally decoy with reckless abandon and provide excellent up-close action.

▼ Pacific brant nest in Alaska, and many make the long trek to winter in Baja California.

Brant nest in small, loose colonies near tidal sloughs and channels. In the Land of the Midnight Sun the broods are active around the clock and spend up to 20 hours a day feeding. Both parents devote themselves to the care of the brood and aggressively defend it against predators. The young grow fast and reach flight stage in about 50 days.

In late August brant leave the breeding grounds bound for Izembek Lagoon, on the Alaska Peninsula. There they spend September and October feeding on eelgrass in preparation for the fall migration. By October virtually the entire world's population of black brant is found at Izembek. This concentration provides excellent hunting for sportsmen willing to travel to the lagoon.

In early November brant leave for points south. The departure is spectacular, with thousands of birds present at Izembek one day and gone the next. Studies I conducted in the mid-'70s documented the flight time from Alaska to Baja California—a distance of 3,000 miles—to be about 60 hours. To complete this amazing migration, the birds must sustain an average flight speed of 50 miles per hour without stopping! Since 1974 and my early research, the nonstop fall flight has been confirmed by several subsequent studies and remains one of nature's most amazing migrations.

During the 1950s, up to 50 percent of the Pacific brant population wintered along the West Coast of

the US, with the remainder found on the Pacific side of Baja California. However, beginning in 1959 more birds were found wintering in Mexico and fewer in the US. By the late 1960s, not only were there more brant in Mexico, but also they had pioneered new wintering areas along the mainland's west coast in Sonora and Sinaloa. Today the remaining Mexican birds are found in Baja California in San Quintín Bay, Scammon's Lagoon, San Ignacio Lagoon and Magdalena Bay.

Black brant still winter in the US, but most fly directly from Alaska to Mexico. The most significant wintering area outside of Mexico is in Izembek Lagoon, where up to 45,000 birds stay behind. Some birds also winter in Puget Sound, where limited hunting occurs.

**O**n our recent hunt, after the first birds were in the bag we enjoyed classic brant-over-decoys action as flock after flock left the open water of the bay to search for exposed eelgrass beds. Brant generally decoy with reckless abandon, but occasionally they refuse to come in. To our good fortune, it was one of those days when the birds decoyed as if pulled on a string.

The next birds to spot the decoys were a family group of two adults and three juveniles. When the birds were less than 25 yards from the blind, I said, "Now!" and we each picked a bird and fired. To my astonishment, four brant fell. I glanced at Scott, and both of us shrugged. He had killed two birds with one shot, while Kelly and I had dropped one each. The birds kept flying and, while some passed offshore and out of range, singles, pairs and small flocks decoyed readily and we each had our five-bird limits by 9:30 AM. The early finish allowed me to photograph brant as they continued to bombard the decoys. At one point there were at least 60 brant in the set, with birds coming and going while I snapped hundreds of images.

For more than 40 years I have hunted and studied brant on both coasts—from Alaska to Mexico and Canada to the Carolinas—yet each fall when I see that first flock, I am captivated by the birds' elegant-but-simple coloration and diminutive size as well as the thought of their long-distance migrations. Brant hunting is a sport steeped in tradition and held in high esteem by a select group of wingshooters who find the pursuit to be among the finest of all waterfowling experiences. 🦌

For more information on hunting black brant, contact Baja Hunting, [bajahunting.com](http://bajahunting.com).

Gary Kramer is an Editor at Large for *Shooting Sportsman*. His most recent book, *Waterfowl of the World*, provides stunning images and biological information on all 167 species of ducks, geese and swans on Earth and is available from [garykramer.net](http://garykramer.net).

