



Flocks had settled behind the goose spread.



The pit blind sat on top of a bank that looked over a warm-spring side channel.

We came to this piece of cattle country in mid-December, peering as we passed at the buttes and bluffs that framed the trampled grasslands like awkward sentinels on a dry Triassic Era plain. We finally arrived in tiny Minatare and made our way to North Platte Outpost, a converted cattle auction barn that now serves as a dignified lodge for a premier hunting operation, with even the wood-fenced corrals still intact.

My traveling partner was John Depalma, *American Waterfowler's* sales manager. One of John's many talents is outdoor photography. In that role he had visited North Platte Outpost many times over the years and was able to provide background on the lodge and the country surrounding it. What both of us were most interested in at that moment, however, was the angle of the sun, as we'd tried to time our arrival with an afternoon field hunt for Canadas. We hurriedly tossed our duffels in our rooms, donned our duds and were loaded and on the road in guide Ross Juelfs's pickup.

Ours was not the normal hunt schedule, due to my own logistics problems, but we thought we could experience the Outpost despite having only two afternoons and two mornings to hunt. The corn wasn't far off, but we were late. A large wad of birds had already formed on the ground a mile to the north. Our broad cornfield, and the pit blind we'd occupy, was ready for action the moment we arrived. All we needed was geese, but it looked like most had already flown from the roost in the river valley a couple of miles away. It was my and John's fault we were late.

Our high-wired anticipation ran

opposite the stillness of the scene. A golden light draped the field as we watched an empty blue sky for signs of approaching geese. When a random flock appeared, it steadily flew beyond reach, locked on the big bunch of birds that had settled so far behind us. When all seemed lost, Ross, with some careful flagging and calling, was able to turn a small bunch into us and we made quick work of three of the birds. Impressively, John, with his signature 20 gauge, had accounted for a bird that was a good 40 yards out. But that was it—the last of the geese coming out to feed. We enjoyed the show for the next hour or so as small flocks crossed outside our perimeter on their way back to the roost. It had been enough—a taste of the action. Tomorrow morning we would be hunting ducks from a blind at the river and we'd get a chance to return to the corn in the afternoon.

Daylight On The River

The wind came up and blew steadily overnight, pushing against the wall of my bedroom in the lodge. It was still blowing when we headed for the river.

Light was just beginning to leak into the morning's blackness as we arrived at our blind, a metal pit buried into the bank. We lowered our guns and gear and climbed in after them while Ross situated the yellow dog, Lisco, in the small, covered box that served as his "pit," just off Ross's left shoulder.

Gathering light revealed a strange scene—not the river itself, but a small side channel more like a wide ditch that Ross explained ran for about a mile before rejoining the river. The channel held little current but benefited from warm springs that kept it ice free in

freezing weather, though our day was beginning with only a light frost. The morning broke clear with paintbrushed clouds, lots of geese trading over the river and high ducks trading too.

Our buried position and the high bank that encased the blind meant that our view of most of the decoys and nearly all of the water was blocked. Instead, a pan of our surroundings took in the quarter-mile of cattle-distressed scrub trees and dusty ground that lay between us and the Platte's main channel. For anyone used to watching birds "center up" on a decoy spread, the setup was a bit confounding. To add to the off-kilter effect, the light breeze came from hard to our right, so birds would be coming in overland from hard left.

A couple of shots broke the stillness from a blind nearer the river that Ross identified as mallards began their early flights high overhead. Most weren't much interested in our little piece of the world and seemed steadfastly deaf to our calls. Soon a volley erupted much louder from a blind upwind that Ross explained was on the same channel we were hunting—a seemingly positive sign.

The wind, forecast to switch to northwest and come up in speed, had died at sunrise leaving only the light, puffing breeze. Our first guest was a drake mallard that slipped in and landed. "Free-in, free-out," we decided in anticipation of a BIG DAY, letting the confounded greenhead jump into the air and leave unabated. Next came a fast and stealthy drake that I admit missing. We got caught off guard by a couple of different birds that snuck in over our shoulders on the odd, shifting breeze. Vowing not to let that happen



An afternoon limit of geese saved the day.

again, we shot a hen mallard that spilled down from some unknown altitude in a sweeping dive that had us looking directly into the sun. We next took a lone drake mallard before, seemingly suddenly, the ducks stopped looking at us entirely, though from time to time we could hear shogun reports from other blinds. Ross admitted that he had had first choice of blinds and had probably made the wrong choice, which seemed bravely honest. But having hunted enough years, John and I both understood that it wasn't the blind but the failed wind forecast that had dictated our fate on this morning.

