



Coast-to-Coast BRANT

By Gary Kramer

Brant are unique birds, a species virtually unknown to many waterfowl hunters, particularly those that live away from the coasts. The reason is this unique goose is intimately tied to saltwater environments. Yet most serious waterfowl hunters have at least heard about brant hunting in the bays and estuaries on both the Pacific and Atlantic coasts.

Despite its relative obscurity, brant hunting is a sport rich in tradition and one pursued by a rather small but dedicated group of sportsmen. Since the market hunting days, brant shooting has been practiced by individuals who religiously keep track of the tides; learn the habits of the birds; endure wet and cold coastal weather; and own and maintain boats, motors and decoys for the singular purpose of pursuing these tidewater geese.

Among the smallest of the geese, brant average just over three pounds. Three races or subspecies exist worldwide: the Pacific or black brant (*Branta bernicla nigricans*), found along the West Coast of North America; the Atlantic or light-bellied brant (*B.b. hrota*), found along the Eastern Seaboard of North America; and the dark-bellied brant or brent goose (*B.b. bernicla*) that breeds in Siberia and winters in Europe. The most notable identification marks on all the subspecies are the small patches of white on the upper neck and the striking white ventral region on the otherwise dark body.

Brant spend their lives near saltwater nesting in coastal tundra and wintering on coastal bays, lagoons and estuaries. They arrive on the breeding grounds in May and, like other Arctic nesting geese, the amount of snow cover present when they arrive is the most important factor in determining breeding success. Upon arrival, brant 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 female begins to reabsorb eggs. If the wait is long enough, egg laying will not occur and the female can experience a complete breeding failure. This strategy, while devastating on annual reproduction, enhances long-term survival of the species.

This species nests in small, loose colonies near tidal sloughs and channels. In the land of the midnight sun, the broods are active round-the-clock and spend up to 20 hours a day feeding. Both parents are devoted to the care of the brood, aggressively defending the clan against predators, and the precocial young grow fast in the Arctic, reaching flight stage in about 50 days.

Pacific brant nest in Arctic Alaska, Canada and Russia. In late August, they leave the breeding grounds, moving to Izembek Lagoon on the Alaska Peninsula. Here, 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 can be found at Izembek, then in early November, they leave for points south.





The exodus is spectacular, with often more than 50,000 birds departing at the same time. I conducted studies as a graduate student in the mid-1970s that documented the flight time from Alaska to Baja California — a distance of 3,000 miles — at 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, several subsequent studies have confirmed the nonstop fall flight, which remains one of nature's most amazing events.

During the 1950s, up to 50% of the Pacific brant population wintered along the west coast of the United States, with the remainder found on the Pacific side of Baja California. However, beginning in 1959, more birds were found wintering in Mexico and less in the United States. By the late 1960s, not only were there more brant in Mexico but they had also pioneered new wintering areas along the mainland west coast. Today, 10% to 15% of the population migrates to these “new” Mexican wintering grounds in Sonora and Sinaloa. The remaining birds are found along the Baja coast at San Quintín Bay, Scammon's Lagoon, San Ignacio Bay and Magdalena Bay.

About 50% to 60% of the birds fly directly from Alaska to Mexico. Outside of Mexico, the most significant wintering populations are at Izembek Lagoon, Alaska, where the number of brant that do not migrate and stay to spend the winter has steadily increased since the early 2000s. Currently, more than 50,000 Pacific brant winter at Izembek, with the other significant wintering area located

in Puget Sound, Washington, where about 8,000 birds are found.

Atlantic brant, which have much lighter underparts, have the distinction of breeding further north than most other waterfowl, with their nesting grounds in the high Arctic of Canada. In the central portion of the Arctic, the breeding range of the Atlantic race overlaps that of the Pacific. Light-bellied brant move from the breeding grounds in late August to their staging areas in James Bay, where they feed and rest during September and October. The fall migration of the Atlantic race has not been as well documented as the Pacific race, but scientists believe the birds move overland from James Bay to their wintering grounds on the East Coast. In winter, Atlantic brant are found from Massachusetts to the Carolinas, where they frequent coastal estuaries and bays. While their distribution encompasses much of the Eastern Seaboard, up to 70% are found along the coast of New Jersey. Other significant wintering areas include Long Island, New York and the coast of Virginia.

While I have hunted black brant extensively along the Pacific Coast from Alaska to Mexico, and spent several winter mornings on the shores of New York and New Jersey chasing after Atlantic brant, I often wondered if both subspecies could be hunted almost simultaneously — that is, shoot a brant one day on the Pacific Coast and the next day on the Atlantic. Last season, my hunting buddy Dan Connelly and I devised a plan to do just that!

Our adventure spanned both coasts over a six-day period



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in early December. The first leg took us to San Quintín Bay on the Baja California peninsula, 190 miles south of San Diego, California. While black brant are hunted at Izembek Lagoon in Alaska, Samish and Padilla Bays in Washington, Humboldt Bay in California and various other locations along the Pacific Coast, San Quintín in Baja is the single most important harvest area.

The brant season in Baja California is November 1 to February 28, with a daily limit of four birds. At San Quintín, hunting is permitted only Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. The 2023-24 brant season in New Jersey was November 23 to December 2, 2023, and December 14, 2023 to January 6, 2024. On the Atlantic coast, the brant limit is generally two birds per day, but for the 2023-24 season, it was reduced to one bird due to less than favorable breeding conditions.

