

WILD DUCK

IT'S ALL IN THE PREPARATION

By **BILL ANEY**
For the EO Media Group

I started hunting waterfowl in my early twenties, and quickly fell in love with the pastime. Marsh sunrises, excited dogs, shotguns, fast-flying birds, decoys, calls; I was hooked on the whole experience.

With a little success, however, came a real dilemma. I did not like eating ducks. No amount of soaking in milk or slathering with apricot preserves could mask the “flying liver” taste of the ducks I cooked.

I believe every hunter has an obligation to be able to prepare, enjoy, and share the meat of his quarry. If I didn't learn the secret of preparing the meat for the table I would not be able to continue hunting duck — no matter how much I enjoyed decoys, dogs and dawn in the marsh.

Fortunately, over the past 35 or so seasons, I learned some secrets of hunting and preparing duck that make it one of my favorite meat choices. To this day, I have friends who are avid hunters who will not hunt ducks because they cannot tolerate the taste. I'm convinced that they have simply not had the right duck, handled correctly and prepared well.

Be selective about the duck species you hunt. We are blessed with abundant populations of good eating puddle ducks like pintails, teal, widgeon and, of course, mallards. Puddle ducks feed primarily on seeds, grains, and vegetation in water or on land. Then there are the diving ducks that I have learned to pass up when they fly near the blind. Fish-eating ducks (such as mergansers) can surely taste fishy, or so I have heard, so I let them go by. Other divers, like ring-necked ducks, goldeneyes, scaups and buffleheads, I enjoy for their swift flight, their activity on the pond, and their ability to entice puddle ducks into my decoys, but I don't shoot them because I don't eat them. And coots? There's a reason they're called mud-hens.

Of course, this means being able to identify ducks on the wing, and I know plenty of hunters who have stories about having to eat their lessons — yours truly included.

Preparation

I have learned that it is not necessary to clean ducks the minute you get home. In fact, I have good success letting mallards sit in a 40-degree garage for two days before I clean them. It seems like they pluck easier and the meat is better tasting.

Keep the skin on as much as possible. Skinning a duck is an easy way to clean them, but by plucking them you leave the skin and the underlying layer of fat intact. Wild duck meat is notoriously lean, so any fat you can leave attached to the meat helps retain flavor and moisture.

Cooking

The number one rule — do not overcook. Repeat: Do Not Overcook. Overcooking a mallard breast gives it the flavor and texture of liver, a detestable food if you ask me. I cook my duck meat to medium rare. Use a good quality meat thermometer, and pull the meat off the heat when breast meat reaches 135 degrees. Note: the USDA recommends cooking duck to 170 degrees to kill any harmful bacteria. This is probably the safest way to prepare meat, and in my opinion the surest way to create distaste for wild duck. It's your choice.

My current go-to preparations for duck fall into one of three categories: slow roasting (on a smoker grill), frying on the stove top with breading and cayenne (think duck nuggets), and in a duck hash.

The internet and bookstores are full of recipes available for smoking or roasting whole ducks on an outside smoker grill. Just remember that wild ducks are not very fat, and cooking on a grill can dry the meat. I usually start by brining the duck. I submerge it in a salty and/or sweet brine solution for 8-12 hours, and then place it on my smoker grill at a low, smoking temperature for a few hours before finishing at a higher temperature until the legs and thighs reach 165 degrees. Stuffing the interior with apple, orange, etc. is said to help create a moister meat, but of course it will take longer to cook. And don't eat the stuffing.

Hunting waterfowl is a wonderful pastime, with all of the traditional trappings of dogs, decoys, shotguns and the excitement of skies full of birds. Duck on the table can be savored and enjoyed if it is handled and prepared well, leading to a lifetime of good hunting and good eating.

Wild Duck Hash

adapted from *NPR.org*
Makes 2 servings

1 large puddle duck breast (the 2 halves from one duck), skin on

1 to 2 small Yukon gold potatoes, peeled and cut into ½-inch dice (about 1 cup)

Olive oil or vegetable oil

Kosher salt

1 very small onion, diced



Bill Aney and his chocolate Lab, Ruby, pose during a recent duck hunting outing on the Columbia River.

