The Basics of Waterfowl Hunting in Washington

Photo by Jamey Wilkerson

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
Wildlife Program
Hunter Education Division
January 2017

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The information contained in this manual was collected from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife website (wdfw.wa.gov) and its employees unless otherwise cited. (2016)

Introduction

Welcome to waterfowl hunting! This course should provide you with basic knowledge about waterfowl hunting in Washington State and give you a general guide to be successful. It should also serve to help you in your hunting pursuits.

In our Basic Hunter Education course, we teach students how to hunt safely. This course is designed to give you an overview of the biology and habits of Washington's w and how to hunt them effectively. This guide will also help teach you about game handling, hunting equipment regulations and choices, correct shot placement, and much more. These topics will help you become more knowledgeable as a hunter and make the animals you harvest become great table fare.

One thing to remember when pursuing any animal is that it is called hunting for a reason. You may not be successful in harvesting an animal every day, or every season. That's part of the enduring challenge and fun of hunting. Each season brings a new opportunity to hone your skills. To properly set your expectations, check the annual harvest statistics, which are posted on the WDFW website at http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/harvest.

For most of us, hunting is about much more than a successful harvest. It's about spending time afield bonding with family and friends, watching the sunrise over the mountains on a crisp fall morning, and having exciting stories to tell when you get home.

Photo by WDFW, John Bigley, and Jerry Leisle

License Choices

WDFW offers many different licenses that allow you to hunt various game species in Washington. To hunt waterfowl in Washington, you will need to purchase a small game license. If you are 16 or older, you must also purchase a Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) migratory bird permit and a federal duck stamp. If you are under 16, you must have a free WDFW migratory bird permit. There are additional opportunities available, including purchasing a migratory bird authorization and harvest cards for southwest Canada goose, sea duck, snow goose, brant, and band-tailed pigeon. To be authorized for the sea duck, snow goose, brant, and band-tailed pigeon you will need to fill out an application at http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/permits/migratory/ or contact the Wildlife Program customer service staff at Wildthing@dfw.wa.gov or by phone at 360-902-2515. For the southwest Canada goose authorization, you have to pass the WDFW Online Goose Identification Test. It can be found at http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/canada_goose/.

You can also receive a discount when you purchase your small game license and a big game license as a combination license. The cost of the combo is less than the cost of each item individually. Remember that you will not receive the discount unless the license items are purchased at the same time.

License choices are as follows:

- Small Game License
    - Allows you to hunt small game like upland birds and rabbits, as well as unclassified animals such as coyote.
- Any of the big game combos with the discounted small game license.
    - Allows you to hunt the big game species denoted by the license, small game, and unclassified animals.

Types of waterfowl

Washington's extensive and diverse waterfowl habitats provide a wide range of waterfowl species and an even wider range of duck and goose hunting opportunities. We're lucky to have more species of ducks and geese here than most other states in the country. There is a book called *Ducks at a Distance* that is reprinted by the department that will help identify different duck species. You can find the booklet online http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/waterfowl/duck_id_guide.pdf. Please refer to the Ducks at a Distance booklet for species information, identification, and additional information.

Washington provides wintering habitat for approximately 850,000 ducks, 125,000 geese, and 8,000 swans annually. In addition, the state provides habitat for approximately 160,000 breeding ducks and 50,000 breeding geese each spring and summer. The Pacific Flyway waterfowl population contains almost six million ducks, geese, and swans, and many of these birds pass through the state during fall and spring.

Almost all waterfowl visible in Washington (except swans) can be hunted, unless there are special closures due to low population numbers. They can be classified into these four categories: Puddle ducks, diving ducks, sea ducks, and geese.

Puddle Ducks

Puddle ducks, or dabblers, are most commonly (but not always) found in or around shallow water that can be either fresh or salt. They feed on a wide range of submerged vegetation, seeds, and aquatic insects by "dabbling" for food within a foot or two of the water's surface. Dabbling occurs when the ducks put their heads down and tails in the air to feed. Some of the puddle duck species may also be found in and around agricultural fields. This is especially common when those fields contain waste corn, wheat, and other seeds.

Mallards are the most common, largest, and most easily recognizable of the puddle ducks. The mallard drake or "greenhead," is considered by many to be the grand prize of duck hunting.

The pintail is another large duck that is very common in Washington. It is recognized by its long wings, fast and graceful flight, and long, pointed tail from which it gets its name.

