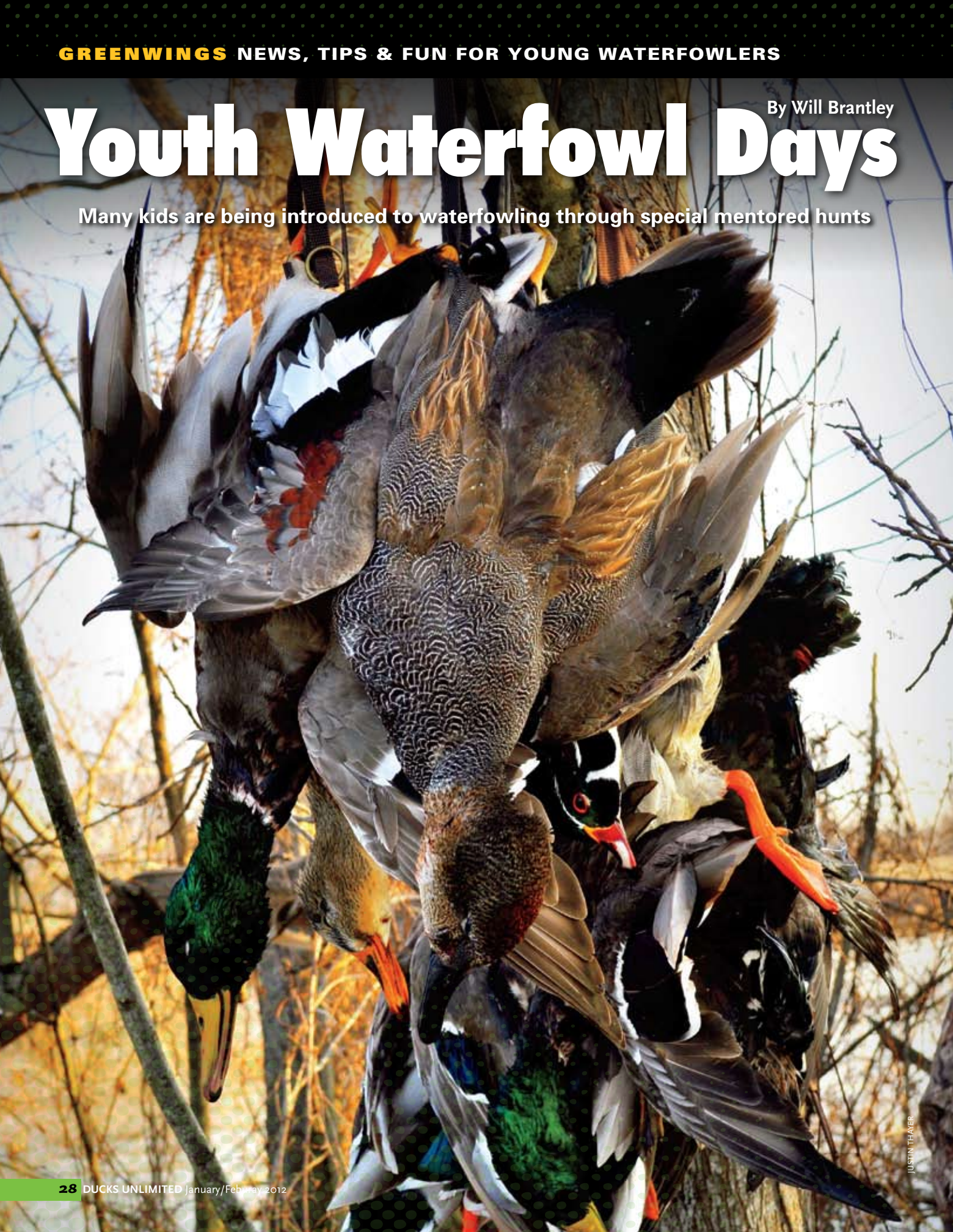


By Will Brantley

Youth Waterfowl Days

Many kids are being introduced to waterfowling through special mentored hunts



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As daylight breaks over a Mississippi wetland, a group of eager teenagers eye a flock of circling mallards. Adults are on hand to help with the calling, the dog work, photos, and breakfast. But none of them are carrying shotguns. This show is for the kids. Many of these young hunters are searching for their first duck, but others have prior experience in the blind. Young Joel Ray of Starkville is even doing most of the calling for his group.

