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OUTDOORS

Like a duck out of water?

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
FOR THE JOURNAL

I need to brush up on my outdoor clichés, because I think the saying in the headline of this week's column is actually supposed to refer to a fish out of water.

In any event, however, 30 minutes before legal sunrise this morning marks the opening day of the 2012-13 South Carolina waterfowl season.

Waterfowl seasons are set by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources within a framework of dates allowed by federal authorities.

As usual, the season is divided into two segments — a short season from Nov. 17-24, and the long season from Dec. 8 through Jan. 27.

For years, there was a push to set hunting dates later into the season to take advantage of late-arriving ducks that migrate from the north. Over the last couple of years, the trend now seems to be to extend the early season to include two weekends to take advantage of resident birds.

This year's season is a total of 60 days, which is the maximum allowed.

The downside for duck hunters is that ducks are fond of water, and water is in short supply.

With our Upstate counties being somewhat off the beaten path from the richer duck environment of the coastal plains in the lower part of the state, area hunters have come to rely on two main species of waterfowl — the wood duck and the Canada goose.

Several years ago, based on requests from waterfowlers, authorities increased the limit on wood ducks from two to three birds per day, which helped make a morning in a backwater swamp or creek a little longer event.



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The opening day of the 2012-13 waterfowl season begins today. While authorities list the Upstate area in a moderate drought status, a shortage of water could have severe impacts on this year's migration and harvest.

The total daily bag limit on all ducks is six per hunter, which would include the three woodies and whatever else you can find except geese. Occasionally, reports come in of some mallards off the lake, particularly if some of the release plantations on the other side of the Tugaloo River shoo some off the reservation, but our bread and butter duck is the woodie.

As the name implies, wood ducks are fond of woody areas and actually roost in trees. They are considered by many to be one of the most beautiful ducks in the wild.

Beaver swamps that are prevalent across many Upstate area hunting lands, as well as farm ponds tucked back in the woods, are likely places to encounter wood ducks.

Woodies don't require deep water and will congregate near areas where acorns and seeds find their way into the water.

The stronghold of Canada Goose hunting in South Carolina occurs west of the coastal region. One particular reason for this reversal of waterfowl habitat use is that alligators and geese don't mix, so the big birds tend to congregate around the Midlands and Upstate.

The Upstate certainly has no shortage of the large birds, as the population has expanded in recent years. In some cases, geese are considered nuisances, especially among golf course and public park managers.

One of the favorable habits of geese is that they regularly flock to open grain and grass fields to feed where savvy hunters often pattern their movements and hide in layout blinds in the open fields for geese to arrive.

When lake levels are only minimally low, the same could be said for exposed sandbars that quickly grew over in moist soil grasses and would attract both ducks and geese.

Either way, the season is here and it's time to go make the best of it.

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