



LEAH TELEGRAM/BOB HOOD

Guide John Bryan, with his dog Big Boy, picks up decoys in the Brazos River near Graford after a duck hunt.

Brazos River offers an ideal layover for many waterfowl

■ Stretches of shallow water and a plentiful food supply make the Brazos an ideal place to hunt waterfowl.

By **BOB HOOD**

TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

GRAFORD — The Brazos River deserves a high-five in duck hunting for more than one reason.

Not only does the Brazos attract a wide variety of duck species, but its constantly moving waters and pristine surroundings put it at the top of the list of the five ways to hunt ducks in Texas, said waterfowl hunting guide John Bryan of Graford.

"Hunting ducks on the Brazos can be the best there is, but even on days when you don't have a really great hunt, you just can't beat being on the river," Bryan said. "It is absolutely gorgeous here."

Bryan, who grew up hunting and fishing on the river below and above Possum Kingdom Lake, gives the Brazos a high-five above the four other types of places to hunt ducks — on large reservoirs, private lakes, gravel pits and coastal marshes and bays.

Access to some stretches of the river is available via shallow-running boats at bridge crossings and by boats or walking in after gaining permission from landowners whose lands border the winding and often high-banked channel.

Bryan and his hunters access the Brazos through an agreement with Holt River Ranch, a historic ranch established just northwest of Graford.

As Big Boy, his big, black Labrador retriever, sloshed through very shallow water in the darkness early Thursday, Bryan set out 16 decoys in a small eddy and then backed into the tall grass on the bank.

Bryan said he chose the location because he had seen many ducks feeding on moss and other available food in the shallow eddy. He also learned that the Brazos River Authority had made a small release of water from the Possum Kingdom dam, indicating a gentle flow of water would be coming down the river near the ranch.

Larger releases are not as favored by ducks or hunters. Ducks prefer quiet water in which to feed and rest, and fast-flowing water causes problems for hunters when retrieving ducks and in keeping their decoys in place.

Because of its tremendous size — at 2,060 miles, it is the 11th-longest river in the U.S., and at 840, the longest inside Texas — the Brazos is an ideal stopover for numerous species of migrating waterfowl.

On Thursday as Bryan, Big Boy and I watched at dawn for ducks approaching the spread of decoys, we heard a sudden series of splashes up-river followed seconds later by loud honking sounds.

A flock of about 25 Canada geese had decided to use the river as a rest stop on their way south and presented an interesting chorus to the more normal sounds that greeted the new day.

When legal shooting hours arrived at 30 minutes before sunrise, numerous small

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DUCK HUNTING

More information on Brazos River duck hunting is available by calling John Bryan at 940-549-3427 or 940-452-3485 or by visiting www.papaloozerie.com.

groups of ducks had zoomed in over the decoys. A few had even landed amid them before sensing something wrong and taking flight again.

Minutes later, a pair of widgeons swung in from the west, cupping their wings as they descended to within 35 yards of our grassy hideouts. The widgeons became the first ducks among two quick limits that would be bagged by 8 a.m.

"This is the way the hunting has gone here since the season reopened last weekend," Bryan said. "The ducks don't just cover you up all at once, but they come in regularly in small groups to keep it interesting. And you never know what types of ducks are going to be next."

Our two limits of 10 ducks had five widgeons, two mallards, two gadwalls and one green-winged teal, but our hunting didn't stop with the last bird that fell.

Instead of packing up our gear and heading back to the truck, we sat in the grass with cameras in hand to watch and to catch on film other ducks attempting to get a closer look at our decoys.

"That's the thing I like about hunting ducks on the river," Bryan said. "They don't just show up at daybreak and then disappear after the sun comes up. I think you could sit right here and see ducks just about all day long if you wanted to."

Bob Hood, 817-890-7769
rhood@star-telegram.com