

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.

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