

Duck Shooting on the Coast Marshes of New Jersey

BY I. NORRIS DEHAVEN

The region especially referred to in the present paper extends from Atlantic City northward to the upper part of Barnegat Bay. It is from five to seven miles wide and includes three large bays, Great, Tuckerton and Barnegat, together with a great many smaller ones and numberless thoroughfares and creeks. The bays have deep channels but their bottoms are mostly flats, some of which are exposed at low tide while others are covered with a few inches to several feet of water and usually with a dense growth of marine vegetation which furnishes an abundance of food for the water fowl.

The vast extent of salt marsh or "meadow" that reaches out on every side consists of a thick growth of *Juncus gerardi*, *Spartina* of several species, *Salicornia* and other plants, the surface being just above the ordinary high water, though during the high tides of autumn the entire marsh is under water, with only here and there a tuft of taller grass showing above the flood. There are small islands scattered about the bays and on the east the long narrow beach islands which form the ocean barrier and are often several square miles in area, some of them supporting a small growth of trees.

The upper parts of Great Bay and Barnegat Bay are fresh or nearly so, owing to the various rivers and creeks that flow into them from the pine barrens, bringing down the clear brown water of the cedar swamps.

This region thus offers a great variety of feeding grounds for the water fowl. The upper parts of the bays and the creeks and rivers are the haunts of the marsh ducks, such as the Mallard, Wood Duck, Teal and Black Duck, while the main expanse of water and marsh back of the island beaches is used by the div-

ing ducks. In the fall, the Scaup, Black Duck, Shelldrake, Red-head, Bufflehead, Brant and Canada Goose, are the common species, while in the spring there are in addition straggling Mallards, Pintails, and Widgeon. Goldeneyes are scarce ducks in this region, and neither the Hooded nor American Merganser are often seen, the Red-breasted being the common "Shell-drake" of the gunners.

The Black Duck occurs regularly in both sorts of feeding grounds and is very fond of the salt ponds on the meadows, where a fine grass grows that is a favorite article of food.

The Brant and Geese use the wide flats near the inlets, particularly the sound flats where they sit at low tide far from any possibility of danger. When the tide comes in they fly up the bay if it is windy, or if calm they drift up with the tide in large flocks. Brant only become in prime condition for eating in the Spring, and are therefore not much shot before January. Outside on the ocean occur the Scoters or Surf Coots and Long-tails or Old Squaws, which occasionally come into the bays, especially near the inlets.

The diving ducks do not seem to pair before they leave us for the north, but the Black Ducks pair early in March, and some of them still breed in sheltered places along the New Jersey coast, although the vast majority move north by the middle of that month.

The boats used for shooting on the New Jersey marshes are apparently peculiar to this region and Long Island. They are twelve feet long, four feet wide and about fifteen inches deep, decked over with a cockpit some four and a half feet long, surrounded with a rail about an inch and a half high. It also has a canvass curtain in front about eighteen inches high, extending to the rowlocks where it is about six inches high. This curtain is raised by putting a stick under it and keeps out the wind and waves in rough weather. The bottom of the boat is oval, rising forward and aft to meet the deck, which curves down from the cockpit to meet it. From the rowlocks aft, there is provided a detachable rack to hold the decoys or stools, which number from forty to fifty. They are hollowed out, carved and painted, to represent the several kinds

of ducks, and have a piece of lead on the bottom to keep them upright in the water; they are fastened together in pairs and each pair is provided with a line and weight for anchor. The decoys and the boat also are made of white cedar which will with care last many years. A boat that I was using this fall was forty years old and was perfectly tight and dry; it was made by the father of the present owner.*

These boats are also provided with a sail, centerboard and rudder, all of which can be stowed away under the deck with the oars. The cockpit is then covered with a light hatch or painted canvass and everything kept dry inside no matter to what storms the boat may be exposed. There is also a pair of runners on the bottom covered with brass for running on the ice in winter, and with sail up and a fair wind the boat will attain a high speed, and if it comes to open water goes right on through and out on the ice on the far side. They are celebrated as rough-weather craft, and a good oarsman can cross the bay in one of them when it is impossible to handle any other kind of boat.

