

Learning to Hunt

Hosting a hunting-based outdoor skills event in your community



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Wisconsin

Department of Natural Resources

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Credits

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Bringing the Birds to You

The art of calling, decoying
& building blinds

Participants learn the skills of duck and goose calling. They also have an opportunity to set out decoys and build duck blinds.



Station 19

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Learning to Hunt

Objectives

Participants shall:

demonstrate the proper use of a duck call.

differentiate between a highball, comeback and feeding call, and when to use them.

demonstrate the proper use of a goose call.

demonstrate how to build and place a blind.

demonstrate how to set out decoys.



Equipment

For the group:

Assorted duck and goose calls
Ball of twine, marked in 1 yard increments, knotted at 15 and 25 yards

Assorted dabbling, diver and goose decoys

Different styles of manufactured waterfowl blinds

Natural blind-building materials such as willow stems, cattails, brush, etc.

Camouflaged canoe

Hip boots

Different styles and colors of camouflage for waterfowl hunting

For each participant:

Duck call

Goose call

Station Setup

Find an outdoor area away from other instructional stations so your participants will not disturb others during the duck and goose calling activities. It is preferable to use a pond, wetland or lake for setting out decoys, but even a large field will do.

Check with your local sporting goods store and ask if you could borrow a sample of various duck blinds to use for demonstration purposes. Ask your local sporting

club members if they would allow you to show their blinds as an example. Then, set up a variety of styles of duck and goose blinds.

Set hip boots and duck calls out for participants to use. Stack decoys in one area for easy access.

Background Information

One of the greatest rewards and challenges of waterfowl hunting is to lure ducks and geese into firing range. By bringing waterfowl in as close as possible, the hunter will increase the probability of correct identification of the birds before shooting them as well as the probability of making a clean, killing shot thus reducing crippling losses. Two ways of bringing birds in close require skills of imitation. The hunter can imitate the calls of ducks and geese and/or the hunter can imitate the appearance of these birds in front of the blind. During this next session, you will help your participants learn several different types of duck and goose calling, different ways of setting out decoys, as well as how to set up a blind.



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Activity A

Learning to Hunt

Before the hunt

Procedure

Welcome your group by blowing a duck or goose call. Tell your participants how important it is for them to get involved in pre-season scouting before the waterfowl season begins. Tell them that if they are unfamiliar with the hunting area, preseason scouting is a must. After the opening day of duck hunting, most hunters are out in the marshes long before sunrise. Therefore, it is very important to know how to find their hunting spot in the dark and where to set out their decoys and blind. This pre-season scouting is especially important on public land where good hunting areas are claimed on a first-come, first-served basis. Wandering around in a marsh just after daylight looking for a place to hunt disrupts other hunters. It is

considered rude and inconsiderate. Besides, it lowers your own hunting success and enjoyment. If you plan to hunt public lands, you should try to figure out where other hunters may be stationed. This is not always easy to determine, and there's really no way of knowing if you'll find someone else at your favorite hunting spot the next morning. If you do find hunters there as you arrive never confront them. Those other hunters have every right to be there. Be a courteous sportsman, excuse yourself and leave the area. The next time you visit that public hunting ground, arrive as early as you possibly can...and earlier than when you think most hunters will arrive.

Hunting private land is a much better way of ensuring a hunting spot each morning. If you don't own or lease the land, always ask the permission of the landowner before you enter their property. Trespass is illegal in Wisconsin in addition to being highly unethical.

While doing your pre-season scouting, watch where the ducks and geese are feeding and when. Pay attention to the prevailing winds. Wind direction plays an important role in determining areas used by ducks and is, therefore, an important factor in selecting a hunting spot. Know which areas to hunt under different wind conditions.

Always ask permission first before hunting on private lands.



Duck calling

Procedure

Ducks hear other ducks calling 365 days a year so they know a good call from a bad call. Tell your participants they will learn several basic duck calls which, when mastered will take them one step closer to becoming master waterfowlers.

