

## THE LAST GENERATION?

By Justin H. Phillips

Some of my earliest memories of the outdoors are of times spent tagging along with my father to pursue waterfowl. The restless night before the hunt, the early mornings and the actual hunt were new and exciting to me. I was too young to shoot but old enough to stay relatively quiet and sit still. For years I went along sans gun. I got first hand experience with setting decoys and letting birds work. I got comfortable with sitting in blinds and retrieving downed birds. I also got used to days when not much was flying. I had a lot of great hunts without personally taking a bird. I enjoyed every moment of it and soaked it all up like a sponge. I learned a lot those first few years and this set the stage for me as I got older.

At the ripe old age of 12 I was legal to shoot and ready to take on any poor bird daring to fly within range. I had passed my hunter safety course and received a new Remington 870 20-gauge pump for Christmas. Another chapter of my hunting life was beginning. That January we headed to Virginia to hunt a saltwater marsh owned by long-time Field & Stream conservation columnist George Reiger. We hunted a small, freshwater feeder creek that the ducks used for drinking water. We set up in the predawn darkness and in the early morning I shot my first duck – a black duck. I was extremely happy and proud since black ducks are somewhat of a trophy. My father always put the focus of the hunts on me. He had shot plenty of birds in his day and now, he figured, it was my turn. He was patient and understanding when we hunted. He taught me all he knew and we also learned together. My father took me all over the eastern shore of Maryland and Virginia in pursuit of waterfowl. We hunted black ducks and mallards in salt water marshes and farm ponds, bluebills and canvasback out of booby blinds, surf scoters in the Atlantic, old squaws on Chesapeake Bay, and Canada geese in stubble fields. I was presented with different species and different circumstances. The knowledge I gained on these hunts was invaluable in my pursuits a few years down the road. It was always an adventure and we always had a good time whether we got birds or not. We formed a bond that is still strong today and I have memories that will last a lifetime.

Around the age of 15 I became heavily involved with friends, sports, girls and the social aspect of high school. I didn't hunt much. It was put on the back burner for a while. My dad seemed to slow down too. He had spent the past few years setting up hunts for me all over the place and now that I was into other things his focus also shifted. He helped me with jump shots and attended my games. We still went out a couple of times but I wasn't exactly hunting a lot. After high school I went to college in Virginia for a year but found nothing there that interested me.

At age 19 I moved to a small island in northern Michigan. The island did not attract duck hunters, but I saw some opportunities. I began to explore and hunt for the first time by myself, in an area that was pretty much not hunted for waterfowl. I hunted hard and learned a lot those first couple seasons. I had never before experienced the

feeling of success that I had after a great morning hunting alone. I had scouted and learned the birds' patterns. I had rigged every decoy to my liking and I had called the shots. All the success was from my expertise and intelligence ... or so I thought.

In late October of my first year I had set up for puddlers on a small barrier island of Lake Huron. After the first hour of daylight I started seeing flight after flight of divers of some kind passing by a point of the island that jutted far out into the lake. I had some bluebill decoys in my bag. The week before I had gotten some buffleheads and the 'bills were the only decoys I had with white on them. I moved my setup to the point a couple hundred yards away with the wind picking up. Within minutes a flight passed by and I shot. Nothing dropped. The wind was getting worse and the water started to get rough. My decoys were being tossed around and pulled by the wind and waves. I stuck it out. I really wanted to identify what these birds were. After a couple more missed birds I finally dropped one. I retrieved a drake goldeneye – my first one. I admired its beauty and had a quiet moment of astonishment with that magnificent bird. He looked regal and proud and the way the dark green of his head had an iridescence shine in the sunlight was beautiful. I was too proud and happy to hunt much longer. I packed up and went home to call my dad. I didn't have a clue what I had discovered.

I think it was the following weekend my father came up from northern Indiana with some goldeneye decoys and plenty of steel No. 3s. We set up on the point before dawn and waited for the skies to gray. He had no idea what to expect. I had already been back out a couple times that week but the hunting was slow. I explained that the birds were coming from the northeast and swinging around the point towards the west. We waited but not for long. The next couple hours were filled with flight after flight of goldeneyes. Flocks of 10-30 birds were passing by every few minutes. We shot a lot of rounds that day and ended up a couple birds shy of our limit. One escaped to deep water and a couple more disappeared as soon as they hit the water. It was a phenomenal hunt in an unexpected place, a jewel in the harsh northern waters of Lake Huron. We had amazing hunts on that point for several years afterward. The third week of October proved to be spot on for these migration flights year after year. My dad even shot his first drakes-only limit of goldeneyes one morning. Those few years provided me with the time and experience to learn and further my knowledge in pursuit of my quarry.

Those times alone in the blind proved to me that I was able to hunt successfully by myself with what I had learned as a young boy. I probably wouldn't have hunted ducks if it weren't for my father getting me started. He planted the seed and helped it grow. Now as I aged I took control and extended my duck hunting experiences. I had the drive and a desire to find and hunt waterfowl, but one question remained unanswered.

Where were the duck hunters my age? I had a couple friends who would come out with me a time or two during the season, but I didn't know a single young person who seriously hunted waterfowl. I have since lived in a few different places and I can count the serious duck hunters under age 30 that I know on one hand. Yet, I couldn't count the number of deer hunters and fly fisherman under 30 I know on 20 hands. Why are there so few young waterfowl hunters?

I grew up in Maryland where duck hunting was a family tradition, especially on the Eastern Shore. But I have no Maryland childhood friends who hunt ducks. The hunters are slowly vanishing.

Many factors are frequently cited as the reason for the lack of young duck hunters. It may be too few birds in our skies are driving young hunters to other quarry. It may be the lack of areas to hunt or the expense. It may be too difficult to identify on the wing all the species. It may be that too few fathers introduce their kids to the sport. It may be social pressure created by anti-hunters. It may be all these things. In areas like Arkansas and the Dakotas I'm sure they have their fair share of the next generation of duck hunters, but in the lesser known areas where the tradition is not as well defined we are a dying breed.

In my family the tradition will live on. I know that my son, who is now four years of age, only has a couple years to go until he will be getting out of bed at ungodly hours to freeze his little butt off with me in a blind on some pothole. I can't wait for the day when he gets to pull the trigger on his first drake mallard with cupped wings over our decoy spread.

I just hope others my age are out there to keep the tradition alive. As the weather turns cooler on late summer evenings my mind begins to wander. I think about the upcoming season and what it will bring, but for the most part I dwell on fond memories of seasons past. My first green-wing, a black duck I shot with my last shell to fill my limit and my one and only cinnamon teal. I remember stories my dad told me about hunting as a young boy with my grandfather. All of these come to mind. These memories last forever. They make up part of who we are. They are an important part of many of our lives.

We belong to a tradition that links generations. Yet, it seems to be slowly dying. I wonder about this and worry. I ask myself: Will my generation – or my son's – be duck-hunting's last generation?

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*Justin H. Phillips, 27, lives in northern Indiana. He has hunted ducks on three flyways and goes afield at every opportunity.*

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

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