

# American Waterfowler

Volume VI, Issue VI

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## NETHERLANDS

# A NEW DUTCH TREAT

Trophy Goose Hunting In A Very "Green" World

By Ramsey Russell

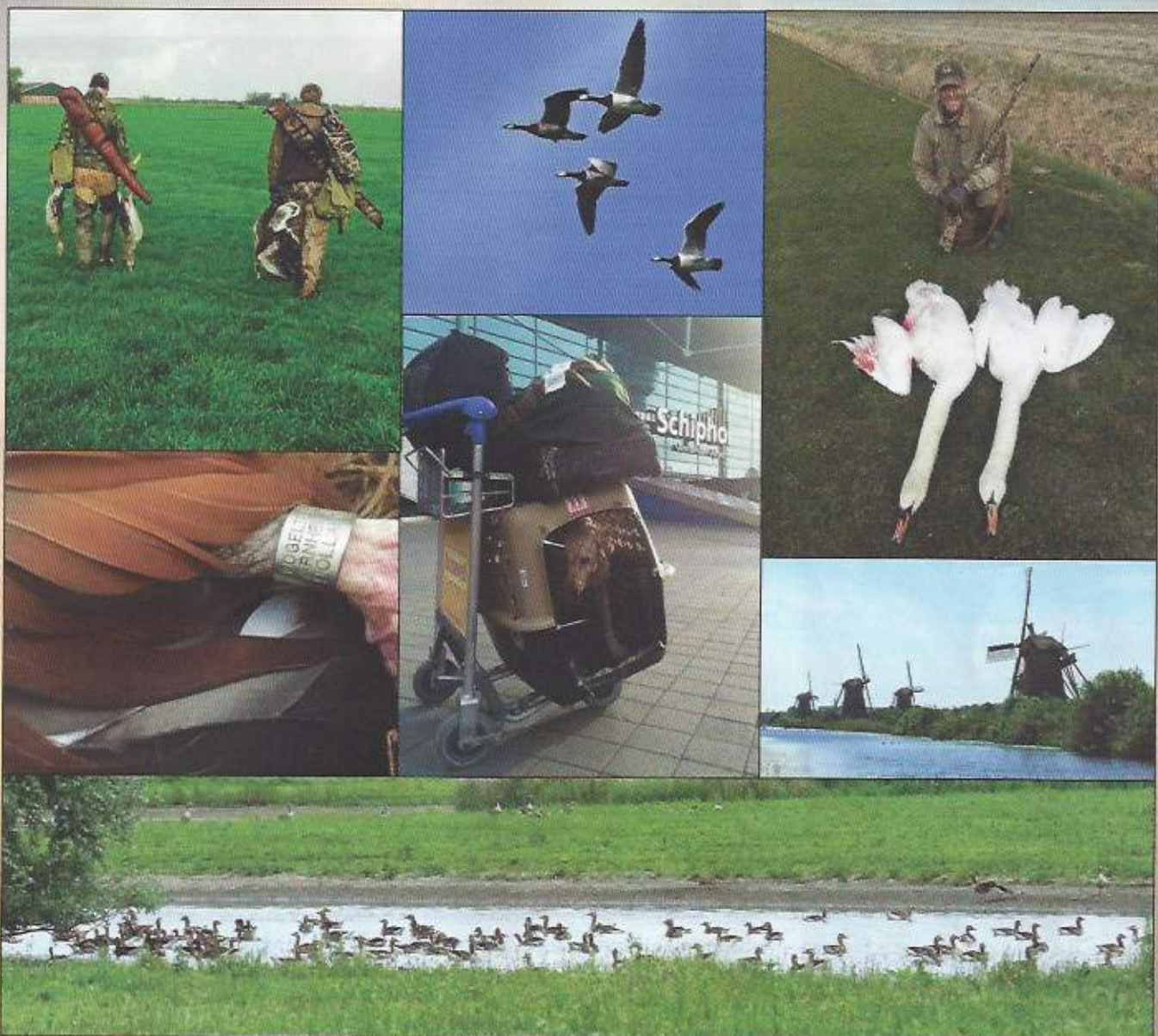
**T**he Netherlands is green. About half the size of South Carolina, its citizens are among Europe's most liberal, a phenomenon local hunters and most citizens of the modern Western world refer to as "green." The Dutch parklike landscape is, as one guest described, "so emerald green it burns your retinas." The countryside is as idyllic as a 1970s Disney movie, replete with narrow, cobblestone

streets, laser-straight rows of tulips that stretch to the horizon, lazily churning, centuries-old windmills, skillfully manicured topiaries, politely smiling (mostly blonde) bicyclists, and tidy, wood-shingled farmhouses backdropped by aromatic dairy farms and lush crops of hay, corn and sugar beets.