Hand out the duck calls. Explain to your group that you will first demonstrate the different techniques of duck and goose calling. After your demonstrations you will let the participants try their hand at calling.

First, discuss the anatomy of a duck call. The duck call is basically composed of two parts... the barrel and the throat. The barrel is the larger chamber and the throat houses the reed. The reed is typically made of mylar or metal or some other very flexible material. It's held in place with a stopper.

The Basic Blow: Demonstrate how to blow into the duck call at the large opening of the barrel. Explain to your participants that as they blow into the barrel, the chamber is filled to capacity. If their cheeks are tight and their lips pursed firmly around the barrel opening, the only way air can escape is by squeaking past

the reed to the small exit hole in the throat of the call. As the air passes the reed, it makes the reed vibrate and slap rapidly against the wooden part of the throat. This makes a musical tone.

Help your participants work toward getting a long, strong, loud stable sound by blowing into the chamber. Have them fill their lungs with air and then use their diaphragm to push or pop the air out their mouth so that it fills the chamber up to the proper volume right away. Tell them to keep their cheeks tight (not puffed out) and their lips pursed over the barrel opening to form a good seal.

Demonstrate the sound you want them to make and then have them practice. Offer lots of positive feedback. If a participant is having difficulty, give that person some personal attention. Having instructional assistants can come in handy here. To lessen the din, you can divide the group into teams and have each team call at a time.

Highball Call

Explain to your participants that ducks are gregarious and willing to share their resources. They call to each other a lot. Most duck species will respond to the calls of the hen mallard. She's the one that

Activity B



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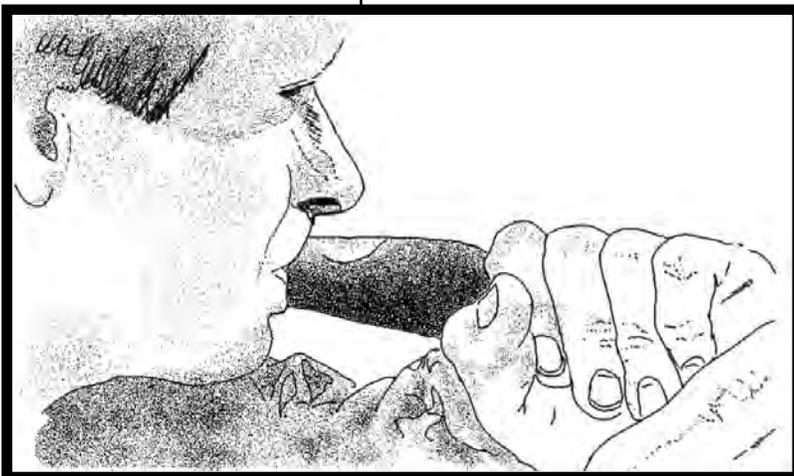
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likes to talk the most. This helps waterfowl hunters in that they don't have to learn 20 different calls to attract different ducks.

If a flock of mallards finds a safe spot on the marsh with a good food supply, the hens in the flock will call out their greeting call to other ducks passing overhead. This greeting call is also called the highball or the hail call. It doesn't matter what other kinds of ducks are flying overhead. The highball call, in effect, is saying "Hey, you! Come on over here! Check it out! This is great! Come on in. It's O.K.! It's safe here!"

Demonstrate how to achieve the sound of the highball. Explain that participants should blow into the chamber just like they did a bit earlier to get a loud, long high note. Then, explain that the highball call works its way down the musical scale. The notes get shorter, closer together and a little quieter. Demonstrate again and then have your group practice.



Remember to give positive feedback and assist those who are having trouble.

Feeding Call

Explain to your participants that once they are successful in getting the ducks to swing in towards their blind they should switch to another call...the feeding call. This call is a quieter call and sounds more reassuring to the incoming ducks. When feeding, contented hen mallards cluck and mumble quietly to each other in the marsh. To imitate this sound, have participants grunt into their calls and say "dooga, dooga, dooga" with the tip of their tongue hitting the back of their front teeth. This results in a lot of fast clucking sounds. You can also have them grunt into the call and say "took....took....took" if you want them to make a set of short, individual clucks. Give your participants time to try these calls.

