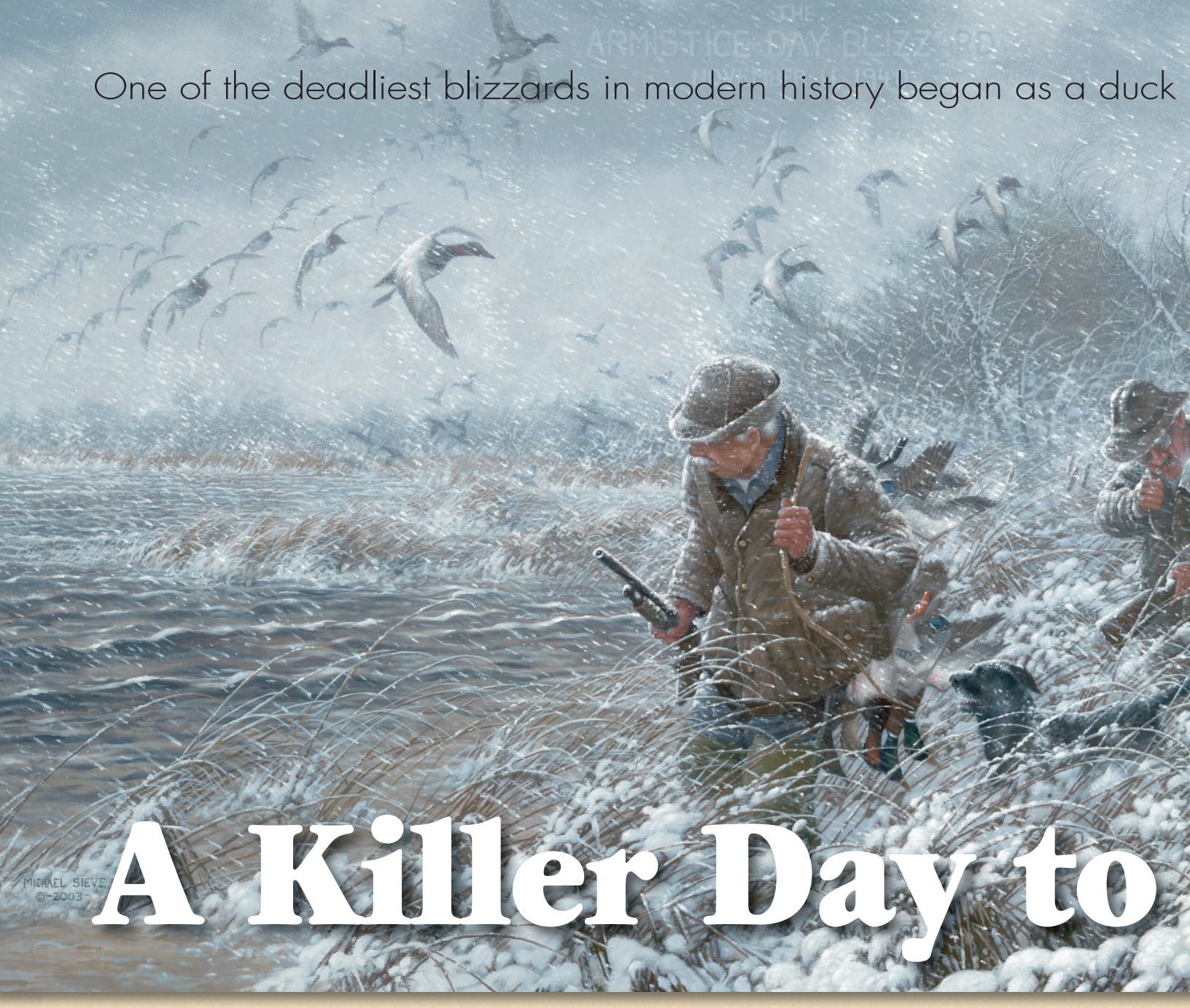
One of the deadliest blizzards in modern history began as a duck

