

by Chuck Davidson

"KA-RONK"

**One-word aria of haughty honker
is Pied Piper's music for
Mike Dutko and two tagalongs.**

MIKE DUTKO was doing his best to sweet talk the Canadas down but they were wary. They made their sweep, high and far from our blind, circled the decoys, and then as if on command made their decision. They were coming in. Mike's reach for his shotgun was conditioned reflex as the big birds cupped their wings and spilled toward the decoys. The hunter came up in the blind, his 12-gauge auto-loader leveling at the closest bird. He slapped the trigger and only the click of the firing pin snapped the electric tension.

Quickly, the surprised hunter racked out the defective hull and swung anew on the now-startled birds. This time the trigger slap was followed by a satisfying boom. A climbing goose folded up, and then started that last, long slant.

"First one," Mike breathed, "one to go."
Three of us were on a Platte Valley honker hunt on a day, so cold and rough that most

sensible men were content to stay home by the fire. Yet, it was a fine day for goose hunting and that's what we were doing. At least, Mike was hunting, we were just along to watch him practice his craft.

Steve Katula, a NEBRASKAland photographer, and I had made arrangements with Mike to go on a goose hunt, but with one thing and another cropping up, we never got around to it until December 3, 1966. I'm a regional information and tourist representative of the Nebraska Game Commission, headquartered in Alliance, while Mike operates a service station in Lisco, Nebraska. His town is a jump-off point for some of the finest Canada hunting on the Central Flyway.

Mike is a dyed-in-the-wool goose hunter. He claims that no other hunting can match it for thrills and satisfaction. In his

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With mallard and honker in tow, Mike heads for blind and warmth

Camouflaged with swamp grasses, pit is unseen until Mike surfaces



Talking to honkers requires lip control and steady nerves for caller



WHAT TO DO
(Continued from page 8)

- 17—"Throne of Blood", Sheldon Art Gallery, Lincoln
- 17-18—Kosmet Klub Centennial Presentation "Irma La Douce", Pershing Auditorium, Lincoln
- 19—W. C. Fields Short Films, Sheldon Art Gallery, Lincoln
- 19-April 9—Contemporary European Watercolors, Elder Art Gallery, Lincoln
- 19—Symphonic Band Concert, University of Nebraska, Lincoln
- 20—Third City Home and Recreation Show, Grand Island
- 21—Paul Doktor Concert, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha
- 21—Travelogue, Grand Canyon, Hastings
- 21-22—"A Century of Progress" Civic Auditorium, Omaha
- 23—Pauline Frederick, speaker, Nebraska Union Lincoln
- 23—YES Pancake Feed, Pershing Auditorium, Lincoln
- 23-25—Chimney Rock Stone Age Fair, Bayard
- 26—Easter Sunday
- 27—"Generation" with Hans Conreid, Stuart Theatre, Lincoln
- 27-May 28—"Solar Spectacle", Mueller Planetarium, Lincoln
- 29—Athletic Association of the Deaf, Basketball Tournament, Omaha
- 29-April 2—Omaha Home Show for Modern Living, Civic Auditorium, Omaha
- 31-April 16—"You Can't Take It With You", Community Playhouse, Lincoln
- No Date Set—Farm and Home Show, Scottsbluff
- Late March-May 4—Horse Races, Fonner Park, Grand Island

KA-RONK
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book, the honker is the game bird supreme, a haughty, elusive, and always challenging adversary.

The Platte Valley is one of the few areas left in the United States where dedicated goose hunters are not a vanishing breed. Big concentrations of south-bound Canadas flock into the area to provide sportsmen with some of the finest shooting in the country. Garden County Refuge and Clear Creek Waterfowl Management Area help to hold the big travelers in the locality through most of Nebraska's 75-day season. Much of the land along the river is privately owned and permission to hunt is a must, but inquiry and a straight-out request often brings an invitation from a blind owner or lessee.

When I phoned Mike to set up the hunt, he was both eager and hesitant.

"Can't promise anything, but I'll sure give it a good go. Sometimes Canadas are pretty stubborn but if the weather is 'good', we'll get some action," he said.

Dawn was a promise when Steve and I drove into Mike's station for the start of our hunt. He was a little late, so we took advantage of the delay to ready cameras and other gear for what could be a long day in the blind. A few minutes later, Mike drove up and after hurried introductions, suggested we follow him to his hay-meadow blinds. He bounced his pickup over a gravel road and then turned off on a trail that wound toward the river. After a few miles Mike parked beside a clump of scrub brush and came back to our car.

"There's a pretty good slough for mallards right around the bend. We might



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as well put on our boots and give it a looking over on the way to the goose blind. It's a little past legal shooting time now, so we're all right on that score," he explained.

