

First Watch

My truck's headlights give me away. Ahead, twenty Labradors bounce up from their sleep, backlit by the glare off their stainless water buckets. Their racket threatens to drown out the whine of the struggling heater. I park the truck at the end of the kennel row and stuff the training collar into the pocket of my camouflage jacket. Opening the door to the commotion, I shake my head in amazement and mutter, "Who needs caffeine?"

Halfway down the row of barking dogs, I kneel and pull off my glove to stick my hand through the wire fencing. "Sorry girl, not today," I apologize to the eager-eyed black Lab. I scratch the silver-flecked muzzle and am thanked with a warm lick. "I think it's time we gave that son of yours a try."

I move two runs down to a still-frenzied younger dog. "Get down, Rebel," I admonish as I open the gate. "Let's try to remember our manners."

Squirming, he manages to sit just long enough for me to snug the training collar around his neck, before releasing him out into the yard. He races off and disappears into the darkness, marking his territory.

"Here!" I call him to the back of the truck where I've loaded a bag of decoys and a dog crate. "Load up, Rebel. Let's go get some ducks."

The drive to the duck hole provides a welcome time to indulge my daydreams. Glancing up at the rearview mirror, I can see Rebel's restless outline in the crate behind me. I smile, reminded of how quickly he grew from a tottering puppy to the muscled-up adolescent that sneaked training dummies out of my handler's bag. I remembered my husband John's parting words over breakfast: "Just like we tell our clients, the first hunt should teach the dog that birds come from the sky. And don't get him into situations above his training level."

The truck bounces over a rut, snapping my attention back to the road. I see the orange-flagged tree marking my turn and head toward the faintly glowing horizon. Stopping the truck under a towering cottonwood, I take the lanyard of duck calls hanging from the rear view mirror and drape them around my neck. Sounds of Rebel's thumping tail greet me at the tailgate.

"Settle down, boy," I whisper, tugging up my waders. "You're going to wake the entire neighborhood." I unlatch the crate door and catch his collar just in time to soften his landing as he leaps to the ground. He circles me, jumping in a fit of exuberance.

The weight of my shotgun and decoys slows my way to the jutting edge of the pond. After finding a safe place for my gun, I begin tossing the decoys out into a pattern I hope is inviting to the migrating ducks. The plastic bodies *thunk* as they hit the water. Rebel splashes around me, rearranging some of my handiwork.

"Hey, cut that out," I tell him.

Scolded, he follows me obediently back to the bank. I lay the now-empty decoy bag on the ground and settle back beside it under a small thicket of willows, pulling some loose brush up in front of me.

"Kennel," I say, motioning toward the bag. Rebel takes his place by my side. "Now all we have to do is wait for the ducks to come in."

His eyes, eager for understanding, glimmer in the growing light.

Soon the sun begins to warm our backs and I hear the familiar sounds of approaching ducks. I grasp the curved wood of my favorite duck call and begin imitating their language. Rebel's panting skips a beat and his rump starts to rise up off the decoy bag.

"Sit," I hiss, dropping the call from my mouth.

I raise my gun toward the incoming pair of drake mallards, keeping the dog in my peripheral vision.

"Sit *down*," I command again. His hindquarters lower to the ground, only to spring him forward at the sudden blast of the shotgun.

"Here!" I yell.

Reluctantly, he returns to sit by my side. I pause for a moment to make sure he locks onto the sight of the duck floating out amongst the decoys. With only a sharp call of his name, he bounds out into the water, snatches up the fallen bird and wheels back toward me.

"Here," I encourage as he reaches the bank.

Then, true to his training, Rebel comes and sits sharply at my feet. I reach out and put my hand around the duck's body.

"Now hold," I firmly remind the dripping dog, giving him a chance to settle. I can hardly contain my excitement at Rebel's first duck. "Drop," I tell him and he pulls his mouth back, gently releasing the bird into my hand. I quickly remind him to sit as I take a step backward.

"Rebel, shake!" I barely get the words out before he lets loose a wild spray of water. I toss the duck behind me and turn back toward my dog.

"What a dog, Rebel! Good boy!" Praising him, I pat his heaving shoulder. "That's what you were bred to do," giving him another pat on his broad head. Then feigning sternness, I shake my finger at him. "But now let's see if we can do that again without you breaking."