A Killer Day to



"Armistice Day Blizzard" by Michael Sieve. Artwork courtesy of the artist and Wild Wings, Lake City, MN 55041. For additional Michael Sieve images,

Story By Joe McFarland

By all accounts, the morning of November 11, 1940 began as just another unseasonably warm day in Illinois and the upper Midwest. Indian Summer—that autumn gift of mild weather that might last for just a day or two—had lingered far longer than usual that year. By early November, Midwestern states as far north as Minnesota still were experiencing a prolonged warm spell that, even to those enjoying it, seemed far too good to be true. People reported their gardens were still productive until late in the season. Day after day, sportsmen heading outdoors during the early morning hours were able to wear light jackets, or no jackets at all. Such weather would've been normal for early September.

Yet duck hunters weren't impressed. The mild weather had postponed the fall migration of waterfowl into the Mississippi valley states, and flocks of ducks that would've typically departed frozen marshes of the north by mid autumn still hadn't arrived. Frustrated hunters up and down the Mississippi said they would've gladly traded the mild weather for one, brisk November cold front.

In a matter of hours, they were about to get their wish.

On the morning of November 11—Armistice Day—crowds of sportsmen took advantage of the Monday holiday and a promising weather forecast to hit the waters for what they anticipated to be the first worthwhile day of duck hunting that season. Rain was expected, plus a cold front. Waterfowlers always favor such weather, so none offered complaints about the warm air as they loaded piles of decoys and shotguns into their wooden boats that morning.

At LaCrosse, Wisconsin, hunters rowing in the darkness at 4:30 a.m. would have been sweating from their labor in the 52-degree weather. Many quickly

hunter's dream.

Hunt

contact 800-445-4833 or visit wildings.com.

shed the heavy coats of the season—or left them ashore. Despite the cold front that was predicted, hunters made at least one, reckless error of judgment that morning: Even today as we head outdoors, many of us willingly decide to abandon clothing we know we might need simply because we don't need it at that moment. With the brutal cold of a November storm about to blast into the upper Midwest, the decision to pack light would prove deadly for

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

Illinois hunter Ray Scott, 81, was duck hunting with his father and grandfather in Minnesota on November 11, 1940. They survived a deadly blizzard—thanks to young Ray's wet boots.

scores of hunters. In a matter of hours, no fewer than 87 duck hunters would die from exposure in Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Yet among those who survived the fury of what's known today as the Armistice Day Blizzard—one of the worst blizzards in modern history—hunters recall it as the greatest day of duck hunting they ever saw.

Ray Scott was just a boy of 12 in 1940, a young Minnesota hunter who'd eagerly planned to spend the holiday hunting with his father and grandfather, plus a couple of others, on Lake McDonald in west-central Minnesota. Scott carried a single-shot 16 gauge—his mother's gun—and was already a pretty fair shot for any age. Now 81 and retired in northern Illinois, Scott recalled rowing out to one of the floating bogs at the lake that morning, and how the morning air was perfectly agreeable for the season.

"It was fine, almost warm, when we started off," Scott remembered. "But the duck hunting wasn't very good until the weather began to change."

And change it did. By late morning, a cold, wind-driven rain began to pelt central Minnesota hunters as the front roared east toward the Mississippi. Constant winds of 45 m.p.h. would rage for hours, with gusts reaching 80 m.p.h. recorded everywhere around the Great Lakes. In LaCrosse, where the temperature was 52 degrees before dawn, it was suddenly 14 degrees by mid afternoon.

The front reached Chicago that afternoon, toppling brick chimneys and metal radio towers, uprooting trees and shattering store windows. People at outdoor memorials for Armistice Day recall ceremonies suddenly turned violent with flying debris—street signs and shattered window glass—airborne as storm shrapnel. As the ferocious "winds of hell" screamed across northern Illinois, the long, pleasant Indian Summer residents had enjoyed for so long literally vanished in a matter of seconds. The temperature in Chicago was 62 degrees at 10 a.m.; by midnight it was 19.

