

A Day on the Havre De Grace Flats

BY J. FLETCHER STREET

IT was exactly four A. M. when a knock on the door of my bedroom brought me to the realization that this little act on the part of a hotel's porter marked the usual beginning of a sportman's day on the Havre de Grace Flats in the pursuit of canvas-backs.

I didn't know it before but I comprehend now that it is not so much the horse-racing of the spring and fall months that has brought renown to this little village that lies nestled at the head of Chesapeake Bay but rather the canvas-back duck, that prize of all hunters of wild-fowl, the most delicious morsel of wild flesh that a man can put to his palate, a bird whose pursuit furnishes a livelihood to a countless number of bay men, who in turn have contributed so largely to the glamour of the locality.

In the darkness of the early morning we make our way to a little wharf at the edge of the village where we embark upon a bay craft which awaits our arrival. This is to convey us down the flats to our chosen shooting grounds. One-half the boat is enclosed with a vaulted, canvas cover, suggestive of an oyster boat. It may serve a double purpose and is the typical craft of the bay men.

Probably no such shooting adventure ever started without discussion concerning the weather, temperature, wind and the prospects for a big bag and, as a silent auditor, I was privileged to listen to a rare line of conversation of a kind a novice always takes a great delight in. Personally, I had little idea where we were going or how it was to be accomplished and not wishing to show my stupidity kept strangely silent, hoping that everything would be revealed to me in the natural course of events.

It is a beautiful, early November morning. As yet no glow in the east presages the dawn. A gibbous moon rides high, intermittently revealed through a mackerel sky while old Orion slowly bends into the west.

Many lights dot the flats. I am told that they belong to rigs. As to what a rig is I have no idea but momentarily conceal my ignorance to afterwards learn that it comprises a collection of boats, including a mother-boat and small power craft, used in housing the bay men, and from which a battery and decoys are set out in a selected shooting area before the break of dawn.

Other boats that we pass are those of bush-whackers. That term smacks of something romantic and sinister and at first I sensed that perhaps it was degrading to be a bush-whacker, the name suggesting some sort of bay piracy that is not on the level. I was to find out, however, as the day wore on, gathering scraps of information, first from one and then from another, that a bush-whacker needs not hang his head in shame. He differs from the rest of us only as our methods of hunting differ. Not so fortunate, perhaps, as to own 500 to a 1000 decoys, he sets out his meagre raft of thirty to forty wooden birds, then retires to a distant vantage point to await the arrival of ducks among his decoys. If he has luck he drifts with the tide or sculls down upon them, arising to shoot as he comes nearby. With good fortune he may obtain from six to eight birds in a single scull. The process is repeated indefinitely until the hunter wearies or wins his quota.

Still our launch chugs along, for miles it seems, and our destination is still vague to me. I do learn, at length, that one, Captain Harry Moore, is awaiting our arrival but how are we to find the captain in the darkness and which of the many illuminated rigs belong to him. Now, someone offers that the captain will burn flares at 5.00 A. M., a red one for ten minutes, then a green one for an equal period and so alternately until he is reached. At last I am getting my bearings. Well, 5 o'clock comes and no flares are seen. "The captain is frequently late," someone offers, but at 5.10 the signal comes in a clear, red gleam at some distance ahead. "He must be over against Turkey Point," my host suggests. That, at least, offers me a geographical location to look up when I get home. Now a green light appears and we pursue that for fifteen minutes more. A second red one is put out just as we approach the boat. Climbing aboard I am greeted by a large, genial bay-

man who is engaged in removing scores of wooden decoys from a shallow hold. The captain is already engaged in setting out others a short distance away.

The dawn comes on apace, the soft-whistled "cur-rows" of the canvas-backs and the "honks" of wandering geese float down from an ambient sky, yet the glow is not strong enough to detect the birds as yet.

My hosts, Arthur and Bernie, hasten to the battery. That is one thing I am not ignorant of. It seems that I have always known what a battery is although not so familiar with all its details. With the departure of the gunners the captain pulls up anchor and cruises to a distant location on the flats, the quiet dawn being heralded with gun reports from many quarters.

Now appeared the great spectacle. Thousands of ducks in the air weaving constant threads of black streamers across the sky. Wafted down from the heights of air comes the voices of the sky wanderers; the soft, whistled note of the canvas-back, the "honk" of the goose and the musical trumpeting of the swan, comparing in form to the call note of the goose but more of a musical laughter, a "wow-how'-oo," heavily accented on the second note.

In sustained flight the swans fly more or less in a V-shaped formation, offering the best arrangement for rapid and sustained flight since by this method the resistance of the air is less. Viewing these magnificent birds with their long necks pointed forward and their black feet trailing behind as they beat the upper air with their broad wings I am inclined to believe that no circumstances could persuade me to kill anything so interesting and beautiful. Nevertheless they are unwelcome birds to the professional gunner since they feed on the roots of wild celery, doing considerable damage by treading great holes in the mud and by wasting quantities of valuable duck food with the result of spoiling some of the best feeding grounds for ducks to the disgust of the sportsmen.

Geese we note in V-shaped ranks when high in the air but when flying about the feeding grounds they appear in compact or irregular bunches. The flight, then, seems labored but it is

much stronger than it seems, for such heavy birds they are really quite agile. They pass in long sloping lines or more rarely in single file. In preparing to alight they set their wings and drift gradually down a long incline close to the surface, then scale to the water which they strike with a resounding splash. The call note, a repeated "honk" or "ke-onk'-ah" has a quality about it that renders it audible over long distances and is frequently detected long before the birds come into view.