The medium-sized wigeon is also common, especially in the western and central parts of the state. It is known for its fast, somewhat erratic flight, and is recognizable from below by the white belly that contrasts with a much darker chest and tail.

Gadwalls are about the same size as wigeon and look similar from below, but are drab in color and not as common in the Northwest.

Photo by Eric W. Holman

The shoveler is Washington's most unusual looking puddle duck. It has a large, wide bill that illustrates its common nickname, the spoonbill. Another mid-sized duck, it's usually found by itself, in pairs, or in small flocks. Drake shovelers are among Washington's most brightly colored ducks.

The drake wood duck is one of the prettiest ducks to call Washington home. A little smaller than the shoveler, the woody is often found around wooded ponds and streams. Unlike other dabblers, they spend some of their time perched in trees. Its diet of nuts and berries makes it a favorite on duck hunters' tables.

The green-winged teal is by far the most common of three teal species found in Washington. The other subspecies are the blue-winged teal and cinnamon teal. Teal are the smallest of Washington's puddle ducks. They can be seen flying quickly in tight, twisting formations, often only a few feet above the water, which makes them a challenging target.

Hunting Techniques

Puddle ducks are generally hunted over decoys or by jump shooting. Because they generally feed in shallower waters, smaller ponds can be effective hunting areas. As with all hunting, preseason and in-season scouting can also have an effect on where to hunt and what method to use.

Diving Ducks

Diving ducks are generally found on larger and deeper bodies of water than puddle ducks. As the description indicates, they feed by diving, sometimes to great depths. Most diving species prefer small fish, snails, and shellfish,making them less desirable table fare in the eyes of many hunters. The canvasback and redhead are the exceptions. The diving ducks' fast flight make them especially challenging for hunters.

Although they're both diving ducks, the greater and lesser scaup prefer different habitats. The greater scaup spend most of their time on bigger, more open water and the lesser scaup are more likely to be found on smaller lakes and ponds. However, the two species are known to mix in certain wintering areas. Only their size and a slight color variation on the back edge of the wings distinguish the two species.

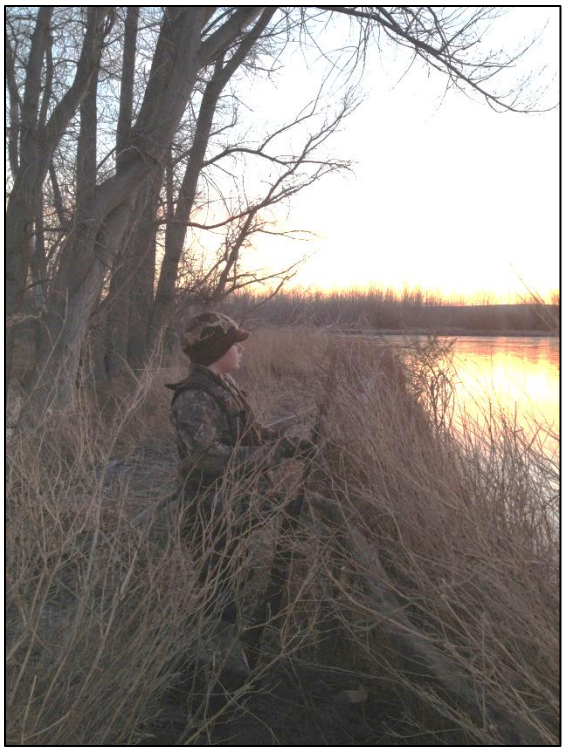

Photo by Drew Austin

The ring-neck duck is sort of short and bulky. They are more likely to be found around freshwater ponds and rivers than open saltwater areas. The white ring around the base of its bill is actually more recognizable than the ring around its neck.

The ruddy duck is a small diver with a longer tail than most other diving ducks. When on the water, it often holds its tail straight up in the air. While it's a fast flyer, a ruddy is as likely to dive and swim away from danger as it is to fly away.

The canvasback is highly prized among Washington hunters. Among the largest of all ducks, it's also one of the fastest flyers, which makes it a true challenge for hunters. Its long sloping bill, sloping forehead, and its red eyes set it apart from the nearest look-alike, the redhead.

A little smaller and a little slower than the canvasback, the redhead is often found in close proximity to canvasbacks. Since they look alike and can be found in proximity, the two are sometimes mistaken for each other. The redhead, though, has a brighter red, less sloping head, a darker back, and a more rounded tail than that of the canvasback.

