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Y

ou see them in your mind's eye. Canadas. Wings cupped down. Feet extending. Bright beady eyes glinting, heads turning, searching for a place to land. You stop calling. Birds overhead are talking, but three are dropping toward the spread, and you don't dare look up. If you do they will flare, and you'll have to take a hurried going-away shot. You don't want that.

You've brought them in from way down over the trees at the end of the field, caught their attention with paddles, and then with the calling. You don't want to spoil it, so you keep your head down, watching the birds through the tops of your eyes. Easy, easy. Your hand tightens on the gun. Easy, let 'em come...

Every workday, a million commuters drive the Long Island Expressway in and out of New York City. Next to the Los Angeles Freeway, it's the second longest parking lot in the world. But at four on a Saturday morning in January, it's deserted and that's just as well. You're not thinking of driving. You're thinking of geese and the way they came in last time, and you wonder how in hell you could have shot behind something so big and so close and so slow. That's what you think of as your car grinds away the 90 miles from Manhattan to the island's East End.

Countless thousands of Canada geese live in the shadow of New York City. You see them on golf courses, in school yards, on corporate front lawns. No matter the season, they trade overhead, tease you with their chatter, and settle into park ponds down the street. You can't hunt urban geese, and these wise Canadas know it. And that, friend, is supreme frustration if you are a died in the Gore-tex goose hunter.

To cope, you long for winter. And when it finally comes, you beat it down to Maryland's Eastern Shore. But mecca is no more. Shifting migration patterns have changed that. The big Canadas just aren't moving over the Chesapeake in the numbers of yore.

Today, the hottest waterfowl hunting in the East is out on the tip of Long Island. It's everything Maryland used to be. Gently rolling fields of cornstalks crisp with frosty rime, bright swaths of green rye stretching from fencerow to treeline. Bays like Mecox and Shinnecock and Napeague are crowded with gabbling birds, lured to the East End by ample feed and sheltered water.

"Let's look at the geese," said Phil Gay as we finished

Under a lowering sky, Canada geese pour into a kettle pond in the Hamptons of Long Island, New York. The island offers outstanding goose shooting only 90 miles from Manhattan.

