

DUCK SHOOTING

ALONG THE ATLANTIC TIDEWATER

EUGENE V. CONNETT, EDITOR

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ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS AND DRAWINGS

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I I I

Merrymeeting Bay

BY RANSOM P. KELLEY

MERRYMEETING BAY is in south central Maine. Two great rivers, the Androscoggin, coming from New Hampshire, and the Kennebec, coming from Moosehead, join with the Eastern, the Abbagadassett, the Cathance and the Muddy rivers to form an irregular, shallow bay eighteen miles long and a mile to three miles wide. This fresh water bay has a five and one-half foot tide two hours later than at the mouth of the river twenty miles away. Within half an hour's flying time are many large salt water bays on Maine's deeply indented coast line. In the winter the Bay is frozen over from early December until early April. Two-thirds of its area is exposed at low water and is much broken up with small channels and guzzles. In the summer and fall the flats are covered with heavy vegetation, mostly wild rice and bulrushes but almost any known duck food that will grow in fresh, cool water can be found on either the mud flats or sand bars or in the guzzles. Much of the shore line is wooded although there is considerable farming on the intervale lands on the west shore of the Bay.

The Merrymeeting area offers twenty thousand acres of the finest conceivable habitat for wildfowl and is singularly blessed, in that it lies at the

intersection of two of the three main Maine flyways of waterfowl, and so close to the third that many birds from the coastal flyways work the Bay. From the meager banding records at hand, the first flyway leads from James Bay in a northwest-southeasterly direction across the St. Lawrence near Quebec city, Lake St. Francis and Lake Megantic in Quebec; thence through the mountain pass at Chain of Ponds, across the Belgrade Lakes to Merrymeeting, approximately one hundred miles from the international boundary, two hundred miles from Quebec and six hundred miles from James Bay. This flyway is fed by birds from the Umbagog area. The second flyway, running north northeast and south southwest brings the birds three hundred miles from the mouth of the St. Lawrence, Labrador and Davis Strait, across the St. John River near Maine's northern tip, through Square Lake and on across to the Penobscot Valley. This flyway crosses near Pushaw Lake into the Sebesticook watershed, which leads them directly to Merrymeeting. The third and last main flyway comes along the coast, and the birds, after passing outside Mt. Desert Island, cross Penobscot Bay and the low country south of the Camden hills, many of them entering the bay area through the Eastern River, although some come in directly from the sea and many more that have stopped to rest in the coastal bays join in with the local birds that are trading back and forth into the Bay.

While gunning at Merrymeeting you soon learn that if a local gunner says "duck" he means a Blackduck (*Anas rubripes tristis*); and "goose" means a regular Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis canadensis*), for these two birds make up the bulk of our hunting. Quite common also are the Blue-winged Teal (*Querquedula discors*), Green-winged Teal (*Nettion carolinense*) and the American Pintail (*Dafila acuta tzitzehoa*). Our common diving birds are the Greater and Lesser Scaup (*Nyroca marila* and *Nyroca affinis*), the Ring-necked Duck (*Nyroca collaris*), the American Golden-eye (*Glaucionetta clangula americana*), and the Buffle-head (*Charitonetta albeola*). All three Mergansers (*Lophodytes cucullatus*, *Mergus merganser americanus* and *Mergus serrator*) or Shelldrake are

frequently seen. Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos*) are taken and seem to be less wary than the Blacks, particularly the females. During the last ten years I have taken occasional Barrow's Golden-eye (*Glaucionetta islandica*), Baldpate (*Mareca americana*), European Widgeon (*Mareca penelope*), Shovelers (*Spatula clypeata*), Redheads (*Nyroca americana*), Canvasbacks (*Nyroca valisineria*), Eiders (*Somateria mollissima dresseri* and *Somateria spectabilis*) and various kinds of Scoters (*Melanitta deglandi*, *Melanitta perspicillata* and *Oidemia americana*) which, when taken in migration before they get to the coast, are delicious eating and are not at all fishy. Wood Ducks (*Aix sponsa*) are seen occasionally and are usually passed up if recognized in time. The only Cinnamon Teal (*Querquedula cyanoptera*) I have ever seen in the Bay I encountered while working a bunch of geese; we let them go and didn't get any geese.

