



# Reflections on the Water

● By Kenneth L. Kieser

**Greenhead mallards made a wide swing** over our decoys in what some have called a sky ballet. Danny Guyer and Luke Rhoads made several sweet sounds on their duck calls and the flock took notice. They pushed around to the south and set their wings for a final approach. I glanced out on the lake's calm surface where Danny's father resided.

Danny scattered his father's ashes out in front of the blind many years before; the earthly remains were long gone, but he was there. We were hunting at one of his favorite hunting spots and it was not hard to feel his presence.

My father and I had our last hunt together on these same waters north of Danny's blind many years before in the 1960's when it was still Trimble Wildlife Area and before Smithville Lake took the wildlife refuge away to memories. He too is gone now but would have loved to hear the whistling through mallard wings as they passed over.

I glanced towards the northern waters in search of my father, at least in my mind, and then turned back to the business of mallards with their wings set and coming in.

Big Water Willie and Mam-J, Danny's talented Labrador retrievers, both watched the incoming flock. There was no more need for calling; the ducks were convinced. Only a good shot remained and was executed.

Both labs were released for a duck race they had swam many times before. Big Water Willie easily reached his greenhead first. He was much younger and bigger than Mam-J in body, but not in heart. Soon two greenheads lay in a customary spot on top of the old blind.

I thought back to the morning many years before when Danny parked his pickup outside a restaurant in Mound City, Missouri. I was to write a story about the hunting in this historic area where Lewis and Clark once passed through and many legendary hunters, sports figures and other celebrities had hunted waterfowl. I stepped outside and noticed the old blue Ford pickup just pulling up with bundles of reed in the back and a large black lab in the front beside a slightly gray-haired, grouchy-looking driver.

"I take it you're an old duck hunter," I said.

"I'm not that old," he answered, not sure whether to be offended or complimented.

It turned out I am three years older than Danny, and he has since often reminded me of my opening comment. Before the hunt that morning Danny and

local hunter Joe Laukemper showed me photos of their fathers on the restaurant walls holding mallards and blowing duck calls. I was in the presence of second and third generation Missouri duck hunters. My father and I had hunted the area, too. The last time he wore a denim shirt with snap buttons, not exactly suitable camouflage, but we managed to harvest five white geese.

