



DOGS AT WORK

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TY SMEDES

IT WAS A COLD AND BLUSTERY morning in early November and one of those days that every duck hunter anticipates. A fierce northwest wind had ushered in a cold front, with rapidly falling nighttime temperatures and it was now below freezing. My own wetland and duck blind were just a stone's throw away, but today I would be hunting at a neighboring marsh with my friend and neighbor, Chuck Lenze. Lenze had invited me along and more than anything, I was itching to see his retriever in action.

The eastern sky began to glow as we entered the old wooden duck blind, just a few minutes before shooting time. And the howling wind seemed to carry a message—that fall would soon draw to a close. We both knew it to be a favorable wind—a tail-wind that migrating ducks like to hitch a ride upon. Lenze's Chesapeake Bay retriever, Chip, took his usual place at a small opening in the front of the blind. It was a spot Chip knew well, and he began eagerly searching the skies for waterfowl. With duck and goose calls at the ready and guns loaded, we also began to scan the sky. It was shooting time.

Chuck Lenze and Chip, his retriever, are a solid team. Lenze uses both voice and hand signals to direct his well-trained retriever to fallen ducks.

Because wary ducks can be spooked by the flash of a hunter's face, the use of a face-mask is a good precaution.



A brown retriever dog is seen from the side, looking out from a small opening in a dark wooden blind. The dog is wearing a light-colored collar with a gold tag. Outside the blind, there is a body of water with tall, thin reeds or grasses growing in it. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting an early morning or late afternoon setting.

Retriever Resources

In the field, one of the best methods to reduce lost game is to use a trained retriever.

Lenze suggests contacting a dog club to get started with training.

- The Mid-Iowa Retriever Club (AKC) conducts hunt tests
<http://mirc.shutterfly.com>.

Iowa's North American Hunting Retriever Association clubs include:

- Skunk River Hunting Retriever Association
<http://skunkriverdogs.org> (southeast Iowa),
- Eastern Iowa Hunting Retriever Association www.eihra.net
- The Midwest Retriever Club (Des Moines & southwest Iowa)
midwestretrieverclub.org
- Okoboji Retriever Club okobojirc.org.

The North American Hunting Retriever Association, www.nahra.org, simulates real hunting situations for waterfowling and upland hunting. Tests simulate an actual day's hunt in the field.

Chip took his usual place at a small frontal-opening in the blind. It was a spot the Chesapeake knew well, and he began eagerly scanning the skies for waterfowl.

Soon we spotted a small flock of ducks to the west—as they flew down Beaver Creek. But our calling was to no avail. The crosswind was just too strong, and the sound of our hail-calls just didn't reach them. Continuing onward, they were soon out of sight. A few minutes passed and several more small flocks moved by, but far to the west. To our frustration, not one flock came close enough to see our decoys or hear our hail calls. But then, with a sudden swish of wings, a trio of mallards banked in and hung above the decoys. We scrambled to shooting position, shots rang out and two drakes tumbled into the decoy spread. Because the third duck was a hen, we allowed her to continue her journey.

Chip leaped through the small dog door and into the water. He had watched the birds fall and had them marked. A strong and powerful swimmer, it didn't take long for the Chesapeake Bay retriever to fetch them up. Chip didn't wait for his master to send him.

If Chip doesn't see the bird fall, he is sent on a blind retrieve, first lined up in the direction he should go. “

“Hopefully, he will go in a straight line to the bird; but if he is off line, you blow a whistle to get his attention and stop him. You then give a hand signal to restart the dog in the direction you want. You might use your voice—or not—depending on how much of a correction you want to make and what obstacles are ahead,” explains Lenze.

Chip retrieved the pair of mallards and we settled back onto the bench when three gadwall came rocketing downwind from the west. Several hail calls turned them, and we switched to greeting calls as the trio cautiously circled several times. Although gadwall are often hard to

decoy, these birds appeared to want down out of the wind. With our heads down, we continued to call—looking straight ahead and over the decoys. Duck hunters often mistakenly look up when they've lost sight of circling ducks, and that flash of the face usually sends a flock of keen-eyed waterfowl climbing sharply away. Our patience was rewarded when the trio dropped below the bills of our caps, fluttering downward, hanging in the wind and just past the decoys. Once again we sprang into action, and three ducks folded.

This time Chip wasn't at his private doorway and didn't see the birds fall, so Lenze sent him on a blind retrieve. Lenze and Chip put on a clinic as I watched. The teamwork between hunter and dog was something special to behold, and the many hours of training and dedication were paying off. Using a combination of whistle, hand and voice commands, it was water-dog work at its best. Soon, Chip fetched the gadwall trio and was again at his master's side. The morning flight was over.