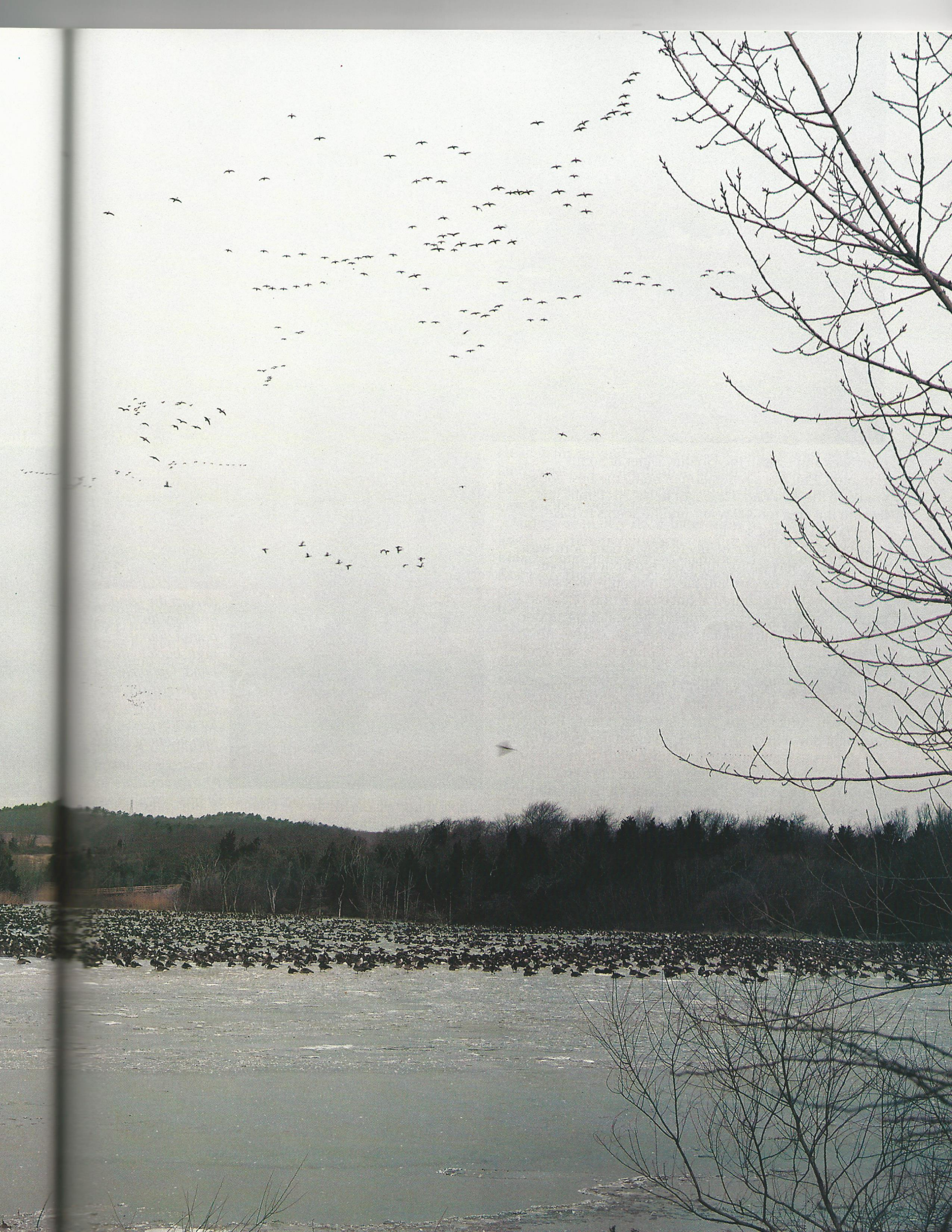


EAST END GEESE

*Some of the finest
goose hunting on the
Eastern Seaboard is
only two hours' drive
from the heart
of New York City.*

*Story and Photography
by John Ross*







pancakes and eggs in the Holiday Diner at South Hampton. Phil has a reputation of being the best goose guide on the East End. He ought to be. His family has lived in the area for 300 years, and he seems to have been raised in a goose pit.

We stood by a tongue of Mecox Bay; a hard northwest wind made conversation futile. A cold front had roared through the day before, and the temperature was still plummeting. Phil gestured at huge black rafts of Canadas, knotted tightly together, tossing on the whitecaps under a dawning pink and blue fair-weather sky. "Geese," he shouted through cupped hands. "Gonna fly. Time to get to the corn lot."

Civilization is a propane heater in a goose pit. It doesn't keep you warm. Nothing could. But its orange hissing makes you think you are, and that's what counts. Before dropping down into the pit, Phil adjusted the spread of 300 stuffers to leave an opening downwind, from whence the geese would come. Stuffed geese are the best decoys; there's nothing so lifelike and still legal. Guns uncased, boxes of shells out and open, thermoses handy. Now we were ready.

There are two ways to shoot geese: Phil's way and the wrong way. He's successful. In a 90-day season, his hunters will take home some 1,300 geese. You do what he says. He's a top-kick sergeant, and you're a buck private.

"When I say paddle, you paddle like this." Phil picked up a pair of elliptical, dull-black painted plywood wings and waved them together over his head in the cadence of a preening goose. It looked easy, but is tough to do for any length of time. "When I say 'flag', wave this flag (black on a black stick) for a count of three, bring it down into the pit and count to ten, and then flag again. Do it until I tell you to stop. When I say: 'close up', slide the top over but leave enough to flag.

"We don't shoot at bunches of more than 12 birds. If you do, you'll educate the others. One that's been shot at may see something and remember and flare away, drawing the other birds off.

"You can't hit them all. Don't shoot the lead bird unless I tell you to. Shoot the last bird. My father told me a



Paddles, waved overhead in the cadence of flapping wings, give life to a spread of decoys, catching the birds' attention and turning them toward the blind. Phil Gay hustles a pair of downed birds back to the blind. Opposite: No decoys are as effective as stuffers for luring geese into gunning range.

simple thing: as long as they're comin', let 'em come. Let the one that's ten feet off your barrel go. Don't shoot it. I'll tell you which birds to shoot."

Jim Peterson looked at me and grinned. During the 90-mile drive from his apartment in Manhattan, he'd told me about Phil, and he was running true to form. He had us organized and ready, each assigned a slice of horizon to scan for incoming geese. The talk in the pit was that quiet, disjointed kind that happens when you're looking over the treeline and trying to pull geese up out of the water by sheer willpower. Goose hunters are masters of mind over matter.

"Over the barn. Short string. Paddle." Jim and Phil pick up wooden wings and begin to beat the air. They seen us and turn. "Down. Close-up. Flag," Phil hisses. A lonely, almost timid hur...ronk, grrr...ronk, ...ronk, ronk comes from Phil's long wooden call. "Not so fast with the flag!" Hur...ronk, hur...ronk. "Flap the flag like a goose flaps his wings!"