Because half of the Netherlands is below sea level, there's water everywhere. Seemingly millions of miles of drainage channels effectively displace

water with Dutch efficiency to myriad larger canals and immense reservoirs. The reservoirs are retained by the country's iconic dikes, the highest topographical points on nearly every horizon. Copious water, forage grass and agriculture: It's a waterfowl utopia and the location of the world's newest and maybe even very best goose hunts. Ironically, however, there is no goose-hunting season. But that does not mean that geese don't get hunted!







With the decoys set in loose bunches on either side of the deep, reed-choked ditch in which we were superbly hidden, it was now daylight, cold and clear. My heart was still excitedly beating against waxed cotton from the walk in and from frantically placing decoys after hearing the morning's first bunches of geese. Did I mention having to heave myself up a steep, head-high dirt bank a couple of times to retrieve my forgotten shotgun and ammo bag? I was gassed, for sure. Also stirring me were skeins of geese streaming overhead in raucous pulses for as far as could be seen, flying inland from their overnight roost on the North Sea to feed. There were greylags, whitefronts and barnacle geese mostly—lots of new birds fresh from the Arctic on the heels of the front, at least that's what the dairy farmer wearing ornately painted wooden shoes had said.

### The Allure Of Geese

The fields adjacent to our hide were rife with fresh sign, but the geese clearly had intentions of feeding elsewhere. Most flocks maintained too-high cruising altitudes. The decoys were enough to seduce a few flocks to fly directly over us, mostly for a fleeting glance—like ladies breaking their purposeful strides, looking toward shop windows but continuing to a hot sale farther up the street. It was enough. In the first volley, a pair of whitefronts folded like love letters from a tall, locked-wing flock of five. The blonde Mississippi Lab, Cooper, made quick work of delivering them to hand. She scrambled up and down that bank much easier than did her owner.

Honing our lead on subsequent fly-over flocks, we were soon plucking pairs and trios like practiced assassins. From out of nowhere, as their kind are prone to do in the Netherlands, a pair of Egyptian geese strafed the decoys to the west, never knowing what hit them in a two-shot fusillade. Canada goose-sized greylags shook the ground when felled. As one might expect, the whitefronts were way too trusting of the decoys for their own good. We tested the limits of steel 3s, the largest-allowable shot size in the Netherlands, with improved-modified chokes.

At some point during the hunt, my blind partner, a longtime friend and client, exclaimed the hunt to be among the best he could recall. That's really saying something considering the number of ducks we've killed together in Argentina and elsewhere over the years. Geese do that to people.

Like goose hunting the world over, when Netherlands goose hunting is good, it's really good, and when it's not good for any of the sundry reasons geese become uncooperative, it's just goose hunting. Average bags range in the teens, but because there is no actual bag limit, it can be much higher. During our inaugural season of goose hunting in the Netherlands, there were mornings that only a handful of geese—or fewer, or none—was bagged, but weekly there were epic mornings that produced bags in the 70s and 80s. One extremely fortunate pair of client-hunters shot 99 greylags on a magical morning when corpulent gray clouds smothered the countryside only 30 meters high and produced drizzle so thick you'd have needed a box cutter to slice it.

### Protecting The Crops

The Netherlands banned goose hunting during the late '90s, essentially converting their entire country into a sanctuary. The venerated goose-hunting tradition of the U.K. consequently nose-dived, as overwintering British Isles geese retreated to gun-free safety across the English Channel. Migratory geese began arriving months earlier and departing months later than usual.

Eventually about 20 percent of the geese ceased migrating and did what resident geese do best under perfect conditions—flourish. Their population increased 10-fold. Local crop deprecations went through the roof. About 200,000 acres were leased as “goose foraging areas” to mitigate crop losses, but geese can't read signs or discern



Live calling mallards are widely used in the Netherlands.

boundaries. Between 2004 and 2008, governmental reimbursements for crop losses increased 10 million euros to 17.5 million euros (nearly \$40 million) with no apparent end in sight.