First of Many Chessies

Lenze began duck hunting as a Mason City youngster and recalls shooting his first mallard at a marsh not far from Zirbel's Slough. “A Mason City hardware store owner had a Chessie that caught my interest. I bought my first one from a kennel in New Prague, Minn. and over the years I've come to own nine Chessies. I became interested in formal training when local hunter and friend Bruce Mountain invited me to an AKC hunt test in Lincoln, Neb. I began formally training my second Chesapeake, and he went on to achieve a 'Working Retriever' title.

I now regularly enter my dogs in hunting trials and sometimes do some judging. I'm also a Midwest Retriever Club officer. I love the dog work, and I start working my dogs each year in January, since hunt trials begin in April and last till September.”

A week later I joined Lenze on another hunt. It was another sub-freezing morning, and the boat dock greeted us with a slick layer of frost as the eastern sky began to glow. As we carefully loaded ourselves, the dog and gear into the boat, the little outboard motor caught my eye. Its styling was from a time gone by, and the little engine sported a mallard decal on the front, along with the





Flagging is a technique used to attract geese at great distances. A goose-colored flag is waved to attract the attention of keen-eyed, motion-sensitive geese. The practice is often quite effective at gaining their initial attention, when calling can't yet be heard.





This duck boat is powered by a 1958 Evinrude Duck Twin motor, which is just a 3 horsepower outboard. Never the less—it runs smooth as silk because it's a two-cylinder engine.

A large Canada goose is a load, but the big Chesapeake had no trouble toting his prize back to the blind.



words “Duck Twin.”

“It’s a 1958 Evinrude Duck Twin. It’s just a three-horsepower motor but it runs smoothly because it’s a two-cylinder engine,” says Lenze. It took three pulls to start the little engine, but once it fired, it ran smooth as silk. Not bad for a 53-year-old!

This time we occupied an island blind which faced eastward, centered in several acres of open water. It was a cloudy morning, so we didn’t worry about looking into the sun.

Lenze’s younger dog, Rudy, was our canine companion. Rudy was just 20 months old, eager to hunt and excited to be our hunting partner. Our decoy spread of a few field decoys were anchored in the mud just in front of the blind, as well as several dozen duck and Canada floaters. The northwest wind was at our backs, so incoming waterfowl would likely cross the large body of open water when approaching our set. Soon it was shooting time, and all eyes were on the sky.

Before long, the music of incoming Canada geese could be heard, as a flock of a dozen or so appeared in the distance. Lenze began flagging while I called. Flagging is a technique used to attract geese at a great distance, by waving a goose-colored flag to attract the attention of these keen-eyed, motion-sensitive waterfowl. The practice is often quite effective at gaining their initial attention when calling can’t yet be heard. But the geese didn’t quite buy it, and disappointingly, they continued onward.

Soon, a single Canada called in the distance, and again we called and flagged. The goose immediately swung in our direction on a straight line—as if on a string—and descended towards our decoy spread. Shots rang out and the goose folded. It was time for Rudy to gain some experience as Lenze directed the young dog towards the downed goose. Rudy had not seen it fall, and his master directed him, using voice commands and hand signals. The goose sailed some distance away before folding, but when Rudy eventually spotted the downed goose he easily retrieved it to his master’s hand. The young dog’s inexperience showed, but impressed all with his desire to please. Rudy showed great promise and will mature into a well-trained retriever.

So what is Lenze’s favorite retriever moment? Hunting a public area in central Iowa, some neighboring hunters dropped several ducks and their two dogs weren’t able to retrieve two wounded ducks that continued to dive. Again and

again they sent their quickly tiring dogs. Exhausted, both dogs gave up. Lenze sent his dog with the other hunters hollering, “your dog is gonna drown,” as his Chesapeake launched after the wounded ducks.

Lenze’s dog had a knack of saving energy by waiting out a diving duck. Eventually he could wear down a wounded bird. The determined Chessie retrieved both ducks, and Lenze delivered them to the neighboring hunters who suffered greatly from wounded pride.

“Another time I sent my dog into the marsh to retrieve a wounded duck. We were surrounded by other duck hunters and everyone had experienced great shooting that morning. By the time my dog worked the vegetation, he not only retrieved my wounded bird but found five others! I can’t emphasize enough how the use of a well trained retriever is just good conservation,” he says. 🐾

GET IN THE FIELD

Buy your state waterfowl stamp and hunting license online at iowadnr.gov. Federal duck stamps are available at most post offices. Both stamps are required to hunt migratory waterfowl.

A single Canada responded to both calling and flagging, and came straight into the decoys—as if on a string.