The Canada Goose has again become very common in Merrymeeting. Last fall during the entire open season there was not a day but what we saw one or more flocks passing through. The height of the flight seems to be between the middle and the last of October. I have taken Lesser Canadas (*Branta canadensis leucopareia*) and one Hutchins's Goose (*Branta canadensis hutchinsi*). Snow Geese (*Chen hyperborea hyperborea* and *Chen hyperborea atlantica*) occasionally stop in and I have definitely identified one flock of Cackling Geese (*Branta canadensis minima*). Brant (*Branta bernicla hrota*) are often seen in the Bay after an easterly storm.

The American Coot (*Fulica americana*) or Crowbill, as he is locally known, visit us in large numbers and it is interesting to watch them form a circle and bluff out a Bald-headed Eagle. The eagles are usually very numerous at the start of the duck season and are not at all well liked. These birds are also very effective in keeping Pheasants from becoming too numerous in the open farming country on the western shores of the Bay. Grebes and Loons are also occasional visitors.

Early histories of Maine mention large quantities of waterfowl in Merrymeeting Bay and some of them claim that the Indians brought rice seed

to the area from the midwestern part of the country. There are many conflicting local legends, the most commonly accredited of which claims that Captain Jack brought the first seed to the Bay in the 1840's. During the last fifteen years the Fish and Game Department has introduced many fresh strains of aquatic plants in the Bay. Giant bulrush seems to be crowding out the wild rice in some areas. It is particularly noticeable in the Big Cove, Bluff Head Cove and many other places, that the wild rice is most thrifty where the geese have concentrated in the spring. The geese in their feeding habits dig up quantities of bulrush roots and while so doing do a nice job in planting the wild rice seeds left over from the previous fall.

The market gunners at the turn of the century were active in Merry-meeting. Most of them used flat-bottomed, single scull boats and their methods of operation were very effective. Their boats were usually fourteen or fifteen feet long and about sixteen inches deep at the deepest part. They were rigged for rowing and some of them carried a light mast and sails which could be stowed. They were sculled with a short, four foot, crooked oar through a leather-bound scull notch set well off-center in the stern. They used no decoys but traveled around the Bay looking for flocks of feeding or resting birds. They often spent an hour or more working a flock of birds until they got them setting just right. A double eight or six shot in a strap took a heavy toll and then a second gun was used in the air. One of the famous early hunters carried a double six, two tens and two twelves, all muzzle loaders. In later times the modern repeating guns replaced the muzzle loaders and double floats became more common.

By the middle 30's Merrymeeting was at its prime as a sportsman's paradise. The market gunners had turned to guiding. Bill Darton had had his try at gunning with the use of stationary floating blinds. After an abortive attempt to outlaw the gunning float in a short but bitter fight in the legislative halls at Augusta, permanent floating blinds were outlawed. Double scull boats became the usual method of gunning.

In any area different gunners have different methods, but Merrymeeting could be roughly divided into two distinct areas, "Down the Bay" and

"Up River." Up river the gunners are apt to gun in the same set, day after day, and flat-bottomed boats are most generally used. Down the Bay, below Browne's Point, the gunners are apt to roam more and use bigger round-bottomed boats. Let's gun a day in each place.

For our up river day let's gun with Captain Harold Houdlette on Green's Point, at the mouth of the Eastern River. After a leisurcly but ample breakfast we walk a few hundred yards down the shore to a little brushed-in shelter. The flats in front of us are just covered with water, as it is two and one-half hours before high tide. For the next five hours we will have good water to gun. It being early in October, the weather is comfortably warm and a light southwesterly wind gives promise of ideal conditions. Through the rice and bulrushes a mowed path runs westerly four hundred yards to the Kennebec River channel. There are two pools mowed out of the bulrushes, each about thirty yards in diameter, one on either side of the main path. They are reached by branch paths and a heavy fringe of grass has been left at the ends of the paths. The Captain has just returned from setting a dozen blocks and five sets of shadow decoys in the southern or windward pool.

