

A slow day for hunters on Catahoula Lake

The author, a former assistant U.S. attorney in Washington, D.C., and general counsel to the National Wildlife Federation, is currently a professor of criminal and environmental law at Tulane University. These were his impressions while observing federal game-enforcement agents on opening day of the 1981 waterfowl season on Catahoula Lake, one of the most heavily hunted lakes in the country.

By OLIVER HOUCK

The guns are booming to the left and right and way out in the dark, but there is nothing in sight — no ducks, no men, no movement at all. It's like the soundtrack from a war movie where somebody forgot the actors.

It's opening day at Catahoula Lake.

5:10 a.m.: We pull up in an old U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service truck. The driver, an agent named Dan, is from the enforcement branch. USFWS agents haven't visited Catahoula for a number of years. The word is that there have been a lot of game-law violators up here. And there are plenty of ducks this year. Aerial surveys on Wednesday showed approximately 250,000 birds. It should be a good day.

In the back of the truck are two huge three-wheelers with oversize tires and a Japanese name. We wrestle them down into the mud.

"Ever drive one of these?" Dan asks.

"Nope," I say. The machine looks as strange as the Moon Rover.

"Ever drive a motorcycle?"

"Yes."

"Too bad," Dan says, hopping on his vehicle and starting off into the gloom. "It works just the opposite way."

5:40 a.m. We have stopped at the edge of the woods. The hunters have begun shooting in the pre-dawn. The moon is as clear as a nickle overhead. Behind us, the Spanish moss hangs like dark laundry from the scrub pine trees. Ahead are the gray lake and a hundred blinds, dark boxes 50 yards or so apart as far out as the eye can see, some with duck decoys around them, some with wooden geese, some with plastic jugs painted black and brown, and staked into the short marsh grass.

I am eating my breakfast banana; Dan is reading the action by sounds.

Several loud cracks resound nearby. "Air balls," Dan says, not bothering to look.

Whump. Whump. "Those are down over water," he says. "That man's killing ducks."

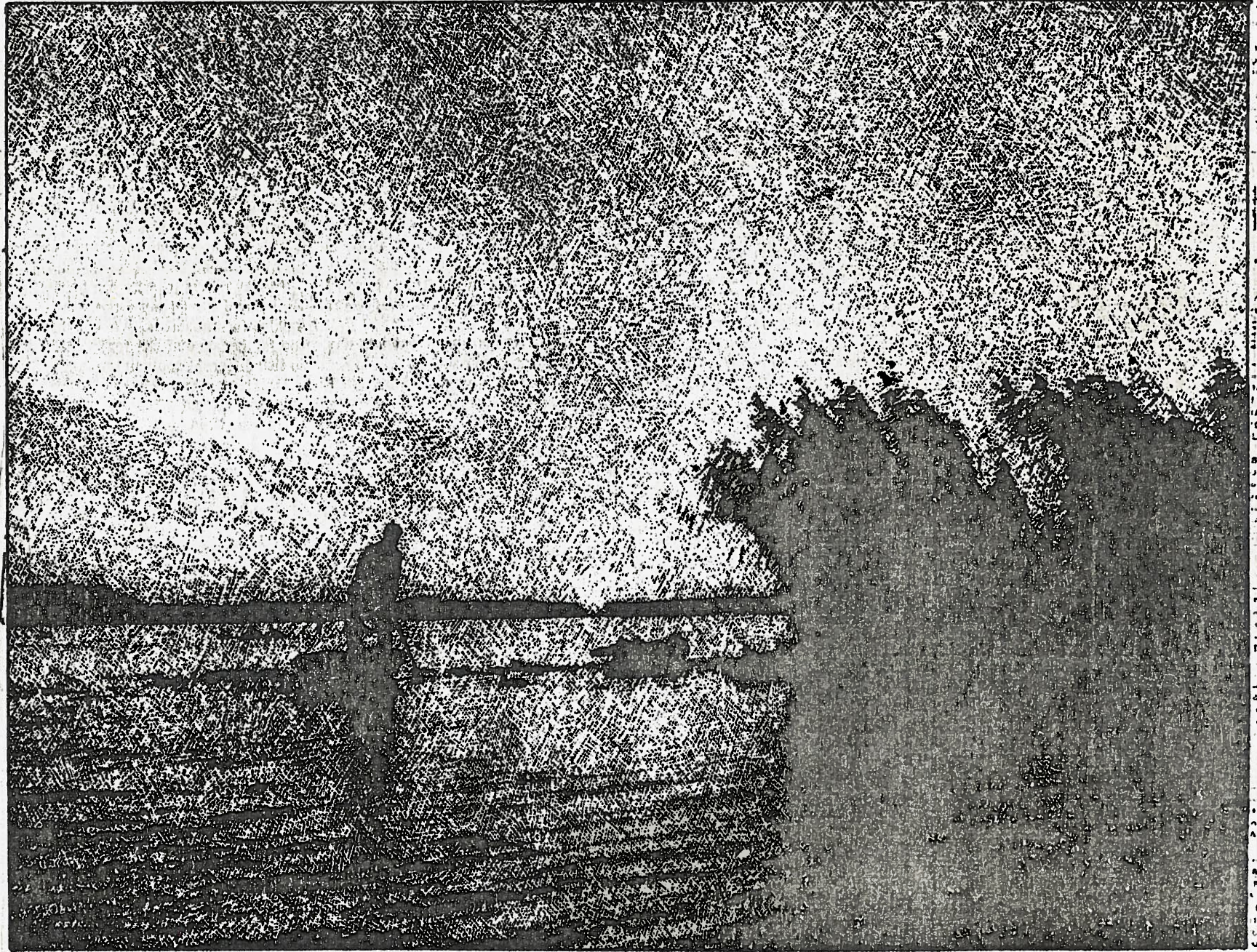
That man has his attention, a dark box singled out among the others in the lead-gray light.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Five quick shots in succession. "Would you say that man's pulled his plug out?" Dan says with a grin. He fixes that direction in his head, too.