Hunting Techniques

Since divers tend to inhabit larger ponds and larger bodies of water, hunters should concentrate their efforts in those areas. Decoying these ducks can be effective if you find areas where the birds like to feed along the shoreline. In some cases, hunters can be successful pass shooting from peninsulas and islands as some of these ducks tend to fly close to the water's surface.

Sea Ducks

Sea ducks frequent Washington's Pacific coast, coastal estuaries, and inland marine waters. They can also be found from the Strait of Juan de Fuca to the southern end of Hood Canal and Puget Sound. Most sea ducks feed on invertebrates and small fish.

Scoters are Washington's most common sea duck. The surf scoter is the most abundant of Washington's three scoter species. The drake surf scoter, with its unusual and brightly colored head, is a unique trophy for duck hunters. Both the white-winged and black scoter is larger than the surf scoter.

With its long, skinny tail, the long-tailed duck looks like a pintail at first glance. Nowhere near as abundant as the surf scoter, this sea duck shows up in sea duck hunters' bags throughout the season.

Although also found in freshwater, the goldeneye is actually considered a sea duck and is mostly found on saltwater during winter in Washington. There are two species of goldeneye that call Washington home. They are the Barrow's goldeneye and the common goldeneye. It can be difficult to tell hens of the two species apart. The Barrow's drake tends to be a little larger and has a larger white, half-moon-shaped spot between its eye and bill.

Photo by Joe Rothrock

The drake harlequin duck ranks with the wood duck when it comes to striking coloration. Although rare, the harlequin is always a possibility for hunters along Washington's marine waterways.

Hunting Techniques

Sea ducks are hunted on salt water sloughs, channels, and large back bays. Hunting over decoys is how most of these ducks are hunted, with large decoy spreads in areas the birds like to feed. However, sometimes hunters can occasionally pass shoot ducks coming out of back water sloughs when heading to larger salt water bodies during tide changes.

Geese (including brant)

Geese (including brant) are the waterfowl hunter's "big game." Washington hunting seasons for geese allow the harvest of several species and subspecies. Along with an abundance of birds, liberal seasons, and lots of hunting opportunity, goose hunting can be a real joy.

The Canada goose is Washington's most common and most popular goose species. Found on both sides of the Cascades, Canada geese provide exciting hunting opportunities throughout the long fall and early winter season. Washington has several varieties of Canada geese that vary greatly in size, coloration, and abundance. Currently the dusky Canada goose season is closed. It is the hunter's responsibility to know the species of the bird they are trying to harvest and what birds are legal.

Large numbers of snow geese migrate into and through Washington from mid-fall through mid-winter and provide excellent shooting opportunity in some areas. The largest numbers of snow geese are most notably in western Skagit and Snohomish counties. Adults are pure white with black wing tips, making them easily identifiable. However, to the untrained hunter, swans may look similar to snow geese. Remember to be sure of your target before you shoot since swans are not legal to harvest in Washington.

Photo by Roy Murdock

Brant provide an exciting but limited hunting opportunity in the marine waters of Skagit and Pacific counties. Most brant of the west coast are darker than those on the east side of the country, and are commonly referred to as black brant. A smaller population of "gray-bellied" brant winter in Skagit County.

Hunting Techniques

Most geese are hunted over decoys. Generally when flying, most geese are too high to pass shoot unless it is early in the season or strong winds force them close to the ground. Hunters can jump shoot geese on some areas as long as they can be concealed until the last possible moment. Geese on larger fields may mean a long belly crawl to get into range.

General Waterfowl Hunting Techniques

There are three basic methods of hunting waterfowl: hunting over decoys, jump-shooting, and pass-shooting. It should be pointed out that there are virtually limitless numbers of variations and combinations of the three depending on the species and the minute-by-minute changes in circumstances that are an integral part of waterfowl hunting. Some excellent resources are available online at http://www.ducks.org/hunting and http://www.deltawaterfowl.org/hunting/first_hunt/.

Hunting over decoys

Hunting ducks and geese over decoys is in some ways a much more complicated endeavor than jump-shooting or pass-shooting (described below), but, done right, it can also be very productive. The object of hunting over decoys is to wait for birds to come to you. By placing decoys you have a hand in enticing waterfowl to come closer than they might otherwise. Please note that is illegal to hunt waterfowl aided by bait (grain, other feed, or salt that has been placed to attract birds).

