

## MISSOURI'S DECEMBER GOOSE HOTSPOTS

A wild goose Christmas dinner is family tradition for many Show-me State outdoorsmen. Geese are plentiful in Missouri and with a little research and planning waterfowlers have a good shot at placing a goose on the Christmas platter.

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A hard chunk of sleet, driven by a cold, north December wind, struck me squarely on my frozen nose. My eyes watered from the pain.

“Oorrhunk,oooorryrunkk,hhrunk,hrunk,or-or-orhrunk”, the unmistakable sound of a Canada goose caused me to forget about my throbbing nose for the moment.

“Northwest”, one of my hunting buddies whispered. Our trio of camoed heads peeked through the elaborate cover of the big jon boat designed for big water goose hunting.

“Grab your call, Bill,” Dennis instructed. “The more of us calling will help convince that trio of birds to give us a look.”

Our first blasts on the flute calls brought tuba sounding responses from the giant panda-colored birds. “They are over the tree line to the north,” someone mumbled.

Our hunting trio began an accolade of harmonious calling that echoed from the walls of the boat blind. “Keep talking,” Dennis said between breaths. “They are coming.”



The guttural conversation between us and the Canadas continued as the birds swung south and then back north and set their wings. Our calling, coupled with a spread of 100 magnum, floating, goose decoys worked. We could see the big birds craning their necks to check out the spread.

The trio of geese continued along a tree line on the west side of the cove we hunted. "Hit it hard and loud to pull 'em back," Dennis gasped.

Each pass brought the birds closer to our dekes. On the eight pass, they chattered at our calls incessantly as they swung from the outside of the eastern side of our spread, locked their wings and sailed across the middle of the spread toward the 'pocket' at the west end of the set.

Almost out of breath, I had never called so long and hard to geese. My Lohman goose flute spewed low, guttural honks and growls that mimicked the sounds of the big birds perfectly.

"Shoot 'em", Dennis shouted. The birds looked as big as 55-gallon barrels when I rose to shoot. When the shooting subsided, I had two mature Canada geese floating in the decoys. Christmas would be special that year.

"Giant Canadas now make up 80% of the annual goose kill in Missouri," said Dave Graber, a wildlife research scientist with the Missouri Department of Conservation. "That has been true for the last 20 years. Dramatic changes in agricultural practices and a warming trend have changed the face of goose hunting."

Graber indicated that Swan Lake National Wildlife Refuge, near Sumner, was the goose hunting capitol in the 60's and 70's. "Swan Lake was the place to goose hunt. The USFWS had done a great job of establishing goose habitat. Other agencies duplicated what had been done at Swan Lake. "

"In those days many geese traveled to the gulf to winter," Graber said. "With the agricultural and climate changes, geese began to stay farther north longer. The southern states complained that Missouri was short-stopping geese. Now geese are staying in Minnesota longer. These days, hunters from Minnesota complain about geese staying in Manitoba so long. They are big, strong birds and will remain north as long as food and open water are available."

"Bad weather made for a good goose season in north Missouri last year," Graber noted. "When freezing weather coupled with ice and snow that covers up food sources occurs up north, the geese are going to head south."

Goose hunters are among the few that pray for foul weather.

"Swan Lake used to account for 80% of the goose harvest in Missouri," Graber continued. "Now only about 15% of the harvest occurs there. "However, 80% of the annual statewide goose harvest still takes place in north Missouri. Geese have

scattered out to take advantage of the expanded food supply. Goose hunting on public areas is not what it used to be.”

Graber highly recommended that goose hunters do their homework and do a lot of scouting. The majority of the goose harvest now takes place on private property. Scouting early pays off, too. Local goose populations have developed in many areas. These geese often stay in the same locale year round and they act as live decoys and will attract migrating geese.

Scouting time is often limited for hunters. Eliminate some of that time by taking a look at these goose-hunting spots in north Missouri.

**SWAN LAKE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE** –Located between the rural communities of Sumner and Mendon, the Swan Lake NWR comprises 10,795 acres of waterfowl habitat. Created in 1937, the primary purpose of the area is to provide nesting, resting and feeding places for waterfowl. Canada geese began using the area in the 1940’s. Numbers peaked at over 150,000 birds and then began to dwindle as more readily available food sources began to appear in north Missouri.

Swan Lake NWR manager Steve Whitson stated that the area is still a viable place to goose hunt. “Tens of thousands of Canada geese still visit the Swan Lake area each year,” he said. “Numbers tend to peak in January as weather worsens up north.”

Other than the natural foods that grow on the area, Whitson manages 1,300 acres of agricultural crops and 2,800 acres of moist soils for food sources for migrating waterfowl.

“We hold a daily draw at headquarters,” Whitson noted. “We are under the “every member draw” system. However, in 2008 we will have rest days with no hunting on Monday, Tuesday and Thursdays, except for Thanksgiving. Other than that, hunting is allowed all day, according to statewide regulations.”

