

Late-season goose hunters in a fog

Misty morning puts navigation skills to fowl test

MOSINEE — "I've got a map," Dennis Carey said as he backed the pickup out of the driveway of his Wausau residence into the damp, misty, pre-dawn December gloom.

"I know just where we're going. You don't have to worry that I won't be able to find the place we'll be goose hunting."

Knowing where and getting there are two different things to the creative Carey, however.

Thirty minutes later, the two of us didn't have the foggiest notion of our location.

Enveloped in animated conversation while cautiously proceeding over a wet, close-to-freezing highway, through a landscape entombed in thick pre-dawn haze, we turned off Interstate 39/51 and entered the twilight zone.

The humid conditions, abetted by the truck's speed, caused a thin layer of ice to build up on the vehicle's radio antenna, inspiring it to vibrate weirdly, as if possessed by some alien frequency.

Instantly, all earthly landmarks disappeared, shrouded by the low-lying blanket of fog, though the moon and stars twinkled overhead.

You could see up but not forward, backward or side-to-side.

If Galileo had been our navigator, we would have been fine.

"I think this is the Highway 34 exit," Carey said, peering through the impenetrable fog. "That's where I want to be. We're looking for Highway C. We'll turn right on C."

A few miles later, a small sign briefly emerged from the mist, denoting the approach of Highway C to our right.

We turned and the trip took a mind-bending twist.

Instead of quickly broaching a railroad crossing alongside a tavern in the tiny hamlet of Dancy, as expected, we found ourselves on a causeway, surrounded by what appeared to be water on both sides of the road.

"Where the heck are we?" I asked just as Carey began to mouth those same words.

Here were two guys, comfortable trekking for hours through the swamps and tag alder thickets of northern Wisconsin, confused on a



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paved highway.

We turned the truck around, backtracked to the junction with C, turned left, retraced our path a couple of miles, turned around again and drove past the connection with Highway C, trying

to make sense of a world that had turned wacky.

Gradually, after we threw out all the preconceived notions of where we were supposed to be, we determined our location.

Even then, it took some mind-bending to convince ourselves.

We had expected to be traveling south on Highway 34 but unwittingly drove past that exit, missing it by several miles, finally turning off on Highway DB.

That mistake turned our entire perspective around.

Instead of being in Dancy, we had arrived in Knowlton.

The whole mismatch took about 10 minutes to sort out but it seemed longer to a pair of hunters who were racing the clock to set out goose decoys before daylight.

Finally back on Highway 34, we made the correct turn on Highway C and reached our desired destination about 6:45 a.m.

Carey had permission from a farmer to hunt Canada geese at the edge of a picked corn field, where he had seen the birds feeding.

We found a suitable blind behind a clump of tall grass, set up 18 silhouette and four full-bodied decoys about 25 yards from our hiding place and sat back to wait for the action.

Hunting geese in central Wisconsin during December is out of place for this writer, so much so that when Carey called with the invitation to hunt, I felt compelled to ask, "Is the goose season still open?"

"I think so," Carey replied. That doubt led to quick calls to the Department of Natural Resources for clarification.

Even state wildlife officials had to do a bit of rule-checking to come up with the answer.

Though Wisconsin's duck hunting season closed Nov. 27, hunting for Canada geese would remain open in the Exterior Zone (which includes most central and northern counties) through Dec. 14 unless the DNR's harvest goals were reached earlier.



Photo courtesy of Jim Lee

Dennis Carey, accompanied by his German wirehaired pointer, carries a Canada goose through a fog-surrounded spread of goose decoys while hunting in southern Marathon County. The goose season ended Friday in the Exterior Zone.

The season had not closed early. Thus assured, we proceeded with our plans.

December goose hunting is rare in this part of the state, not only because of hunting season regulations but because of the onset of winter. When ponds, rivers, lakes and flowages freeze up, the few geese that have hung around move southward.

This fall, however, has been unusually warm. Few waterways froze over until this past week. Some geese were slow to migrate and a number of birds hung around the central counties through the Friday closing date.

For the most part, these geese encountered little hunting pressure after Nov. 17, when the gun deer season opened and hunter attention was diverted to that species.

As we settled into our makeshift blind, fog maintained a steady grip on the countryside through the first hours of would-be daylight.

Visibility was limited to the outer edge of the decoys, a factor that put a premium on auditory senses.

Carey's dog, a German wirehaired pointer, waited alertly in

silent but anxious anticipation.

To relieve the monotony and to announce our location to any geese that might be silently passing nearby, Carey occasionally played a tune on his melodious flute goose call.

About 8 a.m., a barely audible, thin cackle drifted through to our ears. Carey answered with a few return notes, which were rewarded with a single "ker-honk."

Suddenly, from out of the haze, a phalanx of about 15 big-bodied Canada geese filtered into sight barely 70 yards to our right, spotted the decoys, abruptly changed course and powered over our heads about 35 yards above ground.

We fired. One goose fell to the barrage, crashing to the sod less than 10 feet from our hideaway. The dog, which had been anticipating a serious workout, seemed chagrined to retrieve a bird almost within reach.

The goose was good-sized. We estimated the weight to be around 10 pounds, an indication it might be a giant Canada raised in Wisconsin, rather than a migrating goose from Canada.

Hoping to fill out the other half of our one goose apiece daily bag limits, we sat back to wait once more.

About 9:30 a.m., the unmistakable sound of goose chatter could be heard approaching the field.

We called eagerly. The birds obscured by the lingering fog, answered with equal fervor, calling louder as they honed in on our location.

Our anticipation grew, then just as quickly faded.

Two waves of geese, containing about 50 birds in total, poured directly overhead about 80 yards up, well beyond shooting range.

We continued calling. They responded excitedly, but continued on their way.

Fifteen minutes later, the sun drove off the last remnants of fog. We hung around for another uneventful hour, then picked up the decoys.

The return ride to Wausau was a no-brainer, which also, it has been suggested, applies to our arrival.

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