SUGAR BEET HONKERS

By Will Brantley

Chris Dalley tells me that on a cold morning, Montana geese eat sugar beets. I’m picturing the bright-red canned version, since I’ve never seen a sure-enough sugar beet field and had no idea geese ate beets.

But I’m in for several firsts this trip. I’ve never been to Montana, although I grew up watching Lonesome Dove and always assumed I’d see it eventually. Nor have I hunted with a hippie, and Dalley is sort of a hippie. Not in the “Occupy” kind of way — most of them don’t strike me as expert goose hunters — just in the long-haired, relaxed attitude kind of way.

I’ve never hunted with video cameras filming me, either. I’ve traveled here with my buddy, fellow outdoor writer Tony Hansen, to hunt geese for an episode of Benelli on Assignment TV. I don’t think my hunting buddies would describe me as shy, but this camera thing, and talking for TV, is new to me.

Wheatfields and cornfields aren’t the only places to kill geese, especially when the weather turns cold.
Joe Coogan works for Benelli and is the host of the show. He has a career’s worth of experience on camera and keeps asking me interview questions I know are made for sound bites, and then stopping the interviews to remind me to quit calling him sir (that’s an ingrained habit) and to please watch my language. But over the course of my waterfowling travels, I’ve learned the best hunters tend to use cuss words as substitutes for most adjectives, and so I’ve always viewed a salty vocabulary as a measure of credibility. Some things must be left out for the viewing public, though, so I try to behave myself. I should note that by the end of the trip, I learn that not only is Coogan a traveled hunter and talented wing shot, but that he can cuss and cut up with the best of them. We become fast friends.

Finally, I learn that the word “grind” can be a synonym for a big group of geese. When geese load into a section of a field, western hunters get excited and call that congregation of birds a grind. “Look at those geese pouring into that field, Bro. Man, that’s a grind building over there.”

Along with Daley, Terry Honkenan is the waterfowl guru with Tiophies West Outfitters, the outfit we’re hunting with, and the two of them have been watching grinds in various fields for several days prior to our arrival. It’s in the teens the first morning — frigid by my account, but seasonal for a Montanan. Hansen and I join Coogan and the production crew in helping Daley and Honkenan set a decoy spread in a sugar-beet field that’s littered with goose tracks and feathers. Using rumbleweds, we brush ourselves in on a ditch line 20 yards from the landing zone and make small talk until shortly after sunrise. Geese are roosted on the nearby Yellowstone River by the thousands, and Honkenan tells us we’re in for a show when they decide to stretch their wings and head to the fields for breakfast. Man, is he ever right about that.

The first goose, a single, drops its feet and chicks excitedly all the way to the decoys. Miracle of miracles, I manage to kill him on camera with my first shot. I’m shooting Benelli’s new Super Black Eagle II Performance Shop Waterfowl Edition, and since an SBEII is the gun I shoot back home, it’s a familiar platform.

Geese pour in by the hundreds over the course of the morning, and the shooting is choice. Tony insists he’s not a waterfowler or a wing shot, but the pile of dead geese at his feet suggests otherwise. It’s the kind of shooting you dream about, one where you don’t mind taking turns at the singles and pairs. Before long, we have our limit — four a person out here — and it’s time to pick up the spread and make a scouting run for the next morning.

SWEETS IN THE COLD

By my research, Montana grows around 55,000 acres of sugar beets each year, and the most productive region of the state lies along the Yellowstone River, right where we’re hunting. I’d always assumed all table sugar was produced from sugar cane, but that’s not the case. More than half the table sugar produced in the U.S. comes from sugar beets. That lesson in sugar-beet agriculture might not interest you, but a Canada goose’s ravenous appetite for the beets, particularly on cold mornings, should.

Beets, you see, are not the only crop Montana is known for. Wheat is the other big one, and on the warmer days of hunting season, geese are quick to switch their attention to its tender, green shoots. This is a lesson to apply anywhere you hunt geese — or ducks, for that matter. When the weather is cold, more calories are burned, so the birds key on high-energy, or “hot,” foods. Sugar beets, with their high sugar content, obviously provide a lot of this.

