



‘I Got One’

written by Josh Leventhal

photographed by Thomas Harvey

A Delta Waterfowl youth hunt brings out the inner hunter in my son

The sun had barely crested the horizon when my 13-year-old son sprang up from the bush he had been hiding beside, planted the butt of his shotgun in his right shoulder and awaited the instruction of our guide on this early February morning.

“Shoot . . . that . . . bird, Paul,” Chase Luker rhythmically bellowed. “Get it!”

Paul, always a good listener, pulled the trigger on the 20-gauge shotgun we had borrowed for the weekend, simultaneously jolting his body backward and felling the duck into the flooded cornfield about 30 yards out. He had merely wounded the bird, which had begun paddling for cover.

“Shoot it again!” Luker instructed. “Somebody put a gun on that bird.”

Paul stepped forward to the edge of the water and finished it off with one more shot. A round of cheers erupted from our hunting party, part of an annual youth duck hunt run by the Triangle Chapter of Delta Waterfowl. One of the organizers, a Raleigh

realtor and duck hunting enthusiast named J.T. Atwell, retrieved the drake pintail for Paul and handed it to him with a congratulatory pat on the back. “Way to go, Paul.”

Paul inspected his prize, carefully placed it on the ground beside him and returned to his crouch. He then turned to me with a wry smile on his face and very clearly mouthed the words, “I got one.”

He would bag one more pintail during our morning at Dare to Hyde Outdoor Adventures’ impoundment in Fairfield, putting an exclamation point on an exhilarating 36-hour retreat. But really, he received much more: a life-changing experience.

This was my son’s first hunt. It will not be his last. He had gone from hesitantly accepting the invitation for Delta Waterfowl’s annual youth hunt (“What if someone shoots me?” he said worriedly to my wife and me six weeks earlier) to pleading with me to let him join Atwell and his two boys for an afternoon session in the impoundment.



If Delta Waterfowl's mission for its youth duck hunt is to spark an interest in hunting, then Paul left that afternoon with a flamethrower's worth of hunting energy. Let's review Atwell's checklist of goals for kids at the event:

- "I want them to have a good time with their father." Check! (Paul often brings up the trip, inevitably leading to the question of "When can we go back?")
- "I want them to get to spend time in the outdoors." Check! (He slept well on the ride home after his day in the duck muck.)
- "I hope that it will kindle an interest in hunting." Check! Check! (Paul spent the next week in our backyard with his new duck call, trying to lure waterfowl from nearby Lake Lynn into our pool.)
- "I hope that they are fortunate enough to harvest a duck before they leave." Check! (Paul cleaned his two ducks, packed them on ice and helped cook them the following night.)

Paul was not the only new hunter to enjoy success. Seven of the 12 youth hunters that day harvested their first duck. "There were a lot of smiling kids, happy dads and busy taxidermists after that," Atwell said. "I figure if a couple of them get hooked on the sport, then that's great, we've done our job. It kind of passes it down to the next generation, which is always the goal, isn't it?"

Delta Waterfowl's Triangle chapter has been achieving this goal with a youth duck hunt for nearly 10 years. Working in partnership with Dare to Hyde, the outfitter that hosts the kids and their dads at its Mattamuskeet Outpost and provides the guides and impoundments, the youth hunt has grown in popularity and now runs over both weekends of the youth-only waterfowl season. It strives to provide an educational and fun experience, and includes gun safety instruction, duck identification, call workshops and plenty of food and camaraderie.

"Duck hunting is such a social endeavor," said Luker, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission's hunter education coordinator for the Northern Coastal region. "If you do it with someone else, you do it with folks you like. And if you do it with strangers, then you like them, too, when you're done."

How Did We Get Here?

Paul was not the only one with a few pre-hunt jitters; this was new to me as well. I grew up just outside of Washington, D.C., where I spent my youth outdoors playing sports and going fishing with my father. We never hunted, so I couldn't offer Paul much fatherly advice.

I also didn't have the equipment he needed for the trip. So, as I often do with hunting-related issues, I turned to my colleague Mike Zlotnicki. "I've got the perfect shotgun for Paul," Zlotnicki excitedly told me after I informed him that we had been drawn. "It's a Remington 11-87 20-gauge. It's light. Not too much kick. I bought it for my girls."