We decided to pull the plug in favor of a good lunch, but as so often happens as soon as packing begins, one of the busy flocks of geese trading up and down the river decided to turn our way. If they continued on course, this bunch of small Canadas looked like they would take a line over the blind. They did, and Ross and I reached up high with our 12 bores to each pull a bird down to earth.

Back In The Corn

Determined to right our day, we returned to the pit in the cornfield early enough in the afternoon to intercept feed-bound geese. With no live birds on the ground competing with our spread of full-body decoys, the first distant flock took a line straight at our busy goose flag.

Although the guides at the Outpost normally bring their guns along simply as tools for cripples, rather than joining in the shooting, John and I had invited Ross to shoot with us any time he wished. A quiet and efficient young hunter raised in western Nebraska,



The river spread tucked behind a warm spring feed while snow squalls added drama.

Ross had been guiding for North Platte Outpost for eight years. He clearly knew what to expect from the birds in each setting and was good with his calls.

As the geese cleared a center pivot a few hundred yards away, we could see that the dozen or so birds were all small Canadas working against the light wind. On they came just off the deck and not rising until we popped our heads and shoulders above ground level. Two birds fell in unison at John's and Ross's shots, and I dropped a third as the birds flared up and into the wind. We only needed four more birds to finish our daily limit, and with more geese in the air and on the way it looked like it wouldn't take long to accomplish that goal.

The next flock in was lesser Canadas that flared to my side at the last minute. I dropped my last bird and John hit a bird that staggered at the shot from the 20 gauge before faltering and falling just downwind of the spread. As we retrieved the geese, we watched flocks settling in two different fields behind us. We only needed two more but now had visible competition in the form of black masses on the ground.

Predictably, flocks now split on either

side of our spread as they chose to hone in on one or the other of the two feeding flocks. The sun was lowering on the horizon, and we wondered if Ross and John would get their last cracks at birds when a trio of giant honkers took a line on our spread. Ross made some pretty goose music on the call and the birds settled in a low, slow approach just yards off the ground. When they stalled just on downwind side of the spread, John and Ross came up firing left and right and finished our daily limit. Capping off the day with the geese took much of the sting off our morning duck drought and sharpened our appetite for the dinner that awaited us back at camp.

Weather Change

The approaching snowstorm hadn't been a surprise. It had been predicted days in advance to reach the Nebraska plains, the only questions being when and how severe. As we turned in for the night, the sky was overcast, but the parched brown landscape of late fall prevailed. Hours later, fast-falling flakes created an envelope of swirling white-on-black in the halo of Ross's headlights.



Lisco did yeoman's work in the snow and cold current of the river.

A confusing mantle of snow hid the lid of the river pit only feet from the side of the truck. Ross lifted the grassy lid and our headlamps illuminated the cold, dry, steel interior, our home for the next few hours. I found the ladder and crawled in, then distributed guns, shell bags and lunches as they were lowered like so much cargo into the hold of a departing ship. Once settled inside, our breath steaming in the beams of our lights, Ross asked if we'd like the heater turned on—posed as a silly question. As darkness turned to gray, the smell of burned dust wafted off the heater mantle as the gas flame took effect.

Poking my head through the faux grass that covered my shooting port earned me a dose of snow down the neck of my jacket. I ducked back in, threw up my hood and tried again with better results. Surveying the scene, I could see the middle of the river and beyond, but the near bank and any decoys were blocked from view by the high bank on which we perched. It was again strange not to be able to see the decoy spread, and it gave us a bit of a vertigo effect when imagining incoming ducks.

But the river scene was priceless. Snow, fanned by gusts of wind, curled down toward the Platte's black surface as it flowed right to left. The far bank, some 75 yards away, held mixed brush, cottonwoods and open field, all well framed against the newly whitened ground. The river current was moderately strong, its shallow nature revealed by riffles while the bank on our side curled away from us upstream, creating a smooth pocket for resting birds. A small channel fed into the river from the upstream side of this pocket, described by Ross as fed by a warm spring with an outflow temperature that attracts ducks.

Between snow flurries, we could see both ducks and Canada geese tracing the path of the river at safe altitudes. The ducks mostly moved in pairs and singles, at scattered intervals. There really wasn't much working the birds. By the time we saw the incomers emerging out of the snow-scudded

North Platte Outpost

With more than three miles of controlled access to the North Platte River on both sides, and 1,500 acres of adjacent croplands, creeks and sloughs, Cheyenne Ridge's North Platte Outpost is a bird-hunting paradise, including some of the most consistent mallard hunting in the Central Flyway.

