

# Duck Hunting Tips for Beginners

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Duck hunting is a great way to enjoy the outdoors. It's easy enough that anyone can learn. Yet it's complex enough to ensure you won't run out of new things to discover. It combines the satisfaction of identifying birds with the thrill of improving your duck calling and wingshooting skills.

Below are tips to help you master the basics.

## **Clothes Make the Man (or Woman) . . . Warm!**

The right clothes can mean the difference between happiness and hypothermia. Ducks are mighty fond of water so if you're going to see them, you'll need to get aquatic, too. A pair of insulated neoprene waders will keep you warm and dry when you're stomping around marshes, ponds and rivers.

You'll also want a specialized waterfowler parka with an outer fabric of gortex or a similar windproof/waterproof material. It should also have a lightweight insulating material such as Thinsulate. A detachable lining and hood allows you to add or subtract layers as needed.

If you're on decoy duty, neoprene gloves with a fleece lining and a long cuff will keep your hands and wrists from freezing while you set out decoys.

## **Duck ID for Dummies**

One of the most important aspects of duck hunting is knowing and abiding by the regulations, which includes being able to identify waterfowl species and gender in flight. Train yourself to recognize ducks by taking field trips armed with binoculars and a bird book. Things to look for on your duck ID missions are size, shape, plumage, patterns and colors, flocking behavior, wing beat speed, and the calls they make. In addition, understanding when and where they like to feed, loaf and fly will give you the edge when hunting. Build on your knowledge of waterfowl by visiting Ducks Unlimited's waterfowl gallery.

## **Shotgun Shopping**

The "by the book" definition of the ultimate waterfowl gun is arguably a 12-gauge semi-automatic. A 12-gauge chamber holds shells that will definitely get the job done. And the semi-automatic action allows the hunter to quickly get off a second and third shot, without having to deal with a lot of recoil. However, you may wish to try the kinder, gentler 20-gauge semi auto. A 20-gauge is too light for large or long-range waterfowl, yet it can be effective if you're not going for anything bigger than a mallard (versus a giant Canada goose), and you're set up to shoot birds within the effective range of your gun, choke and ammo. On the flip side, there are plenty of waterfowlers who swear by pump shotguns because they're less expensive and the action is more reliable than a semi-auto.

Chokes are a matter of discussion, too. The choke, which is a narrowing at the muzzle, controls the size and density of the pellet pattern. Hunters expecting close-decoying ducks may use an improved cylinder, which produces a wide pattern. A full choke will produce tight patterns for longer range shots, and modified chokes hit the middle when it comes to patterning. Screw in choke tubes allow hunters to get maximum use out of one shotgun because by changing the choke, they're able to go from hunting dove to wild turkey.

## **Loads to Learn**

Selecting the right shotshell load for waterfowling is every bit as important as the right shotgun. Many hunters shoot steel although there are other nontoxic alternatives on the market including bismuth, tungsten and various alloys. While many people swear by bismuth and tungsten load performance, steel is common for waterfowling because it costs less. The key is to find what works for you based on the shotgun and choke used, the type and size of waterfowl you plan to hunt and the distance you're set up to shoot. It pays to experiment with different loads and chokes to see what delivers the best pattern and knockdown power. You'll also want to put in some time at your local gun range sharpening your wingshooting skills by shooting trap, skeet, 5-stand or sporting clays.

## **Calling All Ducks**

Part of duck hunting's mystique is knowing the right type and amount of calling to bring birds to the gun. There is definitely an art and science to calling. Ducks make a variety of vocalizations ranging from high-pitched whistles to low, grunt-like quacks. Plus, in many species the call of the hen may differ from the drake's call. Thus, there are calls for just about every duck species, and they come in different materials such as wood and acrylic. Choosing your first calls can be complicated. So it's a good idea to talk to your

friends who duck hunt or someone at a store specializing in hunting equipment to see what they recommend.

While you're choosing calls, you should also consider buying a video to help you master the hail, greeting and comeback calls as well as the trickier feeding chuckle.