As with all hunting methods, you must first find a place to hunt. You can choose a pond, slough, field, small bay, stretch of marine shoreline, or wherever your research, scouting, and other information-gathering efforts would indicate birds are likely to be found. When hunting over decoys, the hunters need to be well-concealed, so a blind and an outer layer of camouflage from head to foot are usually a must, and that outer layer should be both waterproof and warm.

For duck and goose hunters, decoy location is usually going to make more difference than what kind of decoys you put out. First and foremost, your decoys must be visible from the air, so place them out in the open where they can be seen from as far away as possible. A dozen decoys crowded three feet apart into one corner of a 50-acre field will probably go unnoticed by passing birds, as will decoys lined up tight to the edge of a cattail patch or placed under overhanging trees and brush on one side of a small pond. Also, waterfowl land into the wind, so you should avoid having the wind in your face when setting up, or most birds will be coming to your decoys from behind you.

There are nearly as many opinions on the “right” way to lay out a spread of decoys as there are duck and goose hunters, but there are some general rules on which most hunters agree, and one of those rules is that there should be a an open spot, or hole, among the decoys where there’s room for incoming birds to land, or attempt to land. Placing decoys in a “C” or a “J” formation, with the open side facing downwind, is one way to do it. Some hunters place three to four clumps of two or three decoys each to the right in front of the blind and three or four clumps to the left, leaving a large area of open water in the middle, straight out in front of the blind.

For goose hunters, there are generally large spreads of decoys in agricultural fields being used by geese. Geese can also be hunted on the water like ducks.

As mentioned earlier, big-water hunters gunning for sea ducks and other diving species may use 100 or more decoys, and many of them like parallel strings or a J pattern decoy presentation. Unlike puddle-duck hunters, whose decoys each have a separate anchor line and weight, big-water duck hunters may string dozens of decoys on one line so it doesn't take hours to deploy and retrieve the decoys at the start and end of the day.

If the blind is on a slough, small stream, or side channel off a river, try blocking the entire channel you're hunting with decoys. Flights of ducks on the main river often turn into the smaller feeder sloughs and channels when they see the decoys. If the channel is completely cut off, they'll often drop right in on the first pass. Place a few singles, pairs, and smaller groups of decoys downstream, along the edges of the channel, creating pinch points to funnel landing ducks toward your blind.

Jump-shooting

As the name implies, this method involves walking, crawling, or, in some cases, paddling or rowing to within shooting range of birds that are on the water or on the ground and flushing, or "jumping," them into the air. In other words, you're stalking the birds, not waiting for them to come to you. How you go about stalking them, of course, is determined by the situation. Jump-shooting puddle ducks along a weedy slough or series of small ponds may be a matter of sneaking quietly from one cattail patch to another and shooting at singles or pairs of birds that rise within shooting range.

Jump-shooting a flock of 150 Canada geese on a recently harvested corn field, on the other hand, may require a belly-crawl through mud to get close enough for a shot. If those geese wander too close to an open hillside and a hunter can get to the back side of the hill without being spotted, the best strategy may be to pop up at the top of the hill and shoot birds that are in range.

Jump-shooting isn't a simple matter of slogging along and shooting birds that happen to appear in front of you. Successful jump-shooting requires a certain amount of reconnaissance, strategy, and stealth. Scout the areas you plan to hunt, move slowly and quietly, always be looking and listening as far ahead as possible, use the wind, weather, and available cover to your advantage, and always assume that there are birds behind the next clump of cattails or around the next bend in the stream, so you're ready to shoot when the time comes.

Pass-shooting

Rather than going to where the birds are resting or feeding, pass-shooters find a spot where they think ducks or geese will pass by and hunker down and wait for the birds to come to them. The key, of course, is to put yourself in the right place at the right time, or your pass-shooting efforts could lead to some very long and very boring days.

Luckily for hunters, ducks and geese are creatures of habit and they tend to follow the same routine from day to day, season to season, year to year. That includes using the same travel routes between the places they roost at night and the places they feed during the day. The pass-shooters' primary challenge is to learn where those travel routes are and locate ambush points along the way. In some cases, the research has already been done, as there are well-known pass-shooting spots scattered throughout some of Washington's prime duck-hunting and goose-hunting areas.

