

Winter Ducks in Old Mexico

by
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Photos by Hay Hardy

Our fall season was a bust. My Texas Buddy Dick and I didn't hunt ducks for the first time in over 30 years. It wasn't family or business obligations or any such thing that stopped TBD and me; it was doctors. Billy Crystal got it right in *City Slickers*: "Your 40s, one of your girlfriends from high school becomes a grandmother. Fifties, you have a minor surgery. You'll call it a 'procedure,' but it's a surgery. Sixties, you'll have a..."

By the time we were fit, it was February, and every duck season in the country had closed. But then I remembered Rancho Ala Blanco, a new hunting lodge in northeast Mexico where I'd had a fine white wing dove hunt the September before. I remembered that RAB offered duck hunting late into the winter. TBD and I figured that if the ducks flew south, we might as well follow them down.

We met on the Border. It wasn't hard for us to spot each other across the airport lobby, two gray heads going to white. We gave each other bear hugs and back pats, neither of us saying what we both could tell: a little more bone and a lit-

tle less brawn since the last time we'd met. "Hey Romeo, let's go down to Mexico!" I invited. "Yup, you bet, that's us, Playboys of the Southwestern World," he replied with a grin.

Once you arrive in McAllen, Texas, Rancho Ala Blanco takes care of the rest. Our bags were whisked into the RAB van, and soon we were on our way down

RAB guide Sean Deibler, like a rock



into Old Mexico. Less than three hours later we were out on the rooftop veranda of the main RAB lodge, along with other guests who had flown in by private plane. Greg White, the ranch manager and head honcho, reminded us about gun safety and gave the evening scouting report. There were ducks all up and down the Laguna Madre which lies hard against the Gulf of Mexico. There were also plenty of quail in the brush along with mourning doves. The white wings had moved farther south by the first of the year.

We met our guide, Sean Deibler, a Tennessee boy who can best be described as a fine, strapping young man. Soon there were margaritas to sip in the cool evening air before heading down to the dining room for shrimp fresh from the Gulf, duck breast piccata and flan to die for, the first of many meals that sets RAB apart from other lodges. On our way to dinner TBD whispered, "I see our guide's not drinking—do you think the boy's old enough?" He was of course, but at some point in your life everybody under 35 looks under 21.

"It's Old Mexico, pardner, where age don't matter. Besides, he kind of



Dawn over the Laguna Madre

reminds me of you—about a lifetime ago.”
 “Well, you got that half right anyhow.”

In Robert Rouark’s The Old Man’s Boy Grows Older, the Old Man teaches the Boy about hunting and fishing and life itself. “There ain’t but two things really worthwhile—anticipation and remembrance.” For boys, say from 10 to 30-something, it’s all about anticipation, tomorrow’s magnificent promise that keeps you up all night watching the clock and gets you to the blind an hour early. After 40 you start to spend more time reflecting on what was than getting worked up about what may be. Later on when all you got is a rocking chair in front of the fire and your memories, you still got a lot. And besides, remembrance don’t take nearly as much effort to enjoy.

At First Light

Just before first light TBD and I sit on the SUV’s tailgate parked on the edge of a fresh water pond next to the Laguna Madre, the lagoon between us and the Gulf. We sip coffee and watch Sean’s flashlight beam bobbing in the dark and listen to him churning through the knee-deep water racing to get the decoys set just right before

The author and TBD slogging out.



shooting light.

“I bet the boy’s not even breathing hard,” I remark.

TBD starts to hum, “Like a rock, my eyes were clear and bright, my step was quick and light, like a rock.”

“Singing about us are you?”

“Yup, you bet.”

I remember when we lost our blind in the big marsh up at Anouac. We left the truck on the levee and headed off into the dark lugging guns and decoy bags and enough ammo to start a war. TBD said he

knew the way: “I don’t need no stinking flashlight.” For over an hour we trudged in the dark and muddy marsh ignoring the real possibility of gators and water moccasins and getting fried by Texas lightning as a predawn thunderstorm rolled down on us. Finally, the lightning helped us spot the blind—and showed us our truck parked on the levee 200 yards beyond. “Thanks for the walking tour, pardner,” I grumbled as I dumped gear into the blind. “No problemo,” TBD replied, hustling to set the decoys. I don’t recall either of us being the least bit winded.

