

My First Duck Trip (Because it wasn't a Hunt)

I will never, ever forget my first Duck Trip.

For years I had tried finding someone who wanted to go out and hunt. I was lucky enough to be introduced to fishing at the age of 6 by a family friend. Unfortunately, the same can not be said of hunting.

In 2009 I started a BSA Venturing Crew in the city where I lived. In the summer of that year our Crew was in the parking lot at the location where we keep our gear getting ready for an outing when a gentleman approached me and introduced himself. "Wade" had two daughters and had heard of the Crew from a mutual friend. I invited him to attend a future meeting with his two daughters and shortly thereafter he took me up on the invitation and showed up at one of our meetings.

Following the meeting I spent some time speaking with him and answering many of his questions. We got to talking about activities and some of the things that we've done and were hoping to do. That's when the subject came up. It turned out that Wade had hunted in the past and was looking forward to going out with his daughters. I finally found someone who hunted!

The conversation led to several more over the course of several weeks. Wade was the first person I went out with to go chase quail in the Southern California high desert just East of Wrightwood. We managed to get out a few times with very limited success before the subject of duck hunting came around.

Wade told me that he'd gone duck hunting only a couple of times with a friend up in the California Bay Area. He spoke of a state-controlled area called Wister on the SouthEast side of the Salton Sea East of Palm Springs and we made plans to go there in January, 2010.

Having gone out a total of perhaps 4 or 5 times for quail I had no idea how unprepared I was for hunting ducks...

On January 22, 2010 Wade picked me up and he, his son (9) and a family friend (12) headed out to Wister.

Initially we drove past the road to the refuge and turned around when we reached the city of Niland sometime around 9 PM Friday night. We managed to find the road and drove into the parking lot at the Check Station. While there were cars in the parking lot there was nothing going on in the building and we decided to drive down the road a bit.

January 2010 saw LOTS of rain in Southern California and the paved road made way to a mucky, sticky, awful mess. With a 2WD truck we managed to gain access to the reserve parking area, but the overflow lot was pretty much a lake. Given it was late January we found a few open spots where the reservations are usually occupied and we parked there (I came to find out later on that we had parked next to Pete Schumacher's trailer). We set up the tent trailer and called it a night.

Wade had told me that you needed to make reservations to hunt Wister and that we would simply hunt on public land. That meant we would have the luxury of getting up a bit later and then driving down to a road called Nofsinger and that we would be able to hunt just South of the reserve.

At 4 AM we awoke and got the kids going. We had a quick breakfast and then packed up the truck and headed out somewhere close to 5 AM.

We managed to get down the road about half a mile before realizing the mud was so bad that we would likely get stuck if we continued in the truck. Wade asked if we should proceed on foot and, given I knew nothing of the area, agreed. We stepped out of the truck, grabbed our gear and started the march.

We walked. And walked. And walked. Then walked some more.

Little did we know that the spot where we had left the car was actually four miles North of our destination. Since we were towing two kids we needed to make sure to stop and allow them to rest and ensure we kept their spirits up.

Just before dawn the shooting started and we were still on the road. We continued our march until we finally managed to get to Nofsinger and made a right turn so that we could find a spot. Once we felt we were a fair distance from the main road we opened up our folding chairs (yes, folding chairs) and took our seats. Imagine driving by and seeing a couple of guys and two kids sitting in the middle of the road in folding chairs...

We held this position without seeing a single bird for about two hours (we had arrived at our "blind" around 8 AM). The kids were getting hungry, the sun was heating up and we had not seen a single bird. We also knew there was a good hike to get back to the truck. We therefore made the decision to pack up and head back.

Once we managed to get back to camp and have some lunch we discussed options for the afternoon and the next day. We struck up a conversation with a gentleman who was camping near us and he explained the DFG Check Station process and we decided to go scout some areas in the afternoon and then "sweat line" it for Sunday. During the afternoon we drove over to Niland and then West across Nofsinger and managed to do another hike to the same spot we had taken in the morning to see if it was better in the afternoon. No such luck (although we made great bait for the huge swarms of local mosquitos).

That evening after dinner Wade headed over to the check station and put us in the draw for the Sweat Line. Soon we wrapped up the day and then hit the sack. At 2 AM I heard him get up and head over to the office. In what felt like a few minutes (it really had been almost an hour) he came back to wake me and let me know that I needed to be with him in order to show my license and pay. After getting the kids up in a rush we took care of the admin stuff and we were off to find our very first "real" blind at Wister.

We drove to the designated parking spot and then started walking in the dark looking for what we thought would be a nice designated area all set up for us to simply hop onto our stools and get going. Only – we couldn't find the designated area! For a rookie unfamiliar with the numbering sequences for the sites we had no idea how far over and up the canals we needed

to walk. Again, we finally found a spot that looked “right”, opened up the folding arm chairs and sat down. No decoys, no camouflage, no face paint – no nothing. Oh, and not surprisingly – no ducks (it was only much later that I came to realize we were way off the mark).

We did see other birds that we knew weren't ducks sitting in the ponds. I had no idea what they were and Wade knew they had a name, but thought they might also be called “Mudhens”. I took note of the shape, color, size, etc and stored the mental image so I could look things up on the Internet after I got home.

Meanwhile, hours ticked by and we held to our posts.

It turned out to be a beautiful day and I witnessed one of the most spectacular sunsets I've seen in a long time.

With the day now becoming evening we packed our gear and had lots to talk about as we headed to the car that, fortunately, was much closer than the previous day. As we packed up the tent trailer we discussed all manner of things we saw, things we didn't see and things we should do differently.

One of those notes I made to myself was to make sure I located someone who's been around the duck hunting block a few times so that I could begin the process of learning the trade. A couple of weeks later I walked into Schumacher's Waterfowl Supply.

The other homework I had taken was to identify the strange looking black bird, with a white beak and green legs. I came to find out our “mudhen” was actually the American Coot. Little did I know that would take on a life all its own.

As I said, I will never, ever forget my first Duck Trip.

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

Juan “Prospect” Ossa