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Ducks Unlimited Canada

Conservator

# Waterfowling Heritage Issue **2011**

## Winter Geese

THE NEW CANADIAN  
TRADITION

# 2011

Does it get any  
better than this?

## Why Waterfowl?

CULINARY ADVICE  
FROM TOP CHEFS

## The Bonds That Matter

SPECIAL PLACES WITH  
SPECIAL PEOPLE



# The **Big** Year

*Waterfowling opportunities abound!  
Plenty of water and high bird counts mean  
hunters should be in for a banner season.*

/// BY SHEL ZOLKEWICH

# Whether you carry a camera or a shotgun, the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) should be included in your travel plans this fall. There's plenty of water on the landscape, and that means lots of waterfowl. In some cases, record numbers.

**T**HE PPR, SOMETIMES CALLED "THE Duck Factory" for its abundance of breeding habitat, grabs the eastern half of Alberta, the southern half of Saskatchewan and the southwest corner of Manitoba before dipping down into North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa. This year, widespread flooding, while devastating for residents, has boosted duck and goose levels.

"By all assessments, the wet conditions we've had across the PPR are widespread. We haven't seen anything like this since the 1970s, maybe even since the 1950s," said Scott Stephens, Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) Prairie Region director of regional operations. "There will be water in the wetlands, that's for sure."

## Ducks by the Numbers

**S**INCE 1955, THE U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE has, along with help from the Canadian Wildlife Service, conducted extensive spring waterfowl surveys across all breeding areas including those in Canada, the northern United States, the boreal forest and Alaska. The results serve a number of purposes. The numbers offer a snapshot of how populations are reacting to landscape conditions, and they eventually help regulators develop waterfowl hunting regulations for the season ahead.

All of the information is boiled down into a hefty report called *Waterfowl Population Status 2011*. Of course there are variations in habitat conditions and waterfowl

Right (top to bottom): blue-winged teal, redhead and northern pintail populations are at or near record highs this year.



numbers across the country, but overall, things look very good to outstanding.

Surveyors count ponds in May and this year they were busy indeed, tallying up 8.1 million birds – a 22-per-cent increase over last year's numbers.

More astonishingly, it's 62 per cent above the long-term average. It was only the second time in the survey's history that pond counts exceeded eight million.

The good news continued when it came to duck numbers (all surveyed species). Total duck populations were estimated at 45.6 million breeding birds across the survey area. That's an 11-per-cent increase over last year (also a very good year), and 35 per cent above the long-term average.

The big winners for 2011 include blue-winged teal with an increase of 41 per cent over last year (and a huge 91-per-cent change over the long term). "We're probably talking about record numbers for blue-winged teal," said Stephens.

Redheads are on the rise with a 27-per-cent increase over last year and a 106-per-cent change in the long-term averages. Pintails are also doing extremely well with a 26-per-cent increase over last year.

**S**TEPHENS POINTED OUT THAT WHILE NUMBERS are way up across Prairie Canada, the forecasts for British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec and Eastern Canada are a little more conservative.

"Those areas don't go through the deluge and drought that we have in the PPR. They are a lot more stable and consistent," he said.

When it comes to geese, the numbers are also good. Most goose populations from year to year depend on what happens on northern breeding grounds. This year, the snow melted and warmer weather arrived

right on time, making for a normal breeding season.

The Ungava Peninsula of northern Quebec is the breeding grounds for the Atlantic population of Canada geese. During the spring survey, biologists were pleasantly surprised to find increased numbers "of breeding and non-breeding geese across the survey area." This could translate into better-than-average goose hunting in Atlantic Canada this fall.

**"We haven't seen anything like this since the 1970s, maybe even since the 1950s."**

— SCOTT STEPHENS  
DIRECTOR OF REGIONAL OPERATIONS  
(PRAIRIES), DUCKS UNLIMITED CANADA

The only wildcard in this nearly perfect waterfowling scenario is the number of acres of upland, particularly in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, that didn't get seeded because of flood conditions.

"For waterfowling opportunities, pay attention to where crops went into the ground. Those are going to be your best places. Hunting for ducks and geese across the board should be excellent this fall," said Stephens.





