From the art of camouflage to the approach of cupped wings, Illinois goose hunting is a late-winter masterpiece.

Goose Hunting

Story By Joe Bauer
Photos By Adele Hodde

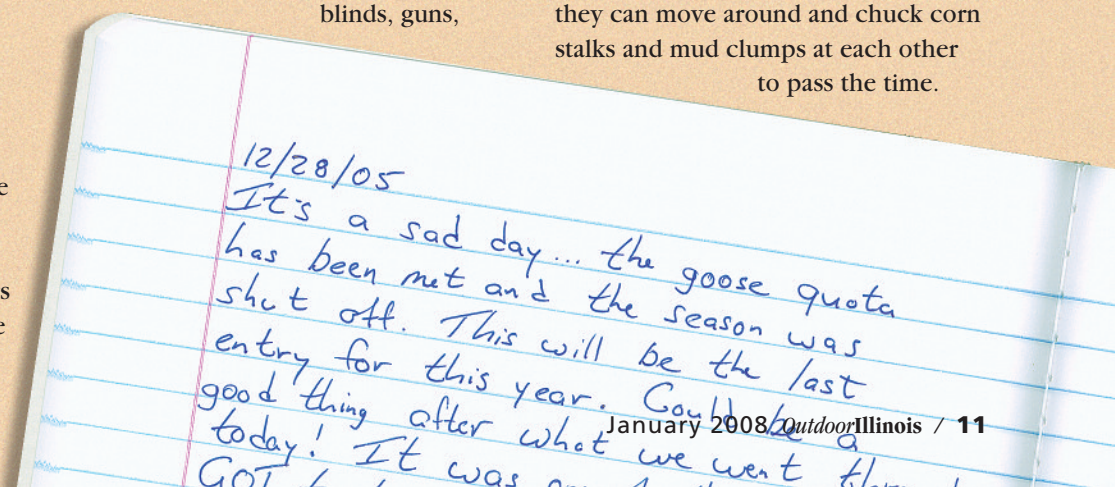
Scanning the skies for little black dots that could turn into geese is an enjoyable pastime. Having hunting buddies in the pit with you makes it even better.

The new year brings duck season to a close throughout most of Illinois. The North and Central waterfowl zones close to ducks in December, but with new regulations enacted during the 2006-2007 waterfowl season, goose hunting remains open through January in the Central and South waterfowl zones and closes in mid January in the North Zone.

The southern waterfowl zone in Illinois used to be known as "the goose capital of the world." This has changed over the last 5 years or so, and the Central Zone has become the place to bag Canada geese. It seems the geese migrate only as far as they have to and the string of mild winters throughout the Midwest has kept the geese farther north.

Methods for harvesting geese basically boil down to two types: Hunting on land and hunting over water. While goose hunting over water with floating decoys is still a time-tested and effective way to take some geese home, much goose hunting is now done in harvested corn and soybean fields.

Both of these methods require a certain amount of effort, but in my experiences, field hunting requires more. Loading a boat and puttering to the blind is easier than hauling out six dozen full-bodied decoys, layout blinds, guns, shells, calls and dogs. On the other hand, I have always felt much safer hunting in a field. When you fall, you don't worry about freezing-cold water spilling into your waders, and I've never been in a field where drowning was a concern. Also, when the going gets slow and the children get antsy, they can move around and chuck corn stalks and mud clumps at each other to pass the time.



Neither rain, sleet nor snow will keep the diehard hunter out of the field. This hunter had to chip his way out of his layout blind...and on this day he got skunked.

There was a time in the not-so-distant past that I would actually dig a hole in the middle of a muddy cornfield and lay down in it. Don't get me wrong, we had tremendous success when an acre-sized puddle formed in the middle of a cut field, but it was about as uncomfortable as it gets. Equipment has improved and the "gotta have" list for the serious, or even the weekend, goose hunter is getting longer every year. If you are hunting fields, layout blinds are the ticket. I know I mentioned above you can hunt in the dirt and mud, but if you don't have to, why do it?

Layout blinds come in all shapes, sizes and camouflage patterns. Find one that you like and then peel the bills off the roll. Layout blinds are not cheap. One way to save yourself a few dollars is to buy the blind without the camouflage pattern. In my experience, khaki brown blinds work better at blending in to a wider variety of surroundings and they are cheaper.