A sneak failed to put up any ducks, so we slogged on toward the goose pit. As we walked I tried to snuggle deeper into my clothes for the wind was chill and cutting. It was a gray day, the kind that probably inspired the old saying, "It's a great day for ducks". The wind had bit through my jacket and insulated underwear before we reached the blind, and I was glad when Mike said that it was heated with a small gas burner.

The pit blind was on land owned by a friend and former employer of Mike's, so we didn't have any problems with the permission bit. As we stowed our gear and picked up the decoys, I gave the blind a quick examination. It was dug into a slight rise that frowned over a small slough and was well camouflaged with swamb grasses. It had three ports and a bench and was surprisingly comfortable. Originally, its main structures had started out as a cattle tank and a culvert tube, but a welding torch and plenty of work had made it into a cozy, if somewhat cramped hideout.

Mike studied the wind and got busy with his geese decoys. As I toted armloads of the fakes to the front of the blind, I watched how he put them out. He made two dry-land sets with one

group of decoys on our left and another on our right. A few duck decoys were scattered on the slough to make the layout complete. With the decoys out, there wasn't much to do but wait, so we settled down in the blind and Mike started briefing us on the finer points of duck and goose hunting.

"These bigger-than-life decoys and their positions—some resting, some feeding, and some on the alert—look natural to flying birds, so if the geese move at all we should be in business. There's another blind here and it might be a little better for geese, but it isn't heated and on a day like this, it could be mighty cold. Besides, this slough attracts ducks and I might as well shoot a couple as long as we are here," he explained.

We were half way through a thermos of coffee when the Lisco hunter pointed to some specks on the horizon.

"Mallards working this way," he said. "Maybe I can call them in."

He fumbled for the smaller of the two calls that hung from his collar and blew the "come-on". The greenheads got the message and swung toward the slough. As they came in, Mike muffled his call to the grub-on-the-table pitch. The ducks dropped in fast, anxious to join their own "kind".

Mike's first blast was off, but his second crumpled a fat drake that was just a little slow in the getaway department. After the retrieve, we went back to the blind and Mike resumed his discussion of waterfowl hunting.

"Three types of shooting are popular here—river blinds on the Platte, hay meadow pit blinds, and barge blinds on Lake McConaughy. All of them will work on any given day, all of them will fail on any given day, so you have to take your chances. Calling and decoying are important. Geese hit the meadows to forage and that is why we have these blinds here."

Ducks were trading back and forth and I knew that it was only a question of time before Mike collected his second duck, but I wasn't sure about the geese and neither was my companion.

"They're just not moving today. Wonder what's wrong?" he grumbled, expecting no answer.

A flock of mallards swung over the blocks and pitched down. Almost nonchalantly, Mike collected his second bird.

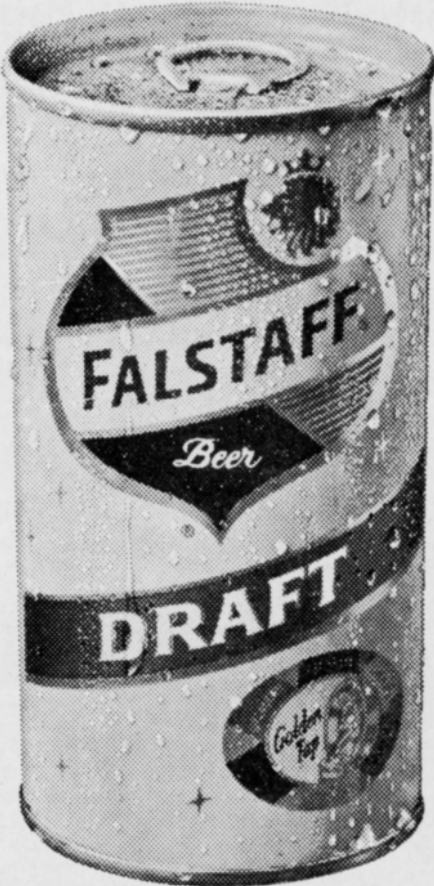
"Now, it's geese or nothing," he remarked, tossing the duck into the blind.

We resumed our waiting and Mike continued to talk about the hunting in west-central Nebraska.

"It's a fine area for pheasants, and quail seem to be on the upswing. There are prairie grouse back in the hills and they offer some good shooting during the season. For big game, we have both mule and white-tailed deer. Then, of course, we have the waterfowl hunting."

I was working on a cup of coffee when Mike's yelp startled me so much that I almost scalded Steve with the hot stuff. He had spotted some specks on the far horizon and experience told him they were geese. We crouched lower in the blind, letting only our eyes follow the

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approaching birds. Somewhere below us, two shots split the air, but we didn't see any geese fall.