6:50 a.m. The sun is up behind us, but so is the mist. The water shines like a greasy pan, studded with tufts of yellow grass and the green branches of the blinds.

The area has come alive with the sound of duck calls. There is more quacking than a zoo pond in spring, but there are no ducks to be seen. They got up before dawn and stole away. The hunters are working their wooden callers to an empty house, quacking each other in.



A flight of geese goes by high overhead — a small V against the sky. They may be snow geese. A chorus of honks swells up hopefully from the ground, each blind offering a variety of tones and speeds to the single flight, but the geese are deaf to the best of them. The V turns to a speck, and disappears.

A few birds descend to run the gauntlet in crazy, solo flights, bringing ripples of gunfire, but the flocks are gone.

7:40 a.m. A flight of large birds is coming over the lake in a ragged line. They don't fly like geese. As they approach, they are trailing their legs, slender as threads on the sky.

"Grosbeck?" Dan asks. I think he knows better. These are egrets.

From the blinds come a frenzy of goose calls, honking up to the egrets.

8:15 a.m. Discipline has broken down. Hunters are opening their blinds and walking out into the flat lake water, rearranging decoys, stretching their legs. Several groups are coming in, tooling around blinds on three-wheelers, trudging in on heavy waders.

A group passes us by at the edge of the woods — an old man and his two sons.

"Look at 'em," the man says to his sons and to us, pointing to the whole scene behind him. "They got no respect for their fellow duck hunter."

As if to prove his point, a large truck pulls out from the trees and stands with its engine idling. If there is a duck within five miles, this is the last place he'd land right now.

We watch the three hunters disappear into the trees.

"That man's been waiting months to take his boys out for some ducks," Dan says. "I feel sorry for him. There are too many people out here."

9:45 a.m. The lake is quiet again. A chill fog has settled in. Half of the blinds are empty. A few hunters stand out in the open, up to their knees in water, still as trees and waiting. There are no birds. As good a time as any to make the rounds.

"Where were you fellas last night?" a hunter asks, handing his shotgun over for a test on the plug.

"What happened last night?" Dan asks, thumbing three shells into the chamber.

"Airplanes, that's what. A couple of them. Harassing the birds."

We move on to another blind, and another.

The hunters are cordial. We are simply showing the flag. Nobody's over the limit today. We see a total of six downed birds.

10:30 a.m. We filter back to the refuge headquarters. Away from the lake the mist has burned off, and the sun is warm. We shuck our waders, wool shirts and jackets, and sprawl under a pecan tree.

Another agent comes in from the far side of the lake. He's had a slow morning, too. Last year, he says, it was a slaughter on opening day. Everybody was on the limit or over. Some of the hunters brought boys — some so small they could hardly lift a shotgun — and put them in the blind, so they could get an extra ten birds.

Another agent comes in, towing a boat. It's been slow in his area, too. Where did all the birds go? I ask him.

"Scared away," he says. "On Wednesday, the lake was covered with ducks."

"Your count or the state count?" he is asked. The state counts have a way of being optimistic about bird numbers.

"Both," he says, "but you should have seen it out on the lake last night. Everyone going out to his blind, and back, and out again. On three-wheelers. On swamp buggies. Air boats. Four-wheelers. You name it. Roaring around with headlights on. It looked like a city out there. I'll bet the birds were gone by midnight."

The last agent comes in, kicking off his boots. Slow morning. "Did you see the egret go over?" he asks. "About 8 o'clock?"

We nod.

"They came right over me, low, and all the blinds started honking for geese." He shook his head. "I just sat there praying, don't come down, don't come down..."