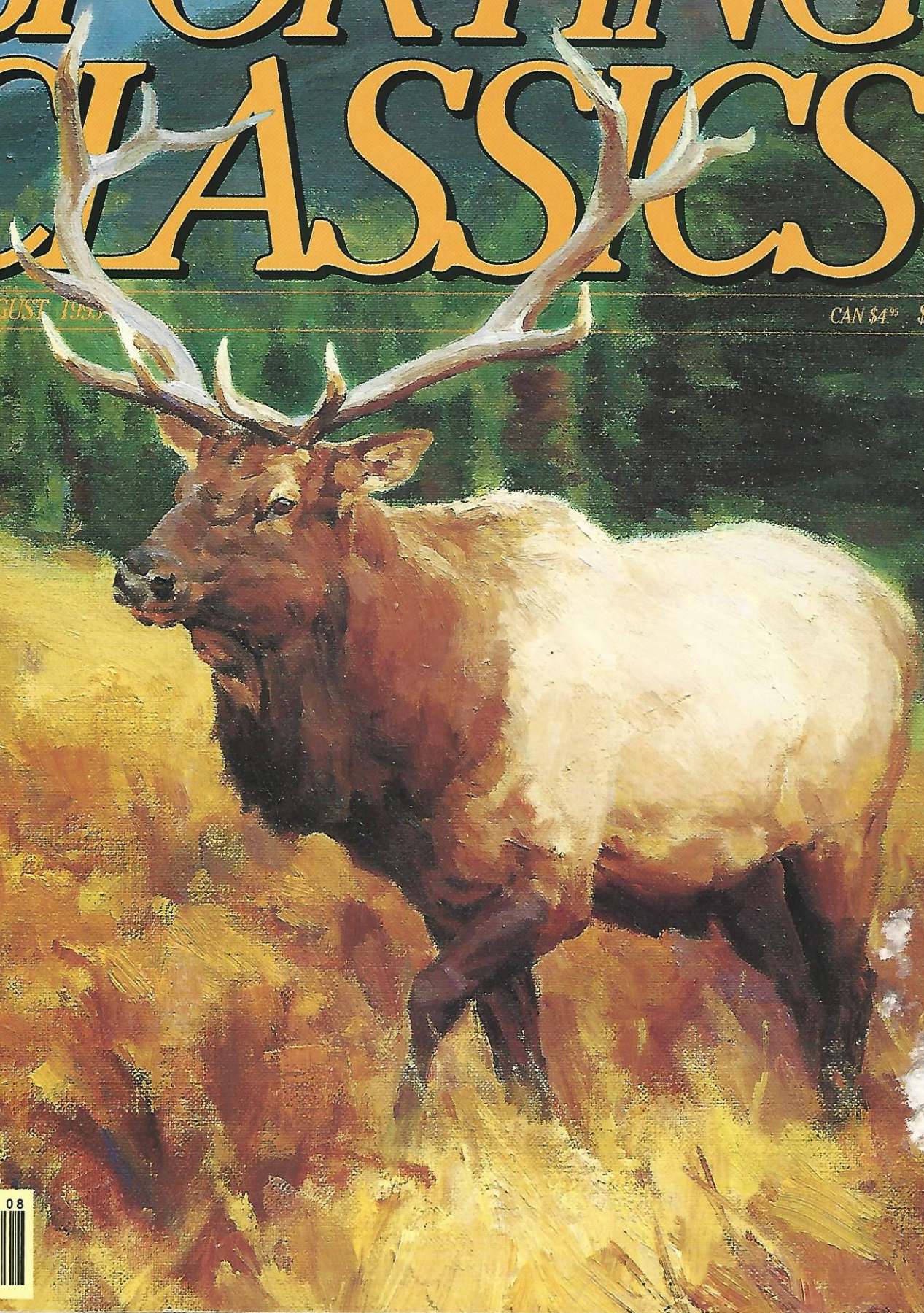


# SPORTING CLASSICS

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# SONGS OF TRANQUILITY

*From goose music in the Garden State to the highball notes of mallards and black ducks on Long Island, it was a waterfowling composition that blended the best and worst of old and new.*

*by John Ross*

**B**

ach must have been a goose hunter. Likes his fugues, notes of calling Canadas build, one upon another, interweaving chords and counterpoint. From down in the pit we hear them, tentative, plaintive in the distance. Then there's nothing, only silent sky. We sit tense in the dark, hunched forward on two-by-six planks, anxious.

The music's back. On his call, guide Tom Cornicelli punctuates his song with sharp after sharp, joining the swelling chorus. Goose hunters see with their ears. Ours tell us the flock is circling the field from behind us. We know they are coming. Louder, the notes are crisp, frequent, blending in discordant harmony. Their music fills the pit like Bach can fill the soul.

