



# MOUNTAIN MALLARDS

A PLAIN DISCOURSE ON DUCK SHOOTING IN THE ROCKIES

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ESSAY AND ART BY RUSSELL CHATHAM



WINTER, YELLOWSTONE RIVER SUITE

**T**he official opening of duck season always seems inappropriately early. This is especially true in the northern Rockies, where the first week in October is usually warmed by Indian summer. It isn't out of place, then, to look forward to a rather personal opening day, which may not arrive until the first of November.

If you're somewhat indecisive anyway, and anything less than a fanatic about duck shooting, October offers plenty of other field sports to divert your attention: upland bird hunting for pheasants and five species of grouse. And in the late fall, trout fishing, the best of the year.

It's hard to predict when the first real cold will hit the Canadian prairies, freezing potholes and putting birds in the air in long, uneven strings aimed south. It doesn't happen all at once. Ducks, in common with other migratory creatures, sometimes move for reasons not easily detected or understood. There will come a day, for instance, when I step outdoors in Livingston and sense fall in the air. Ordinarily this will be in late August and I won't be able to explain precisely what it is I feel, but it is there. Animals must surely feel these pivotal changes with a good deal more clarity than I do. Ducks, in their thoughtless serving of ancient instinct, simply blast up out of the pond, climb to 3,000 feet and hold at a steady 40 miles an

hour, following the bright ribbons of rivers far below.

Let's say this personal opening day starts in the afternoon, because I haven't gotten up early enough to organize a dawn hunt. It is snowing intermittently, with the wind gusting out of the north. The general deer and elk seasons have just opened, thus diverting hunting pressure; it seems a perfect time to privately open the waterfowl season, which has been open to everyone else for several weeks.

The initial hunt involves walking around a tract of land of perhaps 50 acres, laced with potholes, ditches, and a small, winding spring creek. There are bound to be some mistakes. One happens immediately when four mallards jump out of the stream near the car, well before I've loaded the gun. I tense, imagining that this late and futile gesture will prevent it from happening again.

The first spot that normally holds a few ducks is a tiny spring at the head of a slough, hidden well in the cottonwoods and rich with watercress. I calculate a wrong turn and end up in a wild-rosebush thicket, staring at a confused cottontail. I back out, go way around, and come to the spring as if by surprise. There are no ducks. While I stare blankly at the water as if something might crawl out from beneath the 'cress, two mallards that have been sitting off to the side jump and squawk, keeping a cottonwood between us as they climb out fast.

**T**he next stop is an open pond, with some good cover for a sneak. I peer carefully through the trees and underbrush and see about a dozen birds on the water. At a distance they are at first hard to identify; closer they top up, scoot around, and distinguish themselves as green-winged teal. It's necessary to crawl the last little way to get within range. Once there, I look cautiously through the chokecherry and see the birds well bunched up. I stand abruptly to make them fly; the ducks blast straight up, then flare away, catching the wind. I manage to isolate one on the rise, elevate above it and drop it cleanly. It is the only one.

I walk along the creek, alternating in and out of cottonwoods and pines. It's too windy to be able to hear ducks talking, but beyond the trees an occasional single or double cir-

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cles, looking for a resting place. At the edge of a clearing I stop and watch. Most of the birds are very distant, coming into sight above the dark mountains. One comes beating straight toward me. There is little time to decide whether he is within range or in the foolishness zone. I opt for the former and swing up behind the fast-moving bird, which pulls way out in front by 10, maybe 12, feet. It is a long, sweeping grandstand play, the kind I hope works in spite of everything. Luck has it and the dead drake mallard soars a hundred yards into the creek.

The next two holes are empty, so I make the circle back to the car. There is perhaps an hour-and-a-half of shooting time left and I want to set out some decoys on a pond about a mile away. There is no real way of approaching the pond under cover, and the bunch of mallards floating on it flare. They circle once, wanting to drop back in, but I'm too far from the underbrush to run for it, so I crouch like a lum-mox with my bag of decoys. The ducks wing on up the valley.

**S**ix or seven decoys are enough, partly because more than that are hard to carry, and partly because on these little creeks and ponds using more than a dozen is pointless. There are no massive flights here, as along the major flyways. I've seen singles, doubles or sometimes small flocks of eight, ten, or twelve birds looking for a place to drop in and rest.

In the wind the decoys sit taut at the end

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of their tethers, swaying slowly back and forth. The blind is a space in the choke-cherry bushes about 20 yards from the pond. Theoretically, birds should be taken at the ideal distance of 20 to 30 yards, as they set to come in, pass over for a look-within range, or flare up and away.

The first two ducks to come over don't realize this. The loud whistle of their wings is heard only seconds before they fly directly overhead from behind, getting out of range at once. The next bird follows the script more closely. A drake mallard drops in, wings set and wavering, like a high looping softball pitch coming to the plate. I stand, let him start to flare, and drop him into the decoys.