To curb escalating goose-related crop losses, the government finally began issuing deprecation permits, allowing for the take of geese year-round. Yet many confounding geopolitical factors held sway, not the least of which has been a wrestling match between emotional anti-hunter interests that are politically represented in parliament by an animal rights party, and practical interests that seek to minimize economic losses and, especially near the Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, ensure public safety.

How long the deprecation hunting will last is anyone's guess. The general consensus among the Netherlands' dwindling number of hunters is that it is only a matter of when, not if, hunting will altogether cease. But for now it presents a golden opportunity.

### The Right Times

Though geese may be hunted throughout the year, opportunities practically exist only late July through August, mid-September through October, and March through early April. It is during these time periods that decoys may be used for hunting. The use of decoys is forbidden November through February during the peak migratory goose overwintering period, because as the green rationale explains it, “These migratory





Clockwise from lower left: barnacle geese, Eurasian wigeon, greylag, whitefronts and Egyptian goose.

pigeons are also available. The Dutch are adamant about shooting every crow possible, and because they fly, we're always happy to oblige our hosts between goose volleys. Pink-footed geese and all other duck species are strictly protected.

### Foreign Practices

Waterfowl hunting in the Netherlands can be much different than what Americans are accustomed to. But because the best water-

fowlers in the world, who have cut their teeth on the arts of calling, concealment and decoying techniques, live right here in the good old USA, what do you expect?

We'd be thrown into jail, for example, if caught hunting over live mallard decoys in the U.S., but they're widely used in the Netherlands. Proficient and timely calling sometimes works where live mallards will not, and vice versa. Staked in pairs around the blind, as many as a dozen-and-a-half mallards entertain themselves feeding, preening and sleeping throughout the morning until something airborne, be it a plane or a bird (or a cap I've tossed to see what they'd do), catches their eye. When one quacks, they all quack in chorus.

One morning while hunting Cooper, I was nervous she'd mistake a flapping tame mallard for a mark. She didn't. Throughout the morning she indifferently dodged live mallards to recover downed geese. And then it happened: Racing like a yellow blur shot from a cannon for a large greylag that crashed stone dead a few yards past the nearest pair, she would have run right between the tethered mallards had they received the no-harm, no-foul memo. Instead, they were last seen disappearing over the horizon, their stakes swaying in tow.

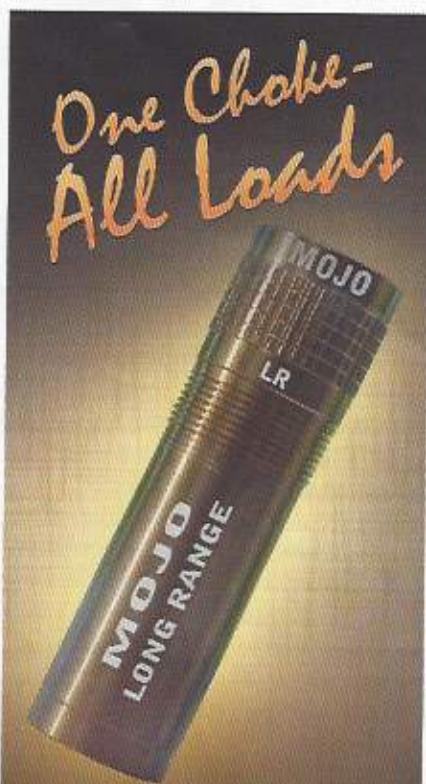
The everyday Dutch hunter uses few if any decoys, live or otherwise. There's an amazing hunting property in the airport zone. Adjacent to a major river roost, it's oftentimes planted in silage corn and

guests are our friends."

March is the perfect time for serious collectors seeking prime specimens in peak plumage. While the bulk of the migration has moved northward toward the nesting grounds, remaining birds are either in breeding pairs, which invariably decoy if not already nesting, or in small non-breeding flocks, which usually decoy as readily as frat boys to cheap draft beer. Hunting for mute swans and Eurasian wigeons, neither of which may be hunted over decoys, is possible only if depredation permits have been attained.

Young geese, stretching their wings for the first time, reach peak activity in August though mid-September. Hunting during this time can produce spectacular shoots volume-wise, but is heavily influenced by summer crop harvests and, of course, the weather, which is sometimes far too beautiful for truly productive goose shooting. By October, migrating geese begin arriving in earnest, hungry from the long flight and ready for action.