Hunting at San Quintín has been popular for at least 85 years. Here, most birds are bagged during early-morning high tides from a series of semi-permanent shore blinds. Because Mexican law requires all visiting hunters to hire a guide, an outfitter at San Quintín sets up visiting hunters with guides, boats, motors and decoys.

The most important condition to watch while brant hunting at San Quintín — or any other location, for that matter — is the stage of the tide. During periods of high water, brant raft up on the bay or move offshore to sit on the ocean. As the tide drops, however, the birds begin to fly in search of exposed eelgrass beds and mudflats where

they can feed, rest and preen. Brant hunters can take advantage of these habits by concentrating their efforts on the outgoing tide.

Brant can be unpredictable. One day they will decoy with reckless abandon and at other times refuse to decoy at all. This was evident during our adventure last December.

On the first day of our trip, Dan and I set up on a point near the bay entrance, where brant pass during the fall of the tide. The tides were good — high at sunrise, dropping to a low by midday. The bay surface was rippled by a light breeze, and not long after sunrise, the birds began to fly. The first pair came in from the bay entrance, rounded the corner and made a beeline for the decoys. Before we knew it, they landed in the blocks. We left them alone, knowing that a couple of live birds would add a new dimension to the spread.

A few minutes later, Dan spotted a flock of about a dozen birds heading in our direction. This time we were ready, and when the birds started to backpedal over the decoys, we came up shooting. When the smoke cleared, three brant were on the water. Needless to say, the two birds that had been sitting in the decoys winged away, not knowing how lucky they were.

The next day, the conditions were even better. A stiff wind was blowing in from the southwest, and the brant started flying even before the tide dropped. While birds moved back and forth across the bay, only a single juvenile decoyed during the first hour of our hunt. By San Quintín standards, that was a slow start. Later, the wind freshened, and while some birds passed well offshore and out of range, singles, pairs and small flocks decoyed with regularity. We easily bagged our four-bird limits. The early finish allowed me to photograph brant as they approached the decoys without fear of ending up in the freezer. At one point, there were at least 75 brant in the decoys, and birds came and went while I snapped image after image.



The third day, Dan and I finished our limits by 9:30 a.m. and made a hasty retreat back to the motel to gather up our gear for the drive to San Diego. We'd timed the five-hour drive so we could make the border crossing by early evening and catch a red-eye flight from San Diego to Philadelphia. The trip went off without a hitch, and at 10:30 p.m., we boarded our plane. We slept through most of the flight and landed on time. Another buddy of ours, PJ Carter, who had arrived the day before and rented a car, was waiting at the curb as we exited baggage claim, and by 6:15 a.m. eastern time, the three of us were bound for the New Jersey coast. Two and a half hours later, we arrived at a boat dock near Cape May, where Captain Jim Weiser, a seasoned waterfowl guide, was waiting and ready to go.

It took only 10 minutes for us to reach the blind in a tidal gut deep in the salt marsh. The brant decoys, along with a few black duck decoys, were already deployed, bobbing and weaving in the chop due to wind blowing out of the northwest. We hunkered down in the blind to ward off the cold wind that blew in off the Atlantic, all the while intent on scanning the horizon for brant that would be moving on the falling tide.

Just after the tide reached its peak, I spotted the first birds in the distance. They came in from the open bay and flew up the wide channel. But instead of decoying, they followed the far shore and passed out of range, completely ignoring our decoys.

The next flock was more cooperative, and three birds came from the south flying into the wind. I was on the right-hand side of the decoys, and as the brant passed over the outer edge of the spread, I fired, pulling the rug out from under one of the birds. Within three or four minutes of the shotgun blast, Jim's boat showed up, with his Lab plunging into the water. And seconds later, the first Atlantic brant on our first morning on the East Coast was in my hands. I glanced at my watch, which read 10:45 a.m.

We had accomplished our goal — to bag brant on both coasts in just shy of 24 hours! It was high fives all the way around.

We settled back into the blind, and in less than 15 minutes, we spotted a large flock off in the distance. As they came off the open bay and into the channel, a small group split from the main formation. In a low and direct flight, they headed toward the spread. When the birds were 25 yards out and over the blocks, Dan and PJ fired. Two brant crumpled moments before they would have touched the surface of the water. The next two days similarly provided solid action, and we each bagged our brant, plus a couple of bonus black ducks. Then we finally headed home, tired but delighted at our accomplishment.

I have hunted and studied brant on both coasts — from Alaska to Mexico and Canada to the Carolinas — for more than 40 years. Yet each fall, when I see my first flock of brant, I am captivated by their elegant but simple coloration, diminutive size and long-distance migrations.

Brant hunting is more restrictive today than it once was. But for those sportsmen who hold brant hunting in high esteem, the opportunity to perpetuate the tradition still exists. With continued wise management, good land stewardship and reasonable harvest levels, brant hunting will be here for the next generation of waterfowlers to enjoy. 🦆

To arrange for Pacific brant hunts at San Quintín Bay, contact bajahunting.com; for Atlantic brant hunts in New Jersey, contact finsandfeather.com.

Gary Kramer's most recent book, [Waterfowl of the World](http://Waterfowl%20of%20the%20World), provides stunning images and biological information about all 167 species of ducks, geese and swans on Earth and is available from garykramer.net.