

It was the dawn of a new season and I was making my way towards a place, that was to become very dear to me and would feature heavily in my learning to be a wildfowler.

It was an area where tide and wind had made largish dunes, then shaped them in to a rough L. The tide had over the years found a weak spot in the western side and as such the tide would flood in on to the mud pan. Eventually the tide bored a deep 3 foot ditch through the mud meaning there was always water regardless of the height of the tide.

Duck decoys were deadly here, mostly on high tides, at dusk. However the vegetation, mostly spartina, colonised the area so the mud disappeared and decoys were hard to show even on the highest of tides and the duck chose over places but for this story that was way in to the future.

The saving grace of this place was the distance required to walk to it and the once the tide was in you had almost 2 hours waiting before you could safely get away. Seldom if ever did one meet another fowler.

It was still a mud pan when I arrived on the morning in question. The tide was already flooding through when I unshouldered the decoy bag, decoys were quickly placed out and soon floating seductively. As the finishing touches were made to my hide the first streaks of dawn came in to the eastern sky.

15 or so minutes later there was the distant pop of a shot coming from way back in the estuary. Somebody's season was off and running, I jealously waited for my first shots of the season.

With a large splash 2 mallard alighted on the water out of range but began to swim in to my decoys. Serious thoughts of shooting them on the water quickly disappeared when 5 mallard came over on stiff wings to commit to the decoys. Rising from the hide a well placed shot had a mallard dead, the benelli thumped again twice but my shots were not deadly accurate and 2 more mallard fell to the water winged.

Had I possessed more knowledge and experience I would simply have reloaded the gun and shot them again on the water but brain wave of the morning was to urge the dog on to one of the wingers then I began to wade out to collect the dead one.

I was waist deep and just yards away from my bird when Ben returned directly to me with his marked one. I stretched out to grab my bird when I slipped on the edge of the submerged ditch. Back peddling furiously to regain my balance I slipped again back towards the ditch. Horrible thoughts of my chest waders filling up and me then drowning flashed through my mind. Instinct took over and I grabbed at Ben. I managed to push down on him which unfortunately meant he went under but I got my footing and managed to stumble way from the ditch. Ben remerged quite unperturbed still holding the mallard in his jaws. Back at the hide, soaking wet I could not believe my stupidity and how close I had come to being in a very serious situation. My appetite for wildfowling deserted me and I called time on that flight but before I left we searched for and found the last mallard tucked up in the reeds.

The estuary can be a dangerous place for both the inexperienced and experienced wildfowler. Whilst out fowling please watch your step.

Note; the author now uses a wading stick and recommends Fowlers add one to their gear.

SW Club Member.