Lonesome Hen Call

Tell your group that while they are doing the feeding call they can also intersperse that call with a lonesome hen call. A hen mallard sitting in the marsh by herself often gives a couple of single, contented-sounding quacks. Have your participants try to imitate the lonesome hen call. They should grunt into their calls while saying the word "kack." Explain that the back of their tongue should be up

against the top of their mouth in the hard pallet area. They should start with one hand cupped and closed around the end of the call. As they say “kack,” have them open their hand. When done correctly, the call will sound like “quack.” Demonstrate for the group, then let your participants try it. Provide positive feedback.

Comeback Call

Now explain that there’s one last call they can use if they are not successful in getting the ducks to settle in close to their blind. If the ducks seem spooked and start to veer off for another wetland your participants should try the comeback call. Have them think of this as an excited hen calling to the ducks that are leaving, saying “Hey! Wait! No! Stop! You come back here! Right Now! Come back! Come back!”

The comeback call is very similar to the highball or hail call, but it is very insistent, a little faster and more driving. As the ducks fly further away, the comeback call gets louder, longer and more insistent. Demonstrate this call to the group and then allow the participants to try. Provide positive feedback.

Tell your participants that they can take these calls back home and practice the basic calls. Review the basic duck calls (highball, feeding, lonesome hen and comeback call)

and review when they are used. Use the highball call when ducks are in the distance to bring them in close. Use the feeding call and lonesome hen call when ducks are nearing and thinking about settling in. Use the comeback all when the ducks seem uncertain about settling and start to fly away.

Encourage your participants to purchase, rent or borrow some duck calling videos or cassette tapes so that they can compare their progress with the experts. Many teaching resources are available at your local sporting goods store, video rental store or library.



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Activity C

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Goose calling

Procedure

Now demonstrate the use of the Canada goose call. Explain the two different sounds that are made with this call. The first is a low, rumbling sound that geese use when they are feeding, or when they come quietly into the decoys. The second sound is a high pitched call...that typical, wild familiar sound of the goose.

Explain that when a flock, a pair or even a single goose comes winging in near the blind, participants should try to make a

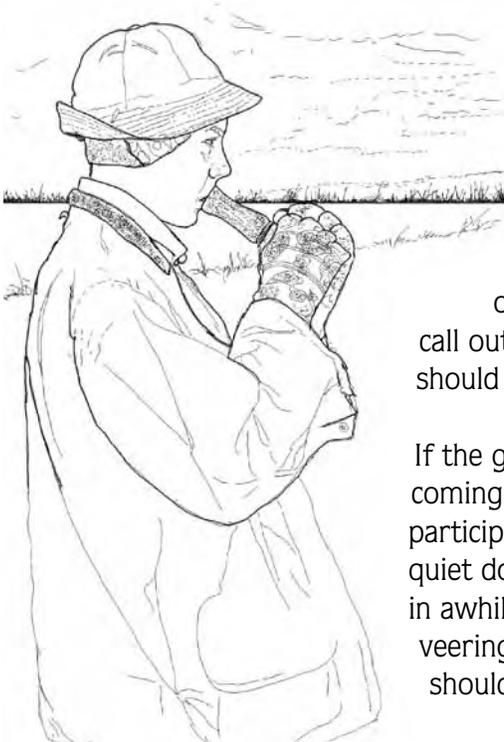
big commotion that sounds like a lot of geese. If the geese turn and come in towards the blind, the participants should

quiet down. Often times, one goose out of an incoming flock will call out. If so, then participants should answer the goose.

If the geese are quiet when coming into the decoys, the participants should likewise quiet down and call just once in awhile. If the geese start veering away, then participants should start calling more.



Demonstrate the goose call. If you are able to provide your class with their own goose calls, have them practice after you. Provide positive feedback.



