

The  
**Retriever**<sup>®</sup>  
J·O·U·R·N·A·L

VOLUME XX ■ NUMBER 3 • February / March 2015



\$5.50 U.S.A. \$6.95 Canada

Pheasant Report • King Salmon Ducks • More Water Marks  
An Oregon Autumn • Canine Core Stabilization Exercises

# King Salmon

*On the tundra with*



# Ducks

## With other people's puppies

by E. Donnell Thomas Jr.  
Editor-at-Large  
Photos by Don & Lori Thomas

After long months buried in the rainforest around our Southeast Alaska summer home, it didn't seem possible that the terrain sliding by beneath the Beaver's wings was part of the same state, or even the same planet. Open horizons stretched away without limit, across Bristol Bay to the west and toward the snowcapped volcanoes of the Aleutian Range to the south. Potholes dotted the tundra like splattered paint on a Jackson Pollock canvas. A vast flock of emperor geese rising from the shoreline made a welcome sight. When I first moved to Alaska 34 years earlier, their abundance had justified generous limits, but the season has been closed on emperors since 1986 because of a sharp decline in their numbers. The species appears to be recovering now, and it felt good just to see some again.

Swan Lake doesn't exist as such on any map. My friends so named it for practical reasons, for the number of swans floating on its surface every fall distinguishes it reliably from the myriad of similar lakes and potholes nearby. Although tundra swans are legal game in parts of Alaska, they are of esthetic interest only in the Bristol Bay area, where swan season is closed because of the occasional presence of endangered trumpeters. But lakes with swans also seem to hold more than their share of ducks, and that was what we'd flown south from King Salmon that day to find.

Clouds of waterfowl erupted as Alex Oberholtzer banked the Beaver onto final approach and let the floats gently kiss the surface of the lake. Moments later, Lori, Josh Fitz, and I were carrying shotguns and decoys ashore as Alex taxied the airplane into a corner where it wouldn't flare inbound ducks – we hoped. By the time Alex had hiked back around the shoreline to rejoin us, we'd beaten out a nest in the grass to accommodate all four of us, along with the final member of the party: Josh's year-old male black Lab, Tater.

It was hard to believe that Lori and I had known everyone but the dog for eight years now. We'd first met Dan Michels and his Crystal Creek Lodge staff when Steve Smith sent us there on an assignment for the regrettably short-lived book series, *A Wingshooter's World*. We've remained good friends ever since, and a late season visit to the lodge near King Salmon has become a frequent highlight on our annual outdoor calendar. Hard working young guides in the field when we first met them, Josh had now been promoted to Head

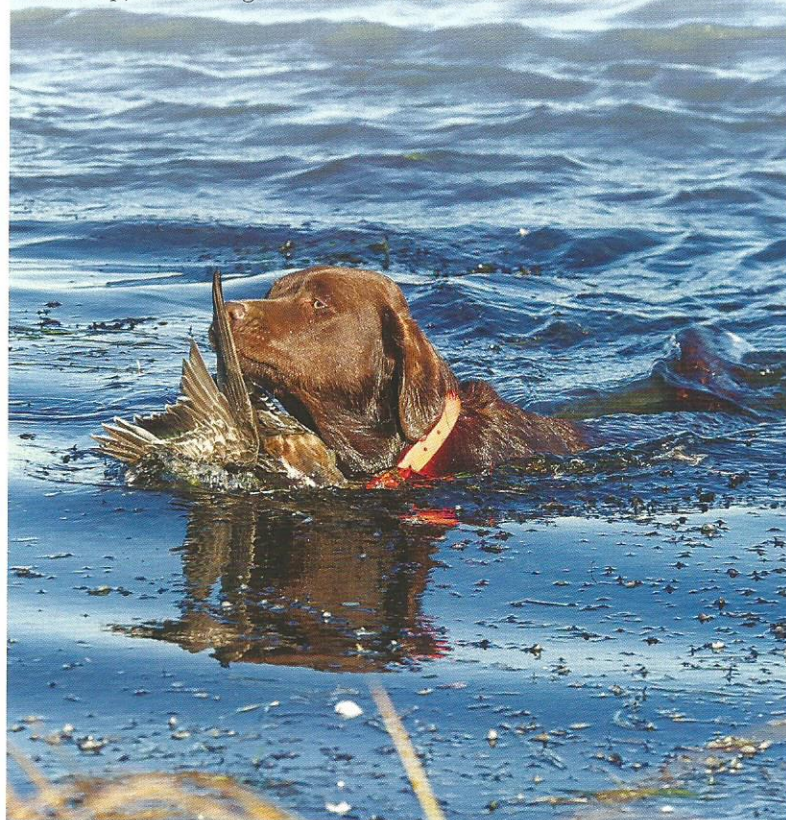
Guide while Alex had become a fulltime pilot and lodge co-owner, and Lori and I were delighted for both of them.

