



DIVERS & SEA DUCKS

With more and more hunters seeing less and less puddle ducks, many are turning to diver hunting!

The following is my opinion of diver & sea duck hunting on Virginia's lower Eastern Shore. I have had no experience on the great lakes, or for that matter anywhere other than the

east coast. I have hunted what I consider "big water", the Atlantic Ocean.

Those changing to diver and or sea duck hunting will soon find out the only thing diver hunting and puddle duck hunting have in common is that they are both ducks. Divers, Sea ducks and Mergansers are faster, harder to hit and harder to kill than puddle ducks or Canada geese. The good news is there are more of them than there are puddle ducks and they like to get shot.

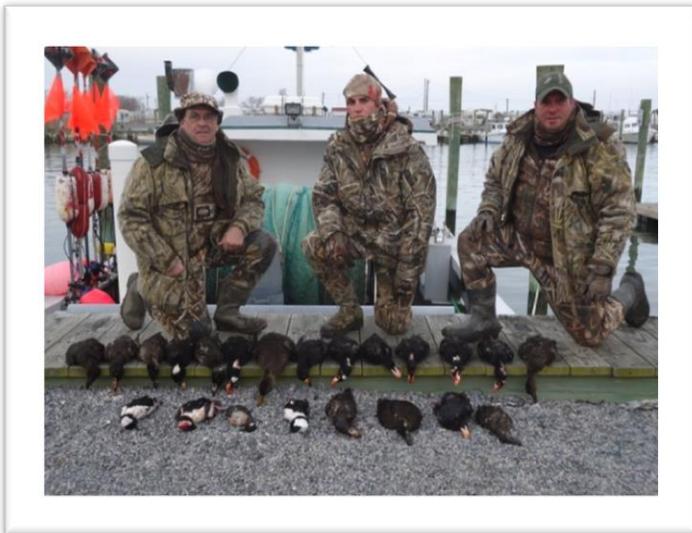
If you are thinking about heading out with a bunch of jugs painted black you are going to be disappointed. On the other hand if you think it requires 50 or more decoys tied to long lines you will be pleasantly surprised. If you are hunting the bays and creeks along Virginia's Eastern Shore you will need 7 to 9 quality decoys, if hunting the larger bays and sounds you will need 12 to 15. In the ocean I sometimes put out 17 to 19.



I throw all my decoys individually, I never use long lines. You will often see flocks of over 100 birds on the sea side bays and flocks of over 1000 on the Chesapeake, they are not going to come to your spread. If you put out 60 decoys, they still aren't coming. Your goal should be to try to attract anywhere from 1 to 10 birds. They are the ones that belong to a different political party than the big flocks and are searching for another group to join. Your decoys should be spread out 10 to 20 yards from your boat or blind. The maximum range for the average shot to hit

a moving target is about 35 yards. I have seen hunters consistently hit well beyond 35 yards and have seen many miss a bird sitting in the water at less than 10 yards. Your decoys should be in a random pattern 3 to 5 feet apart, not in a Y or J or any other letter. There should not be a landing area, they aren't supposed to land. You should be shooting your birds in the air, while they are looking for a place to land. When a diver or sea duck is sitting in the water you have a kill zone about the size of your thumb, that's their head, everything else that's important is under water.

Divers pitch to divers. I mix my spread with Bufflehead, Bluebill and Goldeneye. Later in the season I add Redheads and Canvasbacks. Scoters pitch to Scoters and Oldsquaw pitch to Oldsquaw. One of the most effective ways to hunt divers and sea ducks is from a pole blind, especially for those just getting started. You will be



shooting down at most of your birds, so you will be able to see your shot hit the water and see how far that you missed the bird by. No one shoots in front of the bird, most shots are as much as 10 feet behind the bird. As Andy Linton says "You need to shoot where he's going, not where he's been". For those with experience in open water hunting, layout boats can also be a lot of fun.

When diver/sea duck hunting you should take 3 box's of shells. When the birds are flying as they should and you are shooting as you should, hunters typically will average about 10 rounds per bird. Ammo has been hard to get, if you can find 3x5 mixed shot size, that's what I would recommend. Number 2's or 4's are also a good choice. Keep in mind, all things being equal the larger the shot size, the harder it is to penetrate the birds feathers. Large shot size knocks down a lot of birds, but doesn't kill as many. I can't tell you how many times I get a call on the radio "dead bird". When I show up at the blind and ask where the bird is, I get

that puzzled look and they say “it was right over there?”. To kill divers/ sea ducks you need to keep shot in the air. When the birds are coming into your spread, you need to start shooting and don't stop until it lays its head down on the water.

Feet up in the air don't count, they will roll over and dive and you will never see them again. No, they don't hold on to anything on the bottom. Depending on the species and how hard they are hit, they can swim over 50 yards underwater, they pop their head up for a second to take a breath and their next surface is over 100 yards. If you are out in open water watch for seagulls or eagles, they can spot the cripples from the air and wait until they are tired for an easy meal.



Sea duck hunting is weather sensitive, diver hunting not so much. If the wind is blowing over 15 knots, or the forecast is for over 15 knots, it's not the day to sea duck hunt. On the other hand, some of our best diver hunts have been from bank blinds in wind over 30 mph. If heading out on your own by boat be sure to let someone know where you are going and when you plan to be back. Cell phone service is not available in many areas along the eastern shore. A fixed mount VHF will often work better than a cell phone. Take flares to use as a last resort. The species of divers in our area include; Bufflehead, Bluebill (greater & lesser), Goldeneye (common & barrows), Ruddy duck, Redhead & Canvasback. Species of sea ducks include; Surf Scoter, Oldsquaw, Black Scoter, Whitewing Scoter, Eider & Harlequin (You are not supposed to shoot Harlequin) We have Red breasted Mergansers, Hooded Mergansers and a few Common Mergansers. I have tried to list them in order of abundance, but that can change from year to year and by the season.

All the birds I've listed are good to eat. Those that say they are not good to eat either have not tried them, over cooked them or are expecting something that tastes chicken. If they taste like liver, they have been over cooked. Mergansers

are the only bird that I listed that eat fish, and they taste nothing like fish. If you ask on-line you will get plenty of good simple recipes. Properly cooked, they should taste like a lean cut of roast beef. Whatever the recipe, the meat should be pink in the middle.

If you are hunting divers on the seaside of Virginia's Eastern Shore, you will more than likely encounter Atlantic Brant. For those unfamiliar with Brant, they are a seagoing goose. They look similar to a Canada goose but smaller and without the white patch on their cheek. They do have small white slashes on their neck, but they are hard to see at a distance. They move with the tide and no matter what the weather is doing, there will be a change of tide. They are a separate limit. In most cases 6 or 7 decoys will usually do the trick. The combined limit on divers, sea ducks, Mergansers & Brant is 18 birds! We also have puddle ducks, Canada & Snow geese and you will see all those species in a typical day.

For more information on hunting Virginia's Eastern Shore check our website www.duckguide.com or shoot me an email at pete@duckguide.com

Good hunting,

Captain Pete