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Waterfowl blinds

Procedure

Since ducks and geese, like all birds, have excellent sense of color and can detect motion from long distances, it is important for waterfowl hunters to stay hidden from the birds they hunt.

For this teaching station, you should dress in full camouflage, including hat, jacket, gloves, pants and boots. Explain to the participants that they may also want to dull the brightness of their face with camo paint, mud, or a face net. Explain that they should try to match the colors and patterns of the camouflage they wear to the colors and patterns of

the marsh or field in which they will be hunting. Different camo patterns are available to simulate such places as a cattail marsh, a corn stubble field or a snowy field. Display and describe the different patterns of camouflage available on the market.

In addition to wearing camouflage, waterfowl hunters increase the opportunity for getting ducks and geese to come in close if they also build a blind. Explain that the participants can make blinds as simple or as complex as their time and money allow. Standing perfectly still and hidden in tall reeds, willow brush or cattails makes the simplest blind. The ultimate blind in terms of complexity is a large, permanent structure sunk below ground level, complete with a sliding roof, cushioned benches, gun racks, shelves for ammo and coffee cups and a stove for heat and cooking.



Probably the most common type of manufactured blind that waterfowlers use is a piece of camouflaged netting or burlap. Hunters drape these large sheets of camouflage cloth over willow stems, cattails or a canoe. Explain that a camouflaged-painted duck skiff or boat pushed into the reeds can also be an effective

Activity D



Standing perfectly still and hidden in tall reeds, willow brush or cattails makes the simplest blind. Take advantage of natural existing cover such as large round hay bales or rock piles. These blinds work well because the ducks and geese are accustomed to seeing the cover there already.

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blind. But participants should keep in mind the perspective of the ducks and geese. They are flying overhead. A boat that is painted on the outside, but clean and bright inside will be readily seen by the birds in the air and will act like a warning flag to them. Tell participants that if they plan on hunting near or from a canoe or boat, they should always pull



camouflage netting or natural vegetation over it.

Now show your group the various blinds

you have set up for demon-

stration purposes. Let them touch, feel and enter the blinds. Point out some of the features of these blinds such as weight, bulkiness, ease of transport into and out of a marsh, ease of setting up, etc.

Explain to your participants that if they plan to hunt on public lands, the Department of Natural Resources regulations say that blinds are allowed on state properties for only seven days before the hunting season, as well as during the season. These blinds must be removed within seven days after the season closes. These blinds must also have a sign with the name and address of the owner or user in 1 inch or larger

letters permanently affixed to the blind. Placement of waterfowl blinds on public land does not restrict others from using or hunting on the public land where the blind is located.

Federal refuges have slightly different laws and these can change over the years. Check with your refuge manager for current rules. Generally, the only seasonal blinds that can be left out on a federal refuge are those constructed of natural materials such as willow, cattails, marsh grass, downed wood and biodegradable natural twine. Any artificial blinds brought into the marsh (such as camouflaged netting) must be removed at the end of the day.

Now discuss hunting ducks and geese from boats or blinds. These can be somewhat confusing so be sure to review at the end of the session.

Blinds placed in the water must be wholly or partially concealed in emergent vegetation. This is true whether hunting on a small pond or on a large lake. It is also true whether the blind is on a public body of water or on a privately owned pond.