With his call Phil cajoles the geese, inviting them to breakfast here amongst 300 other fine fellows, the spread



of stuffed decoys, feathers fluttering in the wind. Grrr...ronk, ronk, hurronk, grrronk, ronk...the discussion turns heated. Phil sits on a stool with only the brim of his camo hat poking through a cut-out in the roof of the blind.

“Get ready...NOW!”

There are moments in sport when that shutter snaps in your mind’s eye and freezes a picture forever. It happens when you round the trail and catch a doe and her fawn frozen in a golden pool of sun, bright under the damp green hemlocks. Or when the snook first jumps, and you see your red and white streamer in its mouth, and the fish looks to be a good 36-incher. Another such moment is when you leap from the dark of a closed blind, blink in the sunlight and catch a dozen geese, wings cupped, feet down. You can see their heads turn on craning necks. They freeze in the air the instant they see you. If you are a good hunter, that’s when you shoot. You don’t think of the shotgun or the safety or the sight or the swing. If you are a good hunter you shoot right then. If you don’t, you have to play catch-up because they will be gone in a second or two.

We were grinning like kids at Christmas. A double for Jim, a single for Phil, and my bird, the one I finally swung on, flying back to the bay cursing early mornings and hunters in corn lots. God they were close. Not the high-tailing pass shooting we’d found in Maryland, but birds so near you hear their wingfeathers beating on the wind.

(That’s how I console myself: The birds were *too close*, I think. If they’d been out a little farther...)

Knowing that at least one of his party could shoot, Phil loosened up a little. “Great day for geese, perfect. Cold

makes them fly. Give me a northwest wind. They’ll come in.” These birds were driven out of Massachusetts and Connecticut by ice storms earlier in the week. Ten years ago, they might have flown on down the coast, stopping at Brigantine on the Jersey shore, or heading over the Delmarva Peninsula on their way to the Chesapeake. No more, not since East End farmers stopped growing potatoes and began planting corn and soybeans as cash crops. That’s brought birds in numbers even the old-timers like Phil’s father never knew. In the 30s, Phil Sr. hunted over live geese as callers and shot a few hundred birds each year. In the 40s, he had pits in the fields, “but if there were 500 birds on the bay, that was a lot,” said Phil.

Now, the first birds come in from the north in July, just a few dozen here and there. They feed on sweet corn, staple of summertime clambakes and barbecues, and a money-in-the-bank crop for local farmers. East End farmers have no love of geese.

Field corn is harvested in September and early October. On the corn lots that Phil leases, the farmer picks the corn and knocks over the stalks rather than cutting them off clean at the ground. “Stalks make it hard for a goose to land,” says Phil. “Jabs them in the breast.” That’s why he flattens the stalks in a 20-yard radius of his pits. Makes it easy for the birds to land.

And come in they do. A bitter snow in New England, less than a hundred miles across the open end of Long Island Sound, may push 5,000 birds a day south onto the East End. They may spend the night on the ocean and starved, come into the fields in the morning. “In the last five years, the goose hunting has really gotten good.”

“Good” is an understatement. In the next three hours we collected nine birds and the longest shot was a mere 40 yards. Even I tagged my share. Along with Phil’s magic calling, bitter cold and flying birds, the stuffed decoys made the difference. I don’t care how perfect a full-bodied artificial looks, paint lacks the soft patinaed sheen of feathers. Oversized decoys look out of place. To geese circling overhead, silhouettes disappear.

Phil adds about 75 stuffed decoys to his spreads each year. Once the skin is removed and cured, he stretches it over a plastic form. He then runs a piece of light-weight reinforcing wire up the neck, which he stuffs with insulation. The wire and foam-filled neck can then be bent down for a feeder, left upright as a watch-goose, or positioned straight out as if the bird was quarreling over territorial rights.

From a distance you can’t tell a spread of stuffers from the real thing, except that they don’t move. That’s what the paddles and flags are for. The birds see what appears to be flapping wings, and they turn, their interest piqued. Once committed, only the white of a face, a glint from glasses or gun barrel will change their minds and make them flare.

For hunting over stuffers most shots are within 25 yards. You don’t need a magnum for that; a standard 12 gauge will do. Brian Watson, on whose hunt I was guest, uses a Browning A-5 with great success. Some shooters use 3-inch 20s. Phil favors Remington 870s chambered with 28-inch improved cylinder barrels. Completely reliable, he says, and he should know.

I’m a fan of double guns, especially the new steel shot

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EAST END


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Parkers and Brownings. In a blind, though, breaking a double without pointing barrels at your buddies is well nigh impossible. And, too, there's a lot to be said for that third shot.

