



The quiet waterfowler

A SHIRT, A NEWSPAPER, A LIMIT OF MALLARDS

By Tom France. Illustrations by Mike Moran

It was one of those Saturdays that happens every year right in the middle of duck season.

You go hunting not with high expectations of a big shoot or even seeing many ducks, but just to go. And, as expected, my friend Dennis and I set the decoys out that morning and saw only a few distant ducks before deciding to pick up and scout around for a better spot. After an hour of bumping down gravel roads looking at empty marshes, we were ready to head home.

Then we turned down a road to make one last check of a rancher's creek, and there they were—ducks and more ducks, hundreds and hundreds of ducks, loafing across a big flooded field bordering the stream. If we had been in a duck hunting cartoon, our eyes would have been bulging out of our head, smoke coming out our ears. To our astonishment, the rancher said "You bet" when we asked if we could hunt.

We turned our attention to how we might hunt this hoard of ducks and quickly realized our options were limited. The massive grass field was covered by an inch of water, with no place to hide or even sit down. The only cover anywhere close was along the creek, where a few willow bushes provided a little cover. This being the only option available, we scared the ducks off the field and set out a dozen decoys along the creek, hoping the birds would come our way when they came back.

As we huddled under the bushes, the ducks began to return—but only to the flooded field. Dozens of ducks came back before the sun set, but they ignored our little decoy spread and insisted on landing in the flat water 100 yards away. "Damn," I muttered. "Damn," muttered Dennis.

We returned the next morning determined to have our way with those mallards. Driving up from Missoula in the dark, we pondered our strategy. Maybe a bigger decoy spread would work. What about big goose shells along the banks of the creek? We definitely needed to use our

ducks calls! But none of these options seemed all that promising. Those mallards liked that flooded field and weren't about to land anywhere else.

My friend Dennis is a man of ideas, which he often unveils slowly, putting them out one piece at a time as a conversation unfolds. As we drove, he casually observed that when he was in college he used to scare the wits out of his friends by sneaking a mannequin into the backseat of their cars. "They'd come out of the library at night, jump in their cars, and drive off," Dennis said. "Pretty soon they'd sense they weren't alone, and they were right!"

After a few moments, Dennis asked, "You don't have a mannequin, do you?"

I could see where he was going with all this. We needed a scarecrow for those ducks, something to keep them out of the flooded field and focused on the creek. As the miles passed, we brooded in silence until I suddenly realized we had most of what we needed readily at hand.

"I've got a red jacket in the backseat," I said. Dennis volunteered his waders. We had



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some old newspaper for stuffing materials. Then, driving through the little town of Ronan, I spotted the final ingredient. There, in front of the secondhand store, in amongst other items left out for the night, was a row of chairs. We figured the owner wouldn't mind us borrowing a bright yellow kitchen chair for a few hours of honest duck shooting, but just in case I slipped a note and a few dollars under the front door.

We arrived at the field at first light. Only a few mallards jumped up as we drove in, but we knew the rest were out feeding. Dennis worked on setting up our new hunting partner while I tended to decoys. As we settled into our blind, I finally looked over to the flooded field and my eyes grew wide. There, sitting in his bright yellow chair like he'd been there all his life, was a man at his leisure reading his Sunday paper. "Dennis," I

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said, "With our man on the job, I think this might just work."

At first our new hunting partner didn't have much to work with, just a couple of mallard pairs out for their morning constitutional. But those ducks reacted exactly as we had hoped. The sight of someone sitting in their field reading the Sunday paper confounded them. So they circled, looking at our silent reader first from one angle and then another. They talked things over with their mates. Then they flew around again. Finally one pair decided to come by the creek and our hiding spot, all the while looking nervously over their shoulders. Our retriever was very happy.

At about 9 a.m., the course of the day changed dramatically. The first flock of 30 mallards came back from a feeding field somewhere to the southeast. They had their wings set and were confidently settling into the flooded field when they noticed you-know-who. A little breeze caused him to readjust his paper; I think he was reading the sports page. Up went the ducks and over the creek they came. Again, our retriever was pleased.

For the next hour, flock after flock

returned from the fields. We would peer out of our blind and remark, "Here comes another wall of ducks." It was like being at a big airport and seeing one plane on its final approach, with another plane stacked behind it, and another, and another. Only in our case, they were flocks of ducks.

But it was our hired hand who turned a duck watching morning into a duck shooting morning. With nary a lifted finger, he turned aside every one of those legions of mallards. Oh, a couple might have actually landed in the field, but his mere presence made them so nervous that they quickly departed, usually for a little tour of the creek.

Thanks to our new pal, we made short work of those ducks, easily shooting a couple of limits by 10 a.m. Without him we would have been sunk, sullenly watching as hundreds of ducks landed just out of our reach. With him, we were manly men, with heavy game bags and empty shell pockets. As we picked up, returned the chair, and drove home, we had but one question: How long would it be before we saw him prominently displayed for sale in the Cabela's catalogue? 🐾