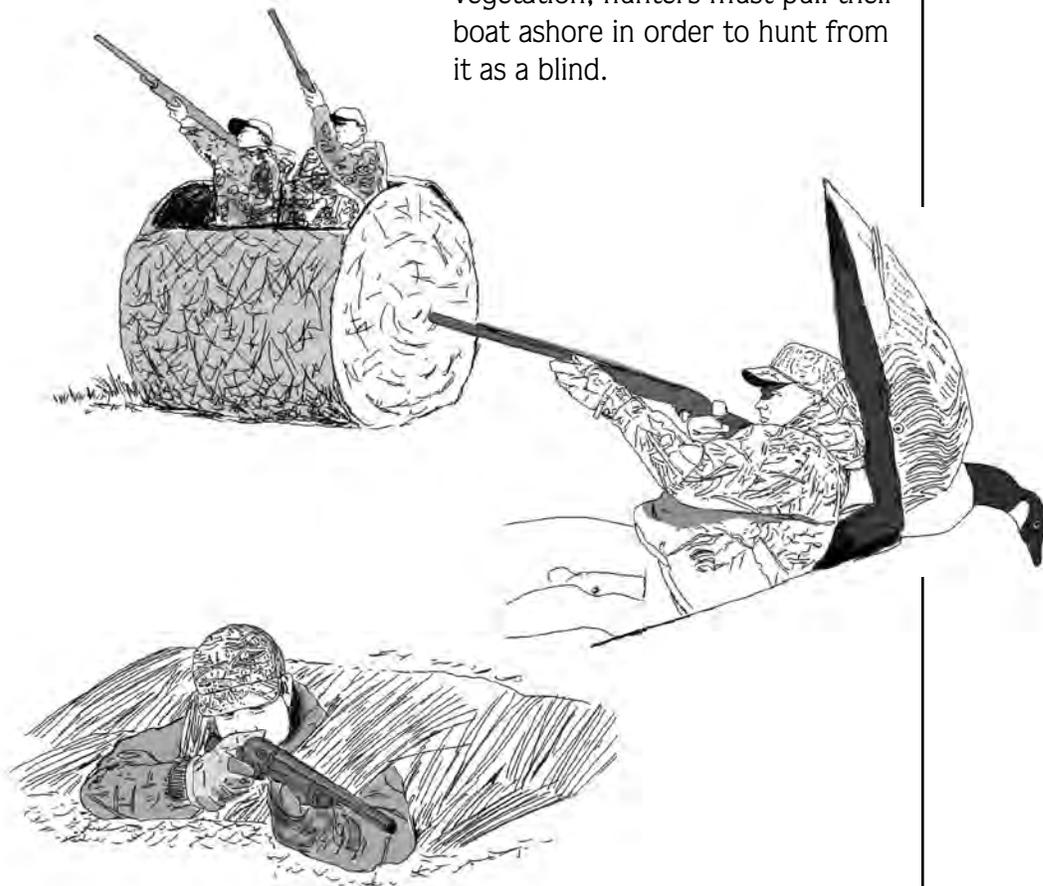
When hunting from a stationary boat that is being used as a blind, the watercraft must be wholly or partially concealed by emergent vegetation if it is in the water. A hunter cannot pull up a boat under a tree limb overhanging the shore and use it as a blind. The hunter can, however, pull the boat ashore and hunt from it there. Of course, if the shore is privately owned, the hunter must first get permission from the landowner before hunting from that shore.

Hunters can hunt open water from a moving boat. This is called jump shooting. Hunters can jump shoot

from a moving boat on streams, rivers, or in small bodies of water like a large pond. On larger, more open bodies of water, the hunter must skirt the water's shoreline in order to legally jump shoot.

When hunting diving ducks on large lakes, including parts of the Mississippi River, Lake Winnebago, Petenwell Flowage, Big Green Lake and the Great Lakes, hunters can hunt in the open from a floating boat as long as they are 100, 500 or 1000 feet from the shoreline, depending on which body of water they are hunting on.

On all other large, open water lakes with relatively little emergent vegetation, hunters must pull their boat ashore in order to hunt from it as a blind.



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Activity E

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Decoys

Procedure

Calling in ducks and geese is one effective way to bring these birds to you. The other effective method is using decoys. Decoys come in all shapes and sizes, and in just about all species of ducks and geese. Demonstrate examples of the more common types of decoys. Explain whether the decoys are in a feeding, sentry or resting pose.