Zlotnicki also loaned Paul his noise canceling earmuffs and a pair of camo fingerless gloves. I borrowed a pair of waders from Atwell; Luker had some for Paul. We grabbed two boxes of the 3-inch No. 4 steel shot at Bass Pro Shops as we hit the road for Mattamuskeet on Friday afternoon. I also bought Paul a camo sweatshirt and beanie, protective eyewear and a tub of Uncle Bob's Snack Mix (a boy's gotta eat). We were finally ready.

Eastbound and Down

Paul and I have traveled much of the Piedmont for baseball tournaments, but we had never been as far east as Hyde County. The vast expanse and remoteness of it was unlike anything we had experienced elsewhere in North Carolina. It felt like we had ventured more than just a few hours from Raleigh; it seemed like a different era.

Paul spent much of the trip fiddling with his new stuff. He counted and inspected the shells, tried out the headgear and put on his various pieces of camo. He perked up as we entered Hyde and began pointing out the new sights.

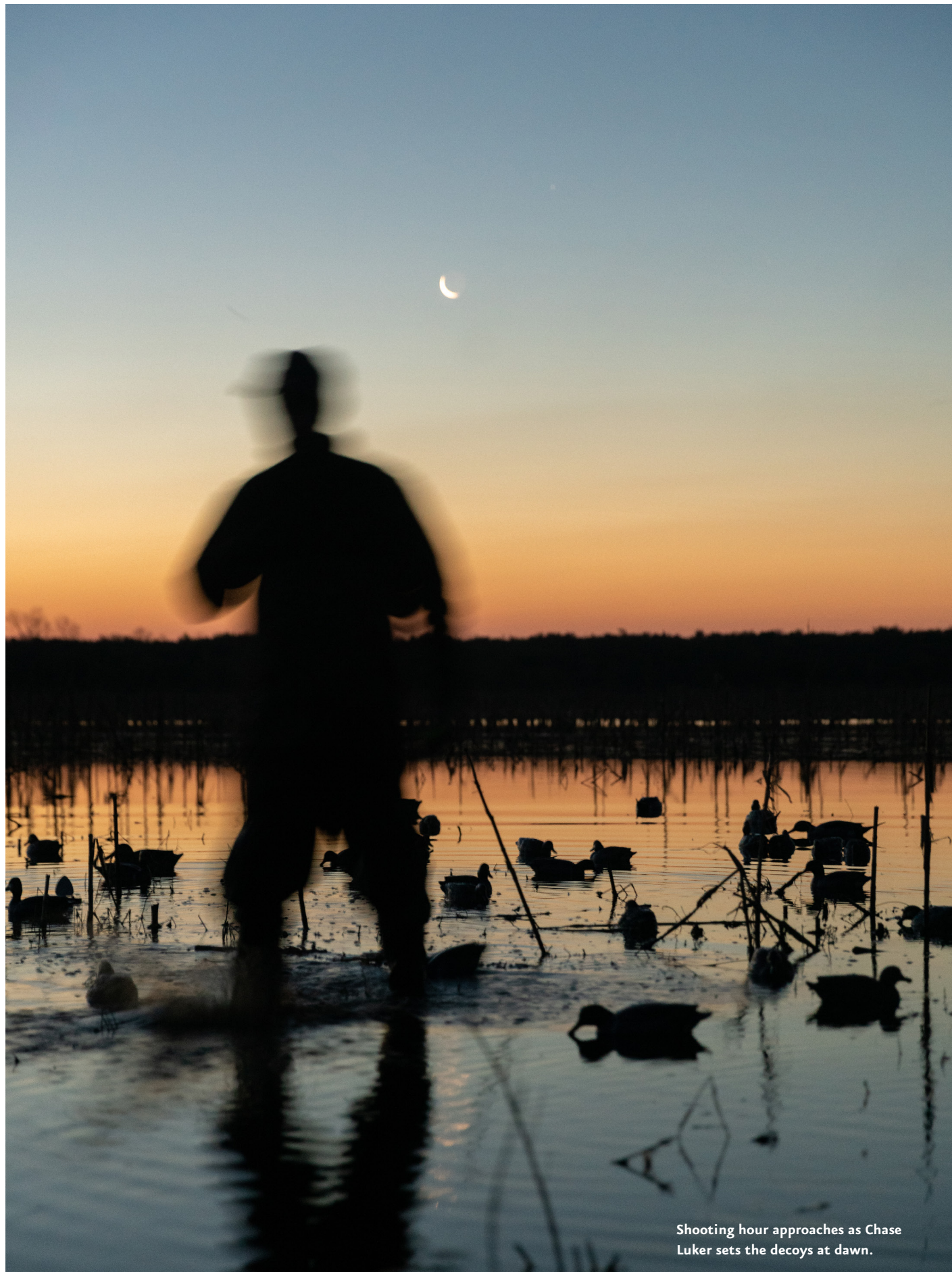
An abandoned fishing boat in Scranton Creek near Currituck caught his attention. "If I lived here, I would definitely have to explore that," he said. Soon after entering the town of Swan Quarter, we passed a pond just off Highway 264 filled with swans. There must have been hundreds. "Now I know why they call this Swan Quarter," he said.