Paradise for hunters the East End may be, but it's not without limitations. There simply isn't any public hunting land. By law, you have to hunt with licensed guide. It's a good law, I think. The number of guides is limited and goose pits are seldom in sight of each other. Sky busting is rare, which is one reason why the birds decoy so readily.

Hunting in the East End may not be long lived. For a century or more The Hamptons have been a summer resort for New Yorkers. The Long Island Expressway channels thousands out to the Island's superb beaches on weekends. What used to be summer cottages are now year-round homes, and what was once farm land, dotted with rustic clapboard houses and board-and-batten barns, is

increasingly carved up into lots. Land use planning, including zoning and tax structures to protect working farms, will delay the inevitable for at least a decade. You might as well enjoy it while you can.

While the geese were being dressed, Jim, Phil, and I chased away the cold with chowder and burgers in the diner. And coffee, lots of it, hot and black. The drive back to Manhattan would be tiring, and on a Saturday afternoon traffic in the city is tense. But even that couldn't spoil our day. Hell, there was a limit of geese in the back of the wagon. And we knew that good gunning could be had, anytime we wanted it, out on Long Island's East End. 

If You Want To Go

What surprised me about hunting Long Island's East End is the happy confluence of convenience, convivial accommodations, and geese, lots of them. Hunters I've talked with report consistent success on Canadas and ducks.

Gunning is uniformly good from November through January, and quite

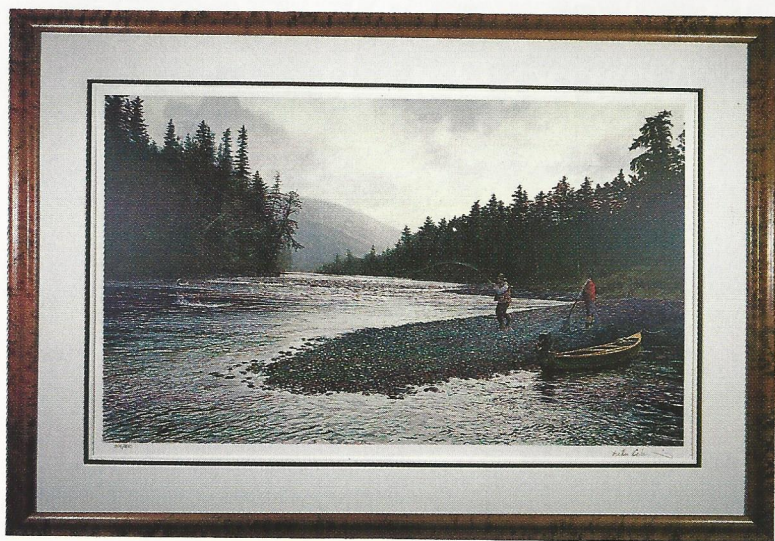
often even later in the season. The limit is three Canadas per day, and you can hunt on both Saturday and Sunday.

Phil Gay has two other guides working with him, and there are a dozen guides in the area. All charge about the same. A full-day goose hunt for up to four hunters runs about \$450, a combination goose and duck hunt is \$525. To arrange a hunt, call the East End Waterfowling Co., 516-726-4374, or write Phil Gay Jr., RR1, Box 251, Water Mill, NY 11976. Should Phil and his guides be booked on the days you have available, he'll recommend other guides in the area.

Unless you live in New York State, you'll need a non-resident small game license (about \$40) and late at night, finding one can be a problem. Get your license before you arrive. Write the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, License Sales Office, Room 111, 50 Wolf Road, Albany NY 12233-4790 and request a standard application. You can also obtain a license application by calling any DEC regional office like the one in Stony Brook, L.I. (516-751-7900), which is also a source of guides and other information about hunting Long Island.

The Hamptons has dozens of good restaurants that serve a wide range of cuisine from local clam chowder to fairly exotic continental fare. Bed and breakfasts, as well as motels, abound, offering gunners good lodging at off-season rates. The South Hampton Inn (516-283-6500) on Route 27a is quiet and convenient to charming shops and good restaurants. Rooms, during hunting seasons are \$88-\$99 per weekend night, and corporate, AAA, AARP, and other discounts apply. Dinner at LeChef, a nearby restaurant well know on the East End for seafood and continental fare, is superb.

Getting to the Hamptons is not difficult. Fly into Kennedy or Laguardia, rent a car, and have the clerk at the rental counter trace the best route (this changes from week to week due to perpetual highway construction). If you plan a weekend shoot, time your Friday night arrival so you're on the road prior to 4 p.m. or after 7:30 p.m. Friday night outbound on the Long Island Expressway is the acid test for those of us with Type A behaviors.



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"A Cascapedia Morning"

by
Peter Corbin

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