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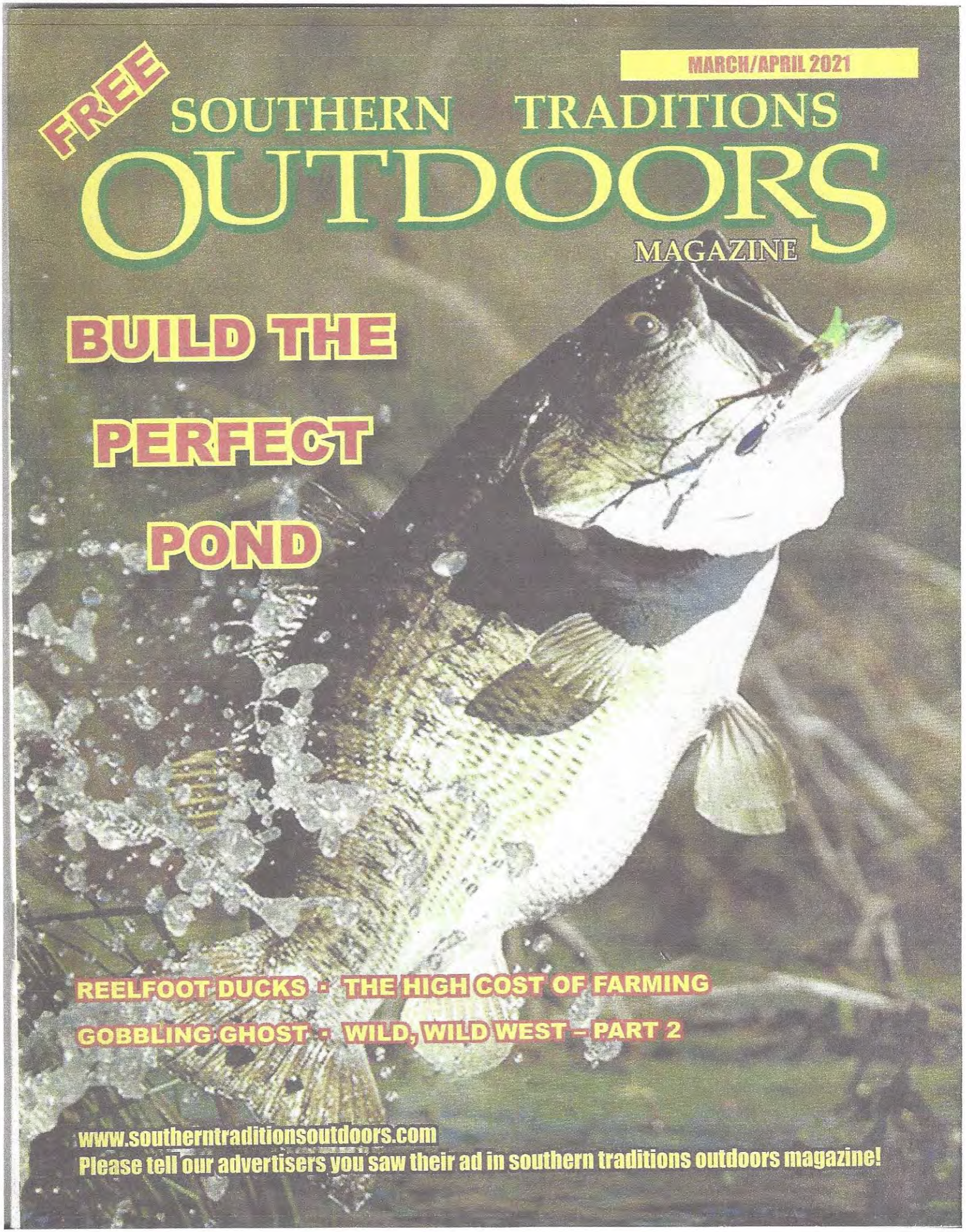

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A WEEKEND FOR THE AGES

By Cody Rodriquez

Hello to all of our faithful STO readers! This article is going to be a little different from my norm. The duck hunt of a lifetime I am writing about occurred on the special youth and military hunt weekend. I want to tell you the story from my point of view. First, a little background on me. Most of you probably know me or we have casually bumped into each other on a west Tennessee lake.

For those of you who do not know me, I am a professional hunting and fishing guide. That's right; I get to live the outdoorsman's dream!! Enough about me and on to the weekend of a lifetime! The special youth and military hunt happens in Tennessee during the first two weekends after the regular statewide duck season goes out.

The second weekend this year was very special. The hunt happened on February 13th for the youth and the 14th for active-duty military and retired veterans. The weather turned brutal and we had a huge push of ducks and geese migrate in before the harsh weather hit. Reelfoot started to freeze up that Thursday. With actual temperatures below 10 degrees and wind chills in the negatives, it does not take long to start seeing ice on the lake. We started making preparations early in the week to help prepare for the weather that was coming. I had 2000 decoys out at the open water blind I hunt on Reelfoot. Tuesday and Wednesday, we picked all of those decoys up. We did this because there is no way we could fight the ice with all the decoys around the blind. Friday evening there was no ice anywhere around the blind, so we felt pretty good about the youth hunt Saturday.

