



It dawned on me that I had missed the most important message revealed by these photos. It was not the number of record-book heads that each had killed. It was the number of animals each hunter must have passed up while seeking a trophy – a number of potential kills that must have dwarfed the number of animals downed.

It caused me to rethink my definition of sportsmanship. I concluded the most over-looked and key trait of all sportsmen (as opposed to hunters) is what they do *not* kill – the many targets that do not measure up to their personal high standards and cause them to withhold fire.

Naturally, when I judged myself by this standard, I failed miserably.

In my early teen-aged years I wanted to kill a duck – any duck. The species did not matter. The sex did not matter. A hen was as valued as a drake. As I grew older and my skills developed, I wanted to kill a lot of ducks. Species or sex remained unimportant. The size of the bag was everything. I was influenced by stories of “old market hunters” who killed thousands of ducks each season.

By the time I reached the age of 30 I began to refine my standards. I tried to avoid killing hens, a task that is sometimes difficult, especially in the dim light before dawn. But the most significant event occurred one day when I was in my layout boat on the lower western shore of Chesapeake Bay.

It was midafternoon. A bluebird day. Nothing was flying. Then a lone bufflehead flashed over my decoys. I dropped the bird with one shot. I immediately rowed out to retrieve it. I saw a dark maroon stain in the jade-colored water being swept along with the running tide. It was the bufflehead’s blood. I picked up the duck, rowed back into the rushes and asked myself why I killed the duck. Buffleheads are perky, trusting little ducks easy to decoy. I had killed enough by then to realize they represent no great sporting challenge. Nor are they particularly great table fare.

I vowed to myself to never kill another one. It lasted for more than a quarter century. Then, while hunting diving ducks a few years ago on Lake Huron, I sat in my blind for three days without firing a shot. When a pair of buffleheads finally approached the decoys, the only ducks I had seen in range, I stood and fired.

I immediately regretted my action. I had broken my private vow. It reinforced the lesson that sportsmanship is about private behavior. Do our actions conform to our personal standards of sportsmanship?

I have not killed any more buffleheads. But my failure to withhold fire continues to gnaw at my conscience.

Importantly, I kill today an occasional black duck. I find this somewhat unsettling even though it is lawful. I have friends who do not shoot blacks because their numbers have dropped alarmingly. They do not want to reduce the breeding population of this troubled

species even by one duck. Their actions cause me to wonder if I should join their ranks and stop shooting blacks.

I still try to avoid killing hens of any species, but am not always successful, especially in the dim light before dawn. Or when a duck is silhouetted against the sun.

And so it goes. I am improving, but slowly. How about you? Do you ever withhold fire? Or do you succumb to temptation?

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

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