

DUCKS DOWN UNDER

By Billy Gianquinto

I was squirming in my United business class seat in anticipation of a waterfowl hunt of a lifetime down under in New Zealand. I didn't sleep a wink during the eleven-hour flight.

It all started back in 1998 lying flat on my back, freezing my toes off, hunting Canada Geese in a west Texas peanut field. I turned to my guide (Matt Sullivan) and asked him if he ever heard about the giant Canada goose hunting in New Zealand? His reply, "No, what about it"? I told him I heard a rumor that the Canada's down there are hunted year round with no limit. "You should look into it", I suggested.

A year later I received a call from Matt's boss, Danny O'dell, thanking me for the suggestion. He started to tell me in his unique Louisiana drawl about his 1999 waterfowl look'see mission down under. "Billy you won't believe it", he said. "It's unbelievable", "New Zealand is like California in the 1890's". "There's no limit on honkers 365 days a year". The Mallard population is between four to six million birds with a twenty bird per day limit. You can shoot lead-and get this-you can bait your pond as much as you want. That's all I needed to hear to get my adventurous juices flowing.

I wanted to do a story for the California Waterfowl Magazine so I immediately set up the trip for the following season. Only one thing was wrong, I had just three days to shoot during the last part of the season at the end of June. Finally, June 19, 2000 arrived. I boarded that United flight from Los Angeles to Auckland, (not Oakland). I couldn't wait to experience the shooting and to see the countryside. After a restful sleep on the first morning I met Dave Collins, my guide, who is one of the top guides and knows the north and south islands like the back of his hand.

He set up a Mallard hunt for me the next morning and an afternoon duck and pheasant hunt on Slipper Island, owned by one of his friends. He said, "Let me first introduce you around Auckland for the rest of the day". For the next nine hours I picked Dave's brain apart with a thousand questions. The answers he gave me were mind boggling. Here are some of his replies. There are no limits on Red deer, Fallow deer, Thar (mountain goats from the Himalayas), Pacific mountain goats or wild pigs. The government deems these animals as pests as they are not indigenous to the country. Dave stated that there are so many wild pigs you could kill a hundred a day and never thin them out. Europeans come to New Zealand to kill countless animals to be shipped and sold back to their countries. In many areas farmers pay and lodge you to kill as many honkers as possible because they over graze in problem areas and their feces cause decay and disease to many crops. There are Black swans with seven to eight foot wing spans that can be shot at night, which I didn't particularly want to. But it's legal. Also in problem areas there are no limits on these gigantic birds. In fact, while I was there a party of two with government permission bagged 135 Black swans on Lake Taupo the morning I arrived. There are no snakes on either the north or south islands, which surprised me. And what really baffled me is there are no predators at all except for a weasel type animal that was introduced recently. There are

thousands of California Valley quail, Bobwhites and Pheasants, which can be hunted for four months. He spoke of Grey ducks, which resembled black ducks of our East Coast. This guy was painting a virtual hunter's paradise. On top of everything he mentioned the paradise Shelduck (the size of our Cackler) that can be bagged in droves and the Pukeko, a black and blue feathered giant mutation of our own Mudhen.

After a great dinner of Red deer steaks I had difficulty digesting the magnitude of hunting opportunities to New Zealand visitors. The next morning we left Auckland at 4:00 a.m. bound for Hamilton on our way to our Mallard hunt. I still hadn't seen the countryside and wouldn't until after the morning hunt. We arrived at a fairly big farm pond and at first light here they came. Flock after flock of Mallards and Grey ducks. I jumped on them with my Olt double reed and had every flock set up to close. Thousands of birds. I couldn't wait to pull the trigger. But I didn't. That's right, I didn't. At sixty yards every swarm veered off and split. I couldn't believe it. I traveled 12,000 miles to be out smarted by the very bird that I fooled so many times for 38 years. What was wrong? I had to inquire about this situation. My guides informed me that the ducks and geese do not migrate from New Zealand. They're all residents. Constant pressure for a month and a half had made these birds super wary.

That afternoon we boated to Slipper Island, a tiny seven hundred-acre island off of the Pacific Coast. We had much better luck there. We bagged several Mallards, pheasant and Pukeko in a tiny marsh. That evening David received great reports from clients' a hundred miles to the south. They bagged eighty Mallards and just as many Honkers. I was beginning to realize that I should have planned for a longer stay, which on this trip was impossible.

The next day I got a great glimpse of the countryside. Mountains, like in California, and valleys best described as rolling green pasture exactly like the diary country outside of Petaluma to Bodega Bay. It looked just like home. During mid day we stopped at a Red deer farm to hunt a remote pond owned by an interesting character, 'George the goose man'. We had a wonderful Mallard shoot and also bagged a few Black swans during the late afternoon.

The next day I had to leave for home, which I was reluctant to do. If I only had a little more time I could have fished Lake Taupo for monster trout and hunted Mallards and honkers on the south island which yielded big bags during the entire season. Waiting for my flight home I told David the next time I will be back for the opener plus a couple of weeks. Three days and I still had a fabulous time. But next time, I'll be much better prepared.

You can hunt Mexico or Argentina and fabulous shooting, but the Mallard and Canada honker shooting down under is beyond belief. To book a hunt contact Danny O'Dell at **TEXAS BLACKFOOT OUTFITTERS** at 1-806-885-1664.

Next trip Mallards and honkers in Oklahoma.