

# WHISTLING WINGS OVERHEAD

Join the Woods & Waters Adventures for an old fashioned waterfowl hunt less than hour from the heart of Washington, DC...

BY C.C. MCCOTTER

**A**s my companions and I walked carefully across the frozen field of cut soybeans in silence we could hear the sound of many birds ahead.

This was good because I had come to hunt ducks and geese, and from all indications, things were looking positive.

My guide, Russ Cavender had called me several times the week prior to our Saturday hunt, his voice ringing with gleeful anticipation.

"There's hundreds of birds on the pond here," he assured me every time he rang.

That 24-degree morning, a slight breeze was blowing and Russ was right, there were still plenty of birds on that pond.

Walking to our pond-side blind my ears picked up the low honks of nervous Canada geese, anxious about our nearing presence.

Within 10 yards of the blind, the birds erupted from the water. It sounded like there were hundreds of them, all heaving themselves out of the pond and into the air where they could put some distance between themselves and us, the hunters. I



**Russ Cavender looks skyward soon after legal shooting hours commence on the W2 Adventures to Whistling Wings.**

could hear individual wing beats at first, then there were too many to pick out and finally, when the birds were aloft, it was just the odd rusty gate sound of many geese flying away and honking disapproval at us over their backs.

Cavender had us pause while the birds lifted and dispersed. Then we filed into the blind in the prearranged order; me on the far left, Rob on my right, Russ in the middle, John to his right, Chris next to him and Russ' fellow caller, Joe, on the right end.

"Load up, load up. They'll be back," Russ told us with certainty.

This was the opening scene of a recent Woods & Waters Adventures waterfowl hunt I attended in, of all places, northern Virginia. Yep, we were hunting within an hour's drive of

D.C., in Prince William County, Virginia. An area more known for its crowded byways than flyways.

Cavender's operation is known as Whistling Wings and he hunts over 1,200 acres for waterfowl, dove, turkey and deer. I had my doubts about hunting far from the more traditional Eastern Flyway, but as I was to find out they were needless.

Per Russ' pressing instructions, I busied myself finding the 3", 12 ga. BB shotgun shells used for geese – no small feat given the lack of light and finger-numbing cold. I heard my fellow hunters feeding shells into their autoloaders and pumps, hollow sounding "flumps" and "clicks" told me they were ready. I had brought along my Weatherby Olympian over and under.

Now, with loaded guns at hand, we waited. Russ had told us prior to getting in the blind, while we sipped juice and ate donuts in a shed that



**Russ calls while his fellow guide, Joe, flags geese to the pond blind.**

## **Whistling Wings continued...**

doubled for our clubhouse, the most important thing was to keep our faces down. He felt that the shine of our faces and possibly our eyeglasses would deter wary geese from decoying down to his spread of fake, floating geese and ducks. Russ had also told us all to wear facemasks to further aid the ruse.

So there we were, the four of us, following Russ' orders and keeping our faces down, facemasks on. I had purchased one camo Avery mask made of neoprene from Green Top and noticed with disappointment my glasses fogged when I wore it at home. The only thing that kept them from completely fogging that morning was the cold breeze that cleared my lenses every couple of minutes.

I was actually thankful for the mask's insulating action. I don't often get cold when I'm outdoors anymore, but I had forgotten the rigors of sitting still, with feet on the ground, trying to outlast the predawn chill.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of air streaming past thousands of feather filaments. Whistling wings is the term used to describe this occurrence. It was the sound of two pairs of ring neck ducks dropping into our decoys, sight unseen until they hit the water. Try drawing air into your lungs over your teeth as you smile, and you'll get a little of what I heard that morning. It's inspiring to hear it. Inspiring because it's so beautiful and makes everything worth getting through to get to this point.

Focusing on what lay ahead, the pond and the incoming birds, I did not notice the approaching sunrise until the action lulled. My eyes were adjusting to more light, a soft light, the kind you only get in the colder months, right before true daylight. The kind of light you'd like to see on your wife's face.

I risked drawing my guide's ire and turned around. My eyes widened as I saw the sky flaming brilliant orange and red, a precursor to the coming dawn. The sky was swirled most vividly starting from the tree line about a mile away and then gave way to darkening shades of gray until it reached the lingering edge of night. Everyone turned and watched.

I don't have space for the details, but I will tell you, our hunt went well and there were plenty of shots. My companions had their limit of geese (two per man) and we managed to knock down a few ducks as well. Russ' Labrador retriever was excellent and entertaining. When she was cold her teeth chattered just like mine.

The first shots came after a flight of a dozen or so Canadas { *continues on page 49*

evidently saw our spread and responded to the goose music they thought was emanating from the birds on the water. Since I was dutifully keeping my head down I did not see the approach, but I heard Russ hiss, "Take 'em" and took that as my cue to look up. I wasn't going to shoot this round anyway. I picked up movement in the decoys, about 45 yards out and counted about 10 geese on the water. As soon as my companions jumped up with raised guns, the birds took flight again and there was a lot of steel flying through the air.

After the guns went silent, just one bird lay on the pond.

I looked at the guys. They looked back at me sheepishly. Rob's gun had jammed. John claimed the goose. Chris was shaking his head.

We didn't have to wait long for the next flight. Four ring neck ducks came from my left, landing into the wind, and lighting on the pond before Russ could notice and call the shot. In fact, I was the only one that saw them and was too polite to shoot without permission.

Russ told me not to do that any more.

"I can't hear as well as I used to, so if I don't answer, just shoot 'em!" he told me.

As the morning unfolded, more and more geese fly by our watery sanctuary. There were even a few more ducks. We shot about 30 times, I pulled the trigger twice, and in the end, we had our limits of geese.

Critical to our success was our guide's attention to the little things. His decoy spread on the pond and the field behind us was extremely realistic. There were actual shooting lanes in the decoys. While we never made it to the pop-up blinds, these things looked awesome. The decoys around them actually moved with the breeze and when geese landed in them it took several seconds to actually pick out the live ones from the imitations.

Russ' and Joe's calling was musical. One blew an old style wooden call made by legend Glenn Scobey. The other blew a more modern version made of plastic that sounded eerily lifelike. In two instances, single birds decoyed down to us from great distances.

My experience with Cavender and his Whistling Wings was one of the best I've had waterfowling. If you would like to hunt with Russ, you can reach him at 703.494.1906 or visit [www.erols.com/remken](http://www.erols.com/remken). **W<sup>2</sup>**