Then there was Tater – eager and enthusiastic, but untested in the field. I'd thought about bringing Rosy along on this trip so she could begin her third season in Alaska, but airline logistics made me decide against it. Besides, there are always plenty of dogs at Crystal Creek, and Rosy's number was due to come up soon enough anyway.

This was Tater's first season. Josh was upfront about the dog's novice status and the rough edges that came with it, but I assured him that I'd seen every puppy fault imaginable, and that Lori and I looked forward to the dog work even more than the shooting. Tater admittedly engaged in some world-class puppy squirming and fidgeting as we settled into the grass, to Josh's evident embarrassment. I'd barely had time to share a few first-year dog stories of my own when a flock of wigeon screamed by with the wind behind them and turned our morning into a duck hunt.

In deference to Tater's inexperience, we'd started with just one loaded gun – mine. I dropped one bird before missing my first duck of the year with my second barrel, and the splash in the decoys effected a sudden transformation in the dog. Suddenly all business, he hit the water in a geyser of spray and completed the retrieve neatly. Granted, he dropped the bird when he emerged from the water and shook, but I assured Josh that it had taken me two seasons to break Rosy of that common fault.

Alex had loaded a second gun and we'd put a half-dozen more wigeon in the bag before Josh's young dog received his first real test, courtesy of a flock of greenwings that snuck in behind us and buzzed the spread at Mach 2. Fortunate to drop a bird with my first shot, I didn't even worry about a second – especially once I saw the downed teal with its head up, swimming hard for the far side of the lake.





Tater's enthusiasm got him to the area of the fall quickly, but the cripple disappeared beneath the surface before the dog could nab it. With the bird swimming in stealth mode, Tater couldn't relocate it, and we couldn't see it from shore in order to provide hand signals. Faced with a hopeless situation, Josh whistled the dog in. All I could do was assure him that it would have been a challenging retrieve for a veteran, and that the only way a dog can learn to handle a diving cripple is through experience.

More of which wasn't long in coming, along with an ideal opportunity for redemption, thanks to a wigeon that came down with a broken wing and not much more a few minutes later. As with the teal, the bird was too far out to swat on the water, so it was up to Tater. Once again, the dog made a perfect beeline to the duck only to watch it dive

and disappear, from his sight as well as ours. After swimming several confused circles, the dog headed off across the lake, apparently in pursuit of nothing. Josh was about to whistle him back when Lori said, "No! I can see the duck swimming low in the water just ahead of him!"

Moments later Tater was churning toward shore with the bird in his mouth. I knew we'd just watched a valuable lesson learned, one that really could not be recreated under artificial training conditions. I was of course happy to have the duck as a matter of principle, but I felt even happier to have been part of a young dog's education.

**A**utumn is the most ephemeral of Alaska's seasons. Sometime in late September migratory birds begin to congregate, and the tundra starts to glow in shades of orange and gold. Then in a matter of a week or two the birds are gone, the warm fall colors have disappeared, and winter's six-month reign begins.

After two days of trout and char, we awoke to northern lights and the first hard frost of the season, a certain omen that another glorious fall on the tundra was about to slip away from us. We'd seen ducks trading up and down the Naknek right in front of the lodge the night before, and I wanted to bid them farewell before they headed down the Pacific Flyway for good. As light rose slowly in the southeastern sky, we braced ourselves against the chill, loaded shotguns and decoys into one of the dozen skiffs moored at the dock, and pushed off, accompanied by Connor Scott

and his chocolate female, Ellie. For the second time that week, we found ourselves accompanying a young dog on its maiden duck-hunting experience.

We already appreciated Ellie's fine manners and cover girl good looks – a block-headed blend of athleticism and femininity wrapped in a rich cocoa-colored coat reminiscent of the local brown bears. I have never enjoyed an opportunity to spend much time around chocolate Labs, and as we finished setting out our decoy spread, my eyes kept wandering to Ellie as if she were some exotic beauty. And her deportment kept pace with her appearance, for when we finally settled into the grass she plunked herself down at Connor's side as calmly as a veteran of many seasons.

