
FROM GOOD LAND

BY BRIAN HALWEIL

GETTING GOOSED

Hunting has changed, but not much.



RIVERHEAD—One thing you don't expect on your first East End hunting trip is that your pen will freeze. Or, once you thaw it by keeping it close to your body core, that the pages of your notepad will become shellacked with a thin coat of ice.

I was sitting shoulder to shoulder with the publisher of this magazine and several other hunters in a grave-like pit dug into a cornfield, having been invited on a Thanksgiving-week goose hunt. The plywood walls nurtured assorted shades of mildew. A faint metallic smell could have been from the gun oil, used shells and assorted tools that littered the floor and were stuffed into crevices. Or it could have been related to the stain created when a shot goose dive-bombed into the bunker and shattered on the back wall.

For hours, we sat and scanned the sky for signs of geese. There were two head-shaped observation holes cut into the roof of the pit, mounted on barn-door sliders with a cord to quickly pull it back in

the event that geese flew near. One of the hunters diligently blew into a goose caller whenever a formation of black specks appeared on the horizon. Another hunter would wave a black, flag-like device that simulated a bird on the ground. Assorted decoys—some of geese feeding, some of them looking to the sky—and bright yellow plastic ears of corn stood guard outside.

And in those long stretches—between when geese flew nearby, and everyone got tense, and someone whispered that the birds were almost in range, and then someone pulled the roof open, and everyone popped up and fired, and you became temporarily deaf, and birds that had crashed to the ground needed to be collected—we reminisced. The close quarters of the pit make a perfect setting for gossip and male bonding, teasing, talk of women, and dirty jokes. “What’s said in the pit, stays in the pit,” I was told more than once.

“For me, hunting is better now than when I was a kid,” said Edwin

Tuccio. (A couple of hours ago, I might have agreed. I was lounging on a billowy couch in Tuccio's toasty den along with a handful of fellow hunters as the wind roared outside. We were watching the hunting channel and grazing on cheese and bread—brought in from Arthur Avenue in the Bronx—as well as two roaring pots of coffee.) Tuccio, a realtor and farmer who owns Tweed's Restaurant and Buffalo Bar in Riverhead and the North Quarter Bison Farm nearby, grew up next to Red Cedar Point on the periphery of thousands of acres of preserved wetlands that were ideal duck-hunting grounds. "It used to be dangerous and very difficult. There were so many things that could go wrong." He remembers getting stranded a few decades ago in a floating duck blind on Peconic Bay when a northwest wind blew all the water out of the bay and left the boat high and dry: "We almost froze to death. I had to take some friends to the hospital for frostbite."

Rich Larocca, a fishermen who lives in Eastport, agreed. As a kid, Larocca would tow a duck boat—elaborately disguised with grass and reeds—through rough, frigid waters and then arrange floating decoys around the boat. "We had no radios," he said. "No neoprene waders. No cell phones either. But we never really got in any trouble." He and his brother used to go out by themselves, a dangerous operation he wouldn't necessarily let his own sons do alone.

Yes, cell phones and Thinsulate have changed hunting on the East End. So has the fact that vast flocks of Canadian geese have taken up year-round residence here for the first time in living memory. Hunting remains a way to gather food, although today's hunters depend less on what they kill. And hunters still camouflage themselves and their surroundings to lure the game into shooting range.

An hour or so before we left the comforts of Tuccio's house, Larocca and John Espenkotter, a Suffolk County detective, braved the wind to right decoys that had been knocked over the previous night. "There is an art to it," said Larocca, speaking in short spurts between the howling gusts. "Basically you want to make them look natural. You have three kinds to choose from: feeding position, resting or century. You can't get too many centuries with high heads. If they all turn their heads up, they're going to jump up any minute. We want to show that they're happy and comfortable."

Good hunters develop a keen understanding of their targets' natural habits, not to mention a strong respect for the unbroken wilderness that houses wildlife. (Many an outdoorsman will tell you that hunters were the original environmentalists and that most of the large pieces of wilderness in Suffolk County—from the North Fork Preserve in Jamesport to the Southaven County Park in Shirley to the Peconic River Club in the Manorville—were donated by private hunters or hunting clubs.)

"The rule with fowl hunting is the worse the weather the better," said Espenkotter, a soft-spoken Suffolk County officer who could be



Above: Rich Larocca scans the sky. **Opposite:** Edwin Tuccio comes up for air as the decoys are arranged.

a model for the GI Joe doll. (His personal passion is bow-hunting for deer; Espenkotter first met Tuccio when he was tracking a shot deer through his land.) "The birds are disoriented and they can't see very well. They can't fly too high. They just want to find a place to hunker down. The best goose hunting is during a howling blizzard." But today the weather wasn't messy enough and the birds—well fed on corn still in the fields after a balmy fall—weren't seeking refuge among our plastic friends.

"Wow, this is frustrating," was the common refrain, as if the hunters were waiting in line at the post office or on hold with a customer service representative. Larocca blew on his hands and stamped his feet against the wood floor, scraping off some of the snow to keep the wood from being slippery should he have to jump up and shoot. "Boy, thought they'd be flying all over the place," he said. "On a cold day like today, it could start slow. They may stay in until 8 a.m. to conserve energy."

The hours slowly inched by. Occasionally, Larocca would climb out of the pit to adjust decoys that had toppled in the wind. Occasionally, we'd hear shots fired by another hunting party a few fields away, and we'd curse them for scaring away our birds. Our asses got sore and cold.

And, then, seemingly out of nowhere, the fits of frustration and boredom turned to bursts of excitement when someone said, "I hear them too." Light flooded in as the roof flew open. The hunters were up and four birds fell. But there was no time to celebrate. Another flock was approaching. Larocca hopped out of the pit and arranged the nearest dead birds to hide their bloodied sides and unnatural limp necks. "I sure love it just as much as when I was a boy," he said, climbing back into the hole and reloading his gun. "The wind woke me up at 4 a.m. and all I wanted to do was come out here." □