# Wildfowl on the Menu

The woman beside me was doing her best to be polite waiting for a turn to select the nicest looking tomatoes from the quickly dwindling basket at the farmers' market. But she could wait no longer. She reached over and began digging, only to draw evil eyes and muffled comments of 'how rude' from other patrons. /// BY SHEL ZOLKEWICH

**I**F YOU'VE BEEN TO A FARMERS' MARKET LATELY, you know that interest in fresh, local and safe food has never been higher. Traffic jams and arguments over who gets the last pound of grass-fed beef are common.

There's little doubt that the appeal of the 100-mile diet and being a locavore (eating more of what's available in your community) are responses to food issues, particularly when it comes to quality and safety. The more we hear about botulism in spinach and E. coli in ground beef, the more we want to know where our food comes from and the path it takes. That's where hunting comes in.

Hunting is a safe and sustainable addition to Canada's food source. We also know few hands touch the finished product; particularly if you're both the hunter who harvested the game and the cook. To explore this idea, Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) asked three prominent chefs to share their philosophies.



**Brad Long**  
Café Belong, Evergreen Brick Works  
Toronto, Ontario

**Q** || Do you think harvested game is safe? Can it be safer than supermarket food?

**A** || Harvested game is definitely safe. I've cooked a lot of caribou, Arctic musk ox, hare, various

birds and other tasty treats. Supermarket food safety is best looked at the same way as its ethics are judged: all the stuff around the outside edge is safest (it's just produce, dairy and all the basics), and it gets scarier the more processing is applied. Scary because processed food has more salt and sugar added to it than you could ever possibly add yourself to the same dish. Scary because it's handled over and over again. Scary because most of the flavour and nutrition are processed out of it. Give me fresh any day. If you know any basic cooking techniques, you can safely feed yourself and family and for a lot less money.



**Q** || How does game harvested by a hunter compare to 'factory' raised meat in terms of quality?

**A** || Game has consumed only the foods it is supposed to eat. It is therefore capable of providing those that consume them

the maximum nutritional value and flavour. When we eat animals that have been fed in feedlots and on unethical farms, it is typically fed the animal equivalent of Halloween candy corn. What I mean by this is that animals are supposed to eat complex foods like grass and other natural items found in their habitats. Domesticated animals are often fed fat and sugar in huge quantities to speed their growth to maximize size and minimize time. This brings two results: stressed animals and maximized profit. Profit is good, but not at the cost of flavour, nutrition and sustainability.

left, right: © Shel Zolkewich (3)



**Ben Kramer**  
Diversity Food Services at the University of Winnipeg, Elements The Restaurant  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

**Q** || What's your philosophy when people start talking about sustainable food sources?

**A** || Most people are hung up on the idea that sustainability is only about the environment. Sustainability is much more than that. It is where the food came from. It is how it got there. It is how it was handled. It is about whether the farmer can sustain a reasonable living off the crops/animals he or she is producing. For me, the biggest issue I have is that lots of people talk about sustainable food systems, but choose not to sustain them.

**Q** || Do you think hunting is a good addition to a sustainable food supply, at least at the family level?

**A** || Absolutely. Knowing where your food comes from is one of the most important things for me. Once you know where your food comes from it gets you thinking about how your food was raised and what has happened along the way. Hunting is a direct connection from the source to the table. Factory meat that comes on Styrofoam trays and wrapped in plastic with no bones or skin feeds the severe disconnect we have as a society as to where our food comes from.



