



Where migration routes meet great habitat, waterfowl of many species mass in great numbers.

'Fowling's Top Spots

GARY KRAMER

Highlighting North America's best destinations

Waterfowl hunters are adventurers at heart and are forever searching for places where ducks and geese fill the sky. Being cut from that cloth, I spent the past two winters traveling the back roads and byways of North America seeking the continent's top waterfowling destinations. My travels were precipitated by both curiosity and a book project for Ducks Unlimited that required me to photograph every species of waterfowl on the continent. I'm happy to report that not only was I successful in obtaining the images I needed for my book (*Flyways: A Celebration of Waterfowl and Wetlands*), but my travels also allowed me to experience waterfowling in dozens

of different locations. As a result, following are my picks for the continent's top 'fowling destinations, not in order of preference but rather from north to south, similar to the way waterfowl travel the ancient routes we know as flyways.



Hiding in driftwood Kodiak-style.

Kodiak Island, Alaska

Despite its far-north location, Kodiak Island is one of the most important wintering areas for sea ducks in the Pacific Flyway. Located in the Gulf of Alaska about an hour's flight from Anchorage, Kodiak is 100 miles long and 50 miles wide. Because of the island's maritime climate, the weather is moderate by Alaska standards—and although winter can be damp and cold, the bays and estuaries seldom

ing Contest. Much of the hunting is in bottomland hardwood forests that are seasonally flooded as the waters of the White, Cache and St. Francis rivers overflow to create this unique habitat. In addition, good hunting is available in flooded rice and soybean fields as well as natural wetlands. Although the mallard is the king of ducks here, a mixture of wood ducks, gadwalls and teal show up as well. A growing population of snow geese along with some white-fronted geese, pintails and wigeon dominate the ricefield hunts.

Public hunting is available on the 34,000-acre Bayou Meto Wildlife Management Area (870-367-3553) and the 50,000-acre White River NWR (870-282-8200; www.fws.gov/white_river/). For information on guided and private-land hunts, contact Jim Ronquest, Rich-N-Tone Guide Service, 888-768-2255; www.mtcalls.com; or Buckshot Duck Lodge, 870-548-3334; www.buckshotducklodge.com.

Texas Rice Country

One of the most productive goose hunting regions in the nation is the rice prairie of Southeast Texas. The area forms a rough triangle from Port Arthur west to Columbus and south to Aransas Pass. This area is the winter home to an impressive assemblage of waterfowl, including snow, Ross', Canada and white-fronted geese along with pintails, mallards, gadwalls, shovelers and teal.

As most hunters know, snow goose populations in the Central and Mississippi flyways have increased, and biologists are worried that the geese are causing long-term damage to their fragile Arctic breeding grounds. Canada geese and white-fronts in the Central Flyway, although not increasing at the rate of snow geese, have shown an upward trend in recent years as well. As a result, this region of Texas winters more than a million geese and is a bona fide waterfowling hotspot.

The goose hunting is over huge decoy spreads primarily on private hunting leases, whereas most duck hunts are in coastal marshes. Early in the season most goose guides target dry rice stubble where waste grain is abundant. By about Christmas, the ricefields get picked over and the birds have a tendency to shift their diets from grain to green forage—mostly winter wheat and rye grass.

For more information, contact Mike Ladnier, Bay Prairie Outfitters & Lodge, 800-242-1374; www.texas-goose-hunting.com; Tim Kelley, Waterfowl Outfitters Unlimited, 888-895-6343; www.waterfowloutfittersunlimited.com; or the Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept., 800-792-1112; www.tpwd.state.tx.

Cameron Parish, Louisiana

If a poll of hunters were taken to determine the top duck hunting counties in the nation, several famous shooting venues would be mentioned. But year in and year out Cameron Parish in Southwest Louisiana takes the top spot when it come to the most waterfowl harvested in the US. This is a region of vast coastal marshes and inland areas dominated by rice and soybean fields. Many of the coastal marshes and bayous were devastated by the

hurricanes that ravaged the region in the fall of 2005. However, wetlands are quick to repair themselves, and many areas provided good shooting in the later part of the 2005-'06 season.

Marsh hunting here delivers a true cornucopia of species, with both blue- and green-winged teal along with pintails, gadwalls, wigeon, shovelers and mottled ducks providing the bulk of the action. Increasing populations of snow and white-fronted geese along with pintails dominate the ricefield hunts. There is public hunting on the Southwest Louisiana NWR complex, and numerous outfitters operate on private lands.

For more information, contact Hackberry Rod and Gun, 888-762-3391; www.hackberryrodandgun.com; Grosse Savanne Lodge, 337-598-2357; www.grossesavanne.com; or the Southwest Louisiana NWR Complex, 337-598-2216; www.fws.gov/swlrefugecomplex.



Dawn breaking, ducks in the air, Western Mexico.

The West Coast of Mexico

For years a dedicated group of hunters has realized that Mexico offers hunting like the "old days," where "out of town" hunters are welcomed and limits are liberal. Mexico's West Coast, specifically Sonora and Sinaloa, provides some of the finest mixed-bag duck hunting in North America. The most numerous species are pintails, wigeon, and green-winged and cinnamon teal, with unique species including fulvous and black-bellied whistling ducks—known as tree ducks to many

hunters. In this region ducks depend on agricultural lands and marshes for food, showing a special preference for wheat, milo, rice and corn. Adjacent to the farmlands are impoundments and overflow lands where excess irrigation water is trapped or meets tidal areas to form vast brackish lagoons that teem with bird life.

The hunting is over decoys, a bird boy accompanies each hunter to pick up ducks, and clients often are transported to blinds by airboat. The waterfowl season opens in November and closes in early March.

Some hunters mistakenly consider Mexico a remote, difficult-to-reach area where the driving is dangerous, the water is uncertain and possessing a shotgun is asking for trouble. Others are intimidated by the language barrier. These fears are unfounded and, with a little pre-planning, hunters can easily and safely import shotguns, fly to productive hunting areas and enjoy guided outings.

For more information, contact Ruben del Castillo, Wingshooters Lodge, 011-52-644-414-9934; wings@cob.me; gared.net.mx; or Bobby Balderrama, Sinalopato Duck and Dove Club, 800-862-9026; www.sinalopato.com.

Editor's Note: Gary Kramer is the author of *Flyways, A Celebration Of Waterfowl And Wetlands*, a 135-page coffee table book that includes 195 detailed photos. Signed copies are available for \$26.90 postpaid (softcover) or \$34.90 postpaid (hardcover) from the author, PO Box 903, Willows, CA 95988, 530-934-3873; www.garykramer.net.