

A silhouette of a hunter in a cap and jacket stands in the foreground, holding a duck high in the air. The scene is set against a vibrant sunset sky with orange, pink, and purple hues. In the background, a calm body of water reflects the sky, with several other ducks swimming. The overall mood is serene and nostalgic.

# A DAY TO REMEMBER

Youth Waterfowl Hunt Day initiates a new generation of hunters.

**Written and photographed by F. Eugene Hester**

As the first light of dawn appeared in the eastern sky, we peered over the side of our hunting blind. It was still mostly dark, but the marsh was awakening in the dawn. A slight breeze gave movement and the appearance of life to the decoys in front of us. The long-awaited time was finally here, and we were experiencing a rush of excitement and anticipation. We waited, watched and listened. We whispered and pointed as flocks of ducks buzzed over the marsh.

**A beautiful late-winter sky, an enticing spread of decoys, and hunting success in the form of a drake pintail help engage youngsters in waterfowling traditions.**



ducks to come close enough, the boys would be able to hit them.

We had spent the previous night in a friend's house in Hyde County near Gull Rock at the edge of Pamlico Sound. The boys were excited as we awoke long before dawn and ate a quick breakfast. Ronald and I told of previous adventures as we drove the 15 miles to a camp owned by a hunt club a few miles northeast of Lake Mattamuskeet. There we met other hunters and obtained instructions about safety, shooting times, bag limits and blind location. All of these preliminaries added to the anticipation, and the boys' enthusiasm was obvious.

It was a cold morning, and each boy was wearing waders, long underwear, an insulated camouflage jacket, a cap and gloves. Ronald and I watched as they loaded their guns and checked the safeties. Ronald and I checked them, too. We explained to the boys why steel shot was required for waterfowl hunting. And we told them about shooting distances and the necessity to lead passing ducks. Then we all watched for incoming ducks.

This was a special day not only because it was an exciting chance to hunt waterfowl, but also because it was devoted to hunting by youngsters only. Adults were in no way competing; in fact, adults served solely as guides, mentors and advisors. The focus was entirely on the young hunters and how to make their adventure a successful and memorable one.

The Youth Waterfowl Hunt is an annual bonus day of hunting that takes place outside of the regular duck season, on a non-school day within two weeks of the end of the regular season. To participate, the youth must be 15 or younger and be accompanied by a non-hunting adult. The concept originated with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and was first offered to the states in the 1996–1997 seasons. As with all migratory bird hunting seasons, FWS establishes a framework, and then each state sets dates and other conditions within that framework.

Paul Schmidt, assistant director of the service, said that most states now encourage Youth Waterfowl Hunt Day as a way to recruit young hunters and educate them on hunting ethics and tradition.

"We believe that these hunts provide a wonderful opportunity for youth to engage in the conservation traditions of waterfowl

hunting," Schmidt said. "It is educational and recreational at the same time. It is important to encourage mentoring of our youth in many ways, and this is one opportunity for the FWS to contribute to this. The sooner hunters can learn important information about the techniques and rules, the sooner they can become proficient in such things as identifying species in the field."

David Cobb, chief of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission's Division of Wildlife Management, thinks the youth hunt is a great idea. Waterfowl hunters usually want to hunt late in the season, so the commission has picked Feb. 5 for the Youth Waterfowl Hunt this year. Adult interest and participation, Cobb said, are keys to making these hunts successful. "Young hunters especially like the waterfowl hunts; they want action," he said. "Riding in a boat, setting out decoys, watching the actions of the dog and seeing ducks flying all provide activity."

In our blind we eagerly waited for the legal starting time of 30 minutes before sunrise. Ducks already were flying by and even stopping among our decoys. With 10 minutes left before shooting time, we began counting down the minutes. More ducks flew by, and the minutes seemed to pass very slowly. But then with 60 seconds to go, Ronald told the boys to get ready, that it was almost time.

Soon we saw a pair of wigeons barreling toward us, and the boys began shooting. The drake fell only a few feet away. As I returned from retrieving it, the boys were exchanging congratulatory high-fives.

