

Carl Mager: Duck Hunting's Next Big Thing

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Carl Mager is used to attention, but these days he's getting more of it than ever.

Closing in on the two-decade anniversary of his country rock outfit, Back in the Saddle, Mager has honed a specialty for turning heads with hot guitar licks and a frontman's charm. But lately, heads (little green ones, often) are turning for a different reason.

"Around here, I'm known for two things," Mager says, "music and duck hunting."

The past few years have found Mager's other passion grabbing for its share of his creative energies, and success has begun to prove itself in the willow-covered duck blinds of western Illinois that Mager has always called home.

"It's been kind of a running joke," he says. "Guys will tell us, 'We've seen those ducks coming in to you. We want to buy one of your machines.' And I'll ask, 'Where do you hunt?' Because if you're in the blind next to me, you can't have one."

Mager believes his new obsession, Duxtrac, can transform the world of mechanical decoys by reproducing a duck's lifelike swimming motion. He cobbled together the first prototype a few duck seasons ago in his home shop, though he's only marketed the machine since last August. His fascination with waterfowl, however, is much older.

"I come from a long line of duck people," he says. "My family on my dad's side has been river people for over 100 years, and everybody has fished and hunted."

Mager's father started carrying him into duck blinds in a backpack at about age two. He was calling ducks at age four and had gotten pretty good at it by kindergarten. Mager took his first duck on a river blind in the Mississippi at age eight, his first mallard at the Gilead Club at 11.

“I can remember it like it was yesterday,” he says wistfully. “I’ve been ate-up with duck hunting since I was a baby.”

Mager remembers growing up within a hunting experience that bore little resemblance to today’s often hyper-competitive environment.

“In those days, we’d hunt areas with 10-12 blinds in them, and guys would ‘set ‘em down’ before somebody would go ahead and shoot. They’d make sure everybody had ducks in their decoys first.”

Now, the ethic has changed somewhat, to say the least.

“These days, it’s dog-eat-dog,” Mager says. “Pardon the pun, but you’ve got to have your guns loaded.”

Over the decades that Mager has been competing for the attention of the area’s waterfowl, he’s watched the birds adjust to the gimmicks hunters have relied upon to fool them, which lately includes the new “spinning-wing” decoys designed to put motion into a decoy spread.

“The ducks are getting wise to these things,” he said. “They see them from the time they leave Saskatchewan. You’ll see it time and again — you get a bunch of ducks working, they’ll get to within 50 or 60 yards and everything looks good, then Poof! And they’re gone. Those decoys are starting to represent danger to them.”

To mimic the look of a group of ducks in the water, Duxtrac uses a three-pulley system to swim decoys in a constant circuit similar to a motion Mager has often observed in the wild.

“Ducks have been swimming for 10 million years, and they’ll likely be swimming long after I’m gone,” he said. “Time and again, I’ve watched a group or mallards bunch up like that, close together, and chase each other, and they don’t swim more than about six feet in a circle.”

During their tireless swim, decoys tethered to a Duxtrac machine also churn up quite a bit of mud, a “mud vortex” that’s also a natural byproduct of waterfowl scouring the shallows for food. And to hear Mager tell it, the effect on their behavior is unmistakable.

“They take a dead spread and make it come alive,” he said. “And the ducks come right on in. It just flat-out works; I don’t know a better way to put it.”

And Duxtrac has also set Mager and others in motion, on a mission to spread the message about what they see as duck hunting's next big thing.

“So far, it's been well received,” he said between sporting shows that have thus far served as Duxtrac's main introduction to the hunting public. “I'd like to kind of continue to oversee things, to see it grow and give people some good jobs.”

And if one of the big-time equipment manufacturers offers him a fortune for his invention?

“I'd honestly have to think about it,” Mager says with a hearty laugh.