As Scott and his hunting group braced against the gale in their Minnesota blind, the straight-line rain changed to hail, then sleet, then a full-blown blizzard. The best part: Thousands of ducks poured from the dark skies as the icy winds pummeled the lakes and marshes of the upper Midwest.

For the crowds of hunters who'd been frustrated by poor shooting opportunities, their dreams seemed to be coming true and the thunder of shotguns soon rivaled the roar of the

Northern Illinois was blasted by gale-force winds during the storm which sank or ran aground at least six cargo ships on Lake Michigan.

(Rockford Register Star/Copyrighted/Used With Permission.)

ROCKFORD MORNING STAR

VOL. 53, NO. 204—Est. March 20, 1888 ROCKFORD, ILLINOIS, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 1940 22 PAGES Weather Fair 5 CENTS

OVER 70 DIE ON LAKE DURING GALE

Italian Officers Try In Vain To Halt Rout

GREEKS TAKE HUNDREDS OF DUCE'S TROOPS

British Planes Bomb Durazzo And

Armed Freighter Battles Nazi Raider; Saves 29 Ships

FEDERAL MEN PROBE BLASTS FATAL TO 14

Huge Ohio Oil Tank Explode

OPEN OFFICE TO HIRE MEN FOR

Storm Victims

WRECKAGE OF SHIPS STREWN ALONG SHORE

(Photo credit: Minneapolis Star Journal)

Following the Armistic Day Blizzard, transportation in Minnesota and Wisconsin ceased as rescuers shoveled out victims covered by more than 2 feet of snow.

wind. As fast as he could work his numb fingers, Scott would eject one shell and cram in another. Every bird in the flyway seemed to be rushing in to load up on food before it would be covered in snow.

"I've never seen anything like it before or since," the hunter recalled. Yet duck hunters everywhere were ignoring the critical clue from nature. Instead of reading the strange behavior as nature's warning to pack up and leave, shivering hunters jammed more shells into their shotguns and kept firing. Hunters from Minnesota to Illinois that day reported ducks diving out of the wind and into their decoys as fast as any hunter could take aim.

"They didn't seem to care that we were shooting," Scott said. "We'd shoot some ducks, then, right away, here would come another round of ducks."

Unknown to everyone was the deadly potential of the massive front that had just barreled into the region. Even weather officials underestimated this now-legendary monster of a storm, but for good reason. By today's standards, weather predictions in 1940 were educated guesswork, with broad, general forecasts issued for entire regions based on weather observations wired in from other states. In 1940, the U.S. Weather Bureau office (now the National Weather Service) in Chicago issued just four daily reports covering eight Midwestern states. The office wasn't even staffed during the night, so the only official hint of potentially severe weather anybody could've had that morning was a "strong cold front" advisory the bureau had issued for Minnesota.

Although modern weather radar and satellite technology didn't exist, the storm already had a fierce, known history. A few days earlier, a newly built but poorly engineered suspension bridge at Tacoma, Washington buckled and collapsed amid steady, 45-m.p.h winds as the low-pressure blast first moved inland. When the powerful front moved across the Rockies on Nov. 9, then plunged into Oklahoma before lifting into the upper Midwest, meteorologists still didn't quite comprehend the deadly potential of the two fronts about to smash together.

Today the storm is cited as a textbook example.

"November storms like that are notorious for giving you some really good weather followed by sudden pressure changes that can create massive storms," explained Illinois State Water Survey climatologist Jim Angel, who said the famous wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald on Lake Superior on virtually the same day 35 years later (November 10, 1975) was caused by precisely such a gale.

"It's the time of year when you get these strong contrasts between warm, moist air from the south and cold air from Canada," he said. "The winds can be incredibly strong, and when the cold front passes through, the temperature drops like a rock."

