

## 20 Tips for Better Waterfowling

**These helpful hints from some of today's most innovative duck and goose hunters might pay off big this season**

What's the most useful garment a waterfowl hunter can wear? It just might be the thinking cap. True, this figurative head covering might not keep the rain off or the chill away, but wearing it will certainly put more ducks and geese in the bag. Thinking hunters – those who are resourceful and willing to experiment – are invariably more successful than those who stick to the same old game plan from one year to the next. Ducks and geese change their habits, and hunters have to do likewise to stay a step ahead of their quarry.

The following tips for better waterfowling, compiled from some of the most innovative hunters in the country, might give you an edge this season.

1. Let Your Lab Run Wild for Geese.  
(Dean Tretter, Cane Ridge Hunting Club, Indiana)

When you are hunting Canada geese in a field or on ice and birds are passing at a distance, send one or more black Labrador Retrievers into the decoys and encourage them to run freely. This will impart movement throughout the spread, which helps attract the geese. When you have the birds' attention and they're coming, call the dog back into the pit or blind. "Having a black dog running through the decoys is better than using flags or wing-spinners because the movement is all over the spread, not just one spot," Tretter says. "I guarantee this really works." Tretter adds that this trick is especially effective in a snow-covered field.

2. Call Working Ducks Once  
(Barnie Calef, Hunter's Specialties Pro Staff, Iowa)

If ducks see your decoys and start working on their own, don't call until they make their downwind swing. Then issue one quick comeback call to pull them around the corner and back towards the decoys. World champion caller Barnie Calef says, "This is what real ducks do in the wild. You don't hear birds on the water call a lot while a flock is approaching, but it's common to hear a hen give a quick four-or-five-note call after the birds pass overhead. This usually spins those downwind ducks right around. It's the right call at the right time to get them to commit to landing."

3. Put Your Retrievers on Remote Control  
(Ed Aycock, D.V.M., Texas)

A retriever that is steady to wing and shot is a considerable asset for several reasons. A steady dog is less prone to flare birds and can be stationed away from hunters for better visibility or be on dry ground while hunters are standing in water. Dr. Ed Aycock, who has a long successful history of field trialing retrievers, says it's easy to teach a dog to work from a remote location. "Sit your retriever at a remote spot, move away slightly, and throw a bumper," he explains. "Gradually increase the distance between you and the dog, and lengthen the time you require

your dog to wait for the retriever command. Start out training with bumpers, and then switch to live birds to increase the level of excitement and to create more opportunity to correct for unsteadiness. It will only take a few lessons to teach to work several yards from where hunters are shooting.”

4. Simulate Safe Haven  
(Kelly Haydel, Haydel’s Game Calls, Louisiana)

A large decoy spread in the big open water may be the key to hunting success when ducks become shy of smaller holes and spreads, according to Kelly Haydel. “Last year, in the first 30-day split, we hunted small ponds in the marsh with just a few decoys, and shooting was poor,” he explains. “But when the second split opened, we put out a huge spread (about 350 decoys) around a blind on a little island in a big wide-open pond. This created an illusion of a large raft of ducks that had found a new safe area. Passing birds worked really well, and our success went way up with this setup.”

5. Spread Your Goose Decoys  
(Sean Mann, Sean Mann Game Calls, Maryland)

To finish more geese when hunting over a field spread, set decoys 10 feet apart (three long steps), and face them in random directions. World champion goose caller and veteran guide Sean Mann says this set provides a natural, relaxed look, and it also offers incoming birds plenty of landing room inside the spread. “By setting my decoys farther apart,” he says, “I use half the number I used to. I can set up and tear down faster, and most of all, the geese work better. Our hunts are much more productive than when I set decoys closer together. Less really can be more.”

6. Try Drake Calls on Still Days  
(Doug Minor, Tennessee)

When mallards are call-shy, especially early in the season, use drake calls instead of hen calls to lure circling birds to the decoys. “I raise mallards and spend a lot of time listening to them,” Minor says. “The drakes are a lot more vocal than the hens, so using drake calls simulates nature. It’s what the ducks are used to hearing.” Minor says drake calls work exceedingly well early in the season and on warm, still days when subtle calling tactics are required. “Not many hunters know about this,” he says, “but if they’d try it, they’d be sold on it.”