Above our heads we can hear the repeated roar of passing flocks of ducks and as the light grows brighter we can see birds by the thousands flying down river. At legal shooting time, the Captain tells us to be prepared to go out on a scull. As there are several boats gunning nearby we don't want to waste any more time than necessary. The boat is hauled stern first on the beach beside the blind. It is a fourteen and one-half foot flat-bottomed craft, with a ten foot open cockpit thirty-four inches wide. The sides and bow are decked in and covered with grass. The Captain's gun lies across the thwarts behind a shooting board, which is a moveable shelf with grass tacked on it. My gun is put in the bow along the starboard side, and on the floor boards there is a rug for warmth and dryness. A low whistle from the Captain makes us watch over the decoys where a flock of eight big Blacks are circling. Once they almost land; two birds are below the grass; but shooting up-wind flares them; however, they circle again. This time as

they circle four birds drop into the leeward pool and the other four go off down the Bay.

Following the Captain's instructions, I climb into the boat and after sitting down in the bow, I work forward, lying on my back until my head is so low that I can just see over the bow of the boat. My gun stock is under my right elbow, my right hand handy to the safety, my left hand comfortably on the forestock. The barrel of the gun rests on the combing and the muzzle sticks out eight or ten inches at a very low angle. After seeing me properly stowed in the bow, Cap pushes the boat off and warns me to keep perfectly still until he tells me to sit up and shoot. The birds, he tells me, should be just to the left of the bow when the crucial moment arrives.

Using a four foot crooked oar thrust through a scull hole in the transom, Cap, who is also lying flat on his back with just his head cocked up, slowly, but very steadily, propels the boat out the mowed pathway towards the pools. Time never passed so slowly and every instant I expected that the ducks would discover that something was wrong or would be frightened by someone shooting nearby. At last we turned off into the right hand channel and the boat seemed to be going so slowly that I doubted if we were moving at all. I had stripped off my heavy top clothing before leaving the shore, but I discovered that I was sweating profusely and I could hear my heart pounding so loudly I was afraid the ducks could hear it and think it was an Indian war drum. Just as the bow entered the thin fringe of grass separating us from the pool, the Captain swung the boat to the right and slowly came to a stop. About twenty yards from me I could see a pair of birds. One of them seemed to be looking right at us but he soon dropped his head. At the Captain's word, I sat up.

The birds looked at us for a surprised second and then jumped into the wind. I swung onto the right hand bird and carefully covered him, but it was my third shot that brought him down. Captain Harold very nicely one-two-threed the others. I had the feeling that I had been shooting where the bird had been because my sitting position slowed my swing. We picked up the birds and went ashore.

For the next four hours we had interesting shooting. The singles, the pairs and small flocks decoyed beautifully and from then on the Captain left the shooting to the bow man. Our execution was not good, but by eleven o'clock we had a reasonable number of birds.

There was a nice set of goose blocks in the channel, a gunshot or more from the mouth of the mowed path. The tide had left us, and as I questioned the Captain as to what came next, a bunch of geese appeared high in the north. It was apparently a family of six who had come a long way, for without circling and hardly opening their mouths, they lit in the broad river channel beyond the goose blocks. After quickly changing to heavier loads, I took my place in the bow and the Captain slid the boat out over the mud. The grass on each side of the pathway concealed him from the birds. As we reached the open water he slid into the boat and we started down river after the geese. The birds in the meantime had drifted away with the tide and were perhaps three hundred yards from us. We worked down the edge of the channel, using the channel bank for a background, until we were below the geese. Then he slowly swung out into the river and headed toward the birds. The light southerly breeze was on our quarter and we were headed down the sun-path toward the geese. They paid no attention to us until we were within one hundred and fifty yards of them and then they turned and headed for the goose decoys. We crowded them faster and faster, until we were sixty yards from them, then, at the warning call of the gander, they quickly turned into the wind and, after spreading out to get wing room, they jumped towards us. Between us we were able to stop three goslings. When we paddled back to the mouth of the path, we found a mere trickle of water coming over the mud. We walked in and hauled the boat after us.