Four-member parties are allowed in each of the areas 13 water blinds and 8 field blinds. Standing crops such as corn, wheat and soybeans are left around the field blinds. Whitson pointed out that his crews do cut crops later in the season to make food more available to waterfowl. Blinds near cut crops are then closed to avoid problems with the baiting regulations.

Parking lots are within 75-to-200-yards of each blind. Hunters generally wade into the water blinds, unless the water is up, in which case a small boat would be feasible. “The big decoy spreads begin to appear when snow geese begin to appear, however.”

There is a handicapped accessible blind available at Swan Lake, but decoys for rent are a thing of the past. All hunters must now bring their own.

Goose hunting has changed dramatically at Swan Lake in the last forty years. “A variety of factors influenced the changes,” Whitson stated. “A warming trend is

certainly one factor leading to the change in numbers of geese using the area. Other factors related to the change are conservation success stories. There are now more managed areas, which attract geese. Plentiful agricultural crops around the region have dispersed the geese. Too, many municipalities now have lakes and generating plants which attract geese.”

With thousands of Canada geese still being harvested annually at Swan Lake, it is still worth hunting. Blinds S1, S3 and V1 were the top producers in 2007. Mid-December to the end of the season is when most of the harvest takes place. And as an old college buddy found out when we were at Mizzou in the early 70's, goose hunting at Swan Lake can become addictive. He skipped so many classes during goose season that he failed a three-hour course his last semester.

Whitson noted that their website will be updated by fall and will supply much more information than in the past. To, a Friends of Swan lake group is forming. For more information go to: <http://midwest.fws.gov/swanlake>.

Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge – Near Mound City, in Holt County, the 7,350 acres along the eastern edge of the historic Missouri River floodplain was established in 1935 as a resting, feeding and breeding ground for waterfowl and other wildlife.

While Squaw Creek itself is not open to waterfowl hunting, goose hunters need to acquaint themselves with the area. As an important stop along the Central Flyway, it attracts tens of thousands of geese every fall and winter. Numerous waterfowl hunting operations can be found near Squaw Creek.

Danny Guyer has been a waterfowl hunter for over 40 years. He has operated Iron Duck Hunting since 1992 near the Squaw Creek Refuge. Many hunters will remember his father, Dave, who was posthumously inducted into the Waterfowlers Hall of Fame in Mound City.

“Geese have begun to return to the Mound City area in appreciable numbers over the last few years,” Guyer said with excitement in his voice. “In the early 80's geese scattered across the northern tier of Missouri with the increase in available food sources. I attribute the return of geese to this area to the improvements August Busch helped finance at the Four Rivers Conservation Area which isn't far away.”

Guyer and his guides maintain goose hunting blinds on selected properties not far from the refuge. “All our blinds are heated,” he said. “We have been at this a long time. We use a lot of Big Foot goose decoys and have had considerable success over the years decoying Canada geese into our field setups.”

All goose hunters need to do is Google “goose hunting around Squaw Creek national Wildlife Refuge” to locate outfitters and guides. Guyer can be reached at [www.ironduckhunting.com](http://www.ironduckhunting.com)

SMITHVILLE RESERVOIR – Goose hunters would do well to take a look at this 7,200-acre Corps of Engineer reservoir just twenty minutes from downtown Kansas City. A recreation haven in the summertime, Smithville is practically uninhabited in the cold weather months. However, the goose harvest on and around Smithville Lake has been increasing annually and is beginning to draw the attention of hunters.

The Clay County Parks Department requires a boat launch fee, which is steep. An annual pass may be had for \$90. They can be contacted at 816-407-3400. The fee does hold some waterfowlers at bay making the investment more profitable for the hunters who bite the bullet to access the prime goose hunting opportunities found at Smithville Lake.

Thirty-four access points and parking lots are maintained around Smithville providing hunters access to well over 6,000 acres of public hunting. Goose hunters should focus some of their attention on the Camp Branch and Little Platte River Arms of the lake. Both are heavily timbered and attract geese.

Permanent blinds are not allowed at Smithville and decoy sets must be picked up at the end of each day. Floating decoys will need long anchor lines. Big boats with blinds for open water hunting situations are popular. Small pontoon boats are often rigged to look like floating islands.

Danny Guyer also runs a popular goose hunting operation on Smithville only one-quarter mile from the refuge.

“We had a phenomenal goose season last year,” Guyer began. “In spite of the bitter cold, ice and snow, the geese stayed in the area. Our clients harvested over 400 Canada geese last year and 203 of those came from one location. We hunt open fields and water sources very near the lake.”

“Canada has long and liberal goose seasons,” Guyer added. “Then geese are hunted all along their migration routes before they get here. As a result, migratory Canadas are very smart by the time they get here. We go to every effort to outsmart them. Attention to every detail is paramount to our success. We work on our camouflage, setups and calling constantly. Keeping up with the day-to-day changes in bird movements is important and we constantly experiment to find out what the geese will respond to. Some days we use 20 Big Foot decoys. Some days we use 200.