The shift in food choices can be dramatic enough to watch during a single hunt.

“I look at the forecast temperatures before every hunt,” Honkenan says. “If it’s supposed to be 10 degrees and I’ve been watching geese in a beet field, I can virtually guarantee they’ll return while we’re hunting. But if the temperatures get above freezing, things change. It’s amazing so watch, but I’ve hunted beet fields that were loaded with geese the day before and had the temperature climb to 35 degrees. Suddenly, flock after flock will bypass the beet fields, ignoring my spread, and head straight for the wheatfields.

This doesn’t just apply to geese in Montana, either. The same holds true for your flooded cornfield in Mississippi. Corn is another “hot” food, and when the weather turns mild, it’s common for waterfowl to abandon those hot foods in favor of green shoots, aquatic vegetation and invertebrates.

FIELD LESSONS FROM MONTANA GUIDES

Of course, it’s usually cold in Montana in the winter, and like any good waterfowl hunters, Honkenan and Daley have learned that every cold morning in a beet field is unique and they must tweak their setup accordingly.

Bringing a plan together requires good scouting. An Illinois goose hunter can tell you not all cornfields are created equal when it comes to honker killing, and there’s far more that goes into a good setup than just birds in a field. Same goes for sugar beet fields in Montana.

“We have a lot of geese out here,” Daley says, “but there’s a lot of open country, too. It’s really difficult to hide...
laidown blinds in sugar-beet fields. So when I’m scouting, I get almost as excited at the opportunity for a good setup as I do at seeing a big grind. A thousand birds sitting where there’s nowhere to hide probably isn’t going to provide as good of a shoot as 500 birds near a big drainage ditch, where we can hide.”

Most waterfowlers like wind, and these guys are no exception. But in a sharp contrast to a flooded-timber duck hunter, they have their best decoy work on cloudy days. When hunting over water, the glare obscures the view from above. Over dry ground, the effect is just the opposite. The only things glaring are hunters’ faces, hands and shotgun barrels.

“Everyone wants to watch them work, and keeping faces hidden is the hardest thing in goose hunting,” Dalley says. “On a cloudy day, it just seems they have a more difficult time picking you out.”

On the best of mornings — cloudy, windy, temperatures in the single digits — Dalley and Honkenen are still in their fields before daylight, setting their signature spread, which is modest by the standards of many goose hunters.

It’s virtually all full-bodies, up to four dozen but sometimes as few as 20, set in two family groups 30 to 40 yards apart. Sometimes they’ll throw in a third group behind the hide.

“I’ve experimented with decoys a lot over the years,” Honkenen says, “and out here, I’ve learned the wiser, the better. I keep plenty of space between individual decoys, but more than that, I want a huge landing zone. They really seem to key on that, and that puts them right in front of the gun barrels.”

“When the spread is set, the hunters will often return to the trucks and sit in the heated air for a while.

“They’re usually not in a big hurry to get up and fly on a cold morning,” Honkenen says. “Make no mistake, they’re coming, but I have sat in the truck until 11 in the morning waiting on the first ones on especially cold days. Typically, there are a few early flights before the main mob gets up and sits. If we can kill our limit, or even close to it, out of those early flights and then get out of the field so the other birds can get in there and feed, that’s what I prefer to do. Too much pressure on a field and educating the big groups can ruin it for weeks.”

THE FINAL DAY

I see almost everything mentioned above come into play on the final morning. The beet field we’d glassed the day before had fewer geese than any of the previous ones — several hundred, as opposed to thousands — but they were tucked nicely in a corner of the field next to a drainage ditch.

The morning was cold but clear, and Honkenen had his doubts about how well the birds would work in the blue sky. But we were hidden so well in the ditch, the lack of clouds didn’t seem to matter. Hansen, Coogan and I limit out early and hand our guns off to Honkenen, Dalley and Marc Womack, who’s been running a camera for the past three days. Shooting a Benelli Super Vinci, Honkenen knocks down four geese in four shots. It’s a feat I hope makes it in the editing room because it’s pretty impressive to watch in person.

As we’re picking up the spread, geese are still trying to pour into the field. No doubt, they got a good grind going after we left.