The abundance of the wild celery on these Havre de Grace flats is responsible for the vast numbers of canvas-backs to be found there. It is no exaggeration to state that 50,000 birds can be noted on a single day, many in great rafts on the surface of the bay, appearing like a smudge along the horizon, others aloft in flocks of 20 to 100 flying across the sky, some on the way to favorite feeding grounds, others wandering aimlessly about. To-day for causes not to be explained, the majority fly high, until under the dome of the heavens they appear as drifting wisps of smoke when their altitude is such that no wing beat is discernible. At an average elevation the flight, though apparently labored, is really rapid and sustained and the swish from their rapid wing-beats come down as a soft, winnowing murmur even from extreme distances.

The birds are to be recognized by their long, slender necks, their long-pointed bills and sharp-pointed wings and by the habit of carrying their heads on a downward curve. The Redheads, which frequently accompany them, are to be differentiated by a more rapid wing movement, by their shorter and darker bodies and by their habit of flying in a more irregular formation.

Other species appear at intervals but in no such numbers as the canvas-back. The flight of the baldpate is swift, strong and direct. The drake is easily recognized by its striking color pattern, its white crown and underparts and by the large amount of white on the wings.

The Ruddy Duck, or the greaser, as the natives call it, courses close to the water, seldom rising to any great height. Its general tawny color and its peculiar, uneven, jerky gait

renders it of easy identification. It flies like a bullet, back and forth over the flats in a desultory fashion.

Old Squaws are infrequent but when noted are seen close to the water or a few feet above it in a swift but erratic flight revealing to fine advantage their multi-colored plumage by twisting and turning like shore birds.

After an hour or more, observing considerable shooting from our battery, we go to retrieve birds. Another boat sets out for the purpose of "pirating for cripples." Here is a dashing phrase which is self explanatory and refers to the collecting of wounded or floating birds which have escaped the gunners.

Bernie insists that I relieve him at the battery so I am privileged to examine it in detail. I am to shoot with Arthur. A battery or sinkbox is a short wooden box, arranged singly or in pairs, just long enough and deep enough to effectually conceal a man when lying down. It is exactly like a coffin excepting that a coffin is padded and presumed comfortable. It is bordered by a narrow wooden platform, attached to its upper edges and is surrounded on three sides by pliable forms covered with canvas or netting so constructed and ballasted that the platform floats flush with the water. The platform may be continually awash but the water is kept out of the boxes by projecting flanges of lead. At the rear of this box and extending to windward is arranged a series of wooden, shutter-like appendages which in their undulation break the force of the waves. Altogether it is an excellent contrivance to point the way to a watery grave in rough water.

The box is surrounded by decoys, flat metal ones set along the wings as ballast and wooden ones to the number of five or six hundred arranged in every-widening series about the boat with the line attenuated in one direction.

The gunner is out of sight, excepting from overhead, as he is flat in the box until the birds fly near enough when he quickly rises to shoot. With his head slightly elevated upon an inclined board he gets a sweep of the horizon about him over the decoys exactly at water level and is conscious of a constant lapping of the water against the box.

Lying in the adjoining box to Arthur I learn many things;

firstly, the necessity of remaining absolutely quiet since a duck upon its approach will veer out of range upon the slightest movement in the sink-box. But moving is essential at times. In such a restricted space with my lower limbs resting upon a cartridge box I was subject to frequent cramps, causing me to shift my position to the apparent disgust of my berth-fellow.

I learned that the expression "mark left" was used to denote that birds were coming from the left quarter and that "mark right" suggested an approach towards the opposite side. I am advised that a duck "darts" when it wheels out of a flock to come down to the decoys. But the birds were not darting. Those which flew over, no matter how quietly we remained, would invariably veer upon coming in view of the battery. Undoubtedly after weeks of a hazardous existence they were beginning to learn that decoys and boxes are objects to be avoided. At least they exercised a marked sagacity in keeping out of gun range on this particular occasion.

I was successful in one instance only, my first shot. My two subsequent shots were futile ones. Luck has always attended me on my first encounter with various kinds of game. It was a first shot that killed my first moose, a first shot which bagged my only tapir and a first shot which brought down the only grouse I ever went gunning for.

There were five ducks that approached our decoys, two veering to the left and three to the right. I raised to the birds on the right and fired. I am at a loss to explain just how it occurred. It was over so quickly. I only remember that at the moment of rising I felt a sharp twinge of pain across my back; my joints having stiffened upon so long reclining. Anyhow the leading bird dropped. Did I aim? I cannot answer. I was only aware that a fine drake canvas-back was flapping its life out at the edge of the decoys. Subsequent to this I was really more interested to note that my floating quarry did not become lost or was not pirated by others than in anything else at the moment.

Later Arthur was relieved by one of the bay men who added a black-head which came to the decoys. Ostensibly the shooting was on the wane and we offered our places to Arthur and

Bernie for a final fling but Lady Luck did not accompany them to the boxes. Now most of the ducks were out on the bay and there was only desultory flying and that at a great height.

In the early afternoon we made our way back to Havre de Grace. I had had my sport without any regrets over a small bag. To view the interminable flights of wild ducks, as had been my privilege, was enough for any bird-lover.

At the station while awaiting our train, one by one the hunters drifted in, some with great sacks of birds with no supporting evidence that they had secured them personally. It is an axiom that duck hunters are prodigious prevaricators and only after the most persistent of cross-examinations did we learn that the highest score of the day for any pair of sportsmen was twenty. It was a great day for the ducks and for those who delight in observing the air-manoeuvers of waterfowl. It was an ill day for the hunter interested principally in the size of his bag.