Those traditional pass-shooting spots tend to be popular, and sometimes crowded, so you may want to find a few of your own. Start by figuring out where birds feed, where they rest, and what the routes might be between those areas. In some cases the feeding areas and roosting areas may be only a short distance apart, such as a large lake and a farm field a mile away. In other cases, the travel route may cover 10 miles of rolling hills between the Columbia River and distant corn or wheat fields. Locate a hill they pass over, a point they pass by, or a narrow valley they fly through on the way and you're in business. On the more wide-open east side of the state, you might be able to find a high point and scan the countryside for signs of low-flying birds in the distance, then zero in on those places that seem to be used frequently.

While the jump-shooter may kick up birds throughout the entire day, most of the action for pass-shooters is going to occur early in the day or late in the day. This is when ducks and geese are traveling from roosting areas to feeding areas and returning to their roosting spots. Put bluntly, that means it is best to be in position by the start of legal hunting hours and/or stay there until sunset.

Try to be invisible to the birds. If there are rocks, bushes, or trees nearby, get behind them or at least position yourself so that they break up your silhouette. You could also build a small blind from limbs, brush, and other natural materials or bring along a portable blind.

The key to pass shooting is to avoid the urge to shoot too high (sky-busting). This is an unethical and illegal practice, because it can wound birds without you knowing it, and also result in wastage of birds when they sail out of range to areas they are not retrievable.

Hunting Equipment

Legal hunting equipment is as diverse as the companies that create and sell them. Since we only have limited space and time, the regulations behind the hunting equipment will be discussed below. There are also suggestions on different shot sizes for each species. Below are some suggestions and information on the different hunting equipment that you may need when hunting in Washington. These are just suggestions and you will need to find what works for you. This section details legal hunting equipment at the time of the writing of this booklet.

Shotguns

Shotguns are the most widely used hunting equipment when hunting Washington's waterfowl. Any shotgun can make a good waterfowl gun as long as it shoots straight. It will help if the shotgun has the correct choke for the type of hunting you are doing. The choke helps group the shot together. Most new shotguns have interchangeable choke tubes and a threaded barrel that allows shooters to change their shotgun's choke based on their needs for shooting/hunting. If your shotgun does not have an interchangeable choke, you will have to be mindful of the distance you can ethically shoot at ducks.

It is unlawful to hunt game birds, including waterfowl, with a shotgun capable of holding more than three shells. If your shotgun is designed to hold more than three shells, the manufacturer should have also supplied a magazine plug to fill the space to only allow the three rounds.

Muzzleloading shotguns

Muzzleloaders come in all makes and models. Muzzleloading shotguns are not generally used for waterfowl hunting because of the long time it takes to load after each shot. Waterfowl hunting can be fast and furious. If you are going to use a muzzleloader, check to make sure it meets the specifications of legal hunting equipment in the big game hunting seasons and regulations pamphlet.

Shot Sizes

Depending on the birds that you are hunting, you will want to look at different shot sizes and loads. Remember that #6 shot is smaller than #4 shot. All waterfowl hunting requires the use of non-toxic shot such as steel. There are a lot of commercially available non-toxic shot and you will have to determine what shot works the best in your firearm.

Bird	Non-Toxic Shot
Large Ducks	2-4
Small Ducks	4-6
Geese	T-BB

You can also use archery equipment and crossbow equipment to hunt birds, but it is very difficult to harvest birds with archery equipment.

Clothing and Concealment

In hunting as in everything else, if you are not comfortable you won't enjoy your experiences as much as if you were comfortable. This is why how you dress is being covered in this manual. Below are some suggestions on choosing clothing, hunter orange vests/patterns, blinds, and tree stands and finding what works for you is the key.

Remember to obtain permission from the landowner prior to placing ground blinds or tree stands and if you are on public land, check the regulations of the agency that owns the land.

Boots and waders

Hunting boots will help support your ankles and also keep your feet dry and warm. Wet and/or cold feet when hunting can make for an uncomfortable day. Some boots have insulation in them to help combat the cold. When choosing a boot, think about the kinds of hunting you will be doing and the temperatures in which you will be hunting. If you are primarily an eastern Washington hunter, you may want to get the boots with 2000 grams of insulation to help on those frigid mornings. But you also may have some hot foot issues when hunting early season in mid-October.

