It takes a strong commitment to waterfowl hunting to hit the water hours before sunrise every morning.

Blind Tradition

Every day there is a waterfowl hunting season in southern Illinois, veteran duck hunters Larry Barton and Charlie Laurenti can be found in their blind, waiting for dawn.

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

In 20 minutes it will be one-half hour before sunrise, and Charlie Laurenti has been up since 3 a.m. Here in this rural speck of Illinois called Orient—in the middle of Illinois' South Zone for waterfowl hunters—most locals are still asleep.

An hour ago during the short ride out of town, Laurenti passed dark houses and empty streets. At such an hour, one's hometown seems unfamiliar. Turning east, past a gas station still closed for the night, the first sign of life appeared: A red fox raised its head from the weeds beside the road, then trotted away.

A few minutes later, Laurenti's heavy truck turned off the empty township road, entered a dirt trail and stopped. There was a jingling of keys, and after a gate was unlocked by headlights, Laurenti shifted into four-wheel drive and plowed into the dark wilderness.

Locals call this place Orient Bottoms. The Big Muddy River winds nearby and hunters have been coming here forever. Laurenti and hunting partner Larry Barton used to hunt these flooded backwaters and potholes as childhood friends. But that was a few years ago.

"I like to get up early," Laurenti offered, leaning against the gas stove in his concrete-walled pit blind. Laurenti and Barton built this subterranean masterpiece of camouflage a few years ago, and it'll be the last new blind they build together.

This one is really good enough, both agree.

There's just a hint of gray light increasing now, but it's hard to notice. It's still nighttime in southern Illinois, and so the waiting continues.

A propane heater hisses like a bottle rocket. It's an echo chamber in this perfect blind, but nobody minds. A couple of feet away, Barton seats himself once again, warming his hands. The decoys

The perfect waterfowl blind needs a stove to cook a hunter's breakfast featuring eggs, sausage and biscuits and gravy.

outside are fine, he announced a moment ago.

Barton can't hear so well anymore, a gift of age, which is why Laurenti is the ears of this duck-hunting team. Barton can still spot ducks a mile away, but none of that matters at the moment. Preparation has taken its toll, so the hunters wait in silence.

Overhead in the black-gray sky, a single duck now circles the decoys, a faint whistling of wingbeats all but impossible to hear. It sticks out its legs before touching the water with a pat, then becomes one of the decoys.

Laurenti glances up at the scarcely audible noise and Barton responds by rising, then peering through the tarp covering the blind.

A widgeon—a brownish duck resembling a hen mallard—has decided the decoys are convincing company. Things are looking up now. It's too early to shoot, but a live duck will promote credibility among the plastic shapes on the water.

Anyone who's ever been late can appreciate the satisfaction of being early. Somewhere else in Illinois, less-practiced waterfowlers are still tossing decoys onto the water, impatient with themselves, muttering at an unforgiving horizon. At boat launches, outboards are finally being started, truck doors slammed, gravel churned beneath tires.

But it's quiet inside Barton and Laurenti's underground fort. The heater hisses, and the two friends sit and wait.

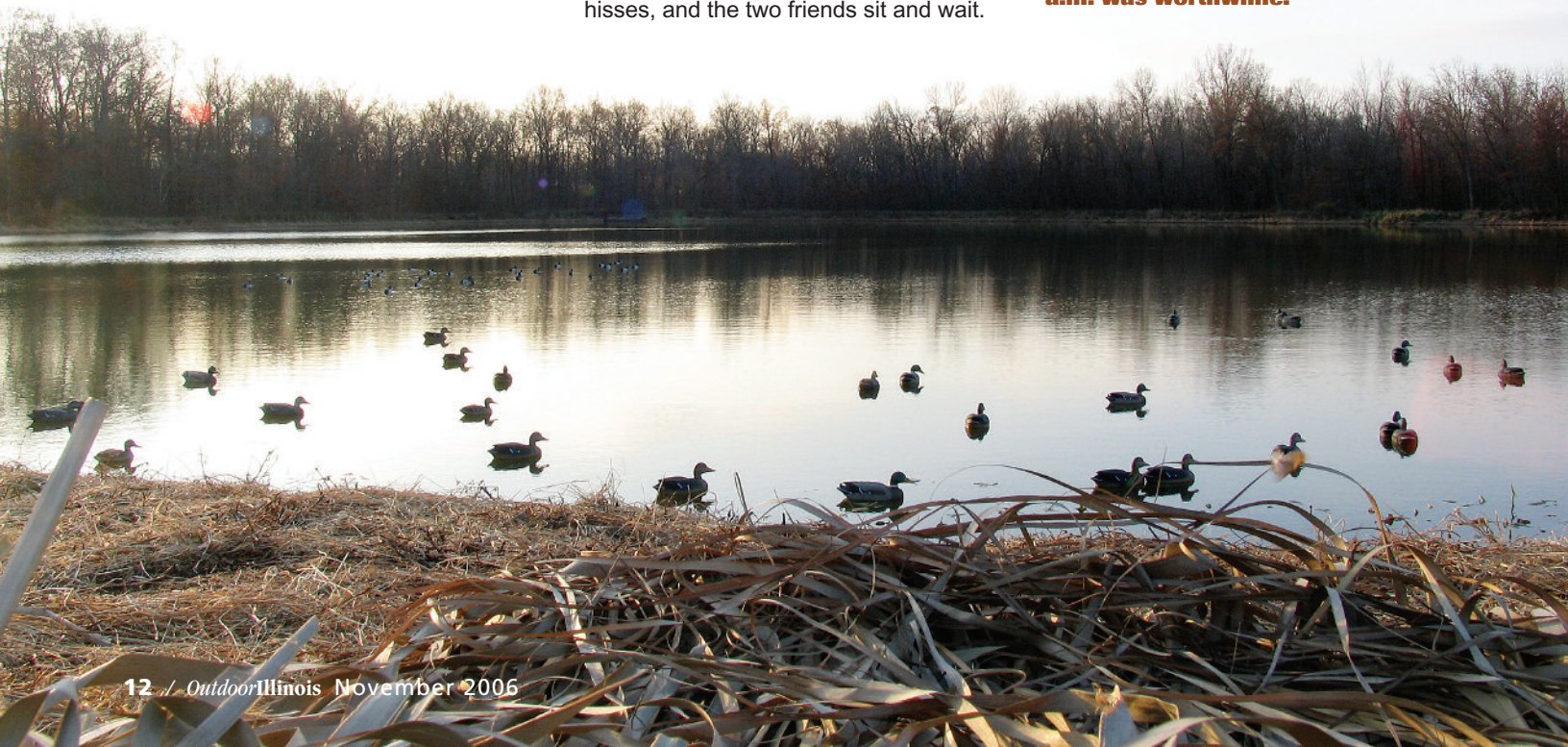
"We were both raised in Orient," Barton explained earlier, recalling days of young friendship. Barton was slightly older, but Laurenti had good aim.

