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# Dakota

# Potholes

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by Billy Gianquinto

Photos courtesy of the author



*The prairies were a vast ocean of uniform prairie grass with potholes everywhere.*

There isn't a waterfowler I know that doesn't dream about a once-in-a-lifetime hunt at one of many fabled locations around the globe. Argentina, Paraguay, and Columbia. The frigid Bering Sea for eiders and oldsquaws. Duck hunting in Egypt, Morocco, or Russia. I've thought about them all, but until I win the lottery I'll just have to dream a little closer to home. One place I've always wanted to hunt is the vast prairie pothole country of the Dakotas. Every time I've traveled across the country I glass this area from 30,000 feet, amazed at the thousands of tiny waterholes and wishing I was hunting one of them.

My chance to prowl the prairies came last year. Scouting for hunt locations for my television show, I decided it was time to make my dream come true. A friend of mine set up a four day shoot in Streefer, North Dakota, about 80 miles due east of Bismarck, the state capital. Since I had only three days of actual hunting, I had to choose my quarry carefully.

I've always heard about the large Canada geese of the Dakotas, ranging from eight to 18 pounds, so I picked a goose hunt and a pothole mallard hunt. I couldn't wait. After a low flight that allowed me to see the pothole country up close, I arrived in Streefer at 11:00 a.m. midweek. My host and guide, Matt Sullivan, was a 24-year-old goose caller from Northern Kentucky. He quickly greeted me and got right to the program. "What would you like first—prairie chickens, pheasants, or mallards?" I said mallards. He replied, "Boy, I have just the place for you." With that very encouraging statement, I quickly gathered my garb and gun and literally ran to his

van, which looked like two bulldozers hit it at the same time. That's my kind of guide.

I couldn't wait to see the countryside. We headed out of town, and asphalt quickly turned to dirt and gravel. The country was everything I'd ever read about—a beautiful, vast ocean of uniform prairie grass covering rolling hills. Very few fence lines were visible. As I gazed out over the prairie I visualized the great herds of buffalo and pioneer wagons wheeling over knolls and passing into the western horizon. I understood why the Sioux, Blackfeet, and Cheyenne cherished and fought for this place.

Every mile or so we saw a farmhouse. Some were abandoned, many rundown. Potholes? They were everywhere! One acre, three acres, 10 acres—every size and formation, each with hundreds of ducks. We stopped at a few potholes. The birds were so calm they never moved. That's what was so unique about this place. No gunning pressure. We weren't gone 20 minutes, and I had already taken four rolls of film. Very few trees dotted the area. The locals said that if there was a grove of trees you'd spot a nice whitetail.

We were 10 miles down the road when we approached a harvested corn field. We drove into the field and came upon an uncut section. Matt stopped the truck at the edge of the uncut corn and said, "Billy, watch this." He blew his horn. At the sound, 2,000 mallards jumped and cleared the corn. I went nuts! He told me there was a four-acre pothole just 50 yards inside the uncut corn. I was so excited I quickly jumped out of the truck, grabbed my 28 gauge and six decoys, and literally ran into

the corn, bulldozing my way the entire 50 yards. As I broke out of the corn I couldn't believe my eyes. Another 500 mallards spooked and cleared the three-foot deep pond, which had all the attributes of a Harry Adamson original. What a pond! I wasn't there two minutes, and the mallards started returning. I threw the decoys about five yards from the shore and stepped back two feet into the corn. It was a nice, natural blind. The birds started to pour back into that wonderful pond. Flocks of 100, 200 every 20 seconds. I kept thinking every duck hunter would love to be in my waders right now. I tried to take the biggest greenies I could. In less than five minutes, I had five of the fattest greenheads I'd ever seen. What a fantastic shoot. The hunt went so fast I stayed around for another two hours just watching that pond get fatter with mallards. The quacking sounds were deafening. I wished I had my camera crew there to film it. You can bet the farm a hunt like this one will be on three-quarter inch tape next season.

Next morning came the honker hunt. How could anything be better than yesterday, I thought to myself. We set 300 goose silhouettes at barely first light in a cut corn field the guides had scouted the previous night. We had time because like clockwork the honkers started flying at 7:20 a.m.

This was going to be laying-on-our-back style hunting, which I love. Wearing a face mask and the correct camouflage, every second of the incoming flight could be seen. I just started to doze off when I heard the faint honks of those massive Canadas. Matt and I started our calling sequence, and the flock headed toward us. I put my call down to see how a real goose-

calling champ did his thing. After a few more melodic honks, the Canadas set their wings in unison. I said to Matt, "Let them land on us."

"Next time," he whispered. "Get ready."

With a hundred 15-pound honkers helicoptering above our prone bodies not 15

yards away, I thought, "If we don't shoot now, they're going to land right on top of us."

"Take 'em!" Matt screamed.

As I raised up to shoot my trusty 28 loaded with bismuth number 2's, I found the closest bird and folded him clean. *Pow!* The second closest fell. *Pow!* The third bird

crumbled. If they weren't so close, I wouldn't have gambled. I had my limit, so for the rest of the morning shoot I played retriever for our group. I enjoyed this type of hunting for three days, and I can honestly tell you I never saw another hunting party nor did I hear any shooting from a distance. It was as pristine as you can get.

Every day the countryside amazed me. During off-hours I drove the back roads to explore, and the potholes continued everywhere. Every now and then a covey of prairie chickens would flush from the sound of the van. When these birds flushed, they were gone—and they didn't stop. I glassed one flock that glided for at least half a mile. What a challenging target. This was a wonderful part of the country.

I think all waterfowlers should experience the fine wingshooting and splendid beauty that the ancient Dakotas have to offer. If you've been dreaming for something 10,000 miles from home, there's no need. A two and half hour flight from either coast to this magnificent area will make any waterfowler's dream come true.

*The author has been a professional caller for 28 years. He has authored a series of videos and cassettes on calling and waterfowling.* 🦆



Billy Gianquinto (center front) experienced the trip of a lifetime in the prairie country.

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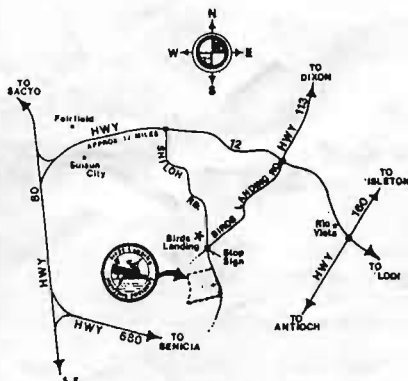
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