"Veer, darn you, veer," Mike muttered under his breath. "Come a little lower now, just a little lower."

Experience told the hunter when the geese reached call range. Mike had made some modifications on his goose call and the rig was taped together, but the Lisco man knew who to use it. The baritone to tenor honk sounded like the real thing to me and apparently to the Canadas. Their responding chatter reached our elated ears as Mike kept coaxing them in.

"Ka-ronk. Ka-ronk," Mike hailed and from high in the sky came the answer, "ka-ronk, ka-ronk, ka-ronk."

The moment of truth was approaching now. Powerful rhythmical wing beats were bringing the Canadas closer and closer but the issue was still in doubt. Mike reduced the volume of his call and kept talking as the still-suspicious birds made their circle. Then, as the birds swept overhead, Mike stopped calling.

Deciding whether or not geese are in range or not is a tough part of goose hunting. Geese loom up like 3-D movies when they're still 60 yards out. To score you have to practice restraint and that's hard on the nerves, but it's the mark of a master hunter.

Mike was a pro at the business and the birds were well within range before he made his play. With the misfire, it is well that he did, for the Canadas were picking up yardage before Mike got squared around for his second try. His prize was a lesser Canada and weighed about five pounds. After the retrieve, we straightened up the wind-tossed decoys and spied another flock coming in from the west. We scooted back to the blind and hoped that the birds hadn't seen us. They flew on without giving us a pass but Mike wasn't disappointed.

"Too high. But we'll get another chance, the geese are moving more all the time," he said, watching the birds dwindle into the distance.

A new flock materialized out of the horizon to back his confident words. The wavy formation came on, its loudening gabble sending chills of anticipation and excitement racing along my spine. Mike was calling hard now and the geese were responding. They circled high and then started slanting down, their powerful wings braking to slow their descent. I could see their legs straightening and the opening webs of their feet as the birds sought the earth.

Mike picked his target, established his lead, and fired. The front bird crumpled and dropped, his dark body in sharp contrast to the winter-seared landscape. Mike's second take of the day was considerably larger than the first. We estimated that he would nudge the 10-pound mark.

Our walk back to the vehicles wasn't near as cold as the trek out. Mike had two mallards and two geese to tote while Steve and I were warm and exhilarated by the hunt, although we hadn't done any shooting. We had learned a lot just watching one of the valley's top goose hunters practice his craft and that was

reward enough for the long morning in the blind. Later, as we headed for home I decided that come next season I was going after honkers on my own, and I guess Steve feels the same way. Mike doesn't know it, but when next season rolls around he's going to have another coaching job on his hands. **THE END**

DANBY FARM

(Continued from page 39)

made an excellent playmate, they decided there might possibly be a market for the animals, and they were right.

Unlike many fairyland stories, elves didn't build the farm. The Langfelds have worked long hours to improve the 156-acre rural residence. Young Dan with the help of his mother, father, and Leo began to mold the place to their desires. The farm grew to maturity fast and when the galloping building pace had slowed to a walk, a total of 52 buildings, most of them painted a soft green, dotted the rolling hills.

Danby Farm is no longer just a family hobby; it is a thriving business. Its plant includes one of the Midwest's largest private indoor training rings, a lighted outdoor arena, two new houses, and shelters in every pasture for ponies and donkeys.

Weaving over the alfalfa-covered hills are 22 miles of fences, not counting the border fence. Unlike most farms, the

rural acreage does not have one strand of barbed wire, because the ponies and donkeys are much too valuable to chance scratches. Woven-wire fences are used instead. Although the eight-foot fences and a steel gate blocking the entrance to the farm seem to indicate No Trespassing, the Langfelds welcome all visitors on appointment.

A \$2 million investment in buildings, fences, and general improvements will not put a farm in contention for No. 1 honors as the nation's top breeder and trainer of Shetland ponies. Danby Farm's reputation was made in show rings across the nation with ponies that have brought more than 600 first-place championship trophies and ribbons to the farm.

To win that many first-place awards, you have to be willing to travel. In one year Daniel Langfeld, Jr., traveled over 80,000 miles and visited 32 states to bring the name of Danby Farm before the people. However, not all the awards were won in faraway show rings. In 1964, Danby ponies journeyed to the Nebraska State Fair where they won every class they entered for a total of 22 wins.

Whenever a sport is competitive, there are always certain individuals who stand out as superstars. In this case the superstars in the show ring are Shetland ponies. Danby Farm can lay claim to several ponies who have earned that much-sought-after title. The farm's superstars include: Mystery Challenger,



Flechok

"It's almost 8 o'clock, dear. Did you have to try and catch all the fish in the lake in one day?"