

# DUCKS WORTH A

## BART IRWIN

*Hundreds of Water-whistling ducks get up out of the grass while Magpie geese prepare to take flight as well.*

The 2007 Magpie goose season had been a good one in the Northern Territory. Ducks on the other hand had been a little hit or miss, and I don't mean marksmanship wise. One day they were there and the next day they were gone. Our waterfowl move around a fair bit up here because of the monsoonal rains that begin half way through our season.

Early in the season the ducks tend to stay on the retreating waterholes but once the rains start in October they move around a lot because of the habitat changes. Harrison Dam held a lot of Hardhead early last year and there was a good number of black duck everywhere. The duck that we have in the greatest numbers is the Water Whistling-duck. He is all over the place.

The problem with the Water Whistling-duck though is he rarely comes close to the edge. He stays out in the water and there are other things that live in the water up here, if you know what I mean.

Two weeks before the end of the season I was out scouting after a successful goose hunt and came across an area that had fresh water on it. It had been dry for most of the season and the water had come from a monsoonal dump.

There were hundreds of geese on it. It would give a great goose hunt but it also had lots of Water Whistling-ducks on it. There weren't hundreds, there were thousands!

They were scattered through the grass and lined along the banks everywhere. The water was only reasonably new and it was very shallow. This meant that there was little chance (hopefully) of a croc being in it yet.

That night I picked up my brother Daryl from the Darwin airport. The first thing he wanted to know was "are there any geese?" "Yeah, a few" I said "but I have found several thousand ducks".

Daryl's eyes lit up! He is from Victoria and as you all know, Victoria did not have a duck season in 2007. "How many?" he asked with glee. "Lots" I replied.

The next morning we were going to hunt geese with some friends at one of their preferred places. It was a good hunt and everyone got their share of geese. On the way home, Daryl asked if we could go and see where the ducks were. It was only slightly out of the way so we drove there to have a look and plan the hunt. They were still there and totally undisturbed.

You couldn't wipe the smile of Daryl's face. "I haven't seen that many ducks in one place since Buloke had water in it back in 1994" he said. "Ah, the Battle of Buloke" I replied, "a memorable moment in the on-going war with the anti-hunters". We cracked a coldie and watched as thousands of ducks swam and flew around the wetland. As we stood there, skeins of geese came over the trees and landed on the water as well.

"When?" asked Daryl. "Not tomorrow" was my answer and the smile nearly left his face. Nearly, but not quite! "The day after tomorrow" I said before he could ask the obvious question. We were goose hunting again the following day at a venue and with people that I had already arranged and couldn't change.

The goose hunt was another good one. Two days in a row with quality hunting still had



*"Paddy" Drennan enjoys his morning on an NT swamp.*

# SMILE



Swamp in NSW. We had arranged months earlier for Paul and Paddy to join us this morning. We told them they had picked a good morning to come along.

The water was only a few centimeters deep, just around the ankles. That was near the edge and that was as far as I was going. The decoys were only fifteen to twenty metres from shore. The trees grew right to the edge and there was plenty of cover to stand behind and be out of sight.

Strangely enough, the mosquitoes seemed to be non-existent. Still, we were all covered in head to toe with varying brands of repellent. My son, Max, was with us this morning. Juniors are now allowed their own bag limit on an adult's permit.

As the light grew closer the geese began honking and the ducks began whistling. It was a Saturday and we had seen other cars come in around the swamp. The birds were getting restless and began to fly as they do early in the morning.

Waiting for legal shooting time, we had geese and ducks pitching into the decoys from all directions. We all began to laugh with the expectation of the excitement that was to come.

The first gunshots echoed from the far end of the swamp and it erupted into a thunder of wings and noise as thousands of birds rose from their overnight roosting areas. Daryl

the smile on Daryl's face. That night we prepared the gear for a duck hunt. We were going to take some Last Look goose decoys and put them close to the edge. Some No.4 steel shot was got out of the safe for the ducks to compliment the No.1's that we use on the geese.

At 5am the next morning Paul Drennan from NT Buffalo & Pig Safaris pulled into the driveway. He had his father, Paddy, with him. Paddy had never been to the NT and was looking forward to seeing what the hunting was like. He used to duck hunt extensively around Hay and Barrenbox



Paul and Daryl take their shots.

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and I had decided to make it a duck morning and when the first birds came into range we belted them. My Labrador, Roy, was keen to go out straight away but I kept him at heel. There was plenty of time for retrieves later.

Paddy, who has shot thousands of ducks in his time, was more interested in the geese. While Daryl and I shot at the decoying and passing ducks, Paddy was taking the high shots at passing geese. Paul was having a go at everything!



*Max returns with some of his ducks.*

We are allowed seven geese and seven ducks for our daily bag limits in the NT. Rarely do you get both.

It became very obvious to us all that we all would obtain our bags this morning and that it was going to be over very quickly at this rate. "Ceasefire" I yelled. "Come over here" I beckoned to everyone.

When we gathered together and counted what birds we had I said "Look, this is all going to be finished in a matter of minutes if we keep going like this. Let's all shoot from



*L to R: Daryl drags a string of geese while Paul carries the decoys back to the car.*

this one spot over the decoys and take it in turns. We'll have two guns up at once, one gun shooting and one gun backing up." Everyone agreed with this idea.

Well, what entertainment this gave us all. There really were thousands of birds on the place and they were swinging right past us in gun range and decoying as well. Two guns stood at the edge of the water and three of us sat back and watched the show. As each shooter bagged a bird he was replaced with the next shooter. If you missed, you stayed there until you splashed one down.

We had our 35 ducks well before the bag of geese. That took a bit longer to get as the geese got a lot higher with the onset of broad daylight. Eventually the tally was reached and Max, who was the official Tally Master called the hunt to a close.

Roy was set to work making retrieves. It was hard work carrying all the birds back to the

vehicles and I don't mind telling you that after the guns were put away, those that were not designated drivers quickly put away a couple of cold cans.

Max began lining all the ducks up on a log for the obligatory photograph and complained that the log was not big enough to fit the geese onto it. "Don't worry mate" I said, "we'll go just with the ducks".

And so it was that we ended the morning standing behind a log with the camera on a tripod having our photos taken. No-one had to say "cheese" to get happy faces on the subjects. It had been a great hunt! With no 2008 duck seasons in SA and Victoria again this year we expect to see a lot more southerners up here trying not to melt in our great Top End.

When I put Daryl back on the plane two days later the smile was still stuck on his face and there was no way you could wipe it off.



*L to R: Bart & Max Irwin, Paddy & Paul Drennan and Daryl Irwin could only just fit their duck bag limits on the log for the photo.*