Setting out Duck Decoys

Next, demonstrate how to set out duck decoys. First, explain that ducks have to land and take off into the wind. Since the best shots are made when the ducks are coming into the blind rather than when they wing in from behind or when they are taking off, hunters should set their decoys out in front of their blind with the wind at their back. This ensures that the

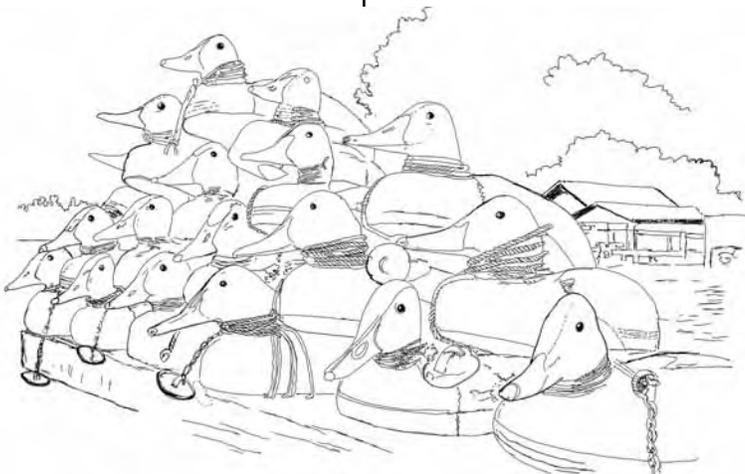
ducks will come flying in towards the blind when they land in the decoys.

Explain that duck hunters can place decoys in the water either from the boat or on foot. Warn participants that if they walk out into a shallow pond or marsh to set out their decoys, they should be extremely careful since the bottoms are often very soft and mucky. Remind them to take along a paddle or a long pole to assist them in case they get stuck in the mud. If you have hip boots available and have ready access to a pond, wetland or other body of water, ask your participants to put the hip boots on and walk out into the water carrying some decoys.

A successful decoy spread includes an open area in which the ducks can land downwind from the hunter. The decoys should also be set within good shooting range of the blind...that's about 15 to 25 yards.

Now take your group to a blind that you have already set up.

Tell your participants that they can hunt out of the blind in any direction, but, based on the wind direction that day, ask them in which area they would set out their decoys? Participants should point in the downwind direction. Respond with positive feedback.





Next, have your group go out in that direction to the place where they would like to set out their decoys. Have them stand at the point where they would throw out their first (closest to the blind) decoy. This part of the lesson helps them get a better appreciation for the difficulties in judging distance. Ask for a volunteer to stand in the blind and hold one end of the ball of twine or string that has been knotted at 15 and 25 yards. Pace out to 15 yards. Explain to the group that this is about the closest they would want to set out their decoys. Then pace out to the 25-yard knot. This is about as far away as they should set out their decoys.

Explain that judging distance is often difficult. Point out how many participants were outside the boundaries, either too close or too far. Also point out that the distances that are of greatest concern are those distances beyond 25 yards. Hunters who place decoys out beyond 25 yards are more likely to miss a shot or, worse, cripple a bird. Encourage participants to spend some time working at home to improve their ability to judge distances before they go out on a real hunt. Stress how vital it is that they work the ducks into good shooting range.

