

It's Hunting Time ...by Bryan Taylor

It's almost that magical time of year again—yes, school is back in for some and soon for all. Just in case you're not a teacher or parent with school age kids but you are a hunting dog owner it is the most magical time of year—yes hunting season is almost here—are you and your dog ready??

GET READY FOR DUCK SEASON

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1, Make a Plan for the Season

For many of the key components of our lives, we have a plan. We plan a career, our family's financial stability, and ultimately plan the disposition of our wealth after we're gone but if we're hunters the key component of our life—hunting—also requires a plan. A good one - not a devised one.

Last season is the best starting point for planning this season. If you keep a waterfowl journal, review last duck season objectively. Try to determine which hunting spots produced and under what weather conditions. Which spot is best on a storm front, and, conversely which should you be at when the weather is clear and calm? Which option is best when it rains or freezes?

What is the river stage reading that gives the best hunting in your area? Factor in all the variables, and you'll have a plan that will put you in the right spot most of the time during the season.

2. Dust Off Your Duck Call

At the end of last season, your calling never sounded better, and the birds responded—at the least that you remember. To pick up just where you let winter take over, you'll need some practice prior to opening day.

Clean your calls and inspect the reed. If you hunt three or four days of each week consider starting each season with a fresh reed or reed set. Expensive calls should be sent back to the call maker for new reeds. Otherwise, try installing and tuning the new reeds yourself. If you intend to buy a new duck call from one of the major mail-order catalogs, place your order as early as possible; a backorder notice holds little value on opening morning.

Once this is accomplished, practice a lot—outside of course if you care for your wife and kids besides calls sound different outside than indoors. Don't just call randomly make your sessions as realistic as possible by calling live ducks where possible if not as if you had a flock coming and go thru your calling sequence from highballs, greeting calls and feeding chatter and comeback series. Practice with a hunting buddy to get valuable if somewhat jaded opinions.

3 Give Your Shotgun a Check-up

At season's end most water fowlers break out their best gun cleaning supplies and treat their duck guns to a good rub down and cleaning before retiring them to the cabinet. By the end of a duck season however, most shotguns have endured considerable abuse and are due for a serious check-up.

A first step of course, is a thorough cleaning. If you have access to a small compressed air tank, use it to blow powder residue and other grime out of the trigger assembly and receiver. Then treat all metal surfaces with a light coating of gun lube. Some shotguns with complex mechanisms—the A5 and the BPS should be fully disassembled and cleaned only by a gunsmith. While your autoloader is disassembled have him check for excessively worn parts and replace them. If your autoloader's stock is exposed to considerable amounts of water of course have the action spring checked for rust.

4. Hone your Shooting Skills

Once your shotgun has a clean bill of health, you should put it to good use before opening day. For water fowlers sporting clays is a godsend, offering much more realistic target presentations than either trap or skeet. At many courses, a round of sporting clays or five-stand isn't expensive and offers an entertaining afternoon with friends and will definitely improve your shooting skills before you waste that first box of shells.

If possible, shoot sporting clays with your duck gun. Remember you're not trying for high score here; the idea is simply to get back on target. Also, let yourself shoot your weaker shots again and again until you achieve improvement if you can.

Also a key ingredient of our shooting skills that is often overlooked is range estimation. Thru the spring and summer take a range finder with you when hiking, fishing, or walking the dogs and practice judging the distance of different objects and birds and then check with your rangefinder.

5. Touch-Up the Rig

When it comes to decoys, duck hunters fall into two categories: those who enjoy the repainting and fix-ups and those who simply buy new ones to replace the shabby or slightly damaged ones in their rigs at the end of the season. Whichever camp you fall into, now is the time to get those decoys in working order.

If you're in the buy new category, place your order at the mail order house as soon as possible big companies sometimes sell out of decoys quickly and have trouble getting more in stock quickly. Hunters who repair and repaint plastic decoys should first remove weathered paint with a stiff brush. Then seal any pellet holes with epoxy; and paint the decoy; with a good primer. Herter's sells decoy paint kits for most species, and Wing Supply offers Parker decoy paints, an old favourite many water fowlers.