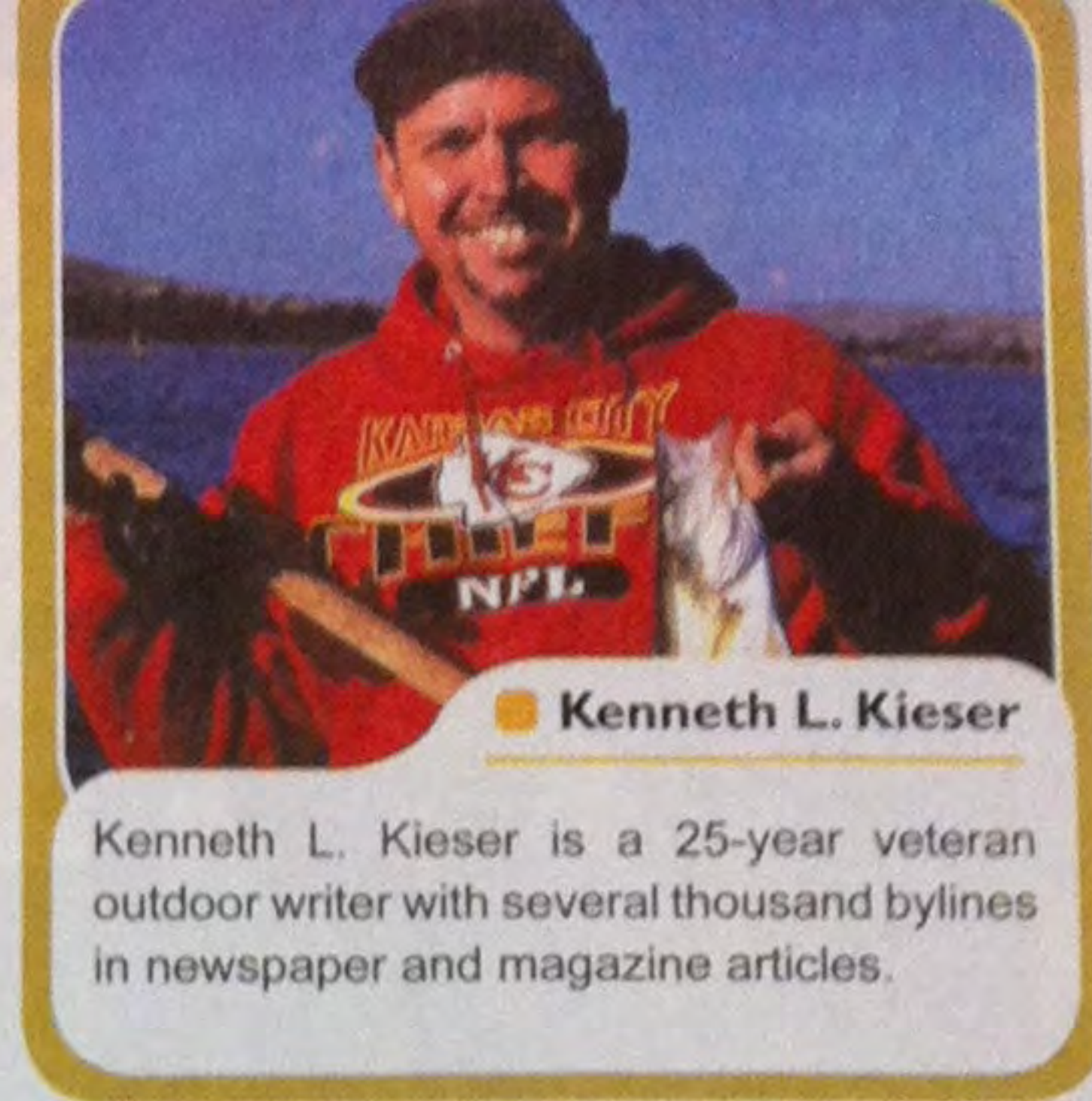
Danny and Luke brought me back from my thoughts with a series of highballs to a distant flock flying down the slot towards waters where I last hunted with my father. I watched them disappear down the lake and then turn back when a



wind drift brought both callers' appealing sounds to the leading hen, who made a bad decision.

I should have been calling to the flock but my attention stayed to the North where a young man wearing a Jon-E-style duck hunting hat and old hand-me-down coat that was two sizes too big sat by his father in a Missouri Conservation blind on Trimble Wildlife Area. I was 12 years old and making every imaginable calling mistake with my old wooden Lohman Duck call. Dad sat and scanned the sky while holding his old 870 Wingmaster bought while serving as a Marine in the Korean War. The barrel had been totally engraved by an artist in Japan.

Dad didn't duck hunt and was only there because I had begged him to bring



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me. A combination of stories in outdoor magazines and talking to an elderly neighbor had convinced me to try duck hunting and my father eventually lost plenty of sleep over this decision.

Suddenly a greenhead flashed by. I jumped up and swung my hand-me-

down Western Field bolt action shotgun with Poly Choke across the duck's path, squeezed the trigger and scattered lead shot that folded the duck as if I had done it thousands of time before. I waded into dingy water that easily ran over the tops and filled up my rubber boots. I soon held up the beautiful mallard to a big smile on Dad's face.

"QUACK, QUACK, QUACK," calling brought me back to the present, although I would have liked to have stayed in my daydream awhile longer. I started calling, too, but my calling abilities have always been marginal at best and I am normally better suited to let Danny and Luke call while I make an occasional guttural drake quack. When I hunt with both men there is no need to pull out a



call at all. This morning the mallards didn't seem to mind my calling efforts, though, and soon two more were laid on the blind.

