

Duck Huntin' in Mississippi with "Catfish"

As a boy growing up, I had the good fortune of being able to do quite a bit of duck hunting. I was raised, as many of you regular readers are aware of, up in Taylor County. Back in those days, the woods were pretty much still the same way our Good Lord had originally made and intended them to be. Taylor County was richly blessed with hunting woods just about as fine as there was to be found anywhere on the earth.

My family lived right next to the uppermost part of the Fenholloway River, near the edge of the vast San Pedro Bay that created the river's headwaters. For those of you who might not be familiar with the San Pedro Bay, it is not the conventional type of salt water bay you find along both our coasts.

The Bay was a huge, meandering series of dense hardwood hammocks and numerous small ponds which were, in turn, surrounded by cypress trees and thick rough titi heads, strands of virgin longleaf pine and endless acres of palmetto and galberry flats that further added to the Bay's unique natural mystique and beauty. Back in the old days, the Bay was much different than it is today, and there were not miles and miles of cultivated pine trees planted all over it.

The Bay was home to just about every species of wild game that could be found in Florida, including deer, gators, bear, panther, all kinds of ducks, and even geese, sometimes. Wood ducks or summer ducks or squealers, as we crackers fondly called them, were the most abundant, but quite often big shiny-headed green mallards and pintails would use the small cypress ponds that were interspersed all through the Bay.

The Bay is much different nowadays, because most of it has been canalled and drained to make the land suitable for growing slash pine trees needed for the paper mill up there. While there are still a few ponds left with standing water, the Bay is nothing like the way it was years ago.

Back then, there were clear, spring-fed, flowing creeks everywhere, and the ponds were always full, - or near 'bout full - of water. Not only was the duck and gator hunting good, but so was the otter trapping. Not to mention that you could catch a good mess of brim, trout (black bass) or pike from any water- almost any-where and any-time you was of a mind to drop a hook. Incidentally, crackers called black bass "trout" in the old days. In fact, until after I went into the army, I did not know there was such a thing as a black bass.

Some of the old crackers and my neighbors use to refer to the area in and around the Bay as possibly the place where the Garden of Eden might have been located back in Bible times. Remembering back on the way the Bay used to be, they might not have been too far off base in their way of thinking. It was, without question, a paradise, especially for us boys to grow up traipsing around in.

Well, there is no doubt the Bay is different nowadays, but you know Mama Nature has her own way of healing everything, and given a mite of time, will take care of all our problems. While there may not be much duck hunting, and for sure trapping is no longer allowed, the deer and turkey are thriving and lots of good folks are enjoying the Bay and the pleasure it continues to offer each hunting season.

Anyway, to tell the truth, duck hunting is not near as good anywhere in Florida as it once was. Most of the migrating ducks never get this far south and end up spending their winter in Arkansas, Louisiana, or Mississippi. Those states manage their ducks a lot harder than we do here in Florida, and those folks up there take their duck and geese hunting seriously. It is big business, and the duck and geese bring in millions of dollars of revenue to those states year iz and year out,

Last spring I had occasion to spring gobbler hunt with Mike "Catfish" Flautt from Swan Lake, Mississippi. Catfish is one of those spring gobbler turkey hunters who takes his gobbler hunting more than just a little seriously. Actually, he may even be a little on the addicted, or afflicted, side. I don't know which. I do know he is in the same shape that I am, and I'll go ahead and admit it right up front that I have it bad. I don't think I have missed a single day going spring turkey hunting over the last twenty or more years, from the day it opened till the day it closed, other than on some Easter mornings. I even hunted on a bunch of them, but I went hunting early and still made it back to church on time. Now, good friends, that's not to say I have not caught more than a double heaping of grief from Shug over the years, not to mention what the Good Lord probably has laid up and waiting for me further on down the road.

Anyhow, Catfish and I first crossed paths over in Lake County where we were both hunting with two lawyer buddies of mine, Ross Davis and Greg Miles, who have a practice over in Winter Park. Greg and Ross have a fine hunting lease in eastern Lake County with a good population of turkey, and they had invited several guests over for a couple of days of hunting. Joining us for the hunt were FWC Commissioner Edwin Roberts and the local FWC law enforcement supervisor, Steve Sawvell.

It don't take long while sitting around a campfire to figure out right quick if someone really knows what they are talking about when it come to gobbler hunting. Subsequently, it did not take me long to figure out that Catfish was not just a bunch of wind, that he had taken a more than a few gobbler in the past. When I watched him breast out a gobbler that Ross had killed earlier in the day, I knew he had been down a dirt road or two a few times and knew his way back home. Over the years I have met up with and had the opportunity to hunt with a bunch of fine folks hailing from all over the country. The vast majority of them have been a pure pleasure to be around, and I have thoroughly enjoyed the many hours spent in the woods and at the camp with them. And, every now and then, you come across that extra-special hunter who is just a notch or two above the rest. Catfish is one of those.

