

Duck blind builds family bond

Generations share autumn hunting forays

By Jim Lee

Gannett Wisconsin Newspapers

MARINETTE — It's only a duck blind.

The camouflaged outpost shrouded in artificial spruce boughs sits snug to the peninsular shore of a northeastern Wisconsin lake.

For more than 70 years, it's been as much a part of the scenery as the deer-cropped cedars that line the wilderness lakefront.

For Steve Johnson, it's part of his roots.

"Our family has really enjoyed this place," Johnson, 34, said one recent morning while sliding a weathered aluminum boat loaded with bluebill decoys off the back of his truck in pre-dawn darkness.

The boat is an aging craft, a catalog model nearly three-quarters of a century old, purchased from Montgomery Ward by a man working his way out of the Great Depression while still maintaining high priorities for the outdoor lifestyle.

The barge-like boat has slipped the leaf- and stick-strewn course from truck down mud-lined bank into the lake's murky waters countless times. The bow cover is split in response to age, hard use and the inevitable weathering that comes from late-season hunting on an ice-enveloped lake.

The boat, like Johnson's German wirehaired pointer, seems to know its role, holding in shallow muck at the water's edge, waiting to distribute its cargo.

"My great-grandfather built the first blind," he said. "It was in the late 1920s or early 1930s. Jobs were scarce so he started a trapline. They'd drop him off and pick him up three days later, dozens of miles away.

"With all of his roaming, he



Jim Lee photo

A combination of snow and rain falls as Steve Johnson gathers decoys in front of a duck blind (right) on a small northeastern Wisconsin lake. The blind has been a focal point of his family's waterfowl hunts for more than 70 years. Accompanying Johnson is Duke, his German wirehaired pointer.

found this lake and noticed it was attractive to ducks. He and my great-grandmother dragged a boat more than a mile to get it into here."

The initial blinds were simple affairs made of brush that needed and received renovations down through the years.

Johnson, a lab technician for 3M Corp. in Wausau, was introduced to waterfowling by his parents and grandparents. His grandmother, now in her mid-80s, fondly recalls autumn afternoons spent in the hideaway alongside her husband.

One of the keys keeping the blind from passing into oblivion

has been the bonding it has forged among family members, relatives and friends fortunate enough to have been invited on a fall hunt.

"We'll have a crew up here this weekend," Johnson said. "My uncle is coming up and maybe my cousin's boyfriend. It's become a family tradition. Things can get crowded. We've had as many as five or six people in the blind."

A seat in the blind is a coveted position, even more so this year now that Johnson, who spends every October weekend and many weekdays at the site, has finished the latest remodeling and enlargement.

"I kept some of the planks and

timbers from the old blinds just to keep the memory of my grandparents and their hunts alive," he said.

For decades, the blind has contained a small charcoal stove, which throws sufficient heat to make even the most severe November storm tolerable.

The stove readily converts to a grill, ideal for roasting hot dogs or warming up venison sausage.

Several high-backed chairs allow hunters to watch the decoys while remaining well-hidden under the blind's sturdy roof. A retractable ramp for dogs to enter and exit faces the spread. Open storage is plentiful. A shelf for

holding shells, binoculars, duck calls and assorted paraphernalia runs the length of the blind.

A swinging portal allows two boats to be stored under camouflage cover immediately alongside. Canvas-like carpeting lines the walls, keeping the wind out and the confines cozy.

Spruce limbs from artificial Christmas trees gleaned from friends or rescued from curbside garbage pickup form 80 percent of the blind's canopy, enabling it to blend in with shoreline trees without having to remove live branches from the trees.

When the door closes on the boats, the blind is nearly invisible though the decoys are easily spotted by any duck approaching the lake, even in the meager light of dawn.

"Listen," Johnson whispers to two hunting companions. "A flock of bluebills just passed overhead."

The newcomers stare intently over the water, unable to see or hear anything but silent flakes of late-October snow filtering across a dreary, stormy landscape.

"You can hear their wings," Johnson says. "I just love that sound."

Seconds later, with a whoosh and a swoosh, four bluebills slip and glide their way across white-splattered blocks bobbing lightly in a fitful breeze.

As the roar of shotguns reverberates across the water, Johnson's German wirehaired pointer bursts from its observation post with full retrieval passion.

With the fallen ducks gathered, the dogs are praised and the watch begins again.

"This is an old-time hunt, like the kind you'd expect to see depicted in a painting," one of the hunters says of the combination of decoying ducks amid snowflakes.

Johnson nods, keeping an eye to the sky.

"Be alert," he says, "I hear a couple goldeneyes ... out there somewhere."