They're here, over the decoys, not in pairs and trios, but all of them, all at once. Scores of birds, echelon after echelon wheeling up over the strung-out silhouettes behind us, swinging above the stuffers in front, breaking up, pairing off, swirling overhead.

Tom knew they'd come into the field, and they did, dropping not in twos or fives, but in dozens, side-slipping and banking and flaring so close we didn't need shotguns at all. We could have swiped our limit out of the sky with long-handled nets. They were so near, barking and yelping to their ersatz brothers.

Hunkered in a goose pit at times like this, you don't know

*Music to our eyes and ears is a flock of Canadas wheeling overhead, their wings set for a glide pattern into the decoys.*

CHUCK WECHSLER



whether to laugh or be reverent. Three hundred geese, careening just overhead, so near, such easy gunning, so tempting... but not a shot was fired. The birds landed all around the blind and began probing the muddy field for waste corn. After several minutes of watching and listening to their noisy feeding, Tom stuck his head up out of the blind to gaze into the startled eyes of a big gander only five feet away. The goose barked an alarm and once again the sky went black with their heavy bodies.

"That was unbelievable," said Chuck Wechsler, editor of *Sporting Classics*. "I've never had so many geese that close. But why didn't you let us shoot..."

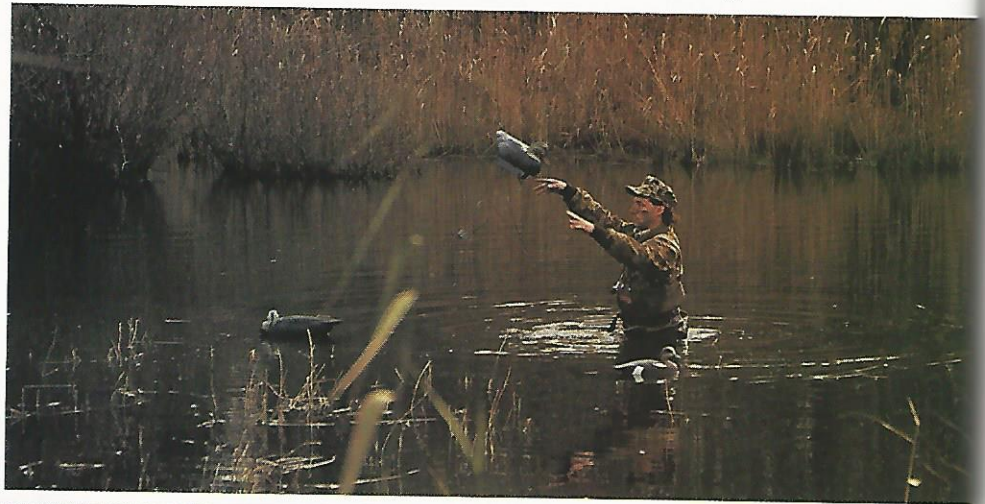
Smiling, Tom Cornicelli turned to his three puzzled hunters and explained: "I didn't want to educate 'em. In other areas along the East Coast – and Maryland is the best example – everyone gunned the big flocks. It didn't take long before the birds got smart and moved away from the hunting pressure. That won't happen here if we only shoot at singles or small groups... say, six birds or less."

It was opening day of the second part of New Jersey's goose season and we were in Tranquility, not only our mental state, but a hamlet about two hours west of New York City. It was Chuck's first visit to the Garden State, a journey he faced with no little trepidation. Raised on the Upper Mississippi Flyway and transplanted to

carved in the styles favored by turn-of-the-century Long Island baymen. Though we'd miss late November's opening day for the second half of the duck season, we figured there would be birds aplenty and the surroundings congenial.

But on this hunt, Messrs. Burns and Murphy worked overtime. Moments after parking the vehicle, Tom discovered that his canoe, stuffed with decoys and stashed deep in the tangled grass at the edge of the pond, had been stolen the previous night. Instead of 60 blocks, we had four.

Gingerly, we picked our way across a catwalk to a wooden blind under the trees. Bob McGowan, Tom's friend and a world-class caller, set out the blocks, and we sat silent, watching the cold steel sky color up in the cloudless dawn. "There are two, over the trees," Bob said softly, and he and



*Bob McGowan tosses out decoys on a marsh in the heart of busy Long Island, while Cody watches with eager eyes. Opposite: Tom Cornicelli of Back-Bay Outfitters works a flock of geese.*



rural South Carolina, he is a lot more comfortable poking around the thorny steppes of South Africa than with the teeming masses of metropolitan New York, currently my corner of the country. I'd invited him and Brian Raley, the magazine's Adventures manager, to hunt with Cornicelli, an old friend and as fine a waterfowl guide as you'll ever find.