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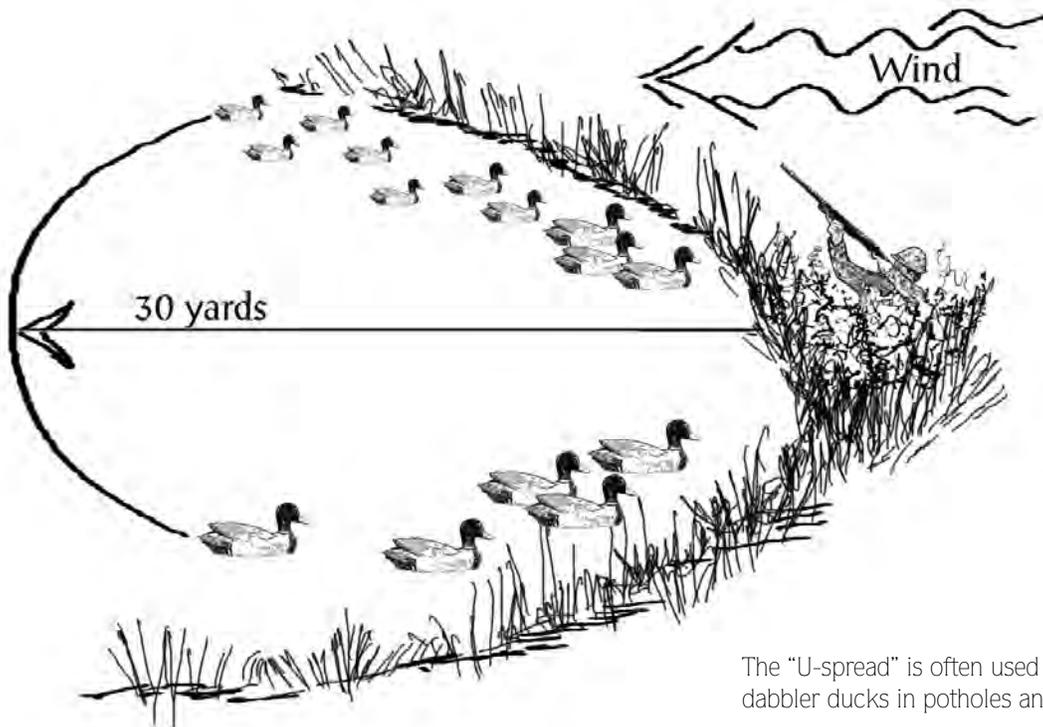
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Decoy Spreads

Explain that just as there are different species of ducks and different types of duck habitats, there are also different ways of setting out a decoy spread.

Dabbling ducks, like mallards and blue-winged teal, rest in loose groups on small pothole ponds in the early, warmer season. Search for a good pothole with plenty of cover along the shore where you can set up a blind with the wind at your back. Ducks will land into the wind in front of your blind. The object is to attract the ducks into your decoys and shoot when their wings are cupped and they are ready to land. Most of your shooting will be at close range.

Set out your decoys over a wide area in front of your blind in the shape of a “U” or a “C”. Leave an open pocket of water in front of your blind to encourage ducks to land close. You can leave as much space as 10 feet between your decoys. The U-spread usually takes from about 12 to 30 dabbling duck decoys. While hunters can use a mixed bag of dabblers, the standard is the mallard. Use more hen mallard decoys than drake decoys, especially in early season when drakes have yet to molt completely into their colorful breeding plumage. Later in the season you can add more drakes to your decoy spreads.



The “U-spread” is often used for hunting dabbling ducks in potholes and ponds.



The J-spread is used when hunting diving ducks on large open rivers such as the Mississippi River or Lower Wisconsin River.

As the potholes freeze, dabbling ducks move to larger lakes or rivers. The diving ducks begin to migrate through at this time, too, when the weather is colder and less predictable. Because diving ducks must run on top of the water in order to gain the speed to take wing, they need large, open bodies of water such as the Mississippi River or the Great Lakes. Different equipment is needed to hunt these ducks. You'll not only need a large, deep hulled boat, you'll also need more decoys.

When hunting diving ducks from open water, the preferred type of decoy spread is the **"J-spread"** or the hook spread. A minimum of four dozen decoys is used. With diving ducks, hunters can never use too many decoys. The

most common species used in the decoy spreads are scaup (also called "bluebill") and canvasback. Hunting diving ducks is a wingshooting challenge since the birds are coming in at speeds up to 75 mph and not likely to slow down before they land. You will need to perfect the swing-through method of shooting in order to successfully bag divers. The object of this type of hunting is to take the birds as they are winging their way along your line of decoys that leads to your blind.

Demonstrate how to set out these various spreads. If possible, split the group into teams and have each team try their hand at setting out the different spreads. Remind everyone of the law: decoys cannot be left overnight or otherwise unattended by hunters.