Paul sat in the passenger seat quietly for a few minutes, alone in his thoughts, before



Clockwise from top: A set of decoys hang at Dare to Hyde's Mattamuskeet Outpost. Paul meets his new hunting buddies during a gathering the night before the hunt that includes freshly shucked oysters.





Shooting hour approaches as Chase Luker sets the decoys at dawn.

turning to me and saying matter-of-factly, “I can’t wait to go hunting.” He had become more comfortable with the prospect of it, thanks largely to Zlotnicki’s idea to bring him for a round of sporting clays a few weeks earlier so he could get familiar with loading and handling a shotgun. We were joined on the outing by colleague Thomas Harvey, an experienced duck hunter who would be coming on the youth hunt as a photographer. Paul hit his first two clays and quickly began needling me for my 0-for-2 start. He would break a few more clays and decide he was ready.

We arrived in Mattamuskeet at around 5 p.m. and pulled in to Dare to Hyde’s Outpost, a converted two-story motel where the participants would be staying. At check in, the kids received a camo hunting bag filled with goodies like a duck call, a camo Delta Waterfowl ballcap and a breech flag for a shotgun. Atwell pulled Paul aside and pointed to the duck call. “When your dad is snoring at midnight, give that a call. That is sure to stop the snoring.” We grabbed our stuff from the car and walked to our room as the sounds of kids blaring duck calls could be heard from all corners of the motel.

The evening began with a social hour of sorts. Oysters were shucked and steamed, and a crowd had gathered beside a fire pit in the parking lot. Paul and I hung out here, with Paul striking up a conversation with Noah, an 11-year-old from Winston-Salem. Noah had grown up deer hunting with his father, and they had gone on their first duck hunting trip earlier in the season with Dare to Hyde. The two boys wandered off to explore the grounds as Noah regaled Paul with stories of shooting his limit. A few minutes later, several loud banging noises came from the boys’ direction. Noah’s father and I walked around the corner to find them throwing rocks at a sign in the distance, with Paul hitting his limit of signposts.

Scouting Report

Dinner was called—hamburgers, hot dogs, spaghetti, dessert; more than the boys could want—and was followed by the evening activities. Mark Cagle, a lieutenant with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission’s Law Enforcement Division, began with a gun safety demonstration.

“If I am walking, should I hold my finger here?” Cagle asked, while pointing to a trigger on a dummy gun.

“No!” the group of kids answered.

“If I am looking at the birds come in, should I put my finger here?”

“No!”

Up next stepped Allen Bliven to give a duck call demonstration. Introduced as a duck calling champion and maker, the kids appeared surprised when Bliven listed a duck call low on the list of items needed for a hunt.

“If you had to rate a duck call on the scale of most important, where would a duck call be? Would it be number one?” Bliven said. “No. Number one would be a gun. Number two: shells. What would be number three?”

“Corn!” shouted a parent from the peanut gallery, setting off a minute of laughter.

“No, you don’t always need corn,” Bliven responded. “But you need a license, a place to go, a way to get there. You gotta have a blind, decoys, waders. . . .

“If you forgot your duck call, you could still go hunting. So why is a duck call so important? Duck calls take a passive sport of hoping that a duck sees your decoys and comes over, to [helping] get that bird to come over. It increases your odds.”

