Story By Joe Bauer
Photos By Adele Hodde

When Ducks Fly

An experienced waterfowler has a humbling experience in a duck blind.

I consider myself a well-rounded sportsman who knows his way around the woods and waters. But occasionally I'm humbled by a new experience. So went a late-season waterfowl hunt near the Cache River in southern Illinois.

The first morning was ducky—foggy with a light drizzle spritzing from time to time—and just to my liking. It wasn't exceptionally cold, but a significant change in the weather was predicted that evening, bringing with it hopes for a few ducks in our spread.

Hunting in a large, comfortable blind, a few ducks visited and I was quite content with the amount of activity.

As things slowed down, the blind filled with the "whoomph" of a stove being lit and the smell of goose sausage and eggs. Steaming plates were passed and a wonderful breakfast disappeared in short order.

One of the people along on this trip was a familiar name, Adele Hodde, the Department of Natural Resources' photographer. While all in the blind were discussing her photography, Hodde mentioned that she would like to get pictures of a drake redhead.

I thought to myself, "I would like to see that too, but good luck here. This is puddle duck country."

A redhead drake was a welcome surprise for both camera and gun operators.

Twenty minutes later—and I'm not kidding—Hodde became the hero of the day when a redhead drake made a low-approach splashdown into the decoys. First on the trigger, I barked two shots off, but missed my chance to harvest my first redhead drake—the first redhead I'd ever seen while duck hunting. One quick shot from our guide and the bird was ours. All it took was a wish from Hodde to bring in a beautiful species.

A large, comfortable duck blind provides ample room for hunters, dogs—and a stove for preparing a sumptuous breakfast.

The promised weather change arrived that night with winds from the north and plummeting temperatures. Awakening when duck hunters normally do—about seven hours before normal people get up—we headed to the hunting area.

Eating humble pie

The next five hours were completely backwards to how I would have done things.

There was no sense of urgency to get to the blind and set up before shooting time. As a matter of fact, there was no urgency to do much of anything besides talk and plan.

The start of shooting time came and went. Sunrise came and went. I began to wonder if these guys knew what they were doing. It was daylight and we sat in the truck. I knew the hunt was over before it even started.

After what seemed like weeks, our host Steve Loveall returned to the truck with the plan of the day: get to the blind, break some ice and see what happened. Loveall saw the questions on my face and explained that experience had proven that on this type of morning we'd have better luck later in the day. It was safer to break ice when you could see what you were doing and the ducks wouldn't show up until later, so why hurry?

Why hurry? Because we are hunting ducks and they move at first light, that's why. Soon, a tractor rumbled over the hill and plowed into the ice-covered water. It was obvious the driver had done the ice-removal ballet numerous times.

It was impressive.

After finishing touches on the water hole and setting some spinning wing decoys, we were hunting—only two hours later I thought we should have started. Ducks flying after 10 a.m.? Whoever heard of such a thing?

These rookies were wasting their time hunting so late in the day yet I enjoyed the banter, name-calling and grief-giving of people who have hunted together for years. The tale of Hodde's wish the day before was retold. Some of the guys suggested she make another wish, which she said she might consider, if the mood struck her.

All of a sudden, the call went out. "Ducks, ducks, ducks!"

Seriously? It's like 9:45. I'll be darned.

Three green-winged teal strafed the decoys from left to right and were peeling hard around the blind. They made another pass and "take 'em" was heard. Shotgun blasts filled the air and two of the teal were ours.

"OK," I thought to myself. "Three teal that can't tell time either. When is breakfast?"

Roughly 30 minutes later, a dozen mallards were spotted and they seemed interested. The duck calls came out for the first time that day and these skilled callers amazed me. There was a melodic rhythm to this exhibition of calling skills until one caller stopped and mentioned he had stepped on the donuts. This almost brought the whole operation to an abrupt halt, except for one focused caller who kept on the ducks.

The mallards liked what they saw and heard, and were flying around the blind, the callers keeping their attention and working them into range. It is truly a treat to listen to a group who has hunted and called together for some time work a group of ducks. There was plenty of quacking, but also conversation about what the ducks were going to do—and when to start cooking breakfast.

Finally enough ducks committed and the quacking was replaced with reports of shotguns. More ducks on the water. I began to rethink my opinion of this group's abilities.

Twenty minutes later a high, and I mean high, group of ducks was spotted way out. The callers scrambled for their instruments and began to holler at the ducks.

With my vast waterfowl knowledge I knew these ducks were way too high and not the least bit interested in our little hole in the ice. I was inhaling to tell them to settle down, put the calls away and start making breakfast when, for a reason I cannot explain, the ducks heard the calls, buckled and literally began to fall out of the sky. There must have been 35 to 40 mallards, and few pintails.

Preparing for the late morning hunt included a well choreographed ice-removal ballet.

Ask and you shall receive. A wish for a flock of pintails became a reality for DNR photographer Adele Hodde.

The birds were wary, staying just out of range for some time. There was a frenzy of birds flying every direction around the blind. The calling became more emphatic. Eventually, some of the birds made their way into range.

Hmmm. Could these guys possibly know something I don't?

There was a brief break in the action and breakfast was cooked. Being a good guest, I didn't elbow too many people out of the way to get my plate of homemade goose sausage, eggs, hash browns, peppers, onions and mandarin orange chunks.

The conversation again turned to Hodde's wish. To get the boys to be quiet, Hodde said she would like to get photos of pintails in flight against the brilliant blue sky.

Again…I'm not kidding…10 minutes later a flock of 70-plus ducks, all pintails, moved into the area. The callers had them working beautifully and she clicked away on photos.

Looking back, I think she was a little selfish. Her wish of having pintails to photograph against the blue sky did indeed come true, but would it have been so hard to wish for a few for the table, too? The pintails gave a grand display of grace and agility for several minutes before making their way out of the area. Not a shot had been fired.

Several more times throughout the rest of the day ducks worked our blind and the dogs had enough work to keep them interested. I don't remember how many ducks were harvested, but it was a fantastic hunt with wonderful new images burned into my mind's eye that I will hopefully never forget.

I learned more than I thought I ever would. Stepped-on donuts make great dog training tools. When Hodde makes a wish in the duck blind it comes true. A steaming pile of eggs is a treat in a cold duck blind. Truly talented callers can get birds to work from great heights. Tractors work well for breaking ice. Ducks actually do fly later in the day.

And finally, on a cold, clear southern Illinois day, I discovered I was indeed the new guy when it came to understanding waterfowl.

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

Eyes skyward, skilled callers work to bring ducks into range.