Saturday morning, Bradley Hobbs and I met the youth and their accompanying adults at South Shore Resort boat ramp at 5:00 am. We had seven youth for the day's hunt and they were excited! As the kids were donning their lifejackets and loading onto the boat, I pulled my phone out from under several layers of clothing to see what the actual temperature was...16 degrees with a wind chill of 2 degrees! I thought to myself, "I hope the ducks fly so it doesn't seem so cold!" As we departed the boat ramp and headed to the blind, we came across a few places of patchy ice. It usually takes about seven minutes to go from the boat ramp to the duck blind. Remember these 7 minutes for later!

As we got around 400 yards or so from the blind, we started hitting ice again. The ice was continuous, but it was just a thin skim. As we eased into the boat shed and the kids began to pull their face masks off, I could see the joy in their smiles and the excitement in their eyes. The joy in their smiles may be because I told Bradley to get the heaters in the blind running!

After everyone was in the blind and all the gear was unloaded, Bradley and I started

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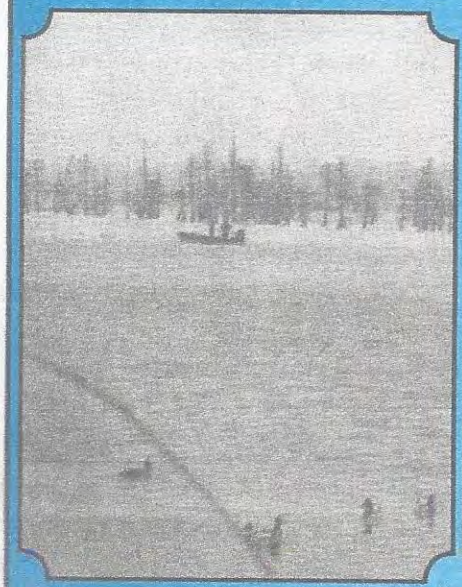
A WEEKEND FOR THE AGES - SOME KODAK MOMENTS

PHOTOS BY CODY RODRIQUEZ & BRADLEY HOBBS



working on breaking and clearing a hole in the ice around the blind to place our decoys in. We busted ice and cleared out about an acre hole in about thirty minutes. We put out four dozen mallard Higdon battleship decoys and two dozen speckle-belly goose decoys in the freshly cleared hole. After everyone was settled into their place in the blind you could feel the anticipation in the air.

Right at legal shooting time four mallard ducks came into our little spread and when I yelled "Shoot em!" all four ducks fell to the water. I knew then that these kids were some real shooters and we would have a good day. Action packed is the only way to describe the first two hours. Ducks were pouring into our hole and the kids were shooting just as fast as they could get their guns loaded. By this time of the morning most of the lake had glazed over with a thin sheet of ice. This made our little open water hole even more appealing to the weary ducks. Around noon time the kids had finished off their forty-two duck limit. It was time to make the cold ride back out. It was a whopping 18 degrees with a wind chill of 5 degrees. This time our boat ride was prolonged into a thirty-minute boat ride because we had to idle through the ice all the way back to the boat ramp.

After we arrived back at the ramp and plenty of pictures had been taken to keep the memories alive of the kid's huge smiles, Bradley and I started putting together a game plan for the next day's military hunt. We decided if we had any chance of having open water on Sunday then we had to go get the ice eaters and put them out to help keep the hole open. Later Saturday evening about an hour before dark, Bradley and I were finally back at the blind to set the generator up and put out the two ice eaters. Our hole had frozen over until all we had was a small hole maybe one hundred yards or so long and not much wider than that. We got the poles in the ground and the ice eaters hung, plugged up and running. After everything was in place, we started working on breaking the hole back out and clearing the ice. We broke

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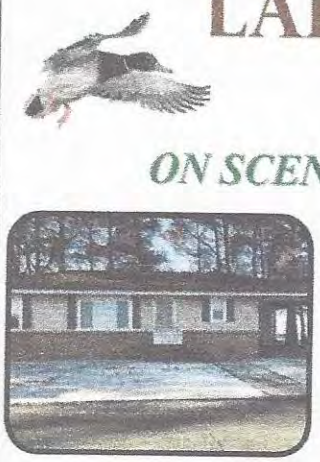

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out about a two-acre hole and hoped that the ice eaters and the hard North wind would keep it open.

Our boat ride out took us about 45 minutes to get back to the boat ramp. Sunday morning at 4:30AM, we met up with our nine active duty and veteran military service members. Everyone bundled up in their cold weather gear and we headed out to the duck blind. This boat trip was an hour and fifteen minutes long. The ice had thickened and we had to slowly break our way across the lake. When we finally arrived at the blind, Bradley and I were both relieved to see that we had a nice hole of open water. We once again put everyone in the blind and then put decoys out. As shooting time neared, you could once again feel the excitement the soldiers had as the bitter cold North wind blew across the back of our necks. The temperature had plummeted to 5 degrees and the windchill was negative 10.