Although the lodge offers a blend of duck, goose and pheasant hunting (all available to hunters each day with the combo package), we chose to focus solely on duck and goose hunting. Still, fellow guests at North Platte Outpost were eager to get on the pheasants after a hearty lunch. Listening to these hunters recount their upland encounters, it was obvious their time was well spent. Not many outfitters can offer a trifecta of ducks, geese and pheasants all in the same day.

One of the things I most enjoyed was the way hunts were scheduled at the Outpost. With a standard four-night, three-day hunt, hunters are able to arrive on the afternoon prior to their hunt, eat a great dinner and bed down well ready for the first day's hunting. On the last day of hunting there is no rush to travel. The third day is a full day of hunting, followed by another fine dinner, leaving plenty of time to pack and get a good night's rest before departing.

Bird limits are generous at the Outpost. Generally, six ducks (five mallards plus one bonus duck), three geese and three pheasants can all be taken on the same day.



That's 12 birds (additional pheasants can be taken for a fee). Processed birds can be frozen and shipped directly to a hunter's home for a fee.

North Platte Outpost is so renowned that it was the first waterfowl lodge to receive the Beretta Trident rating for excellence. Hunters don't have to travel with their guns, unless they choose to. Beretta shotguns are available for free use, and unlimited ammo is also provided at no charge.

The chef at the Outpost did a great job of keeping guests well fed. From the pre-dawn continental breakfasts to sit-down full lunches to chef's specialty dinners featuring pre-dinner appetizers and full bar, all at no extra charge, the meals are memorable and enjoyable as guests get to know each other and share hunting tales at the dining table. The lodge itself is cozy and warm, wood-paneled almost throughout, with the high-ceilinged, restored livestock sales barn the centerpiece of the commons and lounge area offering a bit of cattle-country mystique that permeates the Platte River country.

North Platte Outpost is an easy reach in the center of the U.S., just a bit more than a three-hour drive from Denver International airport and only 20 minutes from the regional airport in Scottsbluff.

A three-day, four-night combo hunt for ducks, geese and pheasants costs \$2,850 per person—a bargain considering that meals, guides, guns, ammo and other amenities are included at one of the top waterfowling destinations in North America. The lodge operates mid-fall through mid-February each season.

Contact CheyenneRidgeOutfitters.com; 877-850-5144; Info@CheyenneRidge-Outfitters.com. J.S.





At the pit, John seems to be having a conversation with Lisco about the weather.

sky, they were locked on the spread and lined up on a slow into-the-wind descent that skirted our side of the river. And so began a paced repetition of side-winded shots—a drake, or two, splashed into the cold North Platte River, then Lisco disappeared over the steep bank and returned to view in front of the blind with his prize from somewhere downstream.

We slowly chipped away at our three-man limit of mallards, all drakes, while wishing for bonus ducks that might fill our six-bird Central Flyway limits. Ross dropped a hen wigeon to aid our cause, and John picked up a green-winged teal with a bark from the 20 gauge, but that was the last non-mallard in our future.

Through it all, Lisco displayed his knowledge of river currents and this


specific spot. He made a couple of impressive marked retrieves on the opposite bank, then proceeded to what appeared to be his favorite crossing, a spot where he could wade, rather than swim, much of the distance across the river's breadth.

Meanwhile, snow kept falling, blanketing three or four inches on what had been bare ground less than 12 hours earlier. With nearly a full limit, we turned off the spinner and honkers began to fall. Three honkers made a low pass over the pit, lured by Ross's calling, and John and I dropped them all. Ross added another from a flaring, decoying flock. We sailed a lone honker across the river where it landed well back in the brush and trees. Lisco was off after the bird, but after failing to pick up its



Ross and Lisco return with another greencap.

trail was joined by Ross, who had waded the river to take up the search. John and I used hand signals to direct Ross, now out of hearing range in the snow and wind, but the bird was never found. Only a short time later, two more honkers made an aborted approach from downwind and I dropped the last goose of the morning behind us on dry land.

Back in the warmth of the lodge, we traded in our heavy clothing for casual wear and headed toward the dining room and a hot lunch. With a head full of magical images from the snowy morning on the North Platte, I noticed for the first time a sign on the hallway wall: "The heavens proclaim the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1). I couldn't have said it better. 



This goose didn't like the way Lisco was handling him, and the current wasn't helping either.



Admiring a brace of Platte River drakes.