If you're new to calling, you may want to limit yourself to some initial "attention getting" calling when you're in the field. Ducks have a pretty good ear and a few sour notes may mean the only thing you see are tail feathers as they head for the horizon. With practice, though, you'll be working birds to your decoy set in no time.

### **Go to the Dogs**

One thing you'll almost always hear duck hunters talk about is their dogs. Retrievers are as much a part of duck hunting as flyrods are to trout fishing. Sure you can duck hunt without a retriever and trout fish without a flyrod, but why not have as much fun as possible?

Retrievers, whether they're labs, goldens or Chesapeake Bays, serve two important purposes. First, they're delightful to watch whether they're splashing out past the decoys to retrieve a bird or proudly returning to the blind with a pintail. And most importantly they're essential in recovering ducks that may be hard to find or those dropped in deep water.

A well-trained dog is a big responsibility and may not be something a new duck hunter is ready to handle. The next best thing you can do is hire a guide or go with friends who duck hunt with a dog. You also can use a boat to retrieve birds from deeper water, though hard-to-find ducks will still be a challenge.

### **Hide and Seek**

Concealment is the name of the game when it comes to duck hunting. Biologists believe that ducks see colors better than we do. To keep from blowing their cover, duck hunters use a variety of blinds. The simplest way to hide from the flock's keen eyesight is by wearing head-to-toe camouflage, in a pattern that's appropriate for the type of habitat you're hunting. By using camouflaged clothes and equipment, remaining motionless and hiding amongst branches, shoreline vegetation and other naturally occurring camo, you can become less visible to waterfowl.

There are also several types of temporary blinds you can buy that will give you the freedom to move according to changes in flight or feeding patterns. A portable blind may consist of a big piece of camouflaged cloth and a few stakes or one of the many commercially available blinds. It depends on how much you want to spend.

The next step up is a boat blind. A small, camouflaged johnboat can seem like a luxury in comparison to a ground blind. Boat blinds offer several advantages. First, throwing your decoys out from a boat is a breeze, and it's easy to change locations. You can always get more elaborate with your boat by adding a motor or rigging it with a fancy box blind.

Whatever method of camouflage you decide on, it's always a good idea to set up with the sun at your back. That way you don't have to battle the sun in your eyes. Plus it makes it harder for birds to see you.

### **Decoy Deceit**

A good decoy spread works with your calling to lure ducks to a setup. While calling can appeal to the musician in you, decoying waterfowl can bring out your artistic flair. There are several kinds of decoys that differ according to size, detail, color, shape, price and material. There are also a variety of ways to set them up depending on what species you're hunting.

Probably the most common duck decoys are solid and hollow floating ones. They're usually made of cork, molded plastic or polyurethane foam. They have a weight that's attached to the underside of the decoy that keeps them floating upright. For best results, decoys should match the species you're hunting.

Although duck hunting varies greatly from region to region, the maxim that seems to unite all waterfowlers is: the more decoys, the better. Ducks have gotten wiser to hunters, and it takes more decoys to reassure the flock that it's safe to land.

Whether you're setting small bunches of decoys to attract puddle ducks or bolder rigs in j-shaped strings to bring in diving ducks, there are some basic guidelines. Always try to keep the sun, wind and some cover at your back. Also, make sure flocks can see your spread, and that it's close enough to bring them within gun range.

### **Go with a Guru**

Probably the best advice is hunt with someone who is wise to the ways of waterfowl. Your duck hunting mentor can help you find a place to hunt, locate where ducks are feeding and pattern their movements.

They also can help you understand duck hunting regulations and make sure you have all the proper licenses and stamps, including the mandatory federal duck stamp. There is no end of things you can learn about calling, decoy placement and wingshooting from an experienced duck hunter. Plus, you'll have a great time, build your skills and give your confidence a boost.

With this advice, try duck hunting at your own risk, knowing it could very well be love at first flight.

Courtesy of [www.outdoorroadmap.com](http://www.outdoorroadmap.com)