



Losing the LAND

The Slough is gone. Long live the Slough.
by David Zoby

Indulgently, unrepentantly, gladly, I'd drive out of town with my two dogs and a satchel of decoys to a slough just off the North Platte River to hunt ducks. Midweek was my favorite time to go. I'd do some light work around campus, maybe sit on a desk in front of a class and discuss the novel at hand, *Huck Finn* or something like that. But my heart wasn't in it. I'd lose speed and let the students go early.

Getting out of town to Bessemer Bend was more difficult than you might think. I had to locate my calls, fill my pockets with shotgun shells (steel #2s), and gather the dogs. Sweets, my old female,



FLURRY AT DAWN, BY MANFRED SCHATZ (1925-2004)
COURTESY OF RUSSELL FINK GALLERY, LORTON, VIRGINIA





barked until she was firmly in my truck's passenger's seat. Rocket, my youngster, spun circles and yipped. He rode in the back with the decoys and the telescopic pole I used to hook them out when the light faded.

Often I'd go alone, or I'd try to enlist someone who appreciated chilly sunsets enough to shirk their responsibilities, some dogsbody who didn't mind missing dinner, or who had recently inherited an old shotgun and wanted to see how it shot. The preferred candidate was someone willing to freeze his hands after shooting hours, coiling decoys while time slipped away.

The slough itself is worth a discussion. A rancher owned about 80 acres of Iron Creek. There was a reservoir that usually froze by December. At each end, warm water trickled out, pooling among the willows and downed trees to form little open spots. Ducks—migrating mallards nearly exclusively—

his own tarmac and fly over Natrona County. I often brought him a case of beer in the summer and sat in his hangar while he tinkered with the hydraulics on a craft that looked like an enormous insect. I doubted it would fly. The wind, even in summertime, shook the hangar and made booming noises as the sheet metal building flexed and expanded.

"Mike, I don't want to read about you in the papers," I said.

"If I stay within the laws of flying, you won't have to," he said. "Trouble starts when you begin breaking the rules." His boots skated out percussions as he scuffed along over the gumbo of cat litter and motor oil that coated the cement floor.

Each year I checked in with him to make sure it was okay to hunt ducks, because he once said that he'd thought of selling the slough. I brought him beer, or a nice bottle of whiskey. Once I brought him steaks from a halibut I'd caught in Alaska.



I had this theory that I had to scatter them all before I sat down to hunt. The idea was to get them in the air, then decoy them back later in the day.



roosted in these shallow pools. I'd set up the decoys; then I'd walk the slough with one of my dogs on a leash, great flushes of ducks rising from the most surprising little knots in the creek. I rarely shot. I had this theory that I had to scatter them all before I sat down to hunt. The idea was to get them in the air, then decoy them back later in the day.

Mike, the rancher who owned the slough, had bought it, parcel by parcel, more than 30 years ago. I was introduced to him by a friend who has since moved to Oregon. The rancher was one of the last people in Bessemer who actually encouraged hunting. He hunted himself, but lately had become obsessed with aviation.

Mike earned his pilot's license at the community college and spent his whole winter rebuilding an airplane, which he threatened to launch right from

I wasn't the only person who had permission. There was a guy who trapped muskrats, his dog trailing along to check the traps on winter evenings. There were other hunters, too. I often found spent shotgun shells, or the telltale signs of a great shoot: boot prints all over the snow, storms of duck feathers where someone plucked one on the spot. Once, after a cold snap, I found a whole spread of decoys frozen into the reservoir, their plastic heads peeking through the snow. Often, Rocket would go off free-lancing and return with a lively cripple in his jaws. Clipped by other hunters but not brought down, they flew to the river, and maybe flew back to the slough the following day. But in a day or so they'd weaken, and Rocket gathered them. Once he caught three ducks before we even fired a shot. Sweets never went looking for other people's ducks.



The slough never froze; it had some sort of relationship with geothermal heat. You often smelled sulfur when the wind was calm. The water bloomed with green algae. The banks were festooned with Russian olives; these get a bad rap for their overbearing burden on the watershed, but the wildlife seem to love them.

Whitetails, more and more each year, rubbed their antlers on the Russian olives. The ducks were often full of their tiny, flesh-colored fruit. The thorns tore my jackets, and once in a while one of my dogs yelped from getting too close to one, but otherwise, we all got along. I even used them as makeshift blinds, a sort of perfume lifting from the cut sprigs. I'd thread my dogs' leashes through the branches (my dogs were used to upland hunting and never quite agreed to sit still in a duck blind), and we'd hunker down behind a sandy berm and look back across the abandoned corrals toward the Platte.

Mallards appeared as wandering black dots at first, but you could tell by the way they paired, or arrowed in the sky, that they were ducks and that they were headed for my spread. They lost altitude so quickly that I often heard their feathers and bladed wings cutting the air. Swoosh, they'd come in, the big ducks, despite my dogs fidgeting, despite the lackluster blind. I didn't have to use a call at all. I'd grip Sweet's mouth shut to keep her from whining. Rocket's tail went mad when I took off my glove and snapped off my safety.

