

Decoy Set-Ups For River Waterfowl

by Stephen D. Carpenteri

Die-hard waterfowlers know that as long as there is open water there will be ducks to hunt. During a typical late-season hunt the only open water is on the outside bends of our rivers and streams, but south-bound waterfowl will take advantage of any open water that allows them to feed and loaf in relative safety.



Photo by Mike Marsh.

Wary ducks can be easier to decoy to river sets once most still water has frozen over.

Even when the long, shallow, slow sections of a river are glazed with ice, the downstream bends and riffles remain open at least till the end of the season. Bridge pools and brushy backwaters are also good places to find late-season birds. Avid duck hunters know this and plan to be on the water and ready to shoot as passing flocks circle and land just after sunrise and just before sunset.

There are two basic tactics that work for winter river ducks. Hunters may build a blind and set a few decoys along the downwind edge of open water (where ducks are most likely to land after a few reconnaissance circles have been made). If the ice is thin and the

shoreline is shallow, hunters can kick a room-sized hole in the ice and set three to a dozen decoys (mallard or goose blocks attract most species of waterfowl) near the upstream edge of the open water.

Set up a blind near the downwind-downstream side of the opening so that incoming birds will have to pass by within range. In windy or stormy weather, plan to stay out as long as the law allows because ducks and geese will often fly up- and down-river all day as they avoid other hunters or seek new places to feed and loaf.

Plan to stay in the blind all day. Bring warm clothing, hot drinks and plenty of food. Pour a hot drink or unwrap a beefy sandwich — that's usually when the birds decide to come in!

Knowing that ducks and geese may move several times a day during the late season, it's also a good idea to try some hit-and-run set-ups. Hunters should have four to six open-water areas in mind and plan to spend two hours or less at each spot.

Most veteran hunters use six or fewer decoys for this kind of hunting. Decoys are tossed along the upstream border of the open water, just far enough to be able to retrieve them with waders or a pole.

Be sure to select a spot where incoming birds are forced by wind or topography to come in downstream or downwind of the decoys. Bring a small portable blind (made of material that matches the existing shoreline cover) or create a makeshift blind out of shoreline vegetation. Wear the appropriate color camouflage and simply pull weeds and grass over your position.

Be sure to hide anything that shines, is off color or in any way may alert incoming birds. Sit tight and be sure to watch upstream and down for ducks moving between open bends and sloughs.

After about two hours, pick up and move to another spot. Of course, if birds are coming in regularly it's a good idea to stay put, but if the action is slow, move on. Set up quickly and be ready for incomers from any direction.

Needless to say, one of the best ways to insure an efficient hunt is to have scouted the river a day or two before the hunt. If you know where the ducks want to be, and have two or three options for finding them, they will be much more likely to come to you on the day of your hunt. And if one location doesn't work, you'll have some good second and third choices for places to set up.

To get the most out of late-season waterfowling, plan to be set up and ready to hunt before dawn and try to stick it out till the end of legal shooting time. In many cases ducks and geese will fly up- and down-river very early and then very late in the day, often flying just over the treetops or even low to the ice as they look for patches of shallow, open water.

The trick to late-season river waterfowling is to put just enough decoys out to catch the attention of incoming flocks. That's why a half-dozen blocks set 10 yards or so from shore is plenty. Singles and small flocks are more likely to be interested in your spread now because the vast majority of birds have already moved to balmy climes.

It's equally important to have enough calling skills to at least turn a distant flock your way. Ducks may circle two or three times before committing, while geese may just turn into the wind and power stroke straight to your set-up. Call only as much as it takes to get the flock's attention, then shut up and get ready to shoot. They know where you are and they will see the decoys — no more coaxing is necessary at this time of year. Shoot straight and fast because spooked birds will not come back!

(Article Courtesy of Gameandfishmag.com)