At the end of the day, there are ducks to pick—mallards, teal, wood ducks, and quite a few shovelers. And nobody's disappointed with the shovelers, least of all the young hunters. This youth hunt has been a resounding success—and a heck of a good time.

Mississippi is just one of the many states that have responded to the challenge of recruiting young duck hunters by taking advantage of special opportunities provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). During last February's three-day youth waterfowl hunt—organized by Ducks Unlimited, the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks (MDWFP), and other partners—15 lucky hunters between the ages of 13 and 16 traveled to both a state wildlife management area and a national wildlife refuge to talk with local biologists about managing different habitats for waterfowl. The young waterfowlers also learned about public-

land hunting opportunities available in the state and across the country, and the key role hunters play in conservation. The camp was free of charge.

Aside from lessons on waterfowl conservation, the campers were given the opportunity to hone their wingshooting skills on a skeet range with MDWFP shotgun guru John Satterwhite. And at the end of the event, the young hunters were invited to participate in a mentored youth duck hunt, where they could put their newly learned waterfowl identification and shotgunning skills to the test.

"Today's youth are tomorrow's conservation leaders," says Ed Penny, waterfowl program coordinator for MDWFP. "Our goal with this camp is to educate these

Taking part in a recent Mississippi youth waterfowl hunt were (from left) James Cotton, Jack Brady, Stephen Collins, Kevin Brunke, David Victory, Adam Oltremari, Ronal Roberson, and Dixie, the yellow Lab.

kids about the importance of wetlands conservation and to introduce them to the joy of waterfowl hunting. Even if they aren't waterfowl hunters forever, they will always have an understanding of its value, and we all protect what we value."

Andi Cooper, communications specialist for DU's Southern Regional Office in Ridgeland, Mississippi, was among the adult mentors on hand during the hunt. "We split up into five or six groups of hunters and adults," she says, "and the groups all hunted different places. All of



John Satterwhite (right) helped young hunters learn the basics of safe gun handling and shooting prior to their first duck hunt.

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the hunting took place in the Mississippi Delta, primarily in flooded timber, but a few groups were set up in flooded fields. I think everyone got to do some shooting, and I think every group came back with ducks. The hunting was really good. Our hosts had tried to set aside some of their best areas for several weeks prior to this hunt to ensure the kids had plenty of ducks around for a good experience.”

Since duck hunting already comes with a set of challenges that can make it a tough sport for newcomers, the goal is to make the experience as enjoyable as possible. The more success young duck hunters have, the more likely they are to become hooked on the sport. Thus youth waterfowl hunts are typically scheduled for maximum opportunity, at a time when the youngsters don't have to compete with the pressure of the regular waterfowl season but there are still large numbers of ducks around. The Dakotas and Minnesota, for example, usually schedule their youth hunts in September to take advantage of resident ducks and early migrants. Many states farther south schedule their youth hunts later, after regular waterfowl seasons have ended and large numbers of birds are still present. For this reason,

Young hunters learned how to rig and set decoys during the hunt.



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Mississippi's annual youth waterfowl hunt takes place in February.

Jim Kelley, who works for the USFWS in Minneapolis, says the idea for youth-only waterfowl hunts was first implemented in 1996. Since then, the hunts have been a success in every flyway. “The USFWS thought it was a good concept to provide young hunters with an opportunity to get out either before or after the regular season, with an adult mentor, and have an opportunity to hunt waterfowl while avoiding

A biologist used a dip net to capture invertebrates that are an important waterfowl food source.

some of the hassles of the regular duck season—namely, competition for hunting spots,” Kelley says.

The framework for these special seasons is flexible, so states can set their own hunt dates. “The hunts have to be on a holiday, weekend, or other nonschool day, for maximum participation,” Kelley says. “But beyond that, the states can pick their own dates. They can be 14 days before or after the regular season, or during a split between the seasons.”

Although state-specific regulations may apply, the federal framework for youth hunts accommodates hunters age 16 and younger. This means that a federal duck stamp isn't required, and in many states a hunting license isn't required either.

“There's been widespread support for this effort,” Kelley says. “Our flyway consultants universally feel that it's important to provide youth hunters with opportunities that they may not otherwise get. It's a concept that everyone can feel good about.”

Plans are now in the works for another Mississippi youth hunt the first weekend of February this season. For more information, e-mail Houston Havens at houstonh@mdwfp.state.ms.us.