Guyer indicated that high fuel prices had not affected his business to date. That is a positive indication that hunting with him is worth the effort. He may be reached at

(816) 210-3969.



THOMAS HILL RESERVOIR – Located in Macon and Randolph counties, this 4,950-acre lake is owned by the Associated Electric Cooperative of Springfield. The lake serves as a source of water to cool the power plant. The area is leased to the MDC, which manages the fish and wildlife resources.

The warm water discharge of the power plant keeps roughly one-quarter of the lake from freezing over all winter. This open area provides unique fishing and waterfowling opportunities. Tired, migrating geese see the open water as an attractive place to rest. Experienced goose hunters know this fact and take advantage of it. Newcomers need to arrive very early to secure a good hunting spot.

Waterfowl hunting is closed on lands and waters north of Highway T to County Road 462 from October 15 to the end of the season. Blinds may be constructed but may not be locked. After 6:00 a.m. any unoccupied blind may be use by the first hunter to arrive. All blinds must be removed from the area by April 1.

Thomas hill does not contain much timber; so open water rigs are necessary. However, many points are relatively shallow making long decoy lines unnecessary.

Long Branch Lake is only a short distance away and offers far more timber. Many goose hunters miss out by not visiting this area. It is one of the few lakes with abundant shallow points, on the west fork, where bank blinds will work. The east fork is covered with timber. Boat blinds work best here.

For more information about hunting Thomas Hill or Long Branch, call (660) 785-2420.



**GOOSE HUNTING TIPS** – Bass Pro Shops Redhead Pro Hunting Team member Allen Treadwell, from Seligman, Missouri is no stranger to shot gunning for geese. Treadwell’s shooting career has included national, international and Olympic shooting championship titles. Accepting an invitation to join Bass Pros professional hunting team soon placed him in the limelight as their premier selection for their waterfowling TV shows.

Treadwell made no bones about stating that his favorite way to hunt Canada geese is in field setups. “I have a great deal more success hunting geese in fields than any other method,” he said.

“A good quality lay-out blind and a few dozen Bass Pro Redhead flocked head decoys are the basic essentials to get started,” Treadwell stated. “I like the flocked heads on the decoys because they don’t shine once the sun hits them. Guys who have trouble with geese flaring from their set should take a close look at their decoys.”

Treadwell generally uses 4-to-5-dozen decoys, but says he has to read the mood of the geese to determine the size and configuration of his decoy setup. “Every day is different out there. Experienced hunters can read the attitude of geese and determine what they want. That ability certainly increases success.”

Full body decoys coupled with a couple of motion decoys create an irresistible situation for geese according to Treadwell.



“Scouting for geese is just as important as scouting for deer,” Treadwell insisted. “Deer hunters are tuned in to that fact. Goose hunters are learning, but many guys fail to put in adequate scouting time. I like to watch geese in a field for three days. If they are there that long, no one is bothering them. After they leave on the evening of the third day, I go to the field and place reflectors where the geese were feeding. It makes the spot very easy to find in the darkness of the next morning. I then place my decoys in the exact spot where the birds were the evening before. They are very likely to return to the same spot in the field. I have learned that if your decoys are not where the birds want to be, your chances of calling them in are greatly diminished.”

Playing the wind right and using flags are two more of Treadwell’s “must do” tips. “A basic factor in goose hunting is placing decoys so that geese can approach them coming into the wind. Most guys cover the wind factor well. Blinds should be placed to take advantage of the best shots as well. Flagging is a much-underutilized tactic, however. I begin waving a black flag as soon as I see geese on the horizon. It is amazing how far away they can see that flag. Flagging works.”

Treadwell prefers goose calls made by Fred Zink, a world champion goose caller. “Zink’s Power Clucker sounds real goosey and is very easy to blow,” he said. “That is very important when you are doing a lot of calling.”

Treadwell's usual scenario while goose hunting is to begin flagging as soon as he sees geese. If they turn his way, he immediately begins clucking at them. "Experience comes into play again at this point," he said. "You have to be able to read the birds' body language to determine how much more to call. Sometimes I cluck and double cluck at geese all the way in. Other times, when the birds seem nervous, I let up on the calling. Most of the time, however, it appears that calling continuously relaxes the birds. I love it when I can call to a big flock of Canada geese as they glide all the way into the set."

Treadwell offered two last tips. "Layout blinds need to be camoed to completely blend in with the natural vegetation around you. If you are in corn, cover the blind with corn stalks. If the stalks are damp, dampen the outside of the blind. Make it blend in. Too, if there is soybean stalks on your blind from a previous hunt, remove them."

"Ammo is important," Treadwell concluded. "We have an ethical responsibility to make a quick, clean kill. Winchester's Extended Range High Density shot shells are the best on the market right now. I use them with an improved cylinder choke and kill geese further out than guys using a full choke."

There you have it – some of the best goose hunting hotspots in the Show-me state and topnotch goose hunting tips and tactics. I wish you a Merry Christmas and may the big goose land on your Christmas day dinner platter.