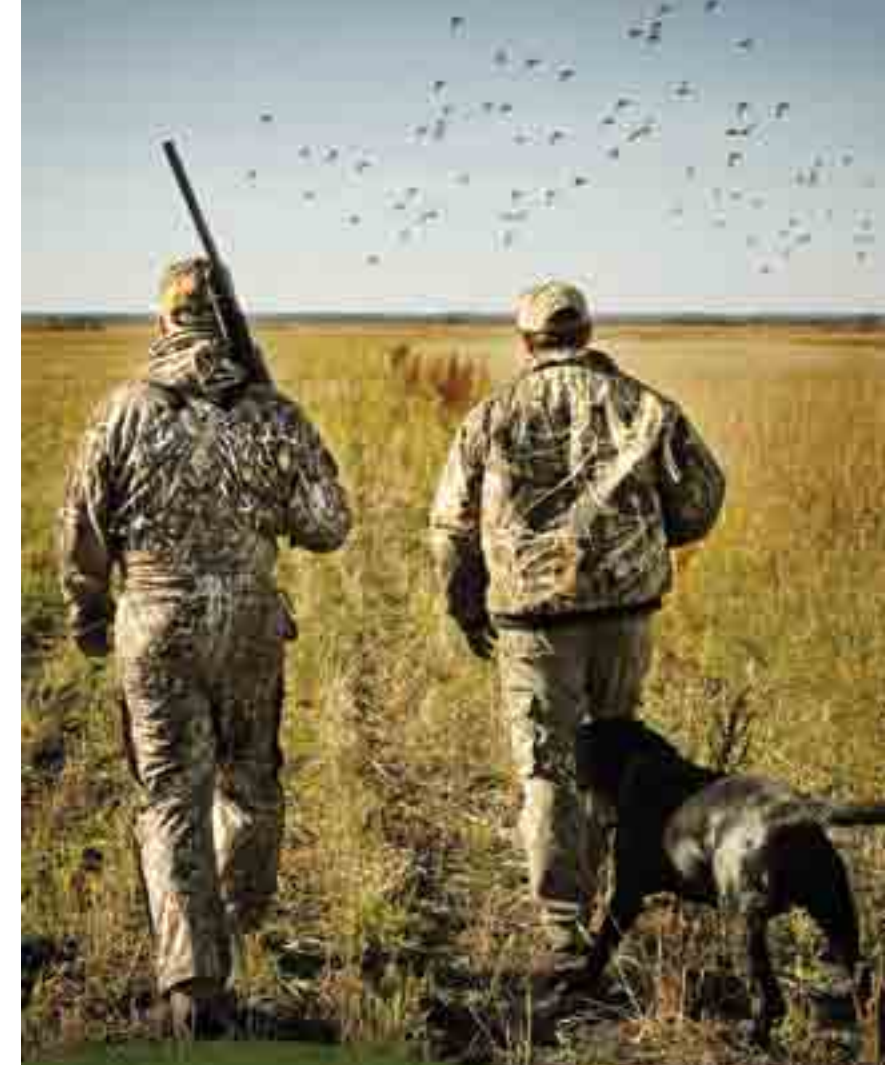
**Scott Pohorelic**  
Southern Alberta Institute of Technology,  
Chef Instructor - Calgary, Alberta

**Q** || What's your philosophy when people start talking about sustainable food sources?

**A** || Sustainability is the ability to endure. Sustainable food production is a system that ensures continued resources. As a father, this is very important to me. The simplest way to think of it is, if we're consuming something, we should make sure it'll still be around for our children and their children.

**Q** || What's the biggest mistake people make when cooking waterfowl?

**A** || Game birds are generally very lean so a slow cooking process will result in a better product. Just turn the temperature down and take a little longer. Also, game birds benefit greatly from brining. ✨



## Keeping the skies full

Every season, the ducks come back and monthly donations help make that happen. DUC's wetland habitat conservation efforts are an important part of keeping your favourite pastime alive.

Give back to the ducks. Donate monthly.  
Call 1-866-384-DUCK (3825) or visit  
[waterfowling.com/donate](http://waterfowling.com/donate)



  
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# Grand Adventure

Late-season opportunities are increasing in many areas of the country. In spite of the challenges of cold and snow, they often offer some of the best waterfowling of the season. /// BY JEFF HELSDON



© Jeff Helsdon (2)



**Was I crazy?** That thought went through my head as I rolled out of bed after the alarm sounded at 4 a.m. on a February morning. Looking at the thermometer and noting it hung below the freezing mark, I prepared to meet Gord Ives of Grind 'Em Outfitters at 5:30 a.m. in Jarvis, Ontario.

**T**HE GOAL WAS TAKING ADVANTAGE OF the February resident Canada goose season, hunting near Ontario's Grand River. It was opening day of the late season, long after most waterfowl hunters have packed away decoys and camouflage clothing and cleaned their guns for the season.

I had some experience with cold-weather waterfowling, but had never shot in February when winter could still have a firm grasp on both the mercury and the precipitation.

When populations of Canada geese exploded in southern Ontario, additional early and late season days were added for them in 1985. The February season was implemented in 1998. When Sunday hunting came to southern Ontario, these additional days over the 107 maximum allowed meant the end of February seasons in areas with Sunday hunting. In areas without Sunday hunting, the February season continues.