7. Diver Decoys for Mallards  
(Chad Belding, Avery Pro Staff, Nevada)

Late in the season when mallards get leery of decoys, try using canvasback decoys instead (if these diving ducks frequent the area you are hunting). Set three dozen to four dozen canvasbacks in a tight grouping. When hunting over ice, chop out a hole, put the canvasback decoys in the open water, and surround the hold with a dozen to two dozen snow goose or swan decoys. “Passing ducks can see those white decoys from far off, and they’ll come to them,” Belding explains. “This spread might look strange to the human eye, but the mallards love it.”

8. Don't Homestead; Move to the Birds  
(Marc Pierce, Ducks Unlimited TV, Montana)

Instead of “homesteading” in a spot where ducks aren’t working, hunters should employ a “run-and-shoot offense”. Keep moving until you find the place where ducks want to land. Changes in wind, weather, water levels, and other conditions cause ducks to work different areas from one day to the next, and success comes far easier by being where the birds want to be. Small boats, waders, decoys in a backpack, and other gear will facilitate making a quick move when it’s called for. Pierce stresses that the main thing to avoid is “camping” in a spot where there is no action. “When the ducks are going elsewhere,” he says, “you have to be ready to follow them and set up quickly in a new location.”

9. Freshen Up Your Blind  
(Trevor Matthews, Ducks Unlimited, Alberta)

You can be in the best of locations, but if your blind, coffin blind, layout boat, or pit isn’t camouflaged adequately, ducks and geese will flare. That’s why Trevor Matthews makes time during the season to freshen the brush on his blinds. “I’m a detail person when it comes to camouflaging my blinds,” Matthews says. “I like to use brush that’s native to where I’m hunting. I’ll fill any holes and cover anything that might shine. I do this before opening day, and then I’ll refresh my camo several times as the season wears on. The last thing I want to see is a duck flaring because it sees something unnatural.”

10. Make Waves with a Jerk String  
(Steve Bowman, Arkansas)

“The thing that draws ducks to decoys is water movement,” says Steve Bowman, “and one of the best ways to create movement is with an old-fashioned jerk string. This is no big secret, but a lot of young hunters who come up with spinning-wing decoys have never used a jerk string.” Bowman makes a portable jerk string by removing the measuring tape from a hand-wind carpenter’s tape and replacing it with a length of nylon trotline string with attached swivels. Thus, the carpenter’s tape becomes a line holder and a means of winding line in without it tangling. “Buy a big carpenter’s tape that’s strong and has a lot of capacity,” Bowman says. “You may have to follow out a hole so it will take up the nylon string. Next, tie a bungee cord on the opposite end from the tape holder. If I’m hunting in shallow water, I’ll tie the bungee cord to a tree or log. If I’m hunting out of a boat, I’ll take a gallon milk jug filled with concrete as an anchor for my jerk string in deeper water. Then once I’ve stretched out and anchored my line, I’ll attach two or three decoys to the swivels with snaps where I want them, and I’ve got a quick jerk string that’ll move a lot of water when ducks are working.”

11. Specialize on Wood Ducks  
(Skip Short, Georgia)

In some beaver ponds, cypress brakes, and marshes, wood ducks are the predominant species, and hunters should tailor their decoy spread and calling specifically to these birds. On the 10-acre beaver swamp where he hunts in central Georgia, Skip Short sets out four dozen wood duck,

mallard and teal decoys, and he uses a wood duck call to draw passing birds' attention. "When wood ducks are flying through the timber, they hear the call, come to investigate, see the decoys, and usually drop right in," Short says.

12. Pontoon Boats for Small Waters  
(Jim Ferguson, Great American Outdoor Trails Radio, Kansas)

One- and two-man pontoon boats convert into great portable duck blinds for small ponds, slow-moving streams, and backwaters of larger lakes. A pontoon can be carried in the bed of a pickup truck, launched virtually anywhere, and powered by electric trolling motor or by rowing. It can be camouflaged on site with netting and natural vegetation. A pontoon offers stable shooting, comfortable seats, and plenty of room for a retriever and decoy bags. "You can paint a pontoon boat in camo and fashion your own blind," Ferguson says, "or some companies offer factory-made blinds that adapt to their boats. Either way, a pontoon is great for hunting hard-to-reach spots where ducks go but other hunters don't."

13. Cover Spinning Wings on Cloudy Days  
(Billy Blakely, Blue Bank Resort, Tennessee)

On cloudy days, encase wings on wing-spinner decoys in brown pantyhose. Stretch the pantyhose over the wings, and then gather and attach them with twist-ties to the wing shafts, where they fit into the body. This cuts down on the flash as the wings spin, creating a much more realistic visual representation of a duck's wing motion on an overcast day. "This really makes a difference on cloudy days," Blakely says. "I've tried two wing-spinners set a few yards apart, one with the pantyhose over the wings and the other without. The ducks all want to go to the one with the pantyhose."