With that, Blivens gave a demonstration of a variety of duck calls (far better than the cacophony of calls during check-in). He went through differences between single reed and double reed calls. He demonstrated the calls of wigeon, pintail, drake mallard, gadwall, wood duck and even a bobwhite quail. He explained how to use a duck call: say the word “foot” when blowing into the duck call and follow the rhythm of “Three Blind Mice” with two extra quacks at the end. He gave the kids a lot to think about—and to practice.

Luker rounded out the evening with a discussion about duck identification. He went into individual species the kids were likely to see the following morning:

- A blue-winged teal has a blue shoulder patch.

Atwell pulled Paul aside and pointed to the duck call. “When your dad is snoring at midnight, give that a call. That is sure to stop the snoring.”





- A black duck “can smell you first. I promise you that.”
- A pintail has “lots of words that can be used to describe it; just make sure one of them is pretty.”

Then came the moment we all were waiting for: blind assignments. Paul and I would be in Luker’s party, along with Atwell and his two sons, Mason and Davis; and another father and son duo of Jack and Henry. We weren’t going to be hunting from a blind, but rather would create a hide amongst the trees of a windrow between two impoundments. Then Luker gave us something to think about: “It’s not an easy walk. The first few hundred yards are going to be tough.” Sleep on that, rookie.

Rise and Shine

Neither Paul nor I slept much that night. A mix of excitement and nerves had each of us tossing and turning until the alarm buzzed at 4:15 a.m. We quietly dressed, helped each other with our chest waders and wandered to the lobby for a light breakfast of fruit and pastries. By 5 we loaded Paul’s gun and gear into Harvey’s SUV and

caravanned behind Luker’s pickup truck.

We piled into Luker’s truck for the final stretch down a rough dirt road. He gave us the option of squeezing into the

cab or riding in the bed with the decoys. “We’ll ride in back,” Paul answered for us. This turned out to be a surprising highlight for Paul, who thought riding in the back of a truck in the dark with more stars overhead than he had ever seen was pretty dang cool.

We arrived at the impoundment at about 5:30 and began walking to our assigned spot. We did this quietly in the dark, without the aid of flashlights, so as not to alert any waterfowl of our presence. The low light, however, was not the challenge; lifting our feet in the Hyde County muck was the tough part. Each step seemed to sink our feet deeper into the mud. The water came up to my knees, which meant it was well up Paul’s thighs, and he struggled to maintain his balance. For the first time this trip I saw a look of fear on Paul’s face,

that perhaps he was in over his head—literally and figuratively.

I grabbed his gear bag as he wobbled back and forth. Atwell offered Paul his walking stick and a helpful tip: “We’re walking through rows of corn. Find the top of one and stay on it.” We followed Atwell’s advice and after about five minutes of trudging through the muck, the water began to lower and our footing returned. We reached our spot with about 20 minutes to spare before shooting hours began.

Luker spread out the decoys and offered the kids some words of wisdom: Try not to look up; ducks will see your faces and turn away . . . Remember your zones of fire . . . Keep your safety on and your finger off the trigger until you are ready to fire.

They were ready.

“When you go out on Youth Day, obviously there are a lot of ducks around, but there are also a lot of things working against you that are just not conducive to a good time,” Luker would say later in an interview. “The kids are up early. It’s cold. They’re wet. But as soon as the first bird hits the water, the whole outlook changes. They’re just not cold anymore. The kids are fired up. I enjoy seeing that.”

Making Memories

The sun had yet to rise when 9-year-old Henry struck first. “Big duck out front,” Luker said to Henry, who stepped forward and dropped the drake pintail on his second shot. Atwell waded into the impoundment and retrieved it for Henry. “I’m so glad that I got to witness this today,” Atwell said while handing Henry the duck.

Luker seemingly served a dual role as duck whisperer and hunting coach. Crouched low to the ground with his hat pulled tight over his eyes, he would glance to the sky to see what was approaching. “Big old black duck there.” He would then call it in with occasional blasts from his call, which he held tightly between his hands and seemingly used as an imaginary remote control. “Come this way,” he would mutter until it was in range. Then there was no waiting. “Shoot that duck!”

Soon after Paul shot his first pintail, another came within range. “Pintail right above you, Paul! Shoot him!” Luker said.

Paul popped up, fired one shot out front and another overhead as the duck escaped.

“Were you out front or behind it?” Harvey, who had been sitting beside Paul, asked him. “Behind it,” Paul said, realizing the lesson.

