

ALBERTA FOWLING

Duck & goose hunting with Black Dog Outfitters

text & photos by Gary Kramer



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LTHOUGH I’VE BEEN TO THE Canadian prairie many times and hunted from stand-up willow blinds with good success, I have to think that at some point those types of blinds won’t work. Let’s face it: If you put a willow blind in the middle of a harvested grainfield almost anywhere in the US, you might see birds, but the chances of putting any in the bag are slim to none. Yet in prairie Canada, willow blinds and more-stealthy layout blinds work like a

charm on young birds and even adults that may not have been hunted yet in a particular season.

So it wasn’t surprising that it was in a stand-up willow blind that my hunting buddy Fritz Reid and I began our October hunt in Alberta with Black Dog Outfitters. It was still 15 minutes before shooting time, and I could barely make out the goose decoys pointing obediently into the wind. They, too, seemed to be waiting for dawn, when the geese would hopefully rise from a nearby roost pond and head to the harvested wheatfield laden with waste grain. When a vanguard group of mallards appeared out of the darkness and buzzed the decoys, we took it as a good omen for the day ahead.

Shooting time was 7:15 AM, and we were ready when we heard the distant chatter of geese. Our guide, Mark Blemmings, went to work on his goose call, and a series of staccato notes kept the birds locked on our spread. The geese kept coming, their flight powerful and direct until they were just outside the decoys. When Mark said, “Shoot ’em!” I stood up to see six Canadas about to set in and others suspended over the decoys. I picked a bird 25 yards away, blocked out the backpedaling goose and pulled the trigger. The bird dropped like a rock. Looking for a double, I swung on a second goose but missed. When the smoke cleared, the six shooters in our group had managed to drop nine nice Canadas. It was an excellent start to the first day.

The next flock appeared as dark forms in the dawn sky, and as the birds winged closer, we could see they were white-fronted geese. There were at least two dozen in the bunch, but they passed out of range despite Mark’s first-class calling. A few minutes later I peeked over the blind and saw another flock, this one heading our way and dropping altitude. When the dozen-plus birds made a tight circle and were 30 yards up, Mark yelled, “Take ’em!” I found a close-in target and swung right while Fritz tracked left. When the shooting stopped, the group had put another eight geese on the ground.

For the balance of the morning singles, doubles and small groups of Canadas as well as a few snow and white-fronted (specklebelly) geese decoyed. Even though the larger flocks avoided our spread, it took only a couple of



▲ Southern Alberta is a magnet for a number of goose species, including Canadas.

▲ Retrieving a mallard that got too close while checking out the goose spread.

▲ Large flocks of snow geese are often harder to fool than singles and doubles.

hours to bag near limits of dark geese and two snows. (The daily limit in Alberta is eight dark geese—Canada, white-front and cackling—and 50 white geese—snow and Ross’—during the September 1 to mid-December season.)

The action took place last fall near Edmonton, Alberta, where each year tens of thousands of ducks and geese spend several weeks before heading south to their wintering grounds. To someone experiencing this part of Canada for the first time, it might appear to be little more than a vast expanse of cropland. Closer inspection, however, reveals fields of wheat, barley and peas; grain elevators; old barns; farmhouses and small settlements scattered throughout the flat-to-gently rolling terrain. Woven amongst this tapestry are numerous wetlands, small lakes, rivers and native grasslands.

Waterfowl hunting starts September 1, and, depending on the weather, the shooting can hold up until November. This makes duck and goose hunting in Alberta—as well as the other Prairie Provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba—a six- to eight-week affair. During this time the Canadian Prairies deliver some of the highest-quality waterfowl hunting in North America. By November 15 most of the birds have headed south, and many of the wetlands have become locked in ice.

Black Dog Outfitters offers hunts from September 1 to November 15, with the final weeks being excellent for northern mallards and big Canada geese, even though the total number of birds has declined by that time. The waterfowl-rich area that Black Dog hunts within is a swath roughly 150 miles wide and 200 miles long—from Edmonton east to the Saskatchewan border and from Bonnyville

south to Wainwright. Other than Edmonton, the region is characterized by small communities and an agricultural lifestyle.

The vast prairie-pothole country of southern Alberta is prime waterfowl-nesting habitat. Often referred to as North America’s “duck factory,” the Prairie Provinces produce nearly half of the ducks harvested in the US. Providing waste grain and secure roost areas on rivers and wetlands, the region is a major fall staging area for local ducks and geese as well as for birds from Alaska and Arctic Canada. It is a magnet for geese—white-front, Canada, cackling, snow and Ross’—along with impressive concentrations of mallards, pintails and other puddle ducks. More than 250,000 geese and a like number of ducks gather here in late September and early October before leaving for wintering grounds. Our October trip coincided with the peak of the southward migration.