Late-season goose hunting is becoming part of the fabric of waterfowling in Canada. Hunts occur in B.C., Ontario, and also for snow geese in Quebec. With populations of resident Canada geese expanding in just about every region where open water in winter is a regular feature, it's probably only a matter of time before opportunities will be available across the country.

It was to one of these areas where I headed after I met up with Ives and hunters from the Oshawa area. Following Ives' trailer of decoys, I noted my vehicle thermometer read -7°C. The area he had scouted was a leased corn field a couple of miles distant that attracted geese off the Grand River. Most good fields in the area are leased.

As we set up the decoys in the dark, Ives told us both ducks and geese were using the field "like crazy" the day before. We set the coffin blinds up near a row of standing corn to break up the profile. "We could have set up anywhere on the field. They've been all up and down the field," Ives said.

Ives is a solidly built man who lives and breathes the outdoors. It's his element. A ship's captain of a Lake

Erie scientific vessel, and the father of three girls and a boy, he's been a part-time professional guide for over 25 years. One of the region's most respected outfitters, and a long-time supporter of Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) he has done numerous seminars for Primos Hunting Calls in Canada and the U.S. as one of the company's pro staffers.

After setting out a combination of various full-body decoys, the setup was done just at legal shooting time. The first melt of the season had come, leaving a few inches of crusty snow between the corn stubble.

While the snowflakes didn't fly early, neither did the geese. The ducks came though and in huge waves. It was a small flock at first flying low over the field. Then, hundreds more joined them becoming black clouds of mallards. The show was spectacular.

**T**HE GRAND IS ONE OF THE LARGEST RIVERS IN southern Ontario. While most rivers in the region flow a short distance and empty into the nearest Great Lake, the Grand starts at one of the highest points in southern Ontario, near Dundalk. Although Georgian Bay is near its headwaters, instead of heading a short distance north, it flows south 280 kilometres into Lake Erie at Port Maitland. We were hunting 40 kilometres away.



As morning progressed, the sky turned grey and a few snowflakes fell. I joked about how the geese would show up as soon as I was out of my blind looking for a drink. Sure enough, it happened, and a pair came in over the left end of our set-up.

DUC has recognized the importance of the Grand River, designating it and the slough forest east of the river as a Priority Habitat Area.

"It's quite diverse," said Jeff Krete, a DUC biologist. "It has different things at different times of the year for waterfowl." He explained the upper part of the river is important for migration, and includes Luther Marsh, one of the larger inland wetlands in southern Ontario. The central part holds high value for waterfowl production while the lower river provides important wintering areas.

"If you get into the late season for waterfowl, you can have some incredible days on the river," Krete adds. "Areas of the river that are open; that's all the birds have left."

Working with partners like the Grand River Conservation Authority, Habitat Haldimand and the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority, DUC completed more than 25 projects in the area in the last seven years.

Ives explains that in most years the field we were hunting is used by overwintering resident Canada geese that are sitting on both the Grand River and Lake Erie. With colder-than-normal conditions last winter, he said the lake froze at least a mile offshore and geese typically don't rest that far out.



Gord Ives (above) recommends a modified choke for single-barrel shotguns and a modified/full combination for over-and-under shotguns. Most shots over decoys are within 30-yards, he says.

Technically called temperate-breeding Canada geese, winter seasons are timed to harvest a growing population of these birds when northern Canadas aren't migrating through. The daily bag limit is a liberal 10 birds per hunter during the late season.

**A**T 9 A.M. I LOOKED AT my watch and a skyline empty of geese. "The birds will move when they sense a pressure change, or they might wait until the snow starts," Ives said. He mused that sometimes the birds move early, sometimes late.

Since there weren't any birds moving, we took the opportunity to talk waterfowling. Brian Boisvert, Wayne Sorhaitz and Fred Bambrough are regulars with Ives for the opening day of the February season. Doug Dykstra was helping Ives with the calling. With several seasons under their belts, the Oshawa crew had seen everything from rain and mud to -30°C temperatures with the wind chill.

As morning progressed, the sky turned grey and a few snowflakes fell. I joked about how the geese would show up as soon as I was out of my blind looking for a drink. Sure enough, it happened, and a pair came in over the left end of our setup. I didn't get a shot off after diving back in the blind, but the shooters on the

left: © Jeff Helsen

opposite end took both birds. Another pair came by, but not close enough.

