

## DUCKS IN A BAG By Howard N. Ellman

I have been campaigning against the mechanical, battery-powered, spinning wing decoys known variously as motoducks or roboducks since they first appeared on the scene in November of 1998. I have condemned them as skill-nullifying gadgets that profane the traditions of waterfowling. I believe they should be outlawed on fair-chase grounds and also because of their impact on ducks populations. I won't repeat all the arguments. By now, they are well known. I have touched on some of them in earlier pieces in this series and I am likely to revisit the subject in later ones.

Many hunters who use motoducks do so reluctantly, almost sheepishly, despite their professed concern for the resource and their feeling that such use is not right. They feel compelled because they hunt near others who use the devices. "If we don't use them," they say, "the guys near us who do will get all the shooting. With us, it's purely defensive."

Hunters offer this same argument to justify illegal and deadly baiting in parts of the Atlantic Flyway, especially the Eastern Shore of Chesapeake Bay, and in some southern regions of the Mississippi Flyway. "All our neighbors bait. If we didn't put out a little feed, we wouldn't get any shooting." The ethically corrosive potency of the argument is demonstrated by the fact that reluctant baiters face criminal charges and heavy fines if caught – which goes to show how quickly many hunters will sacrifice ethical considerations when they perceive that their principles are costing them kill opportunities.

I have been trying since November of 1998 to come up with the most apt metaphor to expose the argument for the sham that it is. What could possibly exemplify to perfection the use of a mesmerizing, mechanical gadget that renders irrelevant all of the skills of our sport and deprives the birds of their defenses so that they can be slaughtered with a total absence of style, proficiency or knowledge? A possible answer finally came to me from the distant past: When I arrived in California in 1956, I sought a place to hunt waterfowl. Through a friend of my father's, I found a blind in the Grasslands, an area of the San Joaquin Valley in the vicinity of the town of Los Banos. For a young man schooled in the art of hunting the Mississippi Flyway – Southern Illinois and Western Tennessee mostly – the Grasslands were big time culture shock.

I was used to flooded bottomlands, heavily wooded. The Grasslands were an evil-smelling alkali flat, low-grade flooded pastureland mixed with greasewood and other desert vegetation, with nary a tree in sight. The hunting positions were concrete barrels sunk into the flooded ground instead of the platforms and stands of my Mississippi Flyway haunts. The barrels were often inhabited by mice or snakes or sometimes even

skunks that had fallen in and found themselves trapped. Instead of freezing temperatures, we hunted in warm weather on most days, the air thick with mosquitoes during the first half of the season. And we hunted pintails. Mallards were a rarity and held in low regard by Grassland regulars.

That first fall and the next, we had a daily bag limit of seven with three bonus pintails – meaning that a hunter could legally kill ten bull sprig per day. We often did. After I got used to the stink, the cloying mud, the treeless environment, the need to approach the blind with circumspection and ducks that whistled but did not quack, I thought that I had died and gone to an unearned reward. Pintails are, after all, magnificent gamebirds, despite their choice of neighborhood in which to hang out.

I was a serious hunter, suffering from a shortage of disposable cash typical of married grad student status. So unless rain was sluicing down, I slept on the ground beside my car in the parking turnout at the hunting grounds on nights before the hunt rather than pay for lodging. If I had to seek shelter, I usually slept in my car. Nonetheless, I soon heard from my hunting companions about a special place in Los Banos, frequented by less serious hunters – men who used hunting as an excuse rather than an end in itself. That special place was a motel, complete with a bar and restaurant. The owner ran a string of call girls to slake the carnal appetites of his guests – a form of “dessert,” he called it – a nightcap to put the finishing touches on the one pound cut of prime rib sloshing around in too much bourbon, brandy and cigar smoke residue.

It should come as no great surprise that many of these tyros were in no condition to venture forth into the marsh or field in the morning, thus posing a dilemma. How, after all, could they repeatedly return home empty-handed without arousing suspicion? The motel owner – a highly entrepreneurial fellow – tried to solve the problem by laying in a stock of live game-farm pheasants and ducks to sell to his patrons. Freshly dispatched and fully feathered, these would appear at first glance to be just like birds taken in the field.

That was a step in the right direction but it didn't solve the problem. A few of the wives helped clean their husband's birds. Others partook of them. The men feared that the women might become suspicious of corpses totally free of shot marks. They might make inquiry. They might contact other wives. They might hire investigators or pay off motel help to rat their men out. The prospects for inconvenience and embarrassment seemed manifold. So the owner decided to put the live birds purchased by his customers into a burlap bag, hang the bag on the fence behind the motel and the customers or the proprietor would shoot the birds in the bag. Disbelieving this tale as a myth created to confound a gullible Midwesterner, I went by the place around noon one day and actually witnessed the burlap bag ritual being performed for a pair of bleary-eyed hunters who hadn't reached their blind that morning.

Taking all things into account, ducks killed over a motoduck are just like those birds shot in the burlap bag. That bag is the metaphor I have long sought. May it suffice.

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If we take care of the ducks, the ducks will take care of us.

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