The next bunch is more interesting. First seen at a distance, they circle widely, staying in sight. When they come over for a look I attempt a high-ball call which comes out sounding more like Zoot Sims than I had hoped. They seem not to have heard from upwind because they veer, pick up speed and begin losing altitude. Ordinarily mallards are not this forgiving when hooted at inately. I tuck the call away, thank God for small favors, and resolve in the future to stick to the more innocuous feeding gabble. When ducks come in like this they are nearly always traveling faster than is apparent. Or else their angle of descent is deceiving, because I poke two neat holes in the sky while the ducks move on unruffled, if not entirely unnerved.

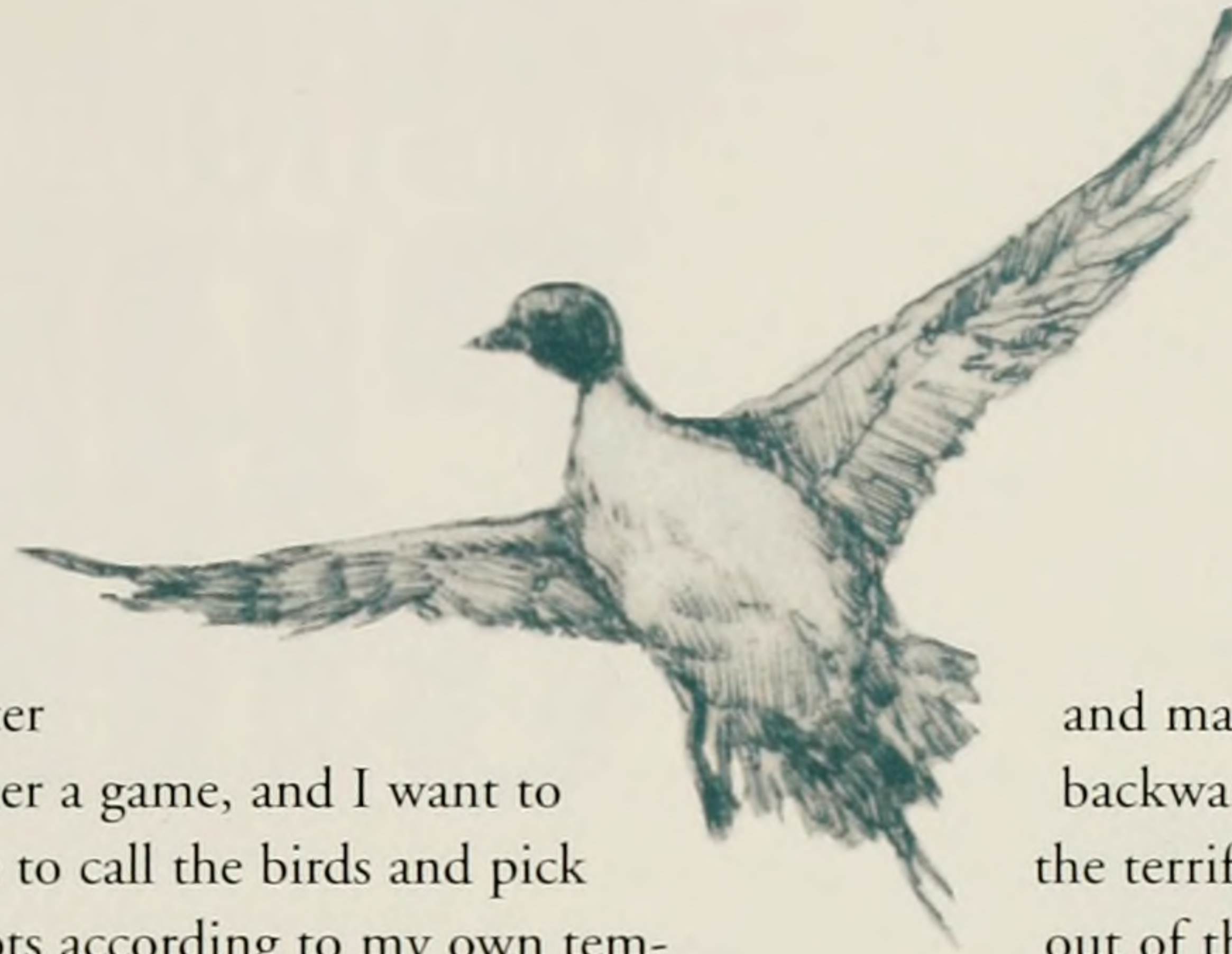
It is nearing the end of shooting time. Mallards move well at twilight hour and this evening is no exception. Birds begin coming in with regularity against the wind. There are the always-mysterious misses, and finally, two more mallards go down to

make a limit. As I go out to pick up the decoys, a distant sound is borne in on the wind, one which takes some moments to register. It always sounds a bit like dogs barking far away or people talking in the next room. Even when I know full well what it is there can be a recognition lapse.