After lunch and a council of war, we went back to the shore blind. The Captain had three suggestions. First, we could watch there and walk to any birds that lit in the pools; second, we could push the boat out to the channel bank and set our decoys in the open water, using the brushed-up boat for a blind; or third, we could take his dog in the brush for Partridge

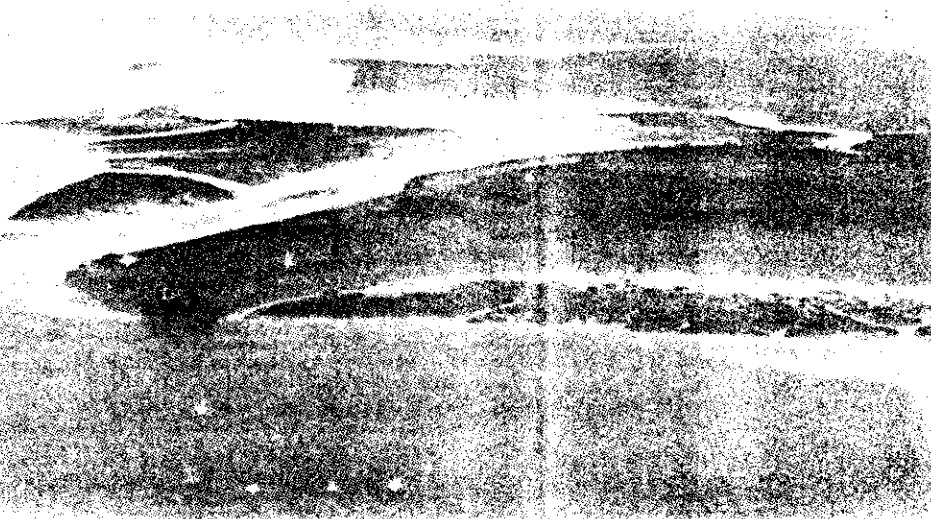
and Woodcock. The wind had dropped to an "Irish hurricane," and there was hardly a cloud in the sky, and we figured with full bellies it would be more comfortable to nap on the shore and follow the first plan.

After an hour, without seeing a bird, three Mallards appeared from nowhere and lit in the northern pool. Two of us walked out within easy gunshot of these birds and we had the satisfaction of adding them to our bag. When we got ashore we counted up and figured we had enough for one day. We picked up our gear and headed for Browne's Point, five miles down river.

The next day at Erle Browne's we found that each of us would have a guide for the day. There were nine boats going out from South Point this morning and we found the boats to be quite different from the one we had used the day before. These boats were each a little different and were sixteen feet long and round-bottomed. Some had a little decoration on them and others had none. They were painted a drab color. When I got in the bow of Erle's boat I found considerably more room, and that the rails were a little higher. As we left the shore and took count of stock we found that we had in the boat our guns, two lunch boxes, two shell boxes, two pairs of binoculars, our rain clothes, twenty-one cork decoys, eight sets of shadows, a large bundle of twenty-three pieces of arbor vitae brush, and a spare seven and one-half foot oar. I noticed that Erle was poling the boat at a good rate of speed without too much apparent effort.

As we headed down the Bay we made quite a flotilla; but four of the boats kept along the shore to the westward and Erle told me that they were headed for Bluff Head Cove. Another boat turned off in a guzzle and the guide said he thought he would set Pogge's Hole. We turned into the Big Guzzle and the fair tide pushed us up through very quickly. This guzzle branched three ways, just before it reached the Abbagadasset channel. Two boats took the south branch and one went to each of the other branches.

The boat behind us set its decoys in a pool at the guzzle's mouth. We continued to the southward a couple of hundred yards. Our eight sets of shadows we set on a trawl along the outside edge of the bulrushes. Then



Aerial view of Merrymeeting Bay shooting grounds.



A goose that didn't get away.



Poling out cripples in typical boat. Note shooting positions.



Some lunch while waiting for ducks to fly.

we pushed into the grass fifteen yards and set out block decoys partially in the pools and partially in the bunches of rice and bulrushes. Then we turned back, and ahead of us I could see the other three boats finishing their sets. The four boats pushed back down the main guzzle for about four hundred yards where we rendezvoused in a small side guzzle.

The air seemed to be full of ducks and many large flocks were headed out to sea. We could see other bunches landing in the open water sanctuary a couple of miles away. Before long one of the guides told us to keep still, and a bunch of twenty or more Blackducks started swinging the decoys. They would start to settle in one set and then flare and move on to the next. There was a moderate southerly wind blowing which put a nice ripple on the water and made the decoys look more natural. Finally a pair of birds dropped into our decoys and four swung back and lit in the northernmost of the four sets.