Waders are also a good purchase for waterfowl hunting because they are completely waterproof and will help insulate you. Also, they will keep you dry when placing decoys and retrieving decoys. If you buy a pair of camouflage pants that are a couple sizes too big, you can wear them on the outside of your waders and help protect yourself from possibly getting a cold bath when waterfowl hunting.

Layering

When dressing for any hunt, make sure to take into consideration what you may be doing. Dressing in layers will allow you to regulate your body temperature more efficiently. The idea is to wear only the layers that you need to stay warm and dry at the time, but have the option to take a layer off or put another layer on if conditions change. In cool weather, for instance, you'll probably want to wear fewer layers to walk into the blind location and set decoys, but will want to put another layer or two on once you are setup at your hunting spot and likely to be sitting for a while.

Camouflage

The number of camouflage patterns and manufacturers is dizzying. Just remember to try to match a pattern with the kind of habitat and climate you are going to hunt. Several of the bigger camo pattern companies have all purpose patterns that will work in a lot of different locations. These can be effective if you are unsure of where you may be hunting. If all else fails, you can use the old style of green, brown, and black camo that is common in popular culture. Remember to camouflage your face with a face covering or face paint and your hands with gloves.

Photo by Tom Frank

The basic idea of camo clothing is to break up the outline of your silhouette and get you to blend into the habitat. Animals are instinctively

afraid of humans and if they see the shape of a human, they will not stick around for you to possibly get a shot at them.

Sometimes no camo is better than a contrasting camo pattern. If you are hunting the desert and are wearing camo that is of cat tails designed for waterfowl hunting, you will stick out like a sore thumb. At that point, wear clothing that is similar in color to the surrounding country.

Also, because the weather in the Pacific Northwest is generally wet, having warm waterproof camouflage clothing can increase your comfort level and improve the experience. Waders are also a good purchase for hunting waterfowl because they are completely waterproof and will help insulate you. They will keep you dry when placing decoys and retrieving decoys. Note that sometimes in the bodies of water you may be wading, there are hidden objects that may pierce your waders. If you buy a pair of camouflage pants that are a couple sizes too big, you can wear them on the outside of your waders and help protect yourself from possibly getting a cold bath when hunting waterfowl.

Blinds

Waterfowl have outstanding vision, so minimizing movement and being totally concealed is the key. Ground blinds are becoming more and more popular. Commercial ground blinds are designed to pop up and provide total concealment on the ground. Just popping this blind up does not guarantee concealment, so try to place brush and cover around the blind to help conceal it. Ground blinds should be set out in advance of your hunt, if possible, so the game become accustom to the blind. Layout blinds or hay bale blinds are also used when hunting waterfowl in open fields.

Blinds can also be constructed with burlap, 1 x 1's, spray-paint, and some string. Cut the 1 x 1's to about a four foot section. Drill holes in the 1 x 1's and lace the burlap to them. Spray paint the wood to be a dark color and put streaks of green, black, and tan on the burlap. You will then have your own blind that is easy to transport.

Depending on the surroundings, you may be able to fashion a very functional blind from available materials such as tree limbs, grass, cattails, or sagebrush. Be sure to "brush up" any blind with whatever natural vegetation occurs at the site you're hunting.

Where you build or place your blind may well be as important as how it looks and how well it hides you. When placing a waterfowl blind, the wind should be at your back since ducks and geese, like 747 pilots, prefer to land and take off into the wind. Winds here in the Northwest are generally out of the west and southwest. If you are not sure of the wind direction, there are wind indicators that can be purchased from sporting goods stores. Also you can use the old standby of picking up some dry grass and dropping that from about eye height and it should give you an indication of the wind direction. If possible, avoid having the sun directly in your face, otherwise the birds will see you easier and identifying birds will be much more difficult.

Locating your blind so that the wind is blowing right-to-left or left-to-right (crosswind) is also a good option, because approaching ducks aren't as likely to look beyond the decoys and be alarmed by something they see in or around the blind. Hunting from a blind with the wind in your face is the worst option because most ducks will come in from behind you, allowing for the shortest reaction time. Sometimes, though, you simply have to build or place your blind where it blends in best, and take your chances on wind direction.

Decoys

Some hunters, especially those who hunt geese on open fields and those who hunt ducks on large bodies of water, may use dozens or even hundreds of decoys to help draw birds into shooting range, but beginners can get by with a dozen mallard decoys. Most ducks seem to recognize mallards, even fake mallards, and will feel safe landing among them. In fact, geese will sometimes be drawn in by mallard decoys. If your decoys look real and are where the ducks might want to be, it doesn't matter whether you're using a dozen mallard imitations or five dozen decoys representing every waterfowl species found in this part of the country.