Species hunted include greylag geese, Egyptian geese, white-fronted geese, and giant Canada geese, all of which are ubiquitous across the landscape. One of the most prized species is the brant-sized barnacle goose. There's nowhere more practical on earth to hunt barnacle geese than the Netherlands, but because these birds have an affinity for extremely large roost waters, they use some forage areas more than others. Mallards, Eurasian wigeons, mute swans and wood



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receives tremendous daily goose traffic. Some young farmers now own the property. The boys describe how their grandfather walked to northern Holland during Nazi occupation to buy a greyhound with which to hunt for hares on the property as a way to feed his family.

The young farmers were astonished while helping us load the take after a spring morning of action-packed, on-the-deck, paddles-down greylag shooting. Saying they usually hunted with only a couple of decoys, they had never shot more than a half-dozen on any given hunt. Nor had they ever seen windsocks that appear to waddle lifelike. (In all honesty, our guide-hosts initially had never seen them either. Sending these fellows modern-era, flocked windsocks was akin to introducing primitive man to fire.)

Once, during an "autumn storm" characterized by brisk nor'easterly winds, cold temps and a persistent light rain, I accompanied a local hunter. He shoots geese on the same property for more than 100 mornings each year, has never owned a single decoy in 50-some-odd years, and is naturally one of the best wing shots seen. Positioned on a flyway near a government-funded goose foraging reserve, we pass-shot geese until urgently requested by our guide-hosts to join clients in the decoys.

The sky was full of geese when we arrived, and even as we trotted through the field they continued to toll the spread. With shooters dispersed at 20-yard intervals along a ditch, the next couple of hours produced amazing shooting for decoying greylags, whitefronts, and barnacles. While shaking hands as we said goodbye, the local hunter grinned ear-to-ear, confiding that decoys were likely a near-term purchase.

### Foreign Bands

The banded mallard Cooper retrieved during a jump-shoot seemed poor consolation for the Egyptian goose taken the week before. During that fateful day we had watched a steady parade of barnacle geese fly over us in countless waves on their way to a freshly plowed sugar beet field. While deliberating what to do



Depredation hunts in cooperation with local farmers can produce impressive results.

for the remainder of our day and solving other world problems, a silent pair of inbound geese appeared. Only 20 yards off the deck, they bored in hard from my side. Letting the guests have what turned out to be the only shots fired that morning, I watched the rear goose crumple and the lead goose retire unscathed. That one Egyptian goose turned out to be triple banded. Guests have since collected several more banded Egyptian geese as well as barnacles, mute swans, greylags and whitefronts, including a whitefront subspecies banded in Belgium.

### The Wise Ones

Many of the country's most productive dairy farming and consequently some of the best goose hunting are located within 8 kilometers of the Schiphol Airport. Decoys and electronic calls may be used yearlong there, citing something to do with geese mixing it up with commercial airliners. The e-calling helps immensely when hunting greylags.

A Russian hunter once described God making greylag geese first and using leftovers for the remainder. I believe it. Greylags are massive, weighing nearly 12 pounds. At a glance they may simply appear drab brown, but their slate-gray upper wing coverts are striking in flight, making distant flocks appear to flicker

like wind-whipped whitecaps. They've truly earned my respect as the wariest of the world's geese, circling too widely and ever suspiciously several times, furtively eyeballing before committing to any setup, and usually not even then. It's like having put Jason Bourne's brain in a decades-old snow goose. Greylags demand nothing less of hunters than the time-honored traditions of perfect concealment and shooting proficiency. Each one strapped is truly earned, and whether it's a handful or more than any grown man can carry alone, there's tremendous satisfaction in any positive result.

Waterfowling is a social event. Place hunters from varied walks of life in a blind anywhere in the world and in that moment they're waterfowlers before all else. Sharing a blind with our Dutch hosts, sipping hot coffee and nibbling on fresh stroopwafel pastries between volleys, it's readily evident that despite many cultural differences, our spirits are ignited equally by the heavy wing beats of geese—for as long as it shall last.

*Editor's Note: The most practical place on earth to hunt barnacle geese, the Netherlands Goose Hunt is also deemed "best couples hunting trip" by many returning guests and is available only through Ramsey Russell's GetDucks.com, 866-438-3897, ramsey@getducks.com.*