"Where were you when that flock came in?" Danny asked.

"Back at Trimble Wildlife Area," I mumbled.

"Should have known," he said, knowing only too well how it felt when his father visited. "I was thinking the other day about Daddy falling in the lake right out there on a cold morning. We managed to dry him out and he hunted the rest of that day, pretty uncomfortable in his soggy clothes. I don't think you could have blown him out of that blind with a stick of dynamite. The ducks were flying and we limited out."

"I wonder if they are with us on this hunt?" I asked.

Danny didn't answer; he just scanned the sky for another flock of the cherished greenheads. Afternoon came and I broke out a stick of deer sausage and cheese. We spoke little that day while surveying the lake and sky. No doubt our minds were traveling back to the past when our fathers scanned the skies for ducks, too.

That afternoon a cold front moved in. Soon the air was filled with snowflakes that were blowing parallel in heavy winds. Driving home would have made sense but we knew what was about to happen. Soon ducks and geese were filtering back over the lake in search of an

escape from the rough weather.

"Mallards - a big flock," Luke whispered.

A large flock of mallards had spotted our decoys through the blizzard. We added some sweet duck music and were answered back by the lead hen. The mouthy old girl seemed interested in joining us, and her group followed. A tear - or maybe it was melted snow - dripped down Danny's cheek as he sent a highballing invitation skyward. He seemed to be grinning as he continued trading passionate sounds with the circling mallards. I stopped calling to watch. He had never called better.

The large flock disappeared into the swirling snow each time they circled. They reappeared downwind and flew back over our set, each time maneuvering lower and lower. Finally they drifted over our set. We jumped up to shoot when the lowest mallard's feet touched water and mass confusion broke out over the lake.

Ducks scrambled in every direction to escape the trap they had blundered into. I picked out a greenhead and squeezed the

and started whistling with our mouths. The remarkable ducks quickly closed in and we dropped two drakes in the water. Their sprigs projected over the lake's surface like flagpoles.

We waded into the lake and started splashing water on each decoy to clean off accumulating snow. Our wet decoys looked bright in the dingy lake water. Apparently another flock of mallards thought so too!

Danny and Luke started calling, but it was not necessary. We were where the ducks wanted to be, an important rule of waterfowl hunting. These ducks wanted a quiet spot to escape the blizzard. About 70 mallards splashed down in our decoys. We raised our shotguns but did not shoot. I guess we were all thinking the same way because no words were spoken. We had enough ducks for a couple of meals - let them have their resting spot.

We worked new flocks over the next hour and filled the pocket with live quacking ducks and a couple Canada geese. I never wanted that hunt to end, but our time was running out and the snow was falling harder. We decided to start for

**“ Ducks scrambled in every direction to escape the trap they had blundered into. ”**

trigger of my shotgun, pitching the duck into our decoys. I heard Danny and Luke shoot as another passed across my sights. I caught up with the duck's flight and for some reason decided not to shoot.

We proudly laid three more big drakes on the blind. Danny grinned at me and quickly looked skyward as another big flock passed close by. The heavy snow was driving them lower for sanctuary that we were happy to provide. The flock made another pass out of the heavy snow and Luke's eyes brightened up. Pintails!

Mature pintails that trailed long sprigs swooped past like fighter planes in tight formation. We backed off on our calling

home. The sky was darkening and it was time to go.

Years from now only one of us will remain. The last survivor from our group will remember this hunt and think fondly of the day when we hunted hundreds of ducks in a blizzard. I only hope that he is remembering the day from this same spot with ducks working and labs whining in anticipation.

Before leaving Danny stepped over to the water's edge and tossed out a handful of mallard feathers where his father's ashes had been spread.

"Thanks Daddy," he said before turning to walk up the hill.