When purchasing decoys, if they don't come with lines and weights you will need to purchase lines and weights to hold them in place. A decoy bag or waterfowl sled makes bringing the decoys in and out of the hunting area easier.

There are types of decoys called "jerk rigs," where you have several decoys on a line anchored with a shock cord, and you jerk the decoys to create movement. This type of rig will help the decoys look more lifelike but will also draw the ducks' attention away from your blind. There are also decoys that have spinning wings. When you jerk the cord, the wing spins to imitate a landing duck. Battery powered or other electronic waterfowl decoys are not legal in Washington.

Goose flags and kites are something that may come in handy when hunting over goose decoys. Flags are colored to mimic a landing goose and can help draw the geese into shooting range. However, this decoy is powered by you in your blind, which may make you the point they focus on, so make sure when using this to be totally concealed in camo or in a good blind.

Photo by WDFW

Duck and goose calls

There's a duck or goose call for virtually every species and hunting situation you might encounter, but research before you buy and practice frequently after you make a purchase. Someone who knows how to use a duck or goose call can work miracles when it comes to drawing birds into shooting range. A bad caller, on the other hand, can chase them off even faster.

Calls can be a very effective tool for the duck or goose hunter, but learn to use them BEFORE you take to the field. Follow the manufacturer's directions and attend a calling seminar at a local sporting goods store or hunting club. A number of audio and video CDs provide very good instruction on calling all species of waterfowl. Have your call ready and practice along with it. Listening to birds on a roost or feeding area and imitating them is a good way to practice your calls, even if you are not hunting. Even after you master the basics, use a call sparingly; over-calling is more likely to chase birds away than under-calling. Here are a few selected pointers (paraphrased) from Ducks Unlimited's 10 tips for duck callers:

- As long as the ducks are coming in, stop calling.
- When targeting particular species, use calls intended for those species. (In other words, don't depend totally on the standard mallard call.)
- If two or more people are calling, one should be the leader while others fill in. Don't compete with your own hunting partners.
- If what you're doing isn't working, make a change of some kind. The birds obviously aren't buying what you're trying to sell.

Dogs

To most waterfowl hunters, their dog is not only a great help in retrieving downed birds, but an eager and loyal hunting partner that stays by their side through the worst of conditions and the longest lulls in shooting, with never a complaint or loss of enthusiasm.

It's impossible to estimate how many dead and crippled ducks and geese would be lost every year if it weren't for the hundreds of thousands of hard-working dogs that accompany their masters throughout the waterfowl season. Waterfowl often drop into deep water, thick cover, or far away from the hunters who shoot them. Without a boat they would be impossible to retrieve were it not for the hunter's dog. To most hunters, a dog pays for itself every time it retrieves a bird that would otherwise be lost. If you don't have a retrieving dog, you shouldn't hunt anywhere that you can't wade or boat to retrieve your game.

Optics

Generally you do not need a spotting scope or binoculars for hunting waterfowl. However, they are helpful to identify birds, observe their movements, or watch them go to their feeding locations.

Where to Go

Finding hunting access on private lands in Washington State is becoming more of a challenge. However, there are still a number of options available to hunters on public land. WDFW's wildlife areas are good places to start. WDFW also has a lot of private landowners who have signed up to allow public hunting access on their lands. These lands can be found on the WDFW Hunting Access webpage http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/hunting_access/ as well as a booklet on how to find hunting access.

Also on the website is an online mapping tool called "GoHunt." This system allows hunters to print their own maps and use them in the field, and also breaks down the hunting success of several species into a visual map. This tool can be found online at http://apps.wdfw.wa.gov/gohunt/.

If hunters want to gain access to private property, they should do some scouting of their desired area and locate lands they might want to hunt. Once a hunter has located properties to hunt, he or she can knock on the door of the landowner. If the hunter can't locate a house, landowner contact information can be obtained from the county tax assessor office. Landowners may refuse to grant permission. If they do refuse access, make sure to thank them for their time. Hunters who are persistent in their search will most likely gain access to some lightly hunted areas and make new friends along the way. Other options include hunt clubs and hiring a guide who has access to private farms and ranches.