Some ducks seemed to know where the blind was, and they skillfully kept out of gun range. Even with four of us watching, several flocks slipped by unnoticed before the boys could shoot. But enough ducks came close enough to provide the opportunities we had hoped for, and by the time the hunt was over, we had three nice drakes: a wigeon, a gadwall and one of the most beautiful pintails I had ever seen, in full plumage. The central tail feathers for which it is named were long, as they typically are late in the season.

At lunchtime we reassembled at the camp, where hunt club members had prepared a meal of hot dogs and hamburgers. A biologist

discussed waterfowl biology, the importance of wetlands, and habitat preservation techniques. There was even a wood duck nest box erected on a post in the yard, with steps that helped the young hunters look inside. The biologist pointed out the metal predator guard and explained the importance of preventing raccoons and blacksnakes from raiding the nests.

Before returning for the afternoon hunt, each young hunter received several gifts, including a pair of mallard decoys, a hunting cap and even a recipe for cooking a duck.

There are many ways to measure the success of a Youth Waterfowl Hunt. One, of course, is by the number of ducks killed. But probably the best way is to observe how long the boys talk about the hunt and how eager they are to go again. With those as a gauge, there is no doubt that this was a very successful trip, and one that will be remembered for a lifetime.

"We are having the pintail mounted," Will said with enthusiasm, "and I will send you a picture of it." I sent Will a photograph of himself at the hunting blind with the duck. "That hunt is about all the boys talked about for several weeks," their parents said. "And they have been busy looking at catalogs of hunting equipment." ♦

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**Youth days allow Will Edwards and other young sportsmen to hunt waterfowl without competition from adult hunters.**

Even though there was little light, we could identify wigeons, gadwalls, mallards, pintails and wood ducks. And there were green-winged teal that buzzed by at what seemed to be incredible speeds, twisting and turning. They were upon us and gone in the blink of an eye.

More than an hour earlier, we had drained water and removed ice from a boat tied to a dike, loaded two boys plus decoys and guns, and paddled to the blind. When we positioned the decoys in the opening in front of the blind, we left a vacant spot in the spread as an invitation to incoming ducks.

I felt fortunate to sponsor Will Edwards, a 10-year-old boy on his first duck hunt. Will and I had shared many outdoor adven-

**Participants in a youth hunt learn about decoys (above) and duck calling (left) and then reap the rewards — seeing ducks fly past their blind.**

tures, including his first squirrel hunt, when he killed two bushytails. We were partners on equally exciting fishing trips, too. Though he had never hunted ducks, I knew about his shooting ability. His uncle had told me, "He has never shot a duck, but he can hit clay pigeons better than I can."

Will and I shared this adventure with Will's cousin, Simon Edwards, and Ronald Barham, Simon's grandfather. I felt confident that if Ronald and I could get the

## If You Go

One of the best ways to ensure a successful youth hunt is to take the youngster to the same places you hunt. If you do not have your own hunting area, you might contact the same guide or club you would for your own hunt. With a guide's blinds and equipment already in place, it can be a bonus day for him. Some county Web sites list hunting guides and provide telephone numbers.

Many guides and other adults recognize that young people are the next generation of waterfowl hunters. They also know that young people must understand why preserving wetlands is important and why saving wetlands hundreds of miles away aids the production of ducks that spend the winter here in North Carolina.

One problem we faced on our hunt was that the blinds were constructed for adults. The young boys had difficulty in seeing the ducks until they were almost overhead. They quickly learned to overcome this handicap by standing on their seats, but then they had to stand the whole time. Next time we will carry something for them to stand on — maybe something light and portable, such as a couple of milk crates and a board. A couple of boxes could be used for seats, too.

The weather in midwinter can be very cold, and hand warmers or heat in the blind can save the trip. Waterproof clothing is essential for protection from rain or snow. And don't fail to pack good treats to eat and drink.

### MORE YOUTH HUNTS

The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, in cooperation with other agencies and landowners, provides several types of youth hunting opportunities. They are described in the "Special Hunt Opportunities in North Carolina" booklet, available from hunting license agents or online at [www.ncwildlife.org](http://www.ncwildlife.org).