Within a few minutes, another small flock of ducks begins to circle our decoy spread. Keeping my head down, I slowly lean toward Rebel to whisper mark, cueing him to watch the sky. I mount the gun to my shoulder, swing through the duck and pull the trigger. This time, Rebel holds firm before I send him after the bird floating belly-up in the water. A clean return and a hearty slap on his shoulder reward his effort. Looking fondly over at my hunting companion, I start to read his growing understanding of where the ducks are coming from.

The morning progresses with a flyby of whistling widgeons. I miss the shot and swear I can sense Rebel's disappointment in a lost retrieving opportunity.

"We all need practice, boy," I reassure him with a quick scratch along his neck. "That's why we're both here."

Suddenly Rebel's ears prick up. The brush rustles behind me and I ease around to look over my shoulder. Just on the other side of my willowy nook, I see a man in a uniform approaching with a glint of a nameplate on his breast pocket. This can only mean one thing - game warden. He rounds the edge of my blind and Rebel stands, watchful of our visitor.

"Morning...ma'am." He stammers out the last word only as I pull my camouflage facemask over my head. His face reddens slightly.

I chuckle to myself, but try not to show my amusement at his near gaffe. I nod. "Good morning, sir."

"Nice looking retriever you've got there," he says appreciatively. Rebel breaks away from my side and frisks the warden with his nose.

"Thanks," I respond proudly. "Today's his first hunt and I think he's beginning to get the hang of it all."

"How many ducks have you shot this morning?" He straightens from petting Rebel and peers over my shoulder at the small pile lying beneath my shotgun.

"Just two. Haven't seen that many." I shake my head. "I thought with that Alberta Clipper we had, it would have moved larger groups through here, but since it's warmed up, I'm beginning to think they're just scattered." Frowning slightly, I survey the sky. "I'd sure like to shoot one more for my dog today." Rebel nudges my hand and I stroke his head.

The warden glances approvingly at the nodding decoys. "Looks like you're set up pretty good here."

"Yes, sir," I answer. "I've really set it up this way for my dog. It's best to work a green dog off a point of land like this. Everything's just a straight line, out and back. And I just shoot the short-range birds. Basically, I'm being careful not to get him in over his head, training-wise."

"Well, I'm glad to see trainers like you take the time to turn dogs into true conservation tools," the warden says. He starts to continue his thought but is interrupted by the sound of approaching ducks. Three sets of eyes turn in unison and begin to track their flight. "Looks like you're going to get your wish for one more duck." The game warden tips his hat. "You and your dog have a good day, ma'am," and he disappears back into the brush.

"All right, Rebel, this is our last group of the day. Show me what you've got, boy!" I pull my facemask back down over my head and crouch back into the willows. I pick up my duck call and begin with a hail call, mimicking a hen's invitation for all drakes to join her. The group's circle tightens, but they do not commit to landing. As they head away from me, I hit the call again, this time louder, more insistently. It works and the ducks bank into the wind, cupping their wings over the decoys. "Mark," I urge. Rebel's head swings with the barrel of my shotgun and I pull the trigger. Feathers explode - it's a longer shot than I expected and I squint to follow the fall. I take a quick glance at the waiting dog as I lay my gun down, but his intense look assures me that he's seen the bird. The crippled duck struggles out in the water and Rebel whines deep in his throat. All it takes is a quick utterance of his name, and he's off. He charges into the water, leaving a bubbly wake. With powerful strokes, he reaches the edge of the farthest decoys, pauses, and lifts his head to look around. I suck in my breath and hold it as he makes a small circle, seemingly unsure of his next move. But heart, training, and frantic flapping of the crippled duck renew his confidence and he moves out into the open water. He grabs the bird and I cup my hands to my mouth to yell, "Here!"

One wing of the bird obscures his left eye and he shifts his grip on the bird's body for the long swim back.

"Good boy, Rebel, here."

Soon the green-headed prize is delivered to my waiting hand.

"Have you had enough ducks for today?" I ask the panting dog. "Well, you sit here on the bank while I pick up the dekes and then we'll go home."

He obligingly watches me as I wade back out into the water to retrieve the decoys, wrapping their weights around the keels. We hike back to the truck, where I heave the sodden decoy bag into the back.

"Load up boy. Your education is paying off - you did a good job today."

As I drive back home, I hardly notice the sputtering heater. Instead, I'm warmed by thoughts of the day and the stories I look forward to telling my husband. My latest protégé showed all the drive and desire that his pedigree promised. As we create more memories afield together, I know he'll become one of my favorite hunting buddies. I tell myself, "You did a good job today, too."

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