In shooting ducks two men usually go out together, each in his own boat. Two men can easily pull one of the boats out on the bank, so one stays by the stools while the other chases the crippled birds in his boat. They put out all their stool ducks in one flock about thirty yards from the point they intend to shoot from. The Brant and Black duck decoys are placed up to windward and the Scaup and Redheads are trailed down the wind from them. They pull their boats into the grass or into holes that have been dug into the favorite points, the racks are removed, and the deck and sides covered with sea trash. Then the gunners lay down with only their heads showing, and the whole boat looks just like a bunch of sea trash left stranded by the tide.

* A house near Cape May Court House, N. J., built over a hundred years ago was recently torn down. The shingles with which the sides were covered were made of New Jersey white cedar and, although very much weathered, they were dry and sound, and would have resisted the storms for many years more. Unfortunately, portable sawmills and the greed for profit is rapidly destroying all the white cedar in the New Jersey swamps and depriving the natives of a valuable tree, leaving only mountains of sawdust where the dark cedar swamps formerly stood.—W. S.

Any bird that comes within fifty yards is shot at if seen in time, but birds that alight among the stools are not shot at until they swim clear or take flight again, as there is danger of damaging the stools. The ducks come very differently to the decoys; the marsh ducks generally come high up and swing around two or three times before they set their wings and drop down, and when shot at every duck darts upward and away, each one looking out for himself. Occasionally one will come in low and drop in among the stools without any hesitation. The diving ducks usually come low over the water well outside of the stools and go down the wind at great speed as if they were going away, but round up quickly, head to the wind, and throwing their legs out in front of them back their wings and drop in with a splash, or wheel away, turning up their bellies as they do so. Their speed is very great, and the gunner must be quick to rise and discharge both barrels before they are out of range. Brant come to the stools much more slowly, wandering back and forth several times, looking all black as their heads are toward you, and then as they turn away showing their white flanks. As they wheel just over the stools or up to windward of them they generally bunch, and at this moment several may be shot at once. Brant are great birds to carry shot, and a wounded bird will often fly away a long distance with the flock before it drops. It can be easily secured, however, as they are poor divers. They are suspicious of points or land of any kind except sandbars, and flocks do not often come in within range, though pairs and single birds often approach the stools without hesitation. Shelldrakes will come from over the water or meadows from any direction, high or low, and will often pass within a few feet of the gunner's head.

Up to 1890 the bulk of the ducks killed on the New Jersey coast were shot by "Baymen," who made their principal living from the natural resources of the region. They owned cat-boats or small sloops, and took out sailing and fishing parties from the various resorts during the summer. Then they put cabins on their craft and went out on the bays for a living. They spent the time fishing, gathering oysters and clams, spearing eels, and gunning, living all the time on their boats,

and when they had gotten together a fair amount of stuff they would sail with it or ship it to market. This business had no appreciable effect upon the abundance of ducks so long as the Baymen were few in number, but there soon came to be a considerable permanent population on the island beaches as the resorts increased, who catered to the summer visitors for three or four months but had no regular occupation during the rest of the year. With such opportunities of sport and profit spread before them as the region offered they naturally took to the bays by the hundreds, with the result that oysters and clams became scarce and game was shot or frightened away until there was not a living left for anybody. Where in the eighties two men could get six to ten ducks on a morning's shoot, by 1890 one or two was the limit, while on many a day the gunners did not get a single shot.

Naturally the Baymen scattered and sought other occupations which, while less exciting, gave a more regular return for their labor. Then came more stringent game laws. In the old days they began to shoot wood-duck and teal in September and kept up the fusilade until the last shelldrake went north in May. Now shooting was limited to the period from November 1st to March 15th. Night shooting was stopped and also shipment of game out of the state, and all gunners were licensed. The oyster grounds, moreover, were leased and clambers had to have licenses. There are still oystermen, clambers and fishermen, but conditions are changed, and each one follows exclusively his own occupation, working on contracts with employers to take up so many bushels of oysters or deliver so many thousand clams in a certain time. They have no longer time to shoot ducks even though they are to be found close at hand. Nor do the fishermen shoot to any extent; they now outfit for the purpose of taking out gunners who come down from the cities, and they well know that one duck killed by these visitors brings them better returns than did many formerly sent to market. So to-day one live duck on the bay is more highly prized by the natives than a pile of dead ones. The result has been that for some years past the ducks have been coming back in gradually increasing numbers, until at the

present writing Black Duck, Scaup, Redhead, Brant and Geese are as plentiful as they were twenty-five years ago. In fact, last spring Brant and Geese were more plentiful than any in season within the memory of the present generation of gunners. Under favorable weather conditions last spring two men got twenty-six Geese in one day near the drawbridge at Surf City and twenty-four Brant were obtained by another party. I, with a friend, got eighteen Scaup in a morning's shoot, which is surely enough to satisfy anyone.