Our base of operations was about an hour east of Edmonton near the community of Tofield, population 2,000. Black Dog Outfitters is owned and operated by Kyler Harms. The business has been in operation since 1996, when Blaine Burns, a former Ducks Unlimited biologist, started it. Kyler purchased the business in 2019, and the following year Covid shut down all guiding operations in Canada. Kyler recognized this as an opportunity, and in 2020 he was able to acquire several adjoining guide territories. This expanded his area of operation to hundreds of thousands of acres, and his became one of the largest waterfowl-guiding territories in Alberta.

The hunting takes place within a 60-mile radius of the lodge, with drives to the hunting spots taking from 10 minutes to an hour. Hunters are housed in single-occupancy rooms in the main lodge, which has four bedrooms



Waterfowlers can enjoy excellent action on the area’s large concentrations of puddle ducks.

and three bathrooms, and five cabins, each with four bedrooms and two shared baths. The three-day hunts are all-inclusive, with airport pick-up in Edmonton, transportation, single accommodations, meals, guide services, use of shotguns, shells, and bird cleaning and packaging all part of the deal.

After that first morning of goose hunting, we returned to the lodge for a late breakfast of epic proportions. During the next three days we dined on farm-to-table family-style meals—many of the ingredients grown and raised within 10 miles of the lodge. At no time did we walk away from the table hungry.

The following day we enjoyed another productive morning, and in the afternoon we met guide Wyatt Wisian for a duck hunt in a wheatfield he had been watching for several days. According to Wyatt's scouting report, there were at least 2,500 mallards and pintails using the field in both the morning and afternoon. For this hunt we were joined by hunting-show host and director Jack Brittingham; his wife, Leigh; and several of Jack's hunting buddies.

After a 30-minute drive, Wyatt pulled the vehicle into the field and we began setting up the willow blind and deploying decoys. Some Canada geese were also using the field, so our spread included both goose and duck decoys. About the time we finished, and with the pickup and trailer still in the field, a group of mallards swung by to take a look. They flared from the vehicle, but it was a signal to complete the preparations and get ready.

It wasn't long before a trio of mallards appeared high overhead. Wyatt started calling, and the birds nearly fell out of the sky in their haste to join the spread. Thirty yards out, all three birds were cartwheeled into the decoys. Jack's English cocker spaniel, Caymus, was sent for the retrieve, and soon three mallards were on the duck strap. A glance at my watch showed there were still nearly two hours before we had to call it quits. One of the benefits of hunting in Canada is that shooting time ends a half-hour after sunset, as opposed to in the US, where it ends at sunset. That last half-hour, like the first half-hour in the morning, often produces some of the best action.

The next group of ducks to decoy was truly impressive. The flock contained at least 60 birds, and after three passes they were at 25 to 35 yards with a couple trying to land. At that point I was in a layout blind behind the shooters photographing the action. I had a front-row seat to the show, as seven or eight ducks hit the ground.

The action continued at a steady pace, and before long we were nearing our limits. With only 15 minutes of shooting time left, we had 30 ducks. It didn't take long for another flock to decoy, and two birds were surgically removed to end the day.

In addition to epic field hunting for ducks and dark geese, we enjoyed a morning of snow goose hunting from

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layout blinds. While snow geese seemed to be more scattered than dark geese and ducks, the scouting team had located a wheatfield loaded with snows about 40 minutes from the lodge. We arrived well before daylight and put out at least a hundred decoys and camouflaged the layout blinds with straw. The first birds came before sunrise as singles and doubles, and we easily dispatched them 25 to 30 yards above the spread. The larger flocks, which contained hundreds of birds, left the roost after sunup and were more difficult to fool, as they obviously had other feeding locations in mind. One flock of about 30 snows decoyed, and we managed to anchor seven. Around 9:30 the flight subsided, and we decided to call it quits. The total bag consisted of 26 snow geese. All but one of the birds were juveniles, illustrating that birds of the year are less wary than adults.

Another morning we decided to set up on a pothole that the scouts said was holding several dozen mallards. We arrived in the dark, deployed the duck decoys and set up a willow blind at the water's edge. Potholes are generally used as day roosts, so we knew that most of the action would be later in the morning when the birds returned from feeding in the fields. The first pair arrived just before sunrise, and two shots put them on the water. A lull followed, with only a few singles showing up. Around 8 AM a couple of small groups arrived, but the flight from the fields back to the roost pond never really occurred and we ended up with a dozen mallards and couple of wigeon.

On the final morning of the trip we enjoyed a mixed-bag field hunt for ducks and geese. Heading back to the lodge that day, Fritz and I began talking about a return visit. It had been six years since I'd hunted in Alberta with Black Dog Outfitters. As we boarded the plane in Edmonton for the flight home, I vowed to never let that happen again. 🐾

For more information on Black Dog Outfitters, go to blackdogoutfittersalberta.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.

When mallards and geese have been seen feeding in the same field, putting out decoys for both can be productive.

