

Christmas Geese

IT WAS A CLEAR but cold December day. Alvin, Brandon, and myself had spent the day in my duck blind over on Piney Island. We had planned on going gunning for some time. Since Christmas was close, we all hoped to get a goose. Brandon and I had hunted together a lot. He was old now, but in his youth he had been a right good shot. Alvin hadn't hunted much and had never been out with us before. I had told him about my blind, and that it was a cinch to get a goose. But, sorry to say, we spent the whole day in the blind and didn't get the first shot.

Piney Island was about two miles northeast of Tangier Island and about one-half mile east of Fishbone Island. Piney isn't there any more. She washed away, but she was one of the best gunning spots in the whole Bay. My blind was the type that I could pole my gunning skiff up into. I had killed many a duck and goose out of her.

It was getting dark. We took in our spread of decoys and shoved out to my old round sterner. She had a motor in her and was forty-two feet long. We tied the little skiff to her stern. For years I had used a gunning skiff that was sharp at both ends, but right then I was using a square stern skiff because it towed better.

I asked, "Boys, do you still want to get yourselves a Christmas goose?" Alvin answered, "Yep, but how are you planning on getting one? We've been gunning all day and haven't even gotten a shot."

"Brandon, start her up and point her toward Shanks Creek. Go over on the east side of the island. There is a lot of marsh root over there for the geese to feed on. We will surely get us some geese," I added.

While Brandon was steering us toward Shanks, I took Alvin inside my cabin and showed him my gunning light. Brandon knew what I was up to, but Alvin had never done any gunning with a light. My light was a twenty-five-watt light bulb that was lit by a six-volt storage battery. I used a cardboard box that canned milk had come in to put my light in. I had cut the lid out of the box and would set it up on the bow, so the open top was facing out into the water. Then I would put my light up in her. I shoved up on many a duck using that old light.

Brandon didn't think too much of my light. He was used to using a kerosene light. He had been a market hunter in a big way. I sold a few ducks around home, but I didn't make my living at it. Brandon had used his light to kill ducks in a big way.

When we got over to Shanks Creek, we anchored and waited for it to get dark. It was a good spot for using the light. It's shallow enough for shoving around, and has some

open water, too. Alvin wanted to know how come the ducks weren't scared of the light. I explained that a duck or person can't tell how close a light is when it is on the water. It may be ten miles away, or it may be ten feet away.

When it got good and dark, Alvin and I got in the little gunning skiff and shoved over to see if we could get those Christmas geese. Brandon stayed behind as the lookout. You see, it wasn't legal to kill ducks with a light, and if the law caught us, we would be in big trouble. We didn't need but three geese anyway. It was also good to leave someone onboard to holler out if we got lost.

Alvin was sitting in the bow up by the light. I was shoving in the stern. I shoved and shoved. It wasn't anything to shove six or seven miles one way to get a shot at some ducks. There was some ice, but it wasn't too bad. It was a pretty night; just what we needed.

Pretty soon, we came up on a raft of ducks. I had told Alvin to wait until he had a sure shot. But he jumped up and shot clean over those ducks. He didn't have time for a second shot. They were gone.

"What ails that, Alvin? You can't see can you?" I said that knowing I had done the same thing many a time. If you are not used to gunning at night with a light, it is easy to overshoot. "You let me have the next shot. I'll show you how to knock them down."

I shoved on through the marsh. It took a while, but soon I could hear a good mess of geese talking. I couldn't see them yet so I pointed the skiff in the direction of the sound. We came up on one old big one. He was so close to us I could have cut his head off with my paddle, but I didn't want just one goose. Alvin motioned to me to shoot him but I shook

my head no. I knew from the sound that there were plenty of geese up ahead. I kept shoving.

I was running out of open water. I still couldn't see them, but they were close. I shoved up through a marsh and saw a bank. They were up on that bank eating marsh roots. There must have been a hundred or two. By golly, they were loud. I couldn't get a clean shot at them because of that ditch bank. Finally, I just took a chance. I knew if I shot in their direction, I was bound to get some of them. Bang! I let loose with my old ten-gauge. Oh, did the geese scatter! We sure did surprise them. Alvin got out of the skiff and went up on the bank and found three big ones dead. He yelled back to me that we had our three.

I said, "Well, that's a Christmas goose apiece; let's head back to the boat. Brandon is probably wondering about us by now."

Alvin got back in the skiff, and I began to shove on back to my round sterner. We had shoved a good five miles. When we got about a mile from my boat, Alvin motioned to me to stop shoving. I stopped and looked around.

"Look over there," he whispered. "There is a boat watching us. What ails that do you think?"

I could see something dark out there, but I couldn't tell if it was a boat. I knew, though, that the only ones out that time of the night were another gunner or the law.

"Pick up that paddle, Alvin, and shove. I think it is the law."

Alvin got the paddle and shoved as hard as he could, and I was shoving as hard as I could.

"He is gaining on us." Alvin said.

"If he is gaining, he has got a motor in her, and I don't hear any motor," I answered. But sure enough, he did look

like he was gaining on us. Alvin shoved harder, and I shoved harder. We were both scared. Every time I looked up, he looked that much closer. I could see the light on my boat ahead. I motioned to Alvin that there was my boat.

Alvin said, "They are still gaining on us. There must be four or five in that boat shoving."

I looked and I was getting scared. "Shove, Alvin, shove. The boat is just ahead!"

Finally we got back to my boat. I jumped aboard with the three geese in my hands. Alvin stayed to tie the skiff up. Brandon was down in the cabin keeping warm. I rushed in and picked up three decoys that were hollow. I stuffed those geese down in the decoys, closed the covers over them, and threw them in the pile of decoys. I shuffled them around so that the ones with the geese in them would be on the bottom.

Brandon said, "What is going on there, fellow?"

"The law is coming," I whispered.

Brandon jumped up and went outside. We all three ducked down looking over the side. I pointed to where Alvin and I had seen the boat. Brandon looked and looked.

I asked, "Does it look like it is moving to you?"

His sharp old eyes stayed in that direction for a good fifteen minutes. Then he said, "You say it's moving?"

"It was moving," I said.

"Are you boys scared?" he asked.

"Yep." Alvin answered.

Brandon got up from where he was stooped down and started laughing. "You boys have been shoving as hard as you can to get away from an old duck blind. That old blind has been there for years."

Alvin looked at me and I looked at him. We felt foolish, but we couldn't help but laugh. We took those geese home,

and I had mine for Christmas dinner. It was some kind of good. While I was eating it, all I could think about was Alvin and I shoving as hard as we could to get away from an old duck blind.

Brandon thought it was so funny I figured Alvin and I would be the talk around the potbellied stoves in all the stores on Tangier. But he never said a word to anybody, and whenever I would mention it to him, all he would do was grin.