When both hands of my watch pointed north to show noon, we stretched our legs, waiting for more action. Another hour went by before we spotted a pair flying over the woods on the edge of the field. Ives and Dykstra called and waved goose flags. The birds turned and headed our way, turning right, just as Ives gave the command to shoot. Both Bambrough and I shot without our guns all the way to our shoulders. One, or both, of us connected and one bird fell.

**W**ITH THE AFTERNOON, THE WIND CHANGED to the southwest. Finally, about 1:15 p.m., we spotted a larger flock over a row of trees at the south end of the field. The birds came in low right over the decoys and spaced out over our blinds. Four birds came down, doubling our count out of one flock. Another six came by, but again turned giving a clear shot at only the last couple of birds. By 2 p.m. we had nine birds. Most had been shot between 20 and 30 yards.

Ives took advantage of a break in the action to adjust the decoys to the changing wind and to give a better shot as the birds turned. The width of the pocket in his spread varies with the number of hunters to give each shooter equal opportunities. Most shots are less than 30 yards with 2s and BBs. Sky busting is discouraged. "If you don't let long-range birds go you just educate them. It's a game of patience," he said.

His adjustments paid off. Our success rate increased as the birds finally decided to stretch their wings and feed. Our count more than doubled again in the next hour.

We were using roughly 75 full-bodied decoys, 95 per cent of which had heads down. High heads were saved for the centre of the pocket. They represented geese that had just landed and were moving into position to feed. Geese do not like to overfly resting birds and will normally set down just behind those recently arrived. On a traffic field between feeding and roosting zones, he'll often set up as many 200 full-bodied blocks. And when birds are particularly shy he'll set up as many as another four dozen silhouettes around the blinds.

The last hour saw several flocks decoying. The highlight was taking all five from a flock of as many. We finished with 39 birds for the day. Even as Ives went to get the truck, another pair tried to settle in.

On the way home, thinking about the successful hunt, I decided that I wasn't crazy. Hunting in snow, in February is just another great Canadian experience. ✨



I'm a Ducks volunteer

Each of our 7,000 volunteers across the country has their own reason for supporting wetland conservation. This is Hugh's "Ducks story."

"Being born and raised on a farm in Delta gave me a chance to watch waterfowl in the hay pastures behind our house. My passion has always been to spend a day hunting the fields with a good dog by my side. Getting a duck or a goose is a bonus; watching the dogs work and do what they were bred for is something that I never get tired of. I have been a volunteer for Ducks Unlimited Canada for 27 years and, being a waterfowler, I realize that if DUC did not conserve habitat for waterfowl and upland birds, I would not be able to enjoy this time outdoors."

— Hugh Savage, DUC volunteer, Delta BC

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## Cold-weather clothing

**The layered approach is always best.** During a winter goose hunt you'll meet two extremes, the set-up period when, if you aren't careful, your body temperature will rise and you end up soaked in your own sweat, and the waiting period in the blind when you often tax the cold ratings of Arctic gear.

**Prepare at home.** Place cold-weather outerwear in a lightweight bag, boots and socks included. The latter are for field use, not in your heated vehicle. Wear street clothes to the field, field clothes to the hunt. Guides don't like it because it wastes time when arriving at your hunting location, but most guides have the luxury of knowing when it's OK to move around and get blood flowing into their extremities.

Your first layer is polyester undergarments under such trade names as Under Armour and Helly Hansen. You can put that on at home before you leave. Next is a pair of wool pants. Blue jeans or cotton are poor choices for cold weather as they lack the ability to wick away moisture. You'll also need a loose fitting shirt and a vest or sweater. Top the whole outfit off with waterproof, breathable and insulated bib overalls and a coat with a hood.

**Your feet, hands and head are the body's primary radiators.** Boots must be waterproof and breathable and the temperature rating should be beyond the worst you can imagine. Wear polyester liners inside of wool or wool/acrylic blend socks. DUC-branded socks sold

in Giant Tiger stores across the country with olefin/polyester liners are outstanding cold-weather products. Never put them on until you hit the field. Insulated gloves are fine so long as you have a pair of mitts for backup.

Carry two pairs of those disposable hand warmers in a spare pocket.

Baseball caps are, well, for baseball; a wool toque or cap with ear flaps are far better options. Again leave them off until you settle into your blind.

**Finally, size matters.** If you normally wear large, buy everything in XL. You need full range of movement in the tight ground-level blinds often used in field shooting of geese. The extra bulk creates air pockets that provide insulation.