In addition, be sure to inspect your rig for dry-rotted or frayed lines. Some hunters tie the cord to large snap swivels and then attach them to the decoy keel and anchor. With decoy lines such as Tangle free tie to the keel using a tight double knot, or try the company's special plastic clips designed for the use.

6. Revive your Retriever

Hard to imagine that same yellow dog sprawled on your kitchen floor was, just months ago, was an awesome force in the duck marsh. He will be this season, too, with just a little summer work.

A primary concern should be getting your dog in peak physical condition. Long walks and lots of water work not necessarily retrieves will help keep him toned up through the summer, Water work not only serves as excellent exercise, but also keeps your dog enthusiastic about retrieving.

During hot weather, land drills are best done late in the evening. If you are working a trained, experienced retriever, focus on drills that reinforce steadying, lining, hand signals, and multiple retrieves. Try to build up the time you spend on it gradually; too much all at once can dampen a dog's fervour for his work. Just 30 minutes every evening are enough to put most retrievers back on the road to glory.

In many places in the prairies one can find lots of pigeons to help out with the training under live action conditions. Often our September hunts are in summer heat so remember to take plenty of fresh water to the field for your dog and to cool off in the water or shade.

7. Whatever Floats Your Boat

In duck hunting, there's no such thing as a free ride. The fare for safe passage to your season is a Saturday afternoon devoted to routine maintenance on your boat, motor and trailer. First on your list should be an inspection of the boat. If the hull is aluminium check for stress damage near welds or rivets and for wear spots on the chine and bottom.

If your johnboat doesn't have plywood flooring, you may have to paint the deck every two years. When the paint wears off, the deck's bare aluminium will gleam in the sunlight thus flaring ducks. Some duck hunters are using the new polyurethane spray-on bedliner to do the job. These products, available at auto parts stores, produce a textured, non-slip surface that is waterproof and helps dampen noise.

Run your outboard well before the season opens to assess if major repairs are needed, if its running poorly, have a qualified mechanic service your motor. Otherwise, you can handle the routine maintenance yourself. First, buy a flush kit from a marine dealer and flush the motor. Then drain and refill the lubricant in the lower unit. Install a new set of spark plugs and lubricate fittings and moving parts.

Also, remember to inspect the gas tank for rust or leaks, and check the gas line and filter for any leaks. Make sure you start the season with fresh fuel. Try out your running lights and all safety equipment. Buy new life vests if yours are badly weathered. Test your trailer brakes, lights and lubricate your bearing buddies, and replace the winch line if its frayed or damaged.

8. Secure Your Hunting Spots

At the end of every season, smart private-land hunters lay the groundwork for the new season. They find an appropriate way to show their thanks to the landowners, and let them know whether they hope to hunt on their property again next season.

Some finalize the details then; others wait until summer. Either way, it's important to keep in touch with the landowner throughout the spring and summer, not only to maintain a positive relationship but also to keep informed of any land ownership changes or farming changes that might impact your hunting spot.

9. Spruce-Up Your Duck Blind

Building a better duck blind is all about having the right perspective—that of a duck's eye view rather than your own earthbound view. Think back over last season, if circling, ducks appeared to shy away from your blind, you may want to take an elevated view from a nearby tree or elevated bank and see if there is anything that needs re-brushing or filling in.

10. Get in a Duck Hunting State of Mind

As the hot summer days grow a little shorter, a subtle crispness in the night air pulls thoughts northward-to the old pothole. You imagine mallards by the hundreds in the barley, fattening up for the journey soon to come. It seems an eternity ago when you watched the sun set on another duck season but the dawn of a new one is close at hand. And, just like last year, you're thankful to be alive again and healthy enough to be waiting on the first cold front anticipating the first flock—wings cupped, growing colourful as autumn—dropping into the decoys.

Slowly, you are returning to a duck hunting state of mind. Surely, you have some preseason rituals of your own to add to our list as well.

Enjoy the work, or at least go at it with joyful determination. You'll know it was worth it, when every bit of sweat and worry when that first flock banks to your call, and the season begins.

Good luck and good hunting!!!!!!