Remembering for my father

A son recalls duck hunting with his father and brother—and understands why no one cared whether they brought home fowl.

BY JOHN W. WILSON, MD

The day begins at 2 a.m. with the screeching of my alarm clock. It feels like I just went to bed. It’s early December 1981, and a fresh layer of snow has just fallen. My father, older brother and I are going duck hunting. The Nevada State Legislature is not yet in session so my father, who is a state senator from Reno, has reserved this weekend to spend time with my brother and me. Ignoring my morning somnolence, our chocolate Labrador jumps about, barking and drooling. He couldn’t be more excited.

My brother and I pack what seems like an enormous amount of hunting gear, lunch and extra clothes into our two-toned aging Chevrolet Suburban. At 13 years of age, I am the smallest of the three of us, which relegates me to the middle of the bench-style front seat, between my father and brother. With this unenviable position comes the responsibility of holding cups for my brother, who is in charge of pouring coffee from a thermos. I hold the cup, my brother pours the coffee, and Dad drives over a bump in the road, causing the hot coffee to spill onto my lap. At this time, I am not yet a coffee drinker, but my hunting companions depend on this small boost of morning “rocket fuel,” and the spilling of coffee is an inevitable part of our routine on these outings.

After an hour-and-15-minute drive, we arrive at our destination within the Carson Lake Wetlands. It is still dark and very cold outside. We put on our waders, jackets, hats, gloves and hunting vests and collect our duck decoys, shotguns, shells and lunch. As we hike along ditches, over dikes and through the boggy marshes of the Carson sink, I feel a piercing sensation on my legs. Another small hole in my waders. I should have expected this. I guess the rubber patch I put on the prior weekend did not hold. On the brighter side, my pants are already wet from the spilled coffee, so how much worse can it get?

We arrive at a large pond within the marsh and spend the next 15 minutes pitching our decoys across the open water in a pattern, as directed by my brother. As the sun begins to emerge over the mountain horizon, we take cover at different points among the tall “tule” grasses lining the pond. In the blind, I scan the morning sky for ducks, entertain the restless dog, and move my legs back and forth to ward against the cold chill that’s now settling in thanks to my wet pants.

It then begins: “Three coming in at 9 o’clock,” “two moving across low at 4 o’clock,” “four moving fast and away at six.” We use a military-style system to call out the location and direction of ducks in flight. Twelve o’clock is east and six o’clock is west. Nine o’clock is north; three o’clock is south.

There are numerous ducks in the morning air now, and I imagine we sound like a squadron of fighter pilots over Germany during an epic World War II air battle.

My brother is the best shot among the three of us, followed by my father. I am a distant third. After every shot, our dog races into the open water looking for the prized bird to retrieve. He quickly becomes frustrated if any of us miss our shots and readily abandons one family member for another, hoping his new “master” has better aim. Needless to say, on days we are not hitting any ducks, our energetic dog has been known to run off and retrieve other hunters’ downed birds. I’m not sure which is worse, the humiliation of being a poor shot or the embarrassment of seeing our dog retrieve someone else’s duck.

After the morning hunt, we eat our lunch, which is the standard cold bologna sandwich on Wonder bread and an oatmeal raisin cookie. To say that my father likes oatmeal raisin cookies is an understatement. Whenever we are hunting, hiking or just spending outdoor time together, they are always present. If there is any question about whether Dad is coming along on a trip, we look no further than the lunch packed to find out. The presence of oatmeal raisin cookies is confirmation.
As I look back on those hunting trips, I find myself remembering not the number of ducks we collected but rather the time spent with Dad and my brother in the Nevada outdoors. I realized years later that my father did not care how many birds we took home. His motivation was spending time with us laughing, growing and building memories together.

Now that his memory is failing, we are the keepers of those memories. We give them back to him in the form of the stories we tell. With dementia, there’s the danger that the pages of one’s personal history can become permanently lost in time. Storytelling with my father opens a relative time portal for us both, allowing us to relive and enjoy those memories together. MM

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Growing up, our hunting trips often became fodder for embarrassing family “roasting sessions.” The stories include my brother getting the Suburban stuck in the marsh mud and burning out the transmission, Dad packing the wrong gauge of shotgun shells, Dad calling our dog a “son of a bitch” (a rather accurate reflection for any male dog), and my mistaking a jet-airplane flying four miles overhead for a duck. There was the one about the dog chewing holes in the decoys, the dog chewing on my waders (maybe that’s where the hole came from) and the dog silently passing gas in the truck on the drive home during the cold winter months with the windows rolled up. Our dog was indeed the genesis for many of our stories—all the more reason to include a dog on any trip.

As the sun begins to set, we pack up our decoys and walk back to the truck. Somehow, the walk back to the Suburban always seems much longer than the morning trek out. It’s getting dark, and the drive back to Reno is quiet except for the barely audible news reports coming from the AM car radio. Upon arriving at home, we pluck and clean our ducks before placing them into the freezer. (When we return empty-handed, we avoid this task, which offers notable consolation.)

After a quick lunch (after all, how much time does one really want to eat bologna sandwiches?), we spend our afternoon walking around other parts of the marsh, searching for hidden pockets of ducks. The walking helps me regain some degree of sensation in my cold, wet legs.

Duck hunting in Nevada is never easy. Unlike California’s Sacramento Valley and the Pacific Northwest, the northern half of Nevada is arid and cool. That comparatively reduces the numbers of migratory birds traveling over the eastern half of the Pacific Flyway. Therefore, to hunt ducks in northern Nevada, lots of patience, walking, perseverance and perhaps some degree of luck are generally required.

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