Tom and I decided to open the hunt with a couple days of duck shooting on a tiny freshwater marsh in eastern Long Island, then finish with geese in New Jersey.

The plan was to hunt the marsh over decoys, all hand-

little pocket of placidity hidden in the tumult of the island's suburban sprawl. The pond is a knuckle no more than 50 yards wide and 75 long on a finger of Moriches Bay. Gunning here is quick.

Coming in from the left, the birds round a 40-foot tree at the upstream end of the pond. They circle up overhead behind the blind and come back lower, and again lower, and again, wings cupped, finally, and feet down, ready to settle into the pothole in front of the blind. When they do this, the shooting is easy – a piece of cake.



Maybe this wasn't the day to hunt ducks. It had started bad and had all the earmarks of going rapidly downhill. Another single came up the pond. We chased it with steel, and Tom's yellow lab, Cody, figuring that with all shooting there had to be something down, broke and went searching for the bird.

Just as Cody plowed across the pond, a trio of mallards appeared from behind the tree, ready to drop in. But seeing the commotion, they got the hell out. That's when Chuck laughed. "You know what the title for this story should be," he told me, "Fowl Luck."

The jokes got even worse after that, but the shooting got better. We poked away at singles – mallards, woodies, widgeon, teal and blacks – and swapped stories. We knew that the gods of the hunt were directing this play, which had almost become a theater of the absurd, and there was nothing to do but go with it. We'd sit, get bored, get up to void the bladder or toss a dead duck to give Pidge, Brian's young Chessie, some action. That, of course, is when the birds would fly.

"Here they come," someone would stage whisper, and we'd freeze, hands tight on pistol grips and forends, eyes boring out from under our camo hats, waiting to uncoil, swing and shoot on Tom's command. Then the perpetrator would giggle, and we'd lash him with verbal assaults on his legitimacy and lineage.

The birds watched our folly and waited until the joke wore thin. Their timing was perfect. When next one of us mouthed, "Here they come," the ducks counted ten and then sailed over, and we laughed all the harder. In case someone actually saw a duck, we agreed to add "no shit"

to the warning. It didn't make any difference.

We chuckled our way from calamity to calamity, but when Bob tripped on a submerged log and took several gallons of marsh water over the top of his waders, we and he roared with laughter.

That night a front raced in and by morning curtains of rain slashed across the marsh and the gunning improved. We had more decoys out, and pairs and trios dropped down in the dark rain, silhouettes, gabbling to each other over the dimpled water. Tom Lenz from Orvis had joined us. Four gunners are too many to shoot at one time, so we broke into two-gun relays.

By mid-morning we'd bagged a black and some mallards and the pressure was off. Chuck and Brian had seen the marsh the way duck-hunting baymen have known it for 300 years, drizzly mist weaving the sienna grasses and umber leaves into soft tweed. Each of us had made a respectable shot or two. It was time for breakfast.

When Tom told me that Bart Sweeney, a Wall Street broker, would fix breakfast, my mind filled the table with eggs and bacon, potatoes and stacks of toast. But Bart had a better idea. Dining on folding tables set up in an old barn, we opened with steaming pot-pies in individual crocks, crust tender and flaky, covering chunked goose breasts and carrots and onions in a savory gravy. This, friends, would have been enough. But no, now there was red cabbage and grilled kielbasa and rich, black moist brownies of about a zillion calories each and hot black coffee.

I needed the coffee, lots of it, to kick my metabolism back into a gear high enough to keep me awake as I led Chuck and Brian, in their van, through the intricacies of



ALL JOHN ROSS



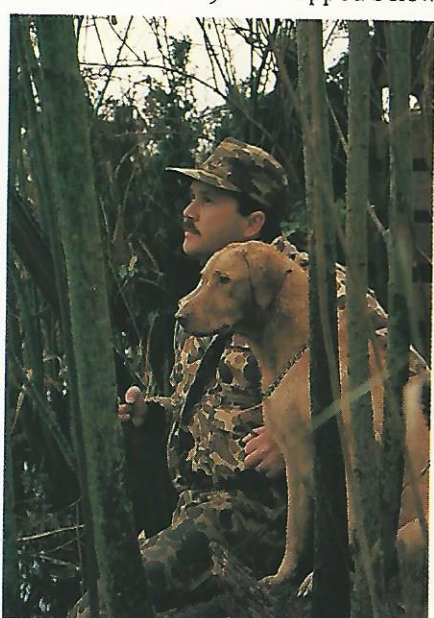
metropolitan New York's interstate system. We ran the gauntlet in heavy rain, a downpour at times, and crossed over the Hudson into New Jersey heading due west on Interstate 80. I couldn't put the city behind me fast enough, and I suspect they felt the same way.