Witnesses to the Armistice Day storm were stunned. At LaCrosse, the temperature fell to 14 degrees by mid afternoon. Ceaseless, raging winds gusting up to 80 m.p.h. stranded hunters on islands along the Mississippi as they were unable to boat to safety. Some tried to battle the 5-foot waves but drowned as their boats capsized. Others remained huddled together in wet jackets, yet many still froze to death within hours.

The official death toll from the Armistice Day Blizzard has never been established. But at least 159 people were known to have died as a result of the storm, and more than half of them were duck hunters.

"It's known as the granddaddy of all blizzards in Minnesota," said Pete Boulay, assistant state climatologist for the Minnesota Department of Natural

Northwestern Illinois hunters on the Mississippi were stranded by the Nov. 11, 1940 blizzard. Not all survived to tell their story.

(Alfred W. Mueller Historical Collection.)

THE GALENA DAILY GAZETTE

g his
ebrat-
rsary
ebrat-
Ohio

in of
birth

WIND STORM CAUSES MUCH DAMAGE IN CITY AND VICINITY

DUCK HUNTERS ARRIVE HOME AFTER CAUSING MUCH ANXIETY FOR THEIR SAFETY

A great deal of concern was held

DRAFT
CARDS
REA

(Photo credit: Minneapolis Star Journal)

Following the storm, rescuers uncovered grim evidence of the tragedy. Minnesota duck hunters unprepared for the sudden weather change froze to death in wet clothing.

Resources. "It's still ranked as the second-worst storm of any kind to ever to hit the state."

Young Ray Scott survived to tell his story 69 years later thanks to one, fortuitous slip of his boot that day.

"I'd stepped out onto the bog to retrieve a couple of ducks and my foot fell through and got wet," Scott remembered. As the 12-year-old sat shivering in the blind, with inches of snow accumulating on his gun, Scott's father finally turned to the other men in the hunting party and announced a fatherly decision.

"Let's take Ray home," his father announced. "I don't want him to get sick."

"That decision probably saved all of our lives," Scott said. "If we'd have stayed any longer, we never would have been able to get across the lake. It would have been frozen solid."

With more than 60 ducks aboard, the hunting party struggled to inch forward with their rowboats in the raging blizzard. One of the men with an oar smashed ice that had formed since morning. Elsewhere, hunters who simply couldn't stop shooting—or had no way to escape the blizzard—eventually found themselves making primitive blizzard shelters with overturned boats. Some chose to break up the wooden boats for firewood in the bitter cold as the temperature plummeted.

"When the boats were burned and gone," Scott said, "they froze to death."

Hunters can make peculiar decisions when they're experiencing the greatest hunt of their life. Ed Sorenson was an Illinois hunter who'd just turned 26 in 1940. On that mild, breezy morning of November 11, when temperatures were still 62 degrees in Chicago at 10 a.m., Sorenson was hunting pheasants near what is now Chain O'Lakes State Park in Antioch. As the front suddenly roared into northeastern Illinois, Sorenson quickly figured out where the real action was at.

"The ducks were flying like you never saw before," Sorenson, now 95, recalled. "But it was so windy you couldn't get out on the water. The shore was the only place you could hunt."

Smart choice. Even without the heavy snows that were smothering hunters elsewhere, the brutally cold wind made boating nearly impossible across much of Illinois that day. On Lake Michigan, five ships ripped apart by mountainous waves either sank or ran aground, killing 66 crew members.

"A number of hunters were stranded on Grass Lake," Sorenson added. "But even if they knew the storm was coming, they still would have gone out."

The hunting was that good.

(Photo Credit: Ray Scott)

Ray Scott Sr. was an avid waterfowler who lived in an era when high-tech, waterproof hunting clothing didn't exist.

REGISTRANTS'
NUMBERED AND
DY FOR POSTING