A line of Canada geese is coming in unseen below the cottonwoods. Ten seconds, twenty seconds, and then I see them against the sky and know at once they must pass directly overhead. They are within shooting range and I huddle under the decoy sack, afraid to move. Geese within range always look far too big, like the letters in a first-grade reader. I'm not specifically hunting for them and don't get that many chances to see them in range. Overhead their talking is very loud, the wing beats clearly audible. The trick with geese is to lead the head and not the body, and to remember, again, that they appear to be moving slower than they really are.

I have plenty of time to think about these things before it's time to raise up. I take the lead bird before it is upon me and hear the shot hit. It wavers but doesn't fall. The second shot is when it is right overhead, and the goose collapses, hitting the ground with a terrible thud. Opening day is over and I couldn't have diagrammed a better one.

**I** never really get used to seeing ducks high in the northern Rockies. The first glimpse of them strung out above a jagged rimrock of the Absaroka Range reminds me of the strange gargoyles in the *Wizard of Oz* that come down from the witch's castle to attack Dorothy and friends. The birds find sanctuary in this harsh land-



scape down in the river valleys and in spring creeks and ponds. Such relief is relatively scarce compared with the vast expanses of open, dry prairie and sharp, high peaks, and the birds must naturally follow a course which keeps them in view of places to feed and rest....

**D**ucks begin to appear about the first of October after the early storms sweep across Canada. After that, sportsmen start thinking about putting the trout tackle away, buying ammunition, and making appointments with the service station to have their cars winterized.

I sometimes arm myself as a hyphenate, putting the shotgun over my left shoulder and the fly rod over my right. Usually I end up with neither ducks nor trout. There I am, waiting in the blind for an hour with nothing going over, watching a trout rising just past the decoys. I give in and step forward with the fly rod, and moments after putting down the trout with a nervous, clumsy cast, two dozen mallards flare away in panic as I foolishly rush back to the blind.

Finally, Indian summer breaks and the cold sets in for good. Trout fishing is still a possibility, but one's attention turns more firmly to ducks and geese, which show in more impressive numbers. A good duck day now will not be confused with a good trout day. Of course, a big game hunter might want to torment himself with that particular conflict, but that's another story....

Good duck hunters must be jealous of the places they shoot. The reasons seem obvious enough. The birds should be able to work in a natural pattern, undisturbed.

It is after all rather a game, and I want to be able to call the birds and pick my shots according to my own temperament and not someone else's.

The best way to hunt mallards, or more accurately, the most interesting way, is to blend jump and decoy shooting. Mallards move best at dawn and dusk, and in between I can usually work out some sort of walk by which to jump them out of ponds, potholes, or ditches. I can do this after an early morning decoy shoot, or in the afternoon before setting the decoys out for the evening flight. Pass shooting—walking the river and taking the luck of the draw, as it were—is usually the hardest way of filling a limit....

Once there is snow on the ground, the matter of visiting favorite duck water incognito is vastly simplified by use of the Sheet Ploy. A simple white bedsheet wrapped around him makes the hunter largely invisible even to the most suspicious of ducks....

Don't be discouraged if your first experience hunting with the Sheet Ploy doesn't work out exactly right. Aside from feeling like a fool, you may have trouble getting settled in a way that will let you spring into action without becoming hopelessly tangled in the sheet. You may feel like a gunfighter in a full-length raccoon coat.

Let's say I have six decoys floating in a likely pond. Above the horizon a large flock of mallards is coming right in, wings set, rocketing down from a thousand feet. I peer at them from under the sheet, feeling like a vigilante. When they are on top of the decoys I make my move, but I am standing on the critical edge of the sheet

and manage only to topple over backwards. Still hoping for a shot at the terrified ducks, which are climbing out of there as fast as possible, I raise the gun and the wind blows a corner of the sheet up over my eyes.

But let's assume I manage to make a version of the Sheet Ploy work. Now I'm on the back porch, both hands full of ducks. A surprising number of hunters lose interest at this point. Some say picking the birds is too much work; others lack any interest in them as table fare.

**I**t's my opinion that wild duck is one of the most superb game meats in the world. If you like steaks well done, you might as well stop reading right here. Eating a well-done steak is not unlike eating an alarm clock. You won't like a fully cooked duck either....

Unless you hunt the southern part of the range where weather is apt to be a bit on the warm side, ducks are best hung. Where weather is always cool, as it is in Montana, five days is about right. Clean the birds but leave them feathered. The purpose of hanging is to tenderize as well as help develop the flavor. All the birds feed on grain and corn and are universally sweet tasting.

Wild duck has less fat than the leanest of beef fillets. Therefore, the main error to avoid in preparing them is overcooking. An overdone wild duck is loathsome and inedible.... Any meal of wild duck is a special treat, special enough to make even the most resolute complainer forget about how frustrating it was to pull those pinfeathers, or how cold the pond was as it came in over the top of the hip boots when reaching for the prize. 🐼