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When hunting puddle ducks in the flooded backwater timber of large rivers, you only need about 6 to 12 decoys, if any at all. You don't usually need to build a blind since the trees and brush make excellent natural blinds. Just find a large tree to stand behind with the wind at your back. To encourage the ducks to sit down once they appear in the opening of the flooded timber, set out a few dabbler decoys to the left and right of your stand.

This style of hunting puddle ducks is a real challenge since you rarely see the birds coming into your stand from a distance. At times, ducks appear so suddenly from apparently "no-where" that you barely have time to lift your gun to your shoulder. You will need to perfect your snap shooting at close range for this type of hunting. It is difficult to shoot ducks as they descend into the flooded waters. So, you can let them land, then scare them up and shoot as they rise off the water.

When hunting Canada geese from a blind in an old corn stubble field, set out at least two dozen field decoys. Some will be in the feeding position, some in the sentry position and some in the resting position. Sometimes hunters use magnum decoys,

which are oversized geese. From the air, geese cannot tell that these huge decoys are not real. In fact, proponents of these decoys say the magnums are easier to see from the air.



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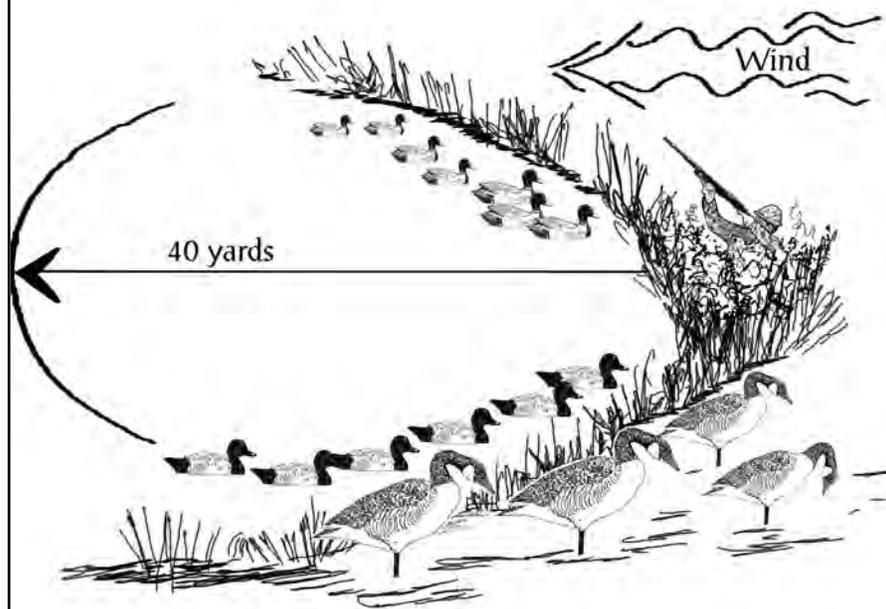
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Finally, some hunters enjoy hunting a combination of dabblers, divers and geese. A combination set includes a set of puddle ducks clumped near shore on one side of the blind and then a spray of diving decoys going out into the pond on the other side of the blind. The hunter can place a number of Canada goose decoys close to shore and upon the shoreline itself.



End of Teaching Station



Safety Tips

Don't hunt a small pothole where other hunters are already hunting. You will all be shooting at the same flocks and frustrating each other, in turn.

Also, rotate the potholes you hunt on a daily basis, or you risk driving the ducks from the area. Give them some rest between your hunting expeditions.

If hunting alone in a boat, shoot from a sitting position. Otherwise, the recoil from the gun could cause you to lose your balance if you stand up when shooting.

When hunting with one or more partners, agree upon your shooting zones in advance of shooting. Keep your shotguns pointed out the opposite ends of the boat or blind.

When wading into the water to set out decoys or to retrieve a duck, carry a walking stick to help you feel your way through the mud and water. The stick will help you keep your balance. It will also tell you whether you will need a dog or boat to retrieve a downed duck.

Do not position your boat in the same direction as you will be shooting, otherwise your partner will have to shoot over your head.

If you lose your balance in the water, check your gun's muzzle for mud or other debris. A clogged barrel could explode.

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