

Four Thousand Miles

By Pete McConville, New York

I'm a Northeast waterfowler; our season is winding down when the rest of the country is getting into the migrating flocks. So in order to extend our season, the highway beckons us to distant lands where the birds are. Like thousands of other waterfowlers, we save and put aside enough moolah to seek out that elusive "hunt of a lifetime."

In early December, two of my duck hunting comrades, Andy and Big Jon, joined me and my one-and-a-half-year-old Lab Finn on such a quest. We were on our way to the flooded timber of Arkansas for the second season opener. Extending the season would also solidify Finn's accomplishments and expose him to the variety of situations that traveling presents.

The weather map for the country north of Arkansas was nasty. The northern states were being hammered with snow and frigid temperatures, driving the migration south on a collision course with us, waiting in the overflow of the White River. If it all lined up, this would be the hunt we all were in search of. As it turned out, we harvested our fair share of ducks, but nothing near what could have been. Success was instead measured by the growth and performance of my young dog.

As dawn approached on the first day, we were strafed by woodies in the pre-shooting light. Finn was on a tree platform as we were in waist deep water. He sat like a stone when the first one finally fell at legal shooting. Then Jon and Andy doubled on a pair of greenheads. By the time Finn went out for the last mallard, it had drifted at least 15 yards with the current from where it splashed down. With a couple of quick casts and whistles, Finn was on his way back with the bird. At times we had three birds in the water at once, and he vacuumed them all up. Our guides were duly impressed with him because of his age and the fact

that he was homeschooled. They had a keen appreciation for the work it takes to get a young dog to that level of performance.

The road trip from New York to Arkansas got Finn used to quick stops at gas stations, lunch stops, and "taking care of his business" without delay. He became accustomed to motel rooms, eating and drinking wherever it was offered, and long stints in the vehicle between stops. All of those heeling drills and sit/stay commands came into play, and the months of training paid off mightily in strange environments.

Upon our return to the Adirondack Mountains in New York, I received a call from Kevin, another confirmed "duckaholic." He still had the fever to chase some birds down in the Finger Lakes region of New York. My work schedule was light, both good and bad, and my wife knew that this hunt would close out the season.

So I put a call into an old friend, Larry, who lives there to get a bird report. With his optimistic encouragement, I again had visions of limits hanging around my neck. We loaded the truck with decoys, blinds, and Finn and hit the road for our second December excursion. To keep within our budget, we stayed in an ancient hotel that reminded me of the movie *The Shining*. Each night when I stepped into the hallway on my way to the bathroom, I was on the lookout for Jack Nicholson wielding a bloodied axe.

The icing on the cake was Larry sharing his duck producing "honey hole" with us and his hunting buddy Perry. At this secluded oxbow on a quick stream, Finn once again got into some fast action with the current posing some tricky retrieves. Finn had undivided focus and showed courage on those retrieves that were in the fast-moving water. Only a few months



earlier these situations were posing a few problems in training sessions. The last bird he brought back to me was a banded greenhead. We don't shoot many banded birds, so that was an extra special treat.

All totaled up, Finn logged 4,000 miles in December alone. He became a great traveling companion, a pretty competent retriever, and our bond grew exponentially. So although I may not have had my one dream hunt, I believe Finn gave me a dream season. What made it so rewarding for me was taking a little happy ball of puppy fur, and, in 18 months, transforming him into a hunting partner. He started out with pretty good bloodlines, and the work brought out his natural talent. My advancing age has taught me to appreciate things as they happen, rather than upon reflection.

Now the cold months of the off-season will give us time to fine-tune our assets and to work on our weaknesses. This will hopefully enable us to rely on each other in any situation. It's a lofty goal, but to realize that goal is what makes hunting with a dog so special. Yes, Mr. Cecum, even with a Lab. ●

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