Photo by Mike Gregg/East Oregonian

Meeting Jan. 9 on Ladd Marsh wetlands plan

LA GRANDE, Ore.— ODFW will host a public meeting on Jan. 9 from 6-8 p.m. at the Community Center, Cook Memorial Library, 2006 4th Street, La Grande.

The topic will be the Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area management plan, which is due for an update after 10 years. ODFW staff are not recommending major changes to the plan, but members of the public are welcome to offer their

suggestions at the meeting. Public comment can also be emailed to wildlife area manager Kyle Martin at Kyle.W.Martin@state.or.us no later than Jan. 18.

Ladd Marsh is one of several wetlands-focused wildlife areas in Oregon, and features the largest hardstem bulrush wetland remaining in north-east Oregon. It is popular with hunters and wildlife viewers.

(about ½ cup)

½ cup chicken or duck stock

1 tablespoon cream (optional)

1 to 2 teaspoons cider or wine vinegar

Fresh ground black pepper

2 poached eggs

Chopped chives or parsley to garnish (optional)

To cook the duck breast: Heat a medium skillet over medium high heat for a couple of minutes. While it's heating, score the duck skin by cutting through the skin and fat (but not the meat) about every inch. Turn the breast 90 degrees and repeat,

so you have a diamond pattern of score marks. Salt the duck on both sides.

When the skillet is hot, place the duck breast skin-side down in the skillet and turn the heat down to medium. Watch the meat carefully here. I go for four to five minutes on one side and then flip and cook for three to four minutes on the other. You're trying to render out all of the fat from the skin side (there won't be much on a wild duck) without overcooking the meat. The meat will still be very pink — do not overcook. Remove it from the heat and place on a plate for a few minutes.

Place the diced potatoes in a small pan and cover with water. Over medium high heat, bring just to a boil. Reduce the heat to maintain a simmer and cook for five to six minutes, until almost done (potatoes should still be slightly firm in the center). Drain thoroughly and pat dry.

Meanwhile, remove the skin and fat from the duck breasts and dice it. Cut the meat into ½-inch cubes (you should have one to two cups of meat).

Return the skillet to the heat on medium-high. If you had a fat wild duck, there will be some fat in the pan. Supplement this with olive oil to coat the pan.

When the fat is hot, add the drained potatoes. Sprinkle with salt and sauté for three to five minutes, until crisp and golden brown. Add the onions and cook for a couple of minutes, until they begin to color slightly. Add the duck meat and cook to heat through, one to two minutes.

Add the stock to the pan and stir to dissolve the browned bits from the bottom of the pan. Reduce until most of the stock is evaporated. Add the cream, stir and cook just until the cream is heated through and coats the hash.

Sprinkle the hash with a teaspoon of the vinegar and

a couple of grinds of black pepper. Taste and adjust seasoning, adding more salt or vinegar as desired.

Divide the hash between two plates and top each with a poached egg. Sprinkle with chives or parsley, if using.

Spicy Duck Nuggets

6 duck breast halves, skinned (breasts from 3 ducks)

Coating mix (I use Pride of the West brand)

Cayenne pepper to taste

Juice of two lemons

Vegetable oil or olive oil

Slice the duck breasts across the grain into strips about ½ inch wide. Place in a bowl and add lemon juice, stir to coat and let sit for 15-30 minutes. Sprinkle ½ cup of coating mix into a pie plate, add cayenne pepper (start with ½ tsp, more if you want the nuggets spicier). One at a time, lift the duck breast slices from lemon, shake excess lemon juice, and then dredge them in the coating/cayenne mix.

Heat skillet over medium high heat, add oil to ¼ inch depth. When hot, gently add a layer of duck nuggets. Let cook for one minute, turn, repeat until outside is brown and inside is still moist and slightly pink. Do not overcook.

Place on a plate in a warmed 200 degree oven. Keep warm until serving.

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