Get your new blind out of the box, have your hunting buddies over to admire how nice it looks, then mix yourself up a bucket of mud and go to town smearing the mud on your new blind from head to toe. Let the mud dry and then brush it off. Next, get a bunch of vegetation from the area you will be hunting and completely cover your blind. Most layout blinds have straps that this vegetation easily attaches to and using black zip ties makes this process a snap.

I generally hunt in corn fields, so I head to a buddy's field, cut down about 300 corn stalks (enough for everyone), take the ear off and attach the stalk to the blind. It is legal to keep the ear of corn on the stalk as long as you don't expose the ear in any way or scatter the corn once you get to the field. Removing the ear doesn't take that long and the farmer gets to keep his profit. Besides, you'll have enough weight to carry.

Weather is key to a successful goose hunt. Geese don't like bad weather. Oh, they will stick around and tough it out until the water is frozen and the field is covered with at least 8 inches of hard-

Good calling is an art form. There are three ways to become a good goose caller: Practice, practice again, then practice some more.

packed snow, but when the weather is nasty their movement becomes more predictable. If it is snowing and blowing, the geese will be getting into the fields to get a craw full and they will actually do it during legal shooting hours. I've even had a few days like this when the geese worked all day.

On sunny days I have spent the morning staring at empty skies and then in the afternoon I've watched literally thousands of geese pile into the fields 10 to 15 minutes after shooting time. Add a full moon to that and you are better off watching the football playoffs than hauling everything and the kitchen sink out to the field. Even just a thick layer of clouds will give you a better chance at the geese.

With that said, weather is never a guarantee and goose hunters will hit the fields and water whenever they can. This I fully understand and appreciate. I would suggest keeping a journal of your hunts, recording weather conditions, time of goose movement how the geese worked and total geese harvested. It's not only a nice way to see what types of weather conditions seem to move geese best in your area, but it also is a fun way to pass the time until next season by reliving the hunts.

Opinions on how to spread the decoys and where to put yourself in the spread are as varied as the day is long.

A pit is generally the most comfortable way to hunt, but also is the least mobile. Still, there is something to be said for comfort.

Should you set up on the front edge of the spread or would the back edge be better? How about plopping down right in the middle, or on an edge? This is another area that makes keeping a journal come in handy.

Keep track of where you set up according to the wind direction and other weather conditions and this may help take out some of the guesswork on later trips. If your location in or near the spread isn't working and the geese are sailing long or short-stopping, don't be afraid to move—even during the hunt. Just make sure you are as camouflaged as you can be.

Geese have great eyes and they become very wary late in the season. If the birds are working and flare off, get out of your blind to see what's causing the problem. A quick fix may lead to more birds for the table.

This leads to calling and flagging. You are on your own in this aspect of the pursuit. I must not be a very good caller. If I were, I think my goose calls would quit disappearing opening day every year. Somehow my calls keep turning into chew toys for the dogs in my hunting party.

So, now you are set up in your spread, the geese are working and it looks like you are going to get a chance at the group of honkers that is slowly working its way to you. Let's delve into the final piece of the puzzle—goose shotguns and loads.

Geese are big birds with thick feathers and I suggest a 12-gauge shotgun. With the newer, nontoxic loads available, 20-gauge shotguns are now a possibility for younger and smaller hunters, but make sure to limit your range for these large and hardy waterfowl. The larger 10-gauge also is a good choice, but if you have to choose one "all around" gun, stick with the 12-gauge.

Like most every type of bird hunting Illinois offers, good dog work is a joy to watch and a successful hunt is topped off by watching a dog do what he loves.

The type of nontoxic load you choose to use will help in the decision of choosing the size of the shot. Lighter, less dense steel shot will require a bigger pellet than some of the other alloys available. Illinois has maximum allowable sizes for all legal nontoxic loads, so ensure you check the waterfowl regulations.

Whether you are in a boat or laying in a field, when the geese make the final run at the decoys, cup their wings, their big black feet come out for landing and the honking is almost deafening, it is a thrill matched by few things in the hunting world.

Joe Bauer is an avid outdoorsman and works for the DNR Division of Education in Springfield.