

A Strange Beginning

by Billy Gianquinto

This year I celebrate 35 years of mud and marsh slogging all over America—and especially in California—anticipating south wind storms, north winds, and heavy drifter fogs in the greater Sacramento Valley. Duck hunting has been a passion of mine all these years. But that wasn't always the case. In fact my first experience in the marsh back in '63 was just short of disaster. I hated it!

I grew up in San Francisco, and one rainy Saturday evening in 1963 I received a phone call from a good friend of mine, Bob Soper, now a teacher and coach as well as a member of the Fish and Game Advisory Board for Napa County. Soper was my boss during the summers at the Boy Scout camp in Cazadero, serving San Francisco scouts. He always had the power of persuasion and manipulation over me. He said, "Billy, go borrow a shotgun and buy a box of shells, a hunting license, and duck stamps because you're going duck hunting with me tomorrow."

"Duck hunting? I've never been duck

ran around San Francisco on what seemed like an old fashioned scavenger hunt. But, I got everything on the list. The next 18 hours would prove to be one of the worst experiences of my life. I dragged myself out of bed at 3:30 Sunday morning and met Soper at 4:00 at his house on 32nd Avenue next to Golden Gate Park. It was a blustery, rainy, cold morning. The drive seemed endless up Highway 80 then criss-crossing levees, rutted muddy roads, and what seemed like a thousand canals.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"The Suisun Marsh. Van Sickle Island," Soper replied. I figured this is what ducks like. What a desolate place. Well, the hour of reckoning had arrived. Van Sickle Island was a tiny island directly across the Sacramento River from the Pittsburg PG&E stacks. We stepped out of the car into the hard driven rain, and I immediately stepped into a puddle. Yep, wet shoes and socks and no spare pair. Bob handed me a pair of waders that were one size too small, and everyone knows how that feels.



Billy Gianquinto hunting the Dakota pothole country on "Back-country on ESPN."

shake in your hand, gave me a quick lesson on duck hunting, and then went off to his own concrete hole.

I yelled to him, "Soper, how am I supposed to shake this thing? I'm freezing my tail, hands, and feet off!"

He laughed. At least I was sheltered out of the rain in this hole. At first light the ducks began to fly. Every duck I saw, I tried to shoot. I mean 200, 300, 400 yards away. I thought the shot would go as far as a .22 rifle, but Soper yelled at me and told me shotguns don't shoot like rifles. I quickly adjusted my shooting technique. I started shaking that call. The more I shook it, the less it sounded like a mallard, but to my surprise here came a lone drake. I jumped up and fired three times, connecting on the last shot. The bird sailed about 80 yards out of sight. As I approached the dead bird I noticed there wasn't any vegetation surrounding it. And then I fell into what seemed like a deep hole. I dropped my borrowed gun, and as I fell completely submerged my waders filled up with water and panic set in. I grabbed and struggled for anything within reach. I thought I had better do something quick or I'd be a statistic. I finally grabbed hold of some vegetation and pulled myself to the pond's edge. I was freezing—soaked to the bone. I had to slip back into the water and find the shotgun, so I took off the waders and jumped in. This time, the water felt like ice cubes. I surfaced and started to call Bob.

"Soper, Sooooooper, get over here!" I screamed.

"What the heck happened to you?" he

*"I kept looking at my first and only mallard
...it appeared to be laughing at me."*

hunting before. Let's go fishing instead."

"We're going duck hunting, so be at my house at 4:00 tomorrow morning," he replied. Then he abruptly hung up the phone. I tried calling him back, but there was no answer. I figured I'd better do what he said or he would work the heck out of me the next summer.

I had never been hunting before, except when I used to chase squirrels and rabbits with a sling shot in Golden Gate Park. The only duck hunting I was familiar with were the escapades of Elmer Fudd and Daffy Duck in cartoons I watched on Saturday afternoons at the Castro Theater.

Needless to say, that Saturday night I

I could barely walk. We started toward the pond but we had to walk along the ties of an old railroad trestle bridge. Soper had the only flashlight so I followed. Not 30 steps off the bridge I fell into a four foot deep pothole. On the way down I dropped my borrowed shotgun. I'm glad I landed right side up, but I was still wet. We found my gun right away, and I said to Bob, "I'm outta here. This is nuts!" It took him 15 minutes to persuade me to continue. Finally we reached the pond, which had a sewer-like odor. I'll have to smell this all morning, I thought. Bob led me to a single, cylinder-shaped concrete hole in the ground. He handed me a duck call that you

inquired, laughing. I told him what I did, and he said, "You fell in the boat canal, you idiot." I struck back, "This is all your fault. I should have never come. Let's get outta here. Now!"

"We're staying!" he said.

I wanted to kill him at this point. I picked up the bird and the borrowed gun and walked back to the blind. Luckily, Soper had six cans of sterno heat. I draped my clothes around the lip of the blind and got into the concrete pit. I lit the cans of sterno and sat in my birthday suit shivering for what seemed like hours. Sitting there, I kept looking at my first and only mallard. Greenish head, white near the neck, but its bill was olive colored, and it appeared to be laughing at me. I yelled to Soper, "What kind of bird is this?"

"A spoonie," he replied.

"A spoonie? What's a spoonie?"


He started laughing and said it's a duck nobody shoots. Great, I thought. Here I nearly drown twice, lose a shotgun twice, and I'll probably need foot surgery from wearing these boots. My body is nearly frostbitten. All this for one duck nobody wants? I'm going home.

Driving back to the city, not a word was spoken. As I was getting out of the car, he asked, "Did you have a good time?"

I scowled at him for a while and then started laughing my head off. We were laughing so hard, we couldn't talk. When I picked up the laughing mallard our guts began to split. That was the best part of the whole trip.

What happened next? Soper invited me to go duck hunting again the next week, and I did.

The rest is history.

Billy Gianquinto has been a professional caller for 28 years. He has authored a series of videos and cassettes on calling and waterfowling. 

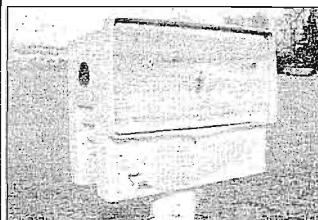
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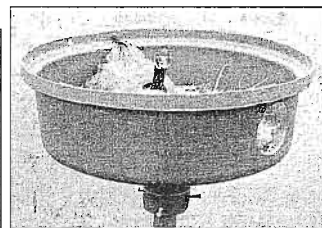


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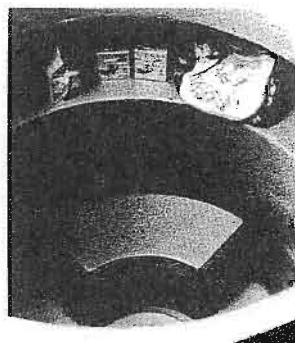
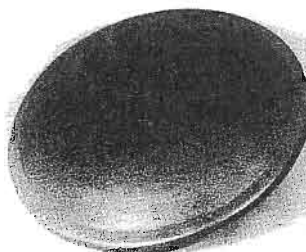
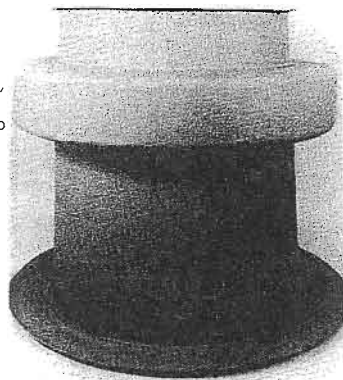
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