

KING CAN

In my book, the canvasback is the king of all waterfowl. Majestic in stature with its size, crimson head, and silvery breast. The can is the fastest duck in North America, reaching speeds of up to 65 miles per hour. Beautiful as it is, in my opinion it's number one at the dinner table by far. One of the oldest myths among waterfowlers is that cans frequent saltwater so they taste fishy. This is true to a point, if you don't draw the bird immediately after retrieving it, you've wasted ammunition. It will taste like an old seagull. But, if you do, oh brother, are they delicious. Better than grain fed puddlers.

Canvasbacks were market gunned in the 1800's and early 1900's almost to extinction. Even today the can population doesn't even come close to their ancient numbers. But, up to a point, they are holding their own. The main wintering grounds for cans in California are Humboldt Bay and the greater San Francisco Bay area. And believe me, it takes a salty-hearty duck hunter to score on cans.

My fascination with the king began back in 1965 along the shores of San Pablo Bay. My old college chum, Tommy Zunino, talked constantly about the wild can hunts he and his dad, Lowell, experienced. I wanted in, but Tommy said his dad would kill him if he ever revealed his secret can spots. So I offered Tommy a trade. A pig hunt for a can hunt. He finally relented and took a chance that his dad might shoot and miss. After Tommy killed his pig I was ready for my end of the bargain. What lay ahead was one of the most dangerous hair raising experiences of my life, and Tommy's too.

I picked my partner up at his house in San Rafael and we drove to the Sonoma Creek Bridge on highway 37. It was a cloudy day, but no storms were predicted. The bay was as flat as glass. I only had a twelve-foot boat and a one-an-a-half horse outboard engine in those days, which served me well. On a day like today we thought we would be okay. Oh boy was I wrong.

We launched the boat by an old run down shack, said to be Fresh Air Dick Janssens' decoy house, where he widdled his way into American folklore. (Currently most of his wooden decoys

range into the thousands of dollars). After loading the boat with our gear, we were off, Tommy and I and my black lab "Seiko" on the bow of the boat. Now, I need to remind you that this was my first time on San Pablo Bay. I thought it would be flat and calm all the time. As we rounded the mouth of Sonoma Creek we could see Lowells' rundown shore blind. My anticipation grew. But I didn't see any ducks. "You will" Tommy said, "as soon as the outgoing tide moves". Ah, my first can lesson. Just in front of the blind we put out two dozen can decoys. No pattern just tossed them overboard. After we squared things away in the blind I motored a couple of hundred yards down the shoreline, covered the boat and started walking back to the blind. Before I reached the blind I could see in the distance over the bay what looked to me like great swarms of bees. "Billy, Billy" Tommy screamed, "Here they come". At that point I was running. Flock after flock of canvasbacks started buzzing our decoys. The limit was two cans at that time so we decided to watch for a while. Now I know why Tommy said his dad might shoot him. This was unbelievable. There were at least 40 to 50 birds to each flock. They would make one swing, set their wings and make a long glide into the decoys. For 45 minutes, we watch this magnificent process, flock after flock. During that time approximately 500 cans had been swimming and diving among the decoys. In many ways it was the greatest tease of my life. Finally, I said to Tommy "let's take the next flock". After three flocks, nine shots and four flawless retrieves by Seiko we were ready to get out of there. However, there was one thing we didn't count on. The wind had started to pick up and the sky had turned darker. We had a storm that was coming in fast. Tommy said, "we need to move now". Even to this day I have never seen a storm get up so fast and have a kick like a mule. By the time I got the boat, there were four-foot waves, and the water looked like the inside of a washing machine. We managed to retrieve the decoys and headed for Sonoma Creek. It had been raining for ten minutes, but now it was coming down so hard we couldn't see one hundred feet in front of us. Waves were pounding the boat and cresting over the bow. We started bailing water with our hats,

which didn't do much good. We were getting pretty darn scared by the time a large wave broke over the bow and washed Seiko overboard. I couldn't get to him but he managed to follow in the water. Damn, what a dog. That one-and-a-half-kicker engine was just not enough. "Tommy, we have to make a decision," I yelled. "Lets turn into shore" he responded. We made it to the shore, but we were still at least a mile from the mouth of the creek. We thought Seiko was directly in back of the boat, but there was no sign of him. Visibility was poor. We yelled and screamed for him, but we were running competition with the storm. We decided to leave the boat on shore, grab our gear and walk out. We would come back for the boat tomorrow. It was starting to get dark and I was reluctant to leave without my dog, somehow I knew I didn't have a choice. The rain and wind continued to get worse. After what seemed like hours we trudged through muck and mud and finally reached highway 37, solid ground. As we approached the truck, and for the second time today, I could not believe my eyes. Seiko was standing in the back of the truck, safe and sound, only a different color. He was solid gray. He must of found the muddy shoreline and made his own way back to the truck. Tommy and I, though still a little rattled, laughed and hugged Seiko. All of us had made it back safely, with our guns and gear and our four King Cans.

I will never forget that day. We learned a valuable lesson through our experience. The Boy Scout Motto. Be aware and be prepared. Oh yes, Seiko rode up front in the truck with us – mud and all – all the way home. By the way, Tommy's dad shot and missed, and we've been hunting cans ever since.