"I was a little bitty guy and I hit him on the head with a tomato," Laurenti grinned. "That's the first time we met."

With that indelible marksmanship, a sporting friendship that's lasted for decades was created.

Friendships just aren't built on anything worthwhile anymore, it would seem. But waterfowl hunting is ancient,

If waterfowl hunters experience nothing beyond the sunrise of a cold winter morning, rising at 4 a.m. was worthwhile.



Charlie Laurenti retrieves a post-sunrise duck he'd bagged moments earlier.

and so Barton and Laurenti's endless pursuit of ducks became a natural friendship that's now lasted for more than 50 years.

As seasons rolled by, fewer kids from Orient could roam these bottoms in pursuit of a limit of ducks. Posted signs appeared. Real estate transferred hands. Before nearby Rend Lake was built, public waterfowling opportunities were dwindling.

"When we bought this place back in the 60s people thought we were crazy for buying this swamp," Laurenti said. "But we knew there would be a day when you'd have to have your own place to hunt."

Fortunately, Illinois still offers plenty of public hunting opportunities. Many sites—such as nearby Pyramid State Recreation Area—have actually increased the opportunities. But opportunity alone doesn't create a hunter. All hunters must first discover a reason to crawl out of bed in the middle of a cold night.

"If I had to pick one day that stands out, it would be all of them," Laurenti said. For as long as they can remember, the two have stood in a blind together nearly every sunrise of every waterfowl season.

"If you don't hunt tomorrow," Barton pointed out, "You might miss the best day of the season."

Barton pulls away the tarp for another peek, and suddenly it's legal shooting hours. A watch is checked, and activity quickens. Shells get thumbed into magazines and jacked into chambers. It's finally light outside and ducks are moving.

Barton notices a few ringnecks and grabs the call.

Shots are fired, and then it's quiet again.

Laurenti trudges out to retrieve a ringneck. When he returns, there is good news.

"Breakfast is at 8:30," Laurenti announces, laying the bird beside the entrance. Like all great duck blinds, a stove, skillet and a willing cook complete the provincial furnishings here. Every morning, sausage and eggs are fried, and biscuits and coffee finish the deal.

The actual benefits are immeasurable.

"You don't want to take a cholesterol test after one of these breakfasts," Laurenti said after cooking another masterpiece. "But we've had guys come back for the breakfast."

A couple of hours later, the early promise of sunrise has dwindled. When ducks are really moving, every hunter knows it. But today's not the day, not yet. There's a new chill in the breeze, which can be good.

"It's getting right now," Laurenti suggested after a particularly cold gust rattled the decoys. "If it'd drop another 20, 25 degrees, it'd be just right."

The propane heater in the blind feels pretty good in this weather. But after another 45 minutes, it seems the ducks just won't be flying in the cold wind.

Nonetheless, there's still hope. For lifetime duck hunters, the measure of success includes the potential of tomorrow being the best day of the season.

"Don't get me wrong," Barton said. "We love to shoot. But that's not why we come out here."

In a little while, the cold wind and gray skies offer no additional promises.

"There's always tomorrow," Barton suggested after unloading his gun and zipping it up in a case. "Hopefully."

"Yeah," Laurenti agreed. "Hopefully."

Check out the National Duck Hunter Survey 2005, released by the National Flyway Council and the Wildlife Management Institute, available online at www.ducksurvey.com. Survey results assist federal and state agencies in improving wildlife management, hunting regulations and hunter satisfaction.

A lifetime hunting partnership starts with true friendship. Charlie Laurenti (left) and Larry Barton have shared waterfowling experiences for more than 50 years.