



Spring Snows

REVEALED AND RETOLD

BY
EVERETT HEADLEY



Snow geese are not for the faint of heart hunter. Much like a Chesapeake Bay Retriever, they will frustrate you more than often than satisfy. And yet for both, when everything coalesces as intended, it becomes the consummate waterfowl experience. Endless flights of birds, landing faster than a shotgun can be reloaded, give the action a fervor unseen in any other type of wingshooting. It is what makes the trek every spring to the central flyway worthwhile; knowing full well the birds will disappoint, but the single morning they cooperate will be sublime.

The rest before the first dawn is fitful. Regardless of a hunter's experience, the anticipation of a near limitless hunt keeps the deeper sleep where dreams form just out of reach. The alarm will sound three hours before sunrise which gives just enough time for coffee before heading to the spread. Overnight, the feelings of expectation have been replaced with lethargy and begrudging, but only slightly. Excitement is pulled from each layer donned and soon ready, consideration for what is coming begins.

For the experienced waterfowler, cold mornings cloaked in blackness are the fertile ground of hope. Decoys will be placed with care to the prevailing winds and precision to guide landing birds. If this offering is deemed



acceptable by those passing, the reward is a frenetic morning followed by a laborious midday cleaning of birds. The simplicity of all this belies the unknowable and impenetrable mind of the snow goose. It is what sets it apart from all other forms of waterfowl pursuits. For what worked yesterday and the days before that, no longer holds the same sway over them.



It is for those who have been left fooled and furious to ponder what changes to the spread will coax the white geese closer.

Arriving at the site of the day's hunt, the cold finishes waking the mind. Cornfields that were weeks before harvested and the stalks only recently cut for silage, tend to be the preferred agriculture. Beet fields that have been left to freeze or any other green crop used as winter cover can also produce, but the big feeds happen most often in corn. The advantage is the excellent camouflage the foot high stalks leave for hunter concealment.

An assessment of surrounding topography, informed with the prevailing wind and any nearby water, determines where the blinds are set, and decoys staked. Decoy is a common term, but very few spreads include full-body decoys. Instead, nearly all snow goose setups





will employ socks. Metal stakes topped with the head of a goose will perpendicularly fly thin, body shaped tubes. The benefits are twofold: these socks can be quickly set out and picked up for “on the fly” adjustments to the spread, and they take up a fraction of the room as full-body decoys. Dark goose hunters will set out two to six dozen for a typical shoot; snow goose spreads are counted by the hundreds. Electronic calls, illegal at all other times, are pointed to the sky. The piercing screams of snow geese will be played all day and echo in your mind long after they are switched off.

Layout blinds are the most prevalent choice for the spring snow goose conservation order. Brushed in with the surrounding foliage, they hide the small movements of readying for the call to shoot. A few socks with longer stakes are placed strategically around them. This adds to the challenge of a quick and clean rise to landing birds. Blind bags are kept small and covered with their own snow covers. Headlamps are adjusted to the maximum lumens as a final check to ensure everything and everyone is in place. Loaded shotguns with plugs removed are placed at the ready. Reflective coffee mugs are stored. After settling into the blind, there is little to do now but wait and hope.

The first sounds of rousing are usually from

an unconcerned Canada for whom the danger ceased weeks ago. The first slice of pink light casts a blue hue to everything. Snow refracts it into a different wavelength. It is temporary as the slice fades into orange and then yellow. Birds of every species that had only been heard before dawn now form silhouettes. It’s good it is still too early to shoot, since identification rests more with a guess than certainty.

The next half hour will decide if this is a day remembered or forgotten. A long line of

broken black appears far and low to the horizon. At that distance all that can be confirmed is they are geese. They could be Canada’s or specklebellies, but probabilities make snow geese much more likely. At this point in the season light geese outnumber dark geese by a factor of one hundred. Soon the high pitch cries from the callers are echoed by real vocalizations. If they come straight into the spread they are either looking for a rest, enticed by a good setup, or juveniles. Adult birds might need one, two, or three passes before they commit or move on. Early season shooting means more adults and higher birds before the shot is called. As the migration moves north young and inexperienced birds lag behind. This is what the snow goose hunter has been waiting for and when triple digit days become most likely.

Once the flights begin, they will mirror the flights of bombers during the second great war. Wave after wave will appear. Moments between shots will be short, sometimes so short without time to reload. Single birds are allowed to loft in and treated as live decoys. Groups of a dozen or more will warrant a called shot. Layers of birds will filter down as larger flocks, nearing one hundred, cover the sky in our view. When the odd bird remains on the ground after the guns quiet, it can allow a hunter to close in before it rises, turning a goose hunt into something more akin to pheasants. Frenzied and chaotic, this much



shooting feels like the time as a kid sitting on a dock catching sunfish after sunfish until your bucket could hold no more.

A fair morning will last an hour; a good one until lunch. Shot birds are quickly collected and placed around blinds with beaks tucked under wings as though sleeping. Those who want a white or blue goose for the wall begin to lay claims. Ross's geese raise the tensions as they are less than ten percent of the birds flying. A blue-morph snow goose hybridized with a Ross's goose, known simply as a "blue Ross," is a unicorn. Only a few are brought to hand each year.

The heartiest of hunters will stay past midway when the geese have landed in their feeds and won't rise until later in the evening. There is still the wayward bird flying and they are eager to find a new flock in which to assimilate. A pleasant day makes this sit easier. Warm sun on the face and lying under layers invites a quick nap. Stories of past hunts and retelling of the morning become part of the experience. A hungry coyote or fox might be fooled into thinking hundreds of lunches are sitting in the field, bringing nature up close.

The satisfaction of a successful hunt can lie in having fooled birds into coming so close, the prowess of fine shots, or in bounty left to clean at the end of the day. Snow geese make very fine fare for the table if, like all other wild game, field and table care are attentively attended. Each breast is a perfect portion to serve at just under a pound. Legs and wings



can be confited, with excellent results. Waterfowl take citrus glazes over a light sear especially well. Handheld metal detectors can help find shot still lodged and save an expensive trip to the dentist. With possession limits so liberal they are rarely met, snow geese can provide many meals until the next season.

Trudging through the snow, or frozen mud if lucky, at the end of a long day saps any remaining strength. Birds need to be cleaned and packed into coolers, each tagged



individually. Gear that held up through the day now needs to be dried and readied for tomorrow. Dinner is whatever is hot and quick. With any speed, all this can be done leaving a solid, or short, six hours before the alarm ushers in the next day. ■

