



This Canada goose was one of many that landed among the decoys during a late-season hunt Monday near Hutchinson, Minn. The hunters were done shooting for the day when this goose nearly landed on the photographer. “Look at them come,” Phil Schmidt said from his blind. “There must be 100 in our decoys.”

Photographs by DOUG SMITH • dsmith@startribune.com



Jeff Zierden of Melrose, Minn., fired from a blind covered with white cloth to blend with the snow.

« THAT WAS SOMETHING EVEN EXPERIENCED HUNTERS DREAM ABOUT. IT WAS THE POT OF GOLD AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW. »

PHIL SCHMIDT (below), on the scores of geese that landed among his decoys

LATE-SEASON CANADA GEESE

• Minnesota’s December Canada goose season begins Saturday and runs through Dec. 19 in most of the state. In the southeast zone, the season runs Dec. 15-24. There is no late season in the west-central zone.

• Unlike last year, in most of the state there is no gap between the end of the regular goose season (Dec. 9) and the beginning of the late season (Dec. 10).

• Late-season hunters must have a special \$4 permit in addition to their regular license and stamps.

• Bag limits during the late season are five per day, except in the southeast zone, where the bag limit is two.

• Minnesota’s Canada goose harvest declined by about 17 percent, from 282,000 in 2003 to 234,000 last year — still No. 1 in the nation. About 10 percent of the kill occurs during the December hunt.

DOUG SMITH



One fowl day

• Late-season goose hunting can be tough. Birds are wary and hey, it’s cold out there. But sometimes the geese warm things up.

By **DOUG SMITH** • dsmith@startribune.com

HUTCHINSON, MINN. — The hunt was over. Four of us had just bagged the last of our allotted eight Canada geese.

But the birds just kept coming. Waves of them. Honking. Gliding closer, webbed landing gear down. Then, sounding like flags snapping in a stiff wind, they flapped their huge wings and landed nearly on top of us as we lay in blinds on the snow-covered field.

“Amazing,” someone muttered. “Look at ‘em come,” said Phil Schmidt, peeking out from his coffin-like blind next to me. “There must be 100 in our decoys. There’s one right at your feet.”

Indeed, a goose stood not 5 yards away in the powdery snow, unsure of how to respond to the plastic decoys it confronted.

Finally, as the afternoon sun faded, we stood up, scattering the geese skyward like snowflakes. We picked up our decoys and called it a hunt.

A special hunt topped with a blizzard of geese.

“That was something even experienced hunters dream about,” Schmidt, of Waverly, said later. “It was the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.”

A new generation

Schmidt is a diehard hunter. “It’s just in my blood,” he said. “I got my first BB gun at 8 or 9. I used to walk with my dad pheasant hunting.”

More recently, he has been smitten with waterfowl hunting. Three years ago, he decided to mix business with pleasure by tapping into hunters’ growing fixation with the state’s burgeoning Canada goose population. He started Goose Busters Guide Service (www.goosebustersgs.com).

“I decided, ‘Why not?’ I’m out hunting all the time anyway,” he said. He guides four mornings a week while working at a plastics company in Maple Plain afternoons and evenings.

“I scout those other three days,” he said. “Scouting is the key to hunter success.”

At just 26, he is part of a new generation of Minnesota hunters — and guides. A handful of other guides, all in their 20s, work with him.

No bad apples ... yet

Like most guides, he’s not getting rich. But his fees help pay for the hunting gear — including dozens of pricey full-bodied decoys, a trailer and blinds — and his gas.

“It’s not what I thought it would be — it’s

been better,” Schmidt said. “I like meeting people, and I haven’t had a bad apple in the bunch. It’s been a blast.”

He added: “The worst part of the job is telling guys that I can’t take them out because I’m booked,” he said. “I hate that.”

His customers usually are experienced hunters who simply don’t have the pile of decoys, the time to scout, the knowledge of how to call and flag geese or the access to private land that he has developed.

Schmidt said he strives for quality hunts: He keeps his hunting groups small — no more than six, including the guides. His goal is to bring geese into the decoys, where close shots mean clean kills.

A cold hunt

On Monday, Rob Paetzold, 38, of Minneapolis, and I were paying customers for Schmidt on one of the coldest mornings of the year. Helping him was fellow guide Jeff Zierden, 21, of Melrose.

The below-zero temperature and a biting wind-chill fouled our morning hunt. The geese stayed put. But later in the afternoon they flew in the cobalt sky, heading for food.

Schmidt and Zierden used bare hands to work their calls, but the exposed flesh quickly demanded attention.

“Call,” Schmidt said to Zierden after spotting more geese.

“I can’t,” he replied. “My fingers are frozen.”

But soon a flurry of activity — and some portable heaters — helped thaw fingers and spirits. It didn’t take long to drop eight geese, especially when all the shots were within 30 yards.

December recommendations

The 10-day December Canada goose hunt is the season’s last hurrah for Minnesota waterfowl hunters. But the recent subzero temps could affect this year’s hunt in some areas, if remaining open water freezes.

“If we lose our water, we’ll lose our geese,” Schmidt said.

Still, geese remain. And temperatures are forecast to rise this weekend.

Schmidt’s recommendations: Find where geese are feeding, use full-bodied decoys and a good blind (covered in white now). Flagging helps, as does being able to toot a call, especially with wary, seasoned birds.

“This time of year, if you’re not at the top of your game, you’re going to struggle,” he said.

2005 NISSAN PATHFINDER

Lease For
\$299/mo.*
Model #09615
Stk # N410569, N410525



Service is Key.



A TO Z YEAR-END EVENT



Santa Claus himself is Here
Sat, Dec. 10
10am - 2pm!
Bring the kids!!

MORRIE'S NISSAN

7875 Brooklyn Blvd.
Brooklyn Park, MN

Toll Free

1-866-521-0675



2005 NISSAN TITAN

Lease For
\$299/mo.**
Model #31415
Stk # 409653, 409785



*42 month lease, 12K mi/yr., \$499 down + upfront fees due at signing, O.A.C. **42 month lease, 12K mi/yr., \$0 down + upfront fees due at signing, O.A.C.