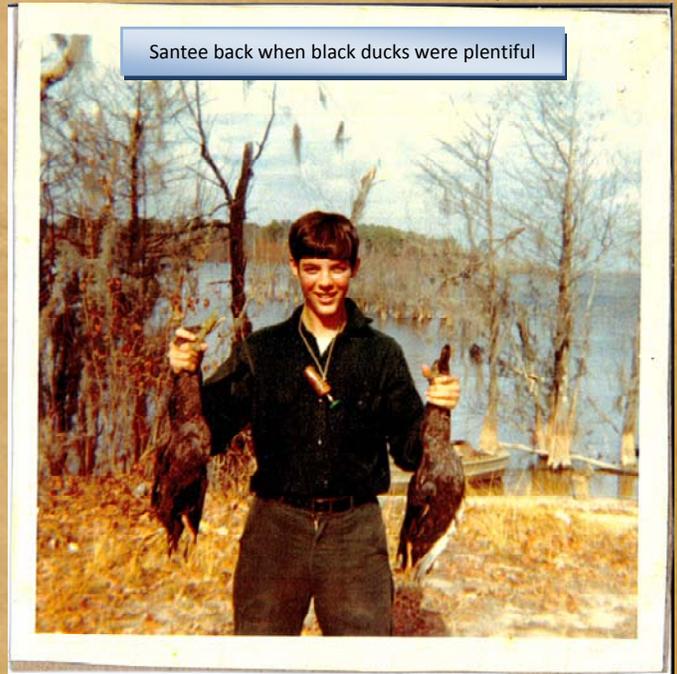


# BIG LAKE Hunting Report

## Greenheads on Santee

Lake Marion, better known as Santee, is partly responsible for the passion of many of South Carolina's waterfowlers due to its rich waterfowling history. For many years Santee was a premier hunting location on the east coast and primarily for migrating mallards. Santee's vast flooded swamps of cypress, tupelo, and oaks offered a rich food resource that drew thousands of mallards to the area. Stories from books, images from worn pictures, and memories lingering from years ago tell the stories of hunts in timber holes, cypress slews, and on open water amidst the ghosts of ancient cypress trees where hunters experienced as fine of mallard hunting as could be had. For reasons unknown and speculated, and other reasons known, the waterfowl no longer migrate in noteworthy numbers as they did in Santee's past. But despite the reduced opportunities of present, hunters still venture out to relive memories of yesteryear and for the hopeful possibilities that may still exist.

An opportunity to do just that arose recently when a friend called with a bird report and the request that I join them on a morning hunt which was excitedly agreed to. It is necessary to first understand a mentality that comes with the tough conditions of today's public waterfowling in South Carolina. The efforts required to hunt Santee and the typical uneventful outcomes can sometimes lead one to overlook hunting this water for more guaranteed opportunities. Personally, most times it is just easier to go to a wood duck hole where harvesting a bird is more of a guarantee than to sit on the lake and just hoping for a chance (albeit that that chance could be a prized wild mallard or black duck). But an unusually cold weather front and good hunting reports provided the best possible scenario to push wild birds our way and gave improved odds for a positive overcome – there was no question that we were hunting in the morning!



We met at the landing at five o'clock am. The sky was crystal clear with stars shining brightly and in fact several falling stars were seen shooting across the sky (what other than hunting would get oneself out of the house to see such a thing?). The temperatures were in the high twenties which is very cold for South Carolina. The wind chill from the howling wind and the typical Carolina humidity increased the intensity of the cold which only added to the possibility that birds just might be pushed on down from the northeast. Despite it being a weekday, there were numerous other hunters putting in at the landing and this element of competition is just expected of what one will encounter when hunting public water.

In no time we were set up in a long finger of water off the main lake with the wind coming from the back of the cove toward the big water (all names, locations, and other specifics have been intentionally omitted as this is very much secret knowledge). The wind direction played into the strategy of choosing the hunting location because the calmer water seemed ideal for ducks as they would likely seek the shelter that the cove would afford. As could almost be expected, another hunting party came and set up uncomfortably close to us despite us trying to shine them off with lights and yelling to make sure they were aware of how close they were. Outside of the fact that they were so close they also had the strong wind directly in their face which made us further question why they would set up as they did. That just emphasized the realization that not every hunter conforms to successful practices or maybe they simply were new to the sport and unknowing of what best to do. But again, other hunters are just another element of the duck hunt to contend with on any given public water hunt.

At the break of day a flurry of ducks were on the wing. A gadwall set its wings and locked in on the spread. It dropped right in without even circling. The sound of our one shot at the gadwall melted into the barrage of sounds from other hunters shooting. There was almost a sense of relief that an element of success had been achieved after a retrieve from the black lab and with a bird in hand. The three of us were each huddled against three cypress trees that were in a straight line in the open water. We stayed motionless as numerous flocks came from all different directions. Just shortly after the gadwall was taken, a pair of mallards began circling the decoys. All three hunters were merited duck callers, with one actually field testing the Big Lake Double Reed and Perfect Timber (quiet single reed), and we collectively gave a combination of enticing calls. The pair worked beautifully and made a pass treetop high over one hunter on the far end. No shots were fired. We all thought that they would set right up over the decoys in front of everyone on the next pass since they were so committed and all the while the drake mallard was plaintively calling back. They swung wide and just when you expect them to bank right in they just unexplainably drifted out and lost interest despite our comeback calls. A commencing conversation of "why did you not shoot" and "I wanted to let them come in so everyone could shoot" soon entailed.

There was a brief lull in the flights of birds with the exception of a lone ringneck mindlessly zooming down the length of the cove and flights of wood ducks flying over distant tree lines. Just when we began to think to ourselves whether the pair of mallards would be the one and last opportunity for a prized chance for a big duck, one of the hunters excitedly said "Hey! Ducks! Ducks! Get ready." A flock of ten mallards came over the left tree line from just far enough that it was questionable if they would see our spread. Luckily they did. They turned and headed straight to us and were clearly committed even from a good ways out. As they approached, they quickly dropped down and started circling. Based on their commitment, we simply gave a couple feed chuckles with a quack or two mixed in and nothing more. As they were working our decoys they made one wide swing near the other hunter party. Unexpectedly nobody shot from the other group which is rare and an appreciable display of public hunting etiquette. With the wide swing they were positioned to come into the wind out in front of us and that they did. Three birds hit the water within the decoys and with the others hovering just above we all commenced to unloading our guns. The results were two birds on the water. We were all surprised there were not more but overconfidence due to how close the birds were got the better of us and our shooting. But with two retrieves there were two fine wild greenheads added to the bag with an immense sense of satisfaction.

The birds completely quit flying after a little more than an hour after shooting time. It did not matter as it had been a good morning and it was time to head to work. We commenced to picking the spread up. That was done with gladness as it is so much easier to do, even despite bitter cold hands from wrapping numerous decoy lines, when you have taken a chance to hunt a location that has no guarantee but still managed to harvest birds. With a pair of greenheads and a grey duck, we made our own new Santee memories while having something to add to the collection of stories from the good ole days.



A brace of greenheads, bonus duck, and Big Lake Open Water and Double Reed call