Less than an hour from the river we crested Allamuchy Mountain and pulled up at the motel. Chuck and Brian were visibly relieved, and surprised by the gentle beauty of the mountain terrain. West of Allamuchy, the state is essentially farmland, drained by trout streams and laced with heavily wooded ridges where deer bed and turkey roost.

In the valley below the mountain, Tom leases four farms, and rotates parties among them. He tries never to hunt the same blind on successive days. That, too, educates the geese. He believes in big spreads of decoys. This year his rig contained a hundred or so Real-Geese decoys (super-light silhouettes), a few dozen Big Foots, and when the weather's good, a score of stuffed birds, so pretty they belong in a den and not a stubble field. Tom has exclusive hunting rights to some of the largest land-holdings in the area, all rich with resident geese.

According to Paul Castelli, wildlife biologist and leader of the N.J. Department of Fish, Game and Wildlife's waterfowl ecology and management project, the state's resident goose population is expected to double, from 50,000 to 100,000, in the next five to six years.

But bag limits in New Jersey were reduced in the 1992-93 season from three to two birds per day. The reason, Paul says, is that reproduction among migrant geese (birds reared in Canada) has dropped below the 70 percent level



Brian Raley and his young Chesapeake, Pidge, scan the Long Island sky for approaching birds.

CHUCK WEIBISLER

needed to sustain the population. Neck-band studies show that Canadas migrate through New Jersey in the first week or two of October. The one-bird limit during the early, eight-day season in mid-October protects this breeding stock. Hunters are allowed two birds in the bag during the main season, November through December, when migrants and resident populations blend. An extra bird is added in the final weeks

of the season in January in an attempt to control the resident population.

New Jersey is contemplating a special two-week early September season, during which hunters, with permits, will be able to take five resident birds per day. And when the waterfowl project is completed, Paul predicts that a


late January, early February season with a five-bird bag will be instituted for much of the state.

Our goose hunt began with breakfast at the Allamuchy General Store, where the coffee is plentiful, the larder varied, and were it not for the geese, one might be tempted to stay and chat with the pretty owners. Bob McGowan met another party of hunters from New York, while we provisioned ourselves and headed out to the field. As we hustled down to the blind, five Canadas flushed from water standing in the field. With corn left from harvest and water too, those birds would be back, I thought.

No sooner were we settled in the pit than they returned, heading for the hole in the decoys in front of us. Chuck nailed the far right bird with his sweet 20-gauge Beretta and my Onyx 12-gauge did its number on the left side. Two shots, two birds, and we'd been in the blind ten minutes.

The warm weather, though, made the birds fly differently than I'd ever seen them before. They either circled overhead and landed in huge flocks or they didn't come in at all. Where we were, the flocks had not broken up into the five or six-bird squadrons that make gunning ideal.

Bob's party, on the other hand, had limited out in less than two hours at a blind in standing corn about 300 yards from a pond where the geese rest. We moved there and Brian and Chuck picked up the remaining birds on their tags by 10:30.

We left the blind in high spirits, geese in one hand, guns in the other. At the vehicles beyond the hedgerow, as we swapped thank yous and goodbyes, a trio of Canadas glided overhead, calling loudly as they slanted down toward the pond, followed by a pair and then a handful. New arrivals picked up the pitch as vee after vee returned from the fields, swirled overhead, broke up and settled onto the water, adding to the wild chorus in this little part of New Jersey called Tranquility. 

## If You Want To Go

Tom Cornicelli runs Back-Bay Outfitters, an Orvis endorsed waterfowl guide service offering hunts in New Jersey and on Long Island. His rates range between \$350 and \$450 for full-day parties of two to four gunners. Contact him at 718-833-6930, and he will arrange licenses as well as lodging.

## Field Tests

For ducks and geese this year I used a Beretta Onyx Model 686 with 26-inch, tubed barrels. At 6 1/2 pounds or so, my Onyx feels light. Recoil from heavy 3-inch loads would be a problem were I not shooting at waterfowl. Then, I just don't feel recoil like I do shooting at clays. Dull finished stock and metal eliminate glare that might spook birds. Overall, I'm very pleased with the gun.

A silhouette's a silhouette, or so I believed until I gunned over Real-Geese decoys. Made of tough plastic, 1/8-inch thick and equipped with sturdy oak legs, these printed decoys come in a dozen different attitudes including feeding, watchers, preening and other positions. Cornicelli used Real-Geese as the main body of his spreads. "No silhouettes have ever worked better for me," he says. For more information about Real-Geese Decoys, contact Darrel Wise at Webfoot Outfitters, 1702 Englewood Ave., Yakima, WA 98902; 509-452-2959.