The department's website contains annual hunting prospects that detail WDFW biologist's expectations for hunting for the current year's seasons. These prospects are broken into 17 districts that mark where a particular biologist is responsible. Hunters can find the hunting prospects online at http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/prospects/.

Hunting Ethics

All hunters should be hunting ethically. There are many interpretations on ethics and what they mean, but before starting your hunt, think of what you believe is ethical and put it against what the public as a whole may think is ethical. Being ethical hunters will improve public perceptions of hunting and will benefit the sport. WDFW encourages you to raise your ethical bar to the highest level.

Some things that are considered un-ethical in regards to hunting are:

- Shooting at birds when they are outside your hunting equipment's effective range.
- Shooting birds while on the land, water, or foliage
- Hogging all of the shots from your hunting party
- Shooting a deer or elk at 1000 yards
- Using a bow or firearm that is not properly sighted in

Shot placement

Shot placement is crucial when trying to harvest any animal. As ethical sportsmen and women, we should strive to only take good shots and make the most humane kill. This can be achieved by only shooting when you are 100% confident in the shot. Part of being confident is practicing with your hunting equipment before the hunt. Another way to be confident is to know exactly where to put the shot. Make sure that you are not taking long shots and shooting beyond the effective range of your shotgun and ammunition combination, so you are able to drop birds within easy retrieval range.

Crossing

When crossing, you want to put the shot in front of the waterfowl so it flies into it. Depending on the speed of the bird, you may need to lead them at different lengths.

Photo by Jason Wettstien

Photo by Flick Creative Commons, Andrey

Flying Away and Head On

When waterfowl is flying away or head on, you will want to start moving your gun from behind the bird, then pull the trigger when you cover it up with the shotgun barrel. This makes sure that the shot will be in the right place.

Landing

When waterfowl are landing into the spread or coming into land you should aim at the bottom half of the bird since they are dropping altitude.

Waterfowl Cleaning

Many duck hunters will do what is called breasting a bird. This refers to removing only the breasts, as there is not a lot of meat on the legs or other parts of the ducks. However, some hunters cook the organs (heart, liver, gizzard) and other parts of the bird. Goose hunters however, may want to keep the goose whole because there is more meat on the legs and other parts of the goose. Remember that it is unlawful to possess in the field or transport game birds unless a feathered head is left attached to each carcass, except falconry-caught birds.

- To breast a duck, pluck the breast clean of feathers.
- Cut down the middle of the breast to one side of the breast ridge bone of the duck.
- They have a ridge bone in the middle of their breast like chickens and turkeys do.
- Cut down to the bone on both sides of the ridge bone.
- Carefully fillet one breast off the rib cage. Then do the other.
- You can skin the breast before you fillet the breast off of the bones if you would like, but sometimes the skin is very difficult to remove.
- If you leave the skin on when you fillet the breast, you can flip the breast over on a cutting board and fillet the skin off the breast.

You can also pluck the bird and keep it whole for roasting. To do this you will want to pull the feathers out. You will want to do this for the entire bird you plan to cook, unless you are in the field and need to keep the feathers on the head.

- Once you have the bird plucked, find the bottom of the breast meat.
- Make a small cut here to expose the entrails.
- Reach two fingers into the body cavity and lightly grasp the entrails.
- Pull them straight down, removing the innards.
- Make sure you got the heart from the upper breast area.
- Wash the bird and pat it dry.

NOTES

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Ten Basic Safety Rules

1. Always keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction and under control.

2. Treat every firearm as if it were loaded.

3. Keep your finger off the trigger until ready to fire. Use your safety, but remember that safeties sometimes fail.

4. Be sure of your target and what lies beyond before firing.

5. Never place or carry a loaded firearm in a motor vehicle.

6. Never use a firearm unless you are familiar with how it works. If you need an owner's manual, write to the manufacturer.

7. Never cross a fence, climb a tree, cross a stream or jump a ditch with a loaded firearm.

8. Never point at anything you do not want to shoot.

9. Unload firearms when not in use. Store firearms and ammunition separately.

10. Never use alcohol (or drugs) before or during shooting.

Learn More about WDFW's Hunter Education Program

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Region 6 Montesano Office:	(360) 239-4628
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More Information

For more information about the Hunter Education Program, contact our staff in Olympia at (360) 902-8111.

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If you need further assistance or information, please contact the Olympia office of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife: (360) 902-2349, or Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD), (360) 902-2207.