



# what lures the WATERFOWLER?

by CLAY SCHOENFELD

Faced this fall with some of the most stringent regulations in history, you might think waterfowlers would call it quits! Not so. Across the country they are counting the hours to opening day as eagerly as ever.

This is because a duck hunt is not just a simple sporting event. It is a great *American ritual*. Its special lure lies in its secret incantations, esoteric garments, and sacred proceedings.

The ceremony begins early in August, with the re-painting of decoys and the camouflaging of boats and blinds, all according to a routine as immutable as a baptism. Caught up in the spell, the duck hunter spends hours staring into sporting store windows or practicing on his duck call.

On a late fall night the ancient ceremony will approach its peak. To keep a date with a storm front moving down from Canada, the hunter flees the city in frantic haste.

The shore of a hidden lake is his lodge room. In the total dark that precedes the dawn he loads his skiff by instinct and paddles off. At an appropriate spot he assumes a kneeling position, tosses out the decoys, and mutters a supplication to the gods of the chase.

Off to the east the dawn is wrestling with the night on a mat of low-hanging clouds. The hunter hunkers down in the cattails to wait—and wait. At last out of the west there comes the sussurant sound of winnowing wings. A flock of mallards has joined the ceremony. To the waterfowler this is living. Nothing can match his personal excitement over a batch of feathered beauties coming into range of his buckshot.

Cautiously the ducks look over the set. As they flare they hear a plaintive chuckle from a call. A half-dozen break off and come sideslipping down.



This is the climax of the ritual. No matter how many times he has been initiated, to the waterfowler it is always a breathtaking experience. For him no other occasion is so fraught with primeval drama. For one awful moment there is nothing in time but the hunter, a little stretch of wind-swept pothole, and a huddle of wild waterfowl. For a magic moment he looks right into the eye of nature.

The firing of his gun is strictly anti-climactic, like the benediction after a sermon. If he misses, the waterfowler doesn't care. The ducks have fought a good fight, and he has kept the faith.



FOUR MAIN "FLYWAYS" mark the migratory routes of North America's waterfowl — the Pacific, the Central, the Mississippi, and the Atlantic. From breeding grounds in Canada the birds flock down the sky trails to Caribbean winter "resorts."



THE CANADA GOOSE is to the waterfowler what the moose is to the big-game hunter — a trophy target. Goose populations are higher now than they have been for many years, thanks to modern management techniques.



"RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BLOCKS!" This is the duck hunter's "home run" — when a mallard whistles by, looks over the decoys, makes a wide, wary swing, and then comes racing back to set his wings out in front of the blind.