The next morning Catfish got a fine, long-bearded, Osceola, trophy gobbler and also managed to video the hunt as well. After the hunt, he invited me, Ross, Greg and Steve to come up to his place in Mississippi and do a little duck hunting the next season. Well, duck season rolled around, and for a while I did not think I was going to be able to make the trip this year, but right at the last minute things worked out so I could go. Greg, Ross and Steve had already made their plans and had flown up to meet up with Catfish. I decided to drive with full intentions of duck hunting a few days with Catfish and then, on the way home, stopping off in Alabama to deer hunt on our lease for a day or two if the rut was going on. It was a lot fur-

ther to Catfish's house than I thought it was, but I made it there just as his lovely wife, Heddy, was serving a sure-'nuff Southern-style breakfast. Every morning during the duck season, Mrs. Heddy prepares breakfast for all of Catfish's hunting guest. Folks, I am here to tell you that, after driving all night, I was ready for the eggs, country ham and sausage Mrs. Heddy had waiting on the table. Since that first day was about shot as far as trying to do any more duck hunting, Catfish suggested I go with him over to Oxford and watch the Old Miss Rebels take on Mississippi State in a rival basketball game.

He didn't have to make the offer twice, and we were soon off to see the game. Catfish is really into basketball and has season tickets that let you get right down where the action is going on. Anyhow, Old Miss won the game convincingly, and we headed out to Catfish's camp where the other duck hunters were making plans for our next day's hunt. When we got there, one of the guides had cooked up a big bunch of ribs and grilled some T-bone steaks. One thing is for sure, when you go to Catfish's place, you can expect to have some mighty fine eatng.

Anyhow, we hit the sack early because we were going to try to be in our blind and ready to hunt at least 30 minutes before daylight. It takes a pretty good while to get set up, especially when you are going to be putting out over a hundred decoys.

The following morning turned out to be cold, with the temperature hovering somewhere down around twenty degrees. We were going to be wading, and I sure was hoping my waders didn't have any leaks. One of the other hunters had on a pair of waders he must have got at a second-hand store, because he had put on at least a roll and a half of black electrical tape, trying to patch up the holes in them. I don't know what kind of hunt he had, but I would venture you a good bet that, the next time he goes duck hunting, he will have a decent pair of waders.

Just as Catfish had predicted, right at the crack of dawn, the ducks started to pour in. I was using a "Primos" Feedin' Mallard duck call that all you have to do to make it work is shake it. The "Feedin Mallard" call makes authentic sounds of excited, feeding, greenhead mallards, and it worked great. I also have several other "Primos" duck calls, including my alltime favorite, the "Hardwood Wench." I have used this call for years and it has never let me down. I don't care how cold it gets, this call will still work.

It was furious, non-stop, shooting action for nearly a full hour, and when we counted up our ducks we had to quit, as we all had a limit. We had taken six different species of ducks, including greenhead mallards and pintails, greenwing teal and gadwall, plus a hooded merganser and a shoveler. It turned out to be the best duck hunt I have ever been on, and I have hunted a lot of good places, including the famous Stuttgart area in Arkansas.

Folks, Catfish has a hired hand named "Geech" who cleans the ducks, so we dropped a few off for him to pluck for me. Later, when I started home, we stopped by to pick up the ducks, and sure enough, he had two packages ready for me. Trouble was, when I got back home the other day and got ready to put a couple of the duck breasts on the grill, I found I had one package of ducks and the other package contained at least one full-grown grinning possum and no telling what else. There were a couple more skint critters

of some kind or another in the package. Both had a hind foot still attached, so I reckon that at least they were not house cats. Oh well, I got a big outdoor game cookout coming up in a couple of weeks, and whatever is in the sack can go in the camp stew.

Seriously, I had a fine duck-hunting trip with Catfish, Ross, Greg and Steve. If you should get the urge to go on a real, stomp-down good, no-frills, duck-hunting trip, you can contact Catfish at (662) 375-8792, or at his office, (662). 375-2116.

You can call me and I will be glad to give you any additional information you might need, It is hard to find a decent duck-hunting place in Florida anymore, and if you would like to go on one more trip where you will get into some sure'nuff, old-fashioned, good shooting, give Catfish a call.

Always unload a firearm when it is not in use, leave the action open, carry empty firearms in a case to and from shooting areas.