Erle started out for our birds and another boat came along in back of us. As we went booming up the guzzle with a fair tide, Erle explained to me that, according to the unwritten law of the Bay, it was "our scull" as our birds had lit first, and that the other boat would scull his birds but not shoot until our birds jumped. As we broke around the corner I saw a bird swimming into the grass and heard Erle mutter: "That's good; I hope they'll stay there." The birds had apparently lit to our shadows and swum into them. Not finding them to their liking they had started into the grass to see the other decoys. As we swung in by the shadows Erle told me to be ready as he didn't know just where the birds would be. Suddenly he told me to "take 'em" and as I sat up he jumped to his feet to back me up. One bird broke to the left and the other to the right. As my right-hand bird folded I heard the splash of his, hitting the water. I looked to our left to see how the other boat was making out and could see three dead birds in the air at once. They were nearly out of sight before we heard the five shots that cleaned up that flock. We quickly picked up our birds and paddled back to the other boats, and during the next six hours there was something doing every few minutes for one or the other of the boats. The tall tales

that were told as we waited for more birds to appear would have shamed Baron Münchhausen.

It was noticeable that time after time a few birds would decoy from a large flock and the rest would go back to open water, unmolested. One flock of twelve lit between our decoys and the next set. We made a successful two-boat scull on this flock, and between us we stopped seven birds.

When the ebbing tide threatened to leave the guzzle dry, we picked up our decoys and set the shadows just outside a big bunch of bulrushes. Outside and beyond them, and a little downwind, we bunched our block decoys. At this time there was about eight inches of water over the mud. We put the arbor vitae brush in brush sockets along the combing of the boat and pushed into the big bunch of bulrushes where we soon grounded out. The decoys lay well to the left of the fore and aft line of the boat, with the furthest one about thirty yards from us. For the next hour nothing further happened, and the other three boats which were downwind from us had remained quiet. Then some singles and pairs appeared, but these fell to the downwind boats. As I composed myself for a nap, a remark from Erle called my attention to six big Blacks headed our way from the river channel. Without a single circle they plopped onto the mud just outside our decoys. Erle gave the word and I sat up and tried to shoot with a face full of brush. My bird finally pitched down into the Abbagadassett channel. Erle sat there laughing at me; he had made no move to reach for his gun. We dragged the boat back out of the bulrushes and slid her over the mud to the channel. The bird that I had shot was a cripple and the strength of the ebb tide took us well down the Bay before we eventually picked him up.

A mile or so beyond us was a large raft of Blackducks that had drifted out of the Sanctuary. Erle got me down so low in the boat that only once in a while could I see the water thirty yards ahead of us, and, after putting a good application of vaseline on the sculling oar, started the long scull after the rafted birds. When we were within a few hundred yards of the birds, Erle struck a slow and steady pace. He had instructed me to hold

tight, no matter what happened, until he gave the word to shoot. The rafted Blacks were having a grand time, playing and splashing water; but when we got within a hundred yards of them the nearest ones jumped and flew a short way. For an hour we kept sculling and sculling, the birds refusing to let us get close enough. As a big bunch moved up the Bay another quarter of a mile, I asked Erle if it was any use and he told me that if we kept at it long enough we might get close enough. At last a pair of big "red legs" seemed to pay no attention to us and let us get just as close as we wanted. I had the good fortune to get the pair, and after Erle had rested a moment or two, we took the flood tide back towards our decoys. As we picked up and started home he told me that he had been hoping for a flock of geese to alight in the open water while we were down there; but that it was still a little early in the season for them to be really flying.

Merrymeeting today is terribly overcrowded with gunners and many of them are gunning entirely from floating blinds. Last fall the second day of the season was foggy in the morning and when the fog lifted I counted forty-five boats around me. We had a very small kill for the year as the birds were soon driven out and spent their days resting in the ocean. At night they were in, feeding by the tens of thousands. Legislation is now pending to restrict the use of outboard motors and we are hoping that as times become more normal there will be a more reasonable number of gunners in the Bay.