On the most frigid afternoons, the shooting was often raucous. The marksmanship wasn't much to speak of, however. You have to understand: my companions were often fellow city dwellers who, up until that morning, hadn't bought a duck stamp in years. They'd be in their offices when I called, and they'd have to find an excuse, slip down to the sporting goods store for shells. What they told their wives, I never quite knew, but you could tell it hadn't gone well when they crawled into my truck with their faces kind of white and said, *Just drive*. We shot as if we were on borrowed time.

There's nothing like a drake mallard appearing out of nowhere, screaming down a narrow slough, to make a decent shot look foolish. You're witnessing a wild species that no one ever stocked, or transplanted, or attempted to improve. A wild duck

down from the North, how could you improve on that? The gunfire roared out of that slough, and our laughter at having missed so badly roared, too. The birds we missed grew in esteem. I had to wonder at such times, sitting on a simple upturned five-gallon bucket, if one can love a piece of land even though they can never own it.

My companions cursed at their poor shooting, and I plagiarized the poet Richard Hugo and told them that their most important arguments are with themselves, not the ducks. Then I'd miss an easy single. I heard myself referring to the slough as "my duck spot," or "my place just off the Platte." I had become the de facto proprietor of wind and space, the long, sonorous G chord singing out of the barbed wire as acres of wind plowed over all of us.

This year, when Mike told me he'd sold the place, I was somewhat prepared. I knew the day was coming. The muskrat trapper had tipped me off. But it smacked me hard in the manner of a ruined love affair. I had to sit back and count the years I'd been going there.

In those first years it was just Sweets and me. She's gone now, been gone almost six years. Rocket was just a pup back then, and there on the dike I loaded one of those mechanical dummy launchers and fired it so many times, my wrist ached. He learned to swim in the reservoir that summer. Some of the fellow hunters I dragged out there have moved away, or traded hunting for golf.

I brought a girl out once. I tried to make it nice for her, toting along a thermos of coffee spiked with cinnamon schnapps, clipping the olive branches from her line of sight. I had an upturned bucket just for her to sit on, too, and a foam pad for her comfort. I spent more time looking at her than for ducks. She's now gone, too.

I don't blame Mike for selling. The offered price was staggering, and he said he'd put in a good word for me to keep hunting. But the family who bought the land was planning several houses and a big riding barn; I heard the word *subdivision*.

This had been happening all over Bessemer Bend, all over Wyoming, really. A case of beer is a poor levee against that particular tide. The landscape is so

Continued on page 115

Losing the Land

Continued from page 13

awash in money, you sometimes barely recognize it. Who wouldn't want to own a piece of that country—a place where you can look back at Goose Egg Ranch and see the oyster-shell mountains glowing pinkly in the setting sun?

After duck season, it's my habit to hibernate. I cancel cable, put my phone on silent mode, and read in flourishes. Last winter I stumbled upon Sigurd Olson's classic *Listening Point*, where he describes his intimate relationship with the land, and his struggle to hold on to his tiny cabin in northern Minnesota. I came across this quote: "The fact that relatively few have any intimate physical contact with undeveloped country is unimportant. While traveling by canoe, packhorse, or on foot may be the ideal way to experience the wilds, the very existence of such areas affects those who see only its fringes or are aware that it exists at all. So ingrained in our consciousness, so intuitive is this reaction that even a

suggestion of wilderness adds richness and color to experience."

You find this idea in Thoreau, Leopold, and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*; it's in Tolstoy, Hardy, Dickens. I feel it in the most ordinary places carved out by literature. Faulkner touches on it in *The Bear*. Cather is on to it in *My Antonia*. But this isn't a literary lecture; it's a love story—and as love stories go, it needs an ending.

On the last night of duck season, Mike asked me to come up to the hangar and see his plane. He had a woodstove cranking, and we stood around and drank some of the whiskey I'd given him. The plane was almost ready to go; the paint was fresh; the wings were going on come spring. And then he'd fly it out over Iron Creek, and who knows where else.

Outside by my truck, he said the price had gotten too high and he just had to sell.

"Don't apologize to me," I said. "I had

some of my best times down in that slough. I'll never forget it." I shook his hand.

There was still enough light to see flocks of mallards riding the wind, cupping their wings and dropping into the twisted gnarls that mark the creek's course. To the south, fields of snow clung to the flanks of the mountains and glowed.

With a lump in my throat, I drove back through the farmland, the old barns, the brand-new houses, the land cleared for more and more.

That night I dreamed I was walking along the slough with Sweets. The ducks were boiling up out of the creek, and there was a girl waiting for me on an upturned bucket. And then I was with Rocket, and he was wet from retrieving a bird, and he glared at the sky for more and more.

Of course you can love a place you never had a chance of holding. This, by definition, is the way love works. ■

Dave Zoby lives in Casper, Wyoming, where he plies the dirt roads in search of new duck spots. He keeps a lively fishing blog at davezoby.com.

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