As the sun began to come up over the horizon you could see the open water in our hole begin to turn to slush. The welcomed morning sun also brought flock after flock of ducks that seemed to come to our hole like ants to chocolate. It was amazing! As soon as the group would shoot and reload, it would only be a matter of minutes before they were shooting again. It was the dream hunt of a lifetime. At 8:30 am our nine service members had harvested their limit of ducks. That was a total of fifty-four ducks in two hours! Those guys seemed as happy as any duck hunter could ever be. They were sitting on cloud nine.

As we loaded up and headed towards the boat ramp, I called Scott Graves from Special Ops Xcursions. Scott gets countless groups of military service members in the field hunting and fishing every year. There was another group of service members hunting an area about forty minutes away who were not having a good morning of hunting. Scott coordinated getting those guys to the boat ramp to meet us. About the time that our hour and a half boat ride back to the bank was over, the fresh group of military members was pulling in to meet us. We loaded up and headed back to the blind with a total of eleven more active-duty soldiers and veterans. We once again made the long trek to the blind. Every boat trip out the ice was getting thicker and it was taking longer to get to our destination. By the time we made it back to the blind it was almost noon.

We had ducks landing in the decoys while everyone was trying to get in the blind and get settled into their places. After everyone had found their place and got their guns loaded it was only a few minutes until the first flock of Canvasbacks was buzzing over the decoys. Just like it had been that morning the action was hot, heavy and fast! Ducks would almost appear out of the thin air and into our decoy spread. It was like nothing any of the guys had ever seen. Especially since this was two of the soldiers first duck hunts.

Around 1:30 pm we had a huge group of one hundred or more Specklebelly geese come over. As I started calling to

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the flock of geese about fifteen of them broke away from the group and started towards us. As they circled and started their final approach, I started calling really soft, almost as if to "sweet talk" them on into our spread. As I called, I looked down the blind and all the guys were squatted down hiding so the geese couldn't see them. The geese may not have been able to see them, but all I could see was huge smiles and eyes full of excitement. When the geese where close enough I yelled "take em boys!" The guys were up and firing almost instantly.

They knocked down five geese out of the bunch and I wish you could have heard the hollering and celebrating they were doing. As our evening went on, we had group after group of Mallards, Gadwalls, Widgeon, Northern Shoveler, Pintails, Green-winged Teal, Canvasbacks and Scaup come into our spread. It didn't take long and the ducks were starting to stack up in the back of the blind. We also had two or three more large groups of geese work to within shooting range. Finally, at 3:30 pm, we decided we should pick up and leave because we knew it would be a long boat ride out and we didn't want to be breaking ice to get back to the boat ramp in the dark.

The eleven soldiers could have had a total limit of sixty-six ducks. They ended up harvesting sixty-two ducks and fourteen Specklebelly geese. That's four ducks from being at their limit. The ride out may have been one of the coldest boat rides I have ever made in my life. It seemed like everyone's excitement and adrenaline was all that was keeping us warm! We arrived back on shore after almost a two-hour boat ride! That's a huge difference from my usual short, seven-minute boat ride! The ice had frozen thick enough that sometimes almost the whole boat would be on top of the ice before it would finally break through.

Once we reached land and everyone unloaded their gear it was once again time for pictures, high fives and handshakes. There were plenty of smiles to go around and everyone knew we had just experienced the duck hunt of a lifetime. Even though I couldn't shoot on this two-day hunt and there is nothing I enjoy more in this world then getting to shoot ducks, I had the time of my life. In two days, we had twenty-seven different hunters in the blind and liked four ducks getting a twenty seven man limit. The seven youth harvested their forty-two duck limit and the military members ended up with a grand total of one hundred and sixteen ducks and fourteen specklebelly geese. That's 172 birds harvested in two days.

I never realized how much I enjoyed getting to introduce young people to our sport and to the great outdoors. I never realized how much our military service members appreciate the things we do for them to show our gratitude for them risking their lives for ours. I promise you that you will never meet another duck hunter that truly appreciates our military service members like I do. I am so blessed to be able to introduce the youth to the outdoors and to be able to show our military members that we really do appreciate the sacrifices they make to protect us and keep us out of harm's way. Without our military we would not be able to do the things we get to enjoy daily. It's really hard to put this weekend into words because it was so special, but I can promise you that myself and those that participated in it will cherish the memories forever. STO

Editor's Note: I want to thank Cody Rodriquez and Bradley Hobbs for donating their time, equipment, skills and hard work for both the kids and military men they hosted. I am so proud of them both. I also want to recognize and thank Scott Graves for all his efforts in the Special Ops Xcursions. To the men and women of our armed services – thank you all and God bless you!