Some species have, of course, not returned in their former numbers, notably the Wood-duck, though there are still a few, and last fall a drake came to some decoys out in the salt water, an unusual occurrence. The gunners did not shoot it, recognizing how scarce the bird is becoming.

ADDITIONAL NOTE ON THE WATERFOWL OF BARNEGAT BAY.

In consideration of the contrary opinions on the abundance of waterfowl on the New Jersey coast and the most desirable character of legislation to be enacted for their preservation, a commission was appointed this year to collect facts and report to the State Legislature. The report, which I have been permitted to examine by Mr. Wm. Dutcher, one of the Commission, is very interesting.

The Sub-Committee on Migratory Birds made a personal examination of the very waters covered by Mr. De Haven's paper on November 29th and 30th, 1909, cruising on a power launch from Toms River to Atlantic City.

No wild fowl, except an occasional stray one, were seen until after passing Barnegat Inlet. From Gulf Point to Long Point several hundred Canada Geese, about two thousand Brant and a large number of Black Duck were seen, with an occasional Whistler (Goldeneye), Old Squaw and Scaup (Broadbill), but no appreciable number of either. Between there and Tuckerton it became too dark to see birds. South of Beach Haven the next day there were two to three thousand Black Duck and fifteen hundred to two thousand Brant, and in Grassy Bay from seven to ten thousand Brant. The total absence of Broadbills on these days was very noticeable.

At Tuckerton about 275 gunners attended a meeting called by the Commission and testified. The unanimous opinion was that there are less Ducks than there were ten years ago, but that they had increased during the past two years.

Mr. H. Walter Sapp, sixty-five years of age and a life-long resident of Tuckerton, made the following statement regarding the abundance of the various species:

Shelldrake (*Mergus serrator*). Very common but late in the spring season.

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*). Not very many.

Black Duck (*Anas rubripes*). Very common.

Baldpate (*Mareca americana*). Not plentiful.

Green-winged Teal (*Nettion carolinense*). Very few.

Blue-winged Teal (*Querquedula discors*). Very scarce.

Pintail (*Dafila acuta*). Fairly common in spring and fall.

Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*). A few breed.

Redhead (*Marila americana*). Quite plentiful.

Canvasback (*Marila valisineria*). Rare.

Big Broadbill or Scaup (*Marila marila*). Most common duck.

Little Broadbill (*Marila affinis*). More of them in spring than fall.

Whistler (*Clangula clangula americana*). Fairly common to quite plentiful.

Bufflehead (*Charitonetta albeola*). Quite a good many.

Old Squaw (*Harelda hyemalis*). Not very plentiful; used to be abundant; no reason known for decrease.

King Eider (*Somateria spectabilis*). Very seldom seen.

Coots (*Oidemia americana*, *deglandi* and *perspicillata*). About equal in numbers, fairly common, mostly outside the surf.

Ruddy Duck (*Erismatura jamaicensis*). Not common.

Snow Goose (*Chen hyperborea nivalis*). Rare.

Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*). Very common; stay all winter.

Brant (*Branta bernicla glaucogastra*). Very common; stay all winter.

Swan (*Olor columbianus*). Very rare.

Mr. W. W. Justice, Jr., who has had considerable experience

with the wild fowl of Barnegat Bay for some years past, sends me the following as his opinion of the relative abundance of the Bay species for the past ten years:

Brant, Black Duck, Canada Goose and Broadbill regular and abundant.

Redhead abundant at times, apparently more plentiful during the past three years.

Goldeneye (Whistler) fairly plenty, but never in large flocks.

Sheldrake regular, often till late in April.

Old Squaw and Butter Ball more or less regular.

Canvasback and Hooded Merganser, one record of each.

These lists are given to show how opinions of equally reliable men may vary in some respects. I have other lists which are obviously based more upon memory and hearsay than upon present conditions, and hence are worthless for comparison.

There seems to be no question but that there has been an increase of ducks within the past few years. Furthermore, the increase is due largely to the stopping of spring shooting north of New Jersey. The refusal of this and other states to stop shooting ducks on January 1st will certainly practically exterminate many of the remaining species in another generation unless all migratory birds be placed under the protection of the national government, for which a movement is now under way.

—WITMER STONE.