

Baby Steps

I have often heard that when starting out on something new, it is best to take “baby steps” to focus on small tasks that, when done properly, can lead to success and incentive to continue on your journey.

I am now in my second year of hunting, and I must admit I learned a great deal last year. Observing others and how they did things was an important skill that allowed me to fill in gaps when things were not discussed directly. The key was listening and asking a lot of questions.

I can summarize the types of hunting I did last year into three categories: 1) posting up – as done in dove hunting where I sat on my swamp seat and waited for passing birds to come within range, 2) blind hunting – where more preparation was done to focus on concealment, yet still relying on passing birds to come within shooting range, and 3) stalking – those long hikes taken in an effort to locate and hopefully take a shot at game. Of these three types the one I enjoy the most is stalking.

When stalking, the “chase” is almost as much fun as pulling the trigger. I have tried to locate deer, quail and pheasant (the first without success) on pursuits have taken me into the mountains, high deserts, inland hillsides, remote canyons and farmed valleys. All of these trips have provided me with outstanding scenic views and some challenging and occasionally, long hikes.

Now to a newbie like myself, hunting magazines offer some suggestions and tips on how to prepare for these kinds of trips. You will invariably find at least one issue in most magazines explaining how to get in shape for the coming fall hunting season. These same magazines also provide recommendations on tactics (where to look for game), equipment (shoes, clothing, camouflage, etc.) and places to go. I have even seen recommendations for how to search for game in heavy cover (grid searching, zig-zags and the like).

What I really have not yet seen is any mention of road conditions.

To a newcomer, it was easy to understand why almost everyone who hunts does so with a truck. The amount of gear needed cannot easily be shoved into a compact vehicle. Even if it could, the mess that would be made to such a vehicle would take days of cleanup to restore the car to its original state – if that were at all possible. Thus, throwing equipment into the back of a truck is the easy way to go.

I had also assumed that most hunters preferred four-wheel drive vehicles because that would allow them to get through some of the rougher terrain I have seen while chasing deer and quail. It was not until I went on my first duck hunting trip that I realized that those four-wheel drives are preferred for the one thing we all know is part of every waterfowling trip – mud. In my first year, I stepped in it, trudded through it, fell in it, and have spent countless hours trying to get rid of it. I thought after a year of dealing with it that I understood it and was prepared for it.

I was wrong.

At the start of my second year as a waterfowler, I was invited to take part in a week-long goose hunting trip at Tule Lake. The plan was to hunt honkers in the morning and chase pheasant in the afternoon.

The Klamath National Wildlife Refuge offers a large area of harvested croplands for hunting during the winter. Like many other croplands, there are a series of canals and irrigation waterways that weave their way through the hunting fields. Normally, we take these for granted as we drive around or alongside them as we go to and from our blinds. On this particular week though, we were pursuing pheasants on these fields. This meant that after parking the car, we would set out and hike the perimeters of one or more fields, some bordering a canal. I had done my fair share of hiking along fields bordering canals, but I had yet to attempt crossing one that had a pipe or other "bridge" connecting opposing sides.

On my second day of "chasing chickens", three of us were making our way around a rather large field. When we got to the end of the side where we had started, one of the guys decided he would go back and move the car to the place where we planned to end our hunt. That left two of us to walk down the other end (about a mile) to the rendezvous point. When we got to the corner (the spot where we were supposed to make a left) we encountered one of the many canals. This wasn't a wide one, and there seemed to be very little water. John decided to take one side and I took the other. We continued on our quest, and as we were getting close to the end of the field, we saw Bob driving the truck to the rendezvous spot. Within another 10 minutes, we were close to the end and that is when I noticed a rather large canal was bordering the end of the field and made it so that I could not cross from the field where I was walking. Fortunately, I also saw someone had laid down a telephone pole and a large piece of wood across the small canal. This makeshift crossing appeared to be strong enough to allow me to cross the bit of water and mud in the middle so that I could meet up with John and figure out a way to cross the larger canal to meet up with Bob.

I descended the edge of the field to the pit and stepped onto the telephone pole. It appeared pretty solid and I started making my way across. When I got about eight feet down the pole, (approximately the middle of the canal) the pole started to sway quite a bit, and not wanting to take a plunge into the muck, I started to make my way back to where I had stepped onto the pole. I made it to within a couple of feet of the end and decided it would be ok to step onto the dirt and start my way back up the edge to the field.

Boy was that a big mistake.

I took that determined step with confidence and quickly found my left leg buried entirely up to my crotch with my right leg buried to my knee. After a momentary bit of panic, I started to recall how to get out of such situations and went as flat as possible keeping my weight focused on my upper body. I then started to focus on lifting my right leg out of the muck, and when it came out of the mud, I laid my right leg flat and started the job of pulling my left leg out of the slime. Little by little, it started to give way, and soon I had that leg out as well. Fortunately, I was only a couple of feet from more solid footing, and a few crawling steps later, I was able to stand and make my way out of the ravine. Given I was covered in muck, and not wanting to risk another attempt at crossing the ravine, we decided to hike back to where we had started. Bob turned the car around and drove onto the field where he was able to pick us up.

To his credit, Bob, being the seasoned veteran, had a roll of material he uses for such mishaps, and I was able to sit in the car without making too much of a mess (the smell was another matter altogether).

Due to the time (and probably the fact that they could not stand the smell) we decided to call it a day. We made it back to the cabin and all shared in the fun as we recounted the story to the rest of the group.

I thought after a full season that I knew a little something about mud. Now I know a little more. I guess I'm still in the process of taking baby steps.

It's an interesting sport – with lots to learn.

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