For the Love of Ducks

Deep in Louisiana duck country, a new hunting lodge marries a conservation ethic with creature comforts

By T. EDWARD NICKENS
Photographs by ROB HOWARD

WING REY Clockwise from top left: A redhead in hand; hunters watch the skies for incoming fowl; John Burrell on his way to the blind; Diesel, a chocolate Labrador, takes a break; a group of hunters gather to compare notes; arrows full of duck calls and leg bands.
Ducks have been piling into the Seven Rivers region of central Louisiana for untold centuries, but only in the last few years have any but local hunters been privy to the spectacle. That’s changing, thanks to the development of what could be the South’s most elegant duck hunting destination, Honey Brake Lodge. Situated on an 8,000-acre wetlands reserve, Honey Brake is a part of the 40,000-acre Louisiana Delta Plantation, a vast agricultural enterprise raising soybeans, milo, cotton, rice, corn, and wheat. Nearly surrounded by even more duck country in the form of federal and state public landholdings, the complex boasts access to pit blinds in rice fields, brushy hides in low marsh, and big timber blinds large enough for a half dozen hunters.

For the ducks, there is no hesitation, never a wing beat. They descend, bills into the wind, and now there are seven mallards back-flapping over the decoys, and guns are up and two birds drop with the first volley. I shake my head. Those mallards could have dropped into any one of a million little sloughs or timber brakes across more than fifty square miles of Louisiana swamp and marsh and bayou. But this is exactly where they wanted to be. I know the feeling.
he has emerged as one of the South’s leading sporting figures and one of the most sought-after outfitters in the world. His Atlanta-based High Adventure Company manages nearly a dozen of the finest hunting and fishing lodges in North America and Africa, and is the exclusive booking agent for a half dozen others. High Adventure owns and manages the Lodge at Tipitaka in Patagonia, one of the premier trophy rainbow and brown trout and red stag destinations in the world. A sister outfit, S.A. Adventures, custom designs photo and ecotourism safaris in seven southern, central, and East African countries. When High Adventure Company was asked to define the Honey Brake experience, it was another heady opportunity for a small-town East Tennessee boy.

Born and raised in tiny Lake City, twenty-five miles north of Knoxville, Burrell “had a very traditional rural South upbringing,” he says. The son of a small-town doctor and a homemaker, he chased squirrels with a .410 shotgun until he went deer hunting for the first time at age eleven or twelve. “From the moment I stepped foot in the deer woods,” he says, “big game was it for me.” He couldn’t have known it then, but the seeds were planted for a lifetime of chasing some of the world’s largest, and most dangerous, game.

After graduating from Tennessee Tech University with a degree in wildlife biology, Burrell went to work a six-month stint at Georgia’s famed Mossy Oak Enterprises as varied as Eddie Bauer, which asked him to help design the youth camp facility was finished and made ready for summer camps designed around shooting, fishing, and conservation.

But the centerpiece of the Honey Brake experience will continue to be moments like this. Keeth wears a camouflage vest stuffed with 12-gauge shells and a dully brimméd Mclntire hat. His call lanyard is festooned with calls—pintail and teal whistle, mallard drake call, specklebelly goose call, and mallard hen calls for big water and close-up work. The dawn flight is slow, but as the sun breaks free of early clouds, the ducks are on the feed, and Keeth and Burrell put on a tag-team calling exhibition that some of the birds simply can’t resist.

The early morning’s wads of eight and twelve cartwheel ducks turn into flocks of thirty and forty—high birds, but watchable, and we knock down the occasional teal and gadwall. Then a small group of big bucks banks over the slough a hundred yards out, and the Keeth and Burrell show of two-man quacks and hail calls pays off. When one of the ducks quacks back, we know we have them, but they’re not finished messing with our minds. The birds are behind us now, lost in the brush, but we know they’re up there, and Keeth switches to a quiet little mallard drake call, a quivery little querry—querry-buzz that can flush a duck like in a moment, then Keeth breaks the spell with a Louisiana benediction.

"The scale of this place is just enormous," says Keeth, shaking his head despite the fact that he has plummed nearly every acre of Honey Brake. The possibilities for managing duck hunting are similarly impressive. Honey Brake guides and staff members scout every afternoon, some-times by air of the 120 blinds available, perhaps three dozen are regularly hunted at any given time, with another 20 brushed and prepped for “run and gun” hunting, according to Keeth, if the birds show a liking for a particular slough or marsh. Each year, Honey Brake plants 2,000 to 3,000 acres just for wildlife, and the resources of a vast agricultural enterprise can be brought to bear for waterfowl. You need to put out a half mile of polypropylene line to flood a duck field. “It’s a chaos match,” Keeth says. “We figure out where the ducks want to be, and then we do whatever we have to do to be there.”

And the scope is expanding. This year, Honey Brake plans to offer limited hunts for white-tailed deer. In the last six years, only six bucks have been taken off the property, and the largest posted Boone and Crockett numbers between 170 and an eye-popping 236. In recent weeks, a new

the reminders came every sunrise. Across the horizon is a vast tapestry of tall oaks and cypress trees. Elevated boardwalks connect the main lodge to three 1,000-square-foot cabin, half hidden by Spanish moss. Cantilevered over the shores of Larto Lake, one of Louisiana’s least crum- pic hot spots, the lodge decks are awash in sunshine, perfect for a long after- noon of doing nothing if the mood suits. That’s not likely, given Honey Brake’s gun club with fifteen-station and five stand sporting clays ranges, a twenty-station archery range, and fishing boats on standby.

Spent a few moments indoors, and it’s as though Honey Brake’s de- signers conspired to convince you to never want to leave. Backed back on a thick leather sofa, I glance around the lodge’s Grand Room. A table groans with soft-shell crabs, alligator fat, deep-fried crab claws, and shrimp. A four-sided fireplace is fronted with claw-footed overstuffed chairs. Everywhere there’s a wild mix of architectural styles and pati- oms, Go To honeybrake.com.

The ducks cut the corner of the blind and sud- denly appear over the decoys, three mallards with wings splayed. There’s no time to think it through or call the shot, just barely enough time to get the guns up and shoulderred and triggers pulled. Two of the ducks tumble while a third claws for daylight. After the high flies and a few bad shots, we reload and settle down, turning our gaze back to the panorama of sky and marsh and water. The blind grows silent for a moment, then Keeth breaks the spell with a Louisiana benediction.

“Just look out there,” he murmurs. “Greenheads in the decoys. If there’s any place prettier in this world, I don’t want to hear about it. A

EYES TO THE SKY

On my last morning’s hunt, Burrell, Honey Brake general manager Drew Keeth, and I motor in the dark across a remote shallow-water slough, then spread out in a spacious blind. In the daylight, the horizon is an endless sweep of marsh and scrub timber and water, unbroken in all directions. “The scale of this place is just enormous,” says Keeth, shaking his head despite the fact that he has plummed nearly every acre of Honey Brake. The possibilities for managing duck hunting are similarly impressive. Honey Brake guides and staff members scout every afternoon, some-times by air of the 120 blinds available, perhaps three dozen are regularly hunted at any given time, with another 20 brushed and prepped for “run and gun” hunting, according to Keeth, if the birds show a liking for a particular slough or marsh. Each year, Honey Brake plants 2,000 to 3,000 acres just for wildlife, and the resources of a vast agricultural enterprise can be brought to bear for waterfowl. You need to put out a half mile of polypropylene line to flood a duck field. “It’s a chaos match,” Keeth says. “We figure out where the ducks want to be, and then we do whatever we have to do to be there.”

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