14. Fly Balloons for Snow Geese  
(Mark Hoke, Avery Pro Staff, Maryland)

When hunting snow geese over a large field spread, use white helium-filled balloons to add movement to the spread. Balloons and a small helium tank can be purchased at a party store for a nominal expense. Hoke sets a spread of approximately 700 snow goose shells, silhouettes, and full-body decoys, and he enhances this spread with about 400 balloons. He ties a two- to four-foot length of monofilament fishing line to each balloon, and then ties the other end of the line to a decoy on the ground so the balloon floats above it. He deploys the balloons on the downwind edge of his spread to look like geese that are hopscotching over birds in front of them while feeding. "These balloons will give you a lot of movement with even a one- or two-mile-per-hour wind," Hoke says.

15. Teach Your Dog to Hunt Beyond the Decoys  
(John Amico, Deep Fork Retrievers, Oklahoma)

When making water retrieves, some young retrievers get stuck in the middle of a decoy spread and start circling, never understanding that the bird has fallen beyond the decoys. This happens because the spread itself is a terrain change that the young dog needs to learn to negotiate. John

Amico explains how to overcome this problem. “Set a dozen decoys on the left and a dozen on the right, leaving an open lane six to eight feet wide down the middle. Start out with short retrieves in the lane, working your dog back gradually until it is well past the decoys. Once the dog handles this comfortably, move the decoys together into one group and repeat the succession of retrieves, first in the decoys and then beyond it. It won’t take long for the dog to learn to ignore the decoys and go for the bird.”

16. Sound Like Two Ducks  
(Mark Prudhomme, Knight & Hale Ultimate Hunting Team, South Carolina)

When hunting pressure makes ducks call-shy late in the season, hunters should try varying their calling style to avoid sounding like a caller. Mark Prudhomme says one good way to do this is by sounding like two ducks. “Vary your cadence, pitch, and volume to sound like two susies,” he says. “With practice, you can learn to use your throat to make raspy sounds and then come back with ‘straight air’ for a clean, crisp call.” This variation can also be achieved by blowing two different calls back-to-back or by having two callers work ducks together. “The point is, mix up your calls and sound as natural as you can,” Prudhomme says.

17. Map Out Hunting Permission  
(Paul Sawyer, Knock’m Down Productions, Minnesota)

When freelance hunting in new territory, a hunter’s first stop should be the local county courthouse to pick up a land ownership plat map. Paul Sawyer, who hunts extensively in northern prairie states, says, “When we first get to an area we’ve decided to hunt, usually around a big lake or refuge, we’ll go to the county courthouse and purchase a plat map booklet that shows the landowner’s name on each plat. Most of these booklets also have landowners’ phone numbers in the back. Then, if we find birds using a particular field, we don’t have to go knocking on doors looking for the landowners. We can check our map, get the landowner’s name and phone number, and call him to ask for hunting permission.

18. Hammer Time for Silhouette  
(Rick Nemecek, Ohio)

When hunting on frozen ground, a mason’s hammer is extremely helpful in setting silhouette decoys. A mason’s hammer has a long, sharp claw, and one swing opens just the right size hole in frozen ground for a decoy stake. “Before you go out, tie a piece of orange surveyor’s tape around the hammer,” Nemecek advises. “Invariably, you’ll put it down when setting decoys in the dark and then spend the next half-hour looking for it. If it has orange tape on it, you can find it quickly.”

19. Stare Down a Drake  
(Tate Wood, Drake Waterfowl Systems, Mississippi)

Many green-timber hunters prefer to work ducks to the water and then flush them and shoot as the birds gain altitude. Tate Wood says the temptation is to flush the birds before looking for a drake to shoot, which leads to ineffective flock shooting. “A better way,” Wood advises, “is to

lock onto one drake as the ducks land, and don't take your eyes off him. When the ducks flush, stay focused on that one bird and shoot, making sure you get that first duck before trying for a double."

20. At the End of Your Rope?  
(E.J. Deubler, Louisiana)

When rigging a duck boat, trim the bow line so it's just shorter than the length of the boat. Invariably, when the boat is running, this rope will fall off the bow and line out beneath the boat. If it's longer than the boat, it will tangle in the prop and kill the motor. "When this happens, you have to get out of the boat and untangle it, and where we hunt in the south Louisiana marsh, this can be a real problem," Deubler says.

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"20 Tips for Better Waterfowling" by Wade Bourne  
Ducks Unlimited Magazine, Nov/Dec 2005