We quickly realized that the ducks weren't going to behave as admirably as the dog. Most wilderness waterfowl on the Alaska Peninsula have never seen a human hunter, making blinds more elaborate than natural vegetation unnecessary. The birds around the village of King Salmon seemed warier, though, and the first two mixed flocks of wigeon, mallards, and teal flared on final approach to our decoy spread. Ellie needed a slam-dunk – a stone dead bird hitting the water with a splash in the middle of the decoys – but when a single wigeon finally made a mistake at the edge of shotgun range, I had to anchor it on the water with my second barrel. Fortunately, the borrowed 12-gauge got the job done, and it was finally time for young Ellie to go to work.

Her lack of experience became apparent as soon as she reached the bird. After swimming several circles around

it, she used classical young-dog-meets-first-duck technique to retrieve it – by one primary feather gripped between her teeth as lightly as possible, as if the duck were an Ebola virus specimen headed for a laboratory. By the time dog and duck reached shore, I found myself on the horns of a difficult dilemma. Nothing can ruin a morning of duck hunting faster than unwanted advice, particularly when it's focused on someone else's dog. But I needed



## Destination Notes

Most lodges in Alaska's vast Bristol Bay watershed focus their attention on angling. With good reason – the fly-fishing there for trout and salmon is arguably the best in the world. But there is more to this splendid country than fish, and Crystal Creek is one of the few lodges there that offers a wingshooting program to compliment the fishing. Waterfowl and ptarmigan are the featured attractions. Ptarmigan hunting starts on August 10, and duck season opens September 1. Both seasons run longer than you want to be there, and bag limits are generous. Every serious wingshooter deserves to hunt Alaska at least once, but logistics make this a difficult if not nearly impossible do-it-yourself destination. A full service lodge with experienced guides and pilots will solve those problems. Contact: [www.crystalcreeklodge.com](http://www.crystalcreeklodge.com)

to convince Connor that the dog's education was more important to Lori and me than shooting ducks, of which there would be many more in the months ahead. So, I decided to offer some advice born of experience and hope for the best.

My first suggestion was that Connor eliminate as many confounding factors as possible and give the dog the chip shot she needed. With Connor minding the dog, I pitched the bird in a lazy arc toward the decoys. When it splashed down, she understood what she needed to do. She made a beeline for the bird and picked it up properly this time, but she dropped it at the waterline on the return.

Connor was trying to be polite by getting on with the duck hunt. However, I pointed out that accepting such typical puppy faults simply makes them harder to correct down the line, and that we were more interested in the dog than adding birds to the duck strap. We wound up calling time out to work on getting Ellie to deliver to hand. Her intelligence and natural enthusiasm made that job progress nicely, and she finished the morning a better retriever than she'd been at first light.

W e weren't done with Ellie yet. As Lori and I warmed up back at the lodge prior to a fly rod assault on the Naknek's famous big rainbows that afternoon, I wondered if I'd violated the unwritten rules of duck blind etiquette by offering unsolicited training suggestions. Before I could reach any conclusions, Brian Sexton, the lodge's superb young chef, ran up the stairs to our room and announced in a worried tone of voice that Ellie had sustained a collision with an ORV and Connor needed whatever help we could provide.

We arrived on the scene to find a frantic cluster of staff surrounding the dog, obviously a popular favorite around the lodge. Fortunately, things looked worse than they really were.

A long, deep laceration on the inside of one foreleg was doing a lot of bleeding, but the underlying bone appeared intact and there was no evidence of injury to vital structures elsewhere.

Lori and I took care of people and not dogs during our former medical careers; but we were way out in the Bush with no veterinary care nearby, so, we rolled up our sleeves and did our best with some improvised suture and a hemostat from the front of someone's fishing vest. Ellie's fine manners saved the day, for she allowed us to clean, inspect, and loosely close the wound without sedation or anesthesia, which were unavailable. Lori applied her nurse's touch to the wound dressing, Connor and I improvised a head cone to keep the dog from chewing it off, and we cancelled our plans to fish the river that afternoon so we could keep an eye on Ellie.

The change in agenda didn't bother me a bit. It's all about the dogs anyway.

When we finally packed up and left Alaska for the year, I felt all of my usual ambivalence about our departure. The weather that September had been spectacular, and a rotator cuff tear that prevented me from shooting my bow left me with plenty of unfinished business. On the other hand I could already feel the season up north starting to slip away, and it had barely started back in Montana. Furthermore, my own dogs were waiting for me, and it was time they got the attention they deserved. As much as I enjoyed our experiences with other people's dogs, it was now time for me to spend some time with my own.