“Sometimes you can be all over it and it doesn’t matter,” Luker said.

Paul’s second duck came toward the end of the morning. This time he shot it clean and placed it beside his first one. A full day was nearly complete by 10 a.m.

As the ducks slowed and the kids tired, Luker decided it was time to call it. The walk out was much easier, though the load was two ducks heavier. We opted to ride in the back of Luker’s truck again and spotted a bear in an opening in the brush as we pulled away from the impoundment. Another first. While waiting for the rest of the party and taking a few photos, Luker showed Paul how to clean his duck. He pulled the feathers off the breast, peeled back the skin and showed how to make incisions to remove the meat. Paul would replicate the lesson at a cleaning station back at the Outpost.

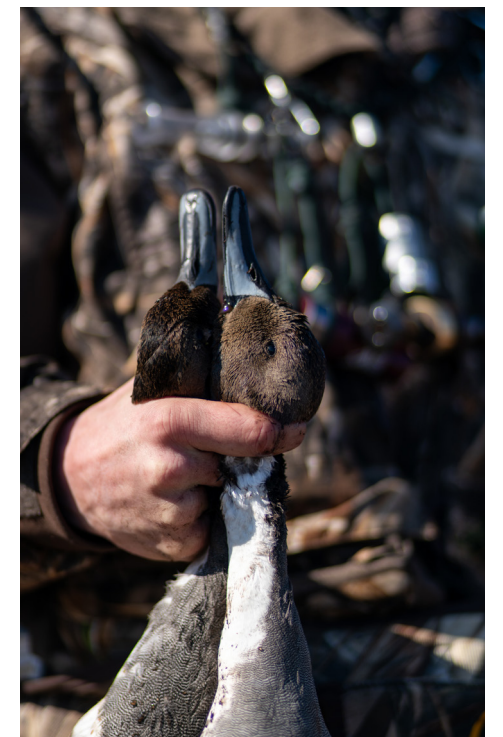
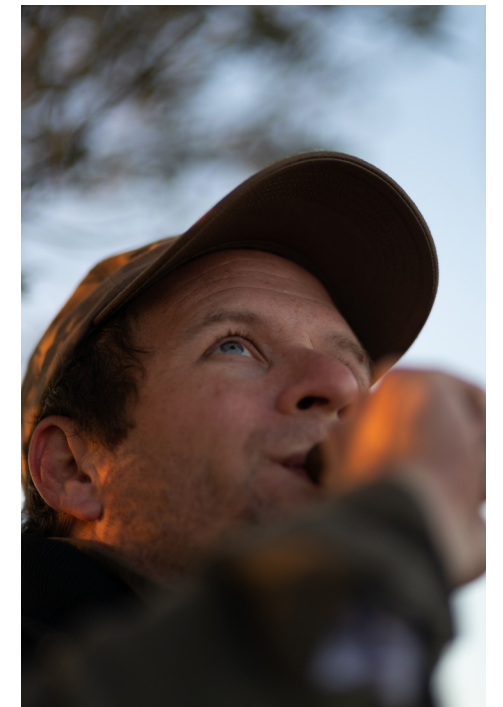
We ate corndogs with our new friends, packed up our stuff and offered up a lot of thank yous to everyone who made the trip possible. I glanced at the clock in the car as we hit the road. How could it only be 1:30?

Paul was asleep before we crossed the county line. The quiet gave me a chance to wonder about what changes are in store for him. He has always had a soft spot for animals. He cried this summer when our dog killed a nestling that had fallen from its nest in our backyard. He loves to fish, and taking an interest in hunting seemed unlikely to change his consideration for animals.

Paul remained asleep until we were back in Wake County. As we traveled down I-440, a route we often take, a group of songbirds passed over the highway. I watched as Paul tracked them.

“You know, going hunting really changes everything,” Paul said. “Now you notice when birds are flying by.” ♦

Josh Leventhal is editor of Wildlife in North Carolina. For more information on Triangle Delta Waterfowl youth hunts, contact J.T. Atwell at jatwell@fmreality.com or 919-845-2316.



Clockwise from top: Paul eyes the sky as guide Chase Luker calls in circling mallards. A youth hunter leaves with a brace of pintails that volunteer organizer J.T. Atwell helped retrieve from the flooded impoundment.