Sean can blow a duck call. His highball shouts and come-on-down chuckles fill the misty gray sky. The whistling wings stay high just out of sight. “Come on, come on, come on, come on,” he pleads over and over again. TBD grins in the gray light as if to say, “Patience is not a young man’s virtue.” And come they do: pintails dropping with wings locked out of the mist, teal skyrocketing up out of the decoys, wid-geon and gadwall decoying down in picture-perfect arcs, and spoonbills circling like wannabe mallards. We take turns shooting, carefully calling our shots, joshing, making the morning last.

Dawn comes up in your face on Agency Lake in southern Oregon. TBD saw them first: “Bandits, incoming, six o’clock!” A flight of bluebills low on the water coming at us out of the rising sun like torpedo planes in Victory at Sea. We started shooting at 40 yards and continued as they swept by us. We reloaded as they regrouped and swung round to come straight at us again. Our second salvo broke their formation, and they buzzed on down the lake in twos and threes. We plopped down on the floor of the blind littered with spent hulls, laughing at our shaking hands. “Thank goodness there weren’t more of them,” said TBD, “or they’d of got us for sure.”

Just before noon and pickup time, a single gadwall circles and circles well outside the decoys. “Want him?” Sean asks



The author with a mixed bag of winter ducks



Late at night when remembrance beats anticipation

from where he is crouching behind us. We shake our heads believing the duck is far out of range. “Mind if I do?” he asks. We shake our heads again. In one fluid motion he rises and fires a single shot, and the gadwall stops as if he’d hit a wall.

We were wrapped in white sheets lying on our backs in the high marsh on Wildcat Point across from Assateague Island when that lonesome snow goose came to your mouth calling but hung out beyond the rag spread. I remember you were still flat on your back when you fired once and then jack-sprang up and trotted out to get him. When you came back I asked,

“How far?”

“Seventy-one paces, but I got a

long stride,” you said grinning.

When Sean comes back to the blind carrying the gadwall, I ask him,

“You pace it off?”

“Yes sir, I did. Not quite 70 paces.” TBD grins and says, “Well, I believe it’s time for lunch and a little siesta.”

Just Before Dark

Late in the afternoon Sean takes us to another freshwater pond along the Laguna Madre. The sun is out, it is warm, there is no wind. Under nothing-but-blueskies anywhere else there would be no ducks flying. But the ducks fly in to feed all afternoon, perhaps fueling up for the long return flight north. We invent our own rules and limits to make it all last. No more than

two of any one kind between us: two wid-geon, two green wings, two blue wings, two gads, two.... We don’t come close to our limits as the sun drifts west toward the eastern Sierra Madres, and we really don’t care.

I remember my Dad always saying the exact same thing at the end of a long day in an icy Michigan marsh those last few seasons before I lost him. He’d be shucking off his stiff canvas waders and say, “I believe duck hunting’s a young man’s sport, and I believe this just might be my last season. No place for old men.”

Just before dark with a thin moon rising up over the Gulf, we sit on the tailgate resting our legs. With the guns safely stowed away, we sip a cold Modelo and watch Sean in the fading light picking up decoys and brushing up the blind for the next hunt, moving as smooth and easy as he had the morning before. I nudge TBD and ask, “You remember what my Daddy used to say about duck hunting there towards the end?”

“Yup, you bet,” he says. “But I’ll tell you what,” he adds, tipping his Modelo at Sean out on the water. “As long as we got the boy with us, this here is a fine country for old men.”

*Sometimes late at night
When I’m bathed in the firelight
The moon comes calling a ghostly white
And I recall. Like a rock, I see myself again
Like a rock.*

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