

Rice Country Specks

A Late Date In Louisiana Proves That Whitefronts Appreciate A Good Conversation

You know you're in rice country when you drive west along Louisiana Highway 14 and pass through the towns of Kaplan, Wright, Gueydan and Lake Arthur. And by the time you get to the towns further west named Thornwell, Hayes and Bell City, it's when you realize this is also specklebelly country. Here, many of the locals, particularly the parents of baby boomers, speak two languages—English primarily and a mix of Cajun French. But there's another language that is perhaps more prevalent than either come fall. If you spend any amount of time in this southwest region of the state, you'll soon learn it's the conversational yodeling of the white-fronted goose.

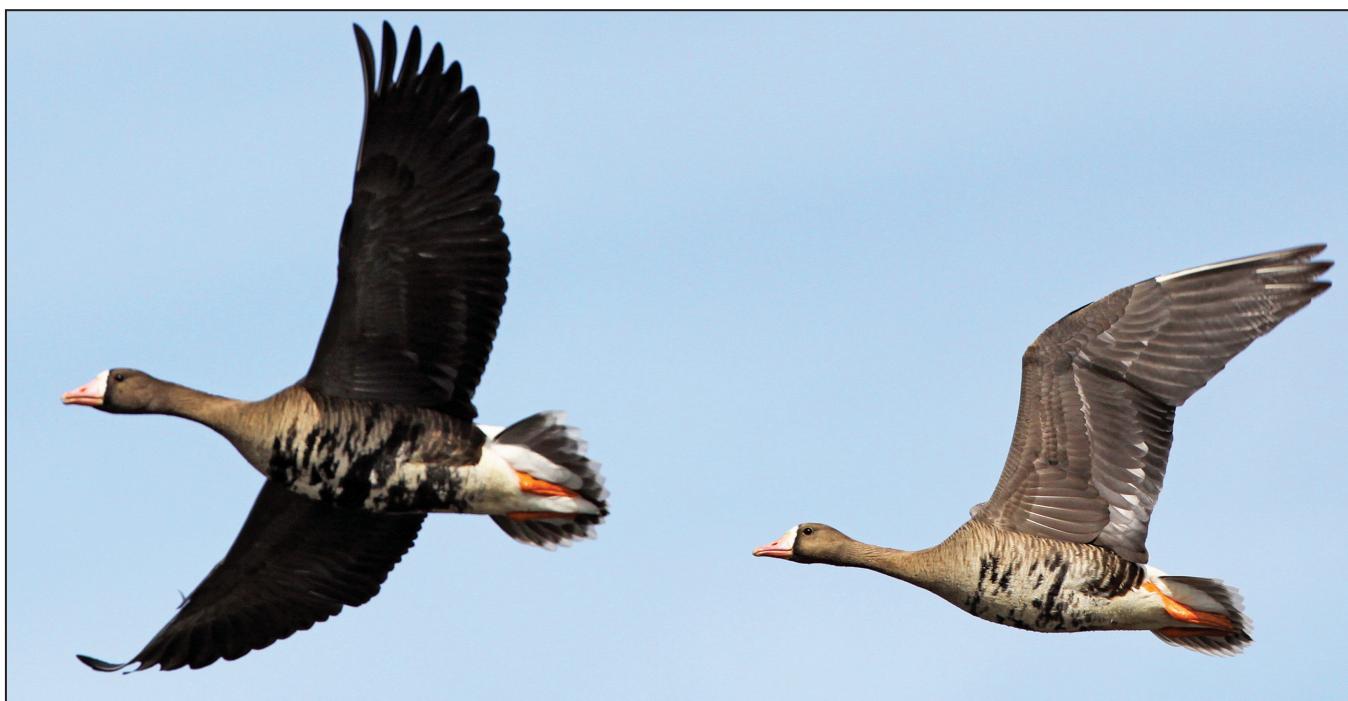


PHOTO JIM THOMPSON

If a waterfowl hunter were stuffed in the cab of a pickup truck, blindfolded and driven to the Gueydan Civic Center the third weekend in August in any given year, he would be liable to think he died and gone to heaven. And he wouldn't have had to go any further than the parking lot.

Outside the civic center, participants practice and fine-tune their routines, perfecting key pitches that might gain them an advantage in winning the state

By John Flores

duck-calling or goose-calling contests going on inside. There is no way a waterfowl hunter couldn't have his emotions stirred. The sound gives off a feeling of wild—mimicked by some of the descendants of the region's original and best callers.

What's more, starting around mid-October, those impersonators are ready to communicate with the original

sound of wild as the first specklebellies announce their arrival to the Louisiana coastal prairie as if to say, "We're home."

Perhaps, the calling from the ancestors of today's birds is what drew Jean Pierre Gueydan and his brother François to the land in the late 1800s. Rest assured it is what draws resident and nonresident hunters from around the country to the rice fields of southwest Louisiana 100 years later. The yodels of white-fronted geese echo through this country.



Daylight, and flocks of geese, over the rice prairie.

Speaking Specklebelly

Bill Daniels is one of those who speaks specklebelly as his second language. He also grew up in Hayes, a patch of grassland surrounded by swamp in the early part of the 19th century that started out with a French name known as "La Savanne des Dugas" for Dugas's pasture. When Thomas Hayes moved to Dugas's pasture in 1832, becoming the first white settler there, the town was named after him.

How many fall mornings did Daniels hear the sound of white-fronted geese while waiting for his school bus or while playing outside during recess? Daniels never said. But the sound of specks for kids who grow up in rice country is as normal as the clattering of a streetcar or honks of taxicabs to those who live in the city. And for Daniels, now 45, the sound of those geese has become the passion that drives him.

In 2013 Daniels gave up the stress and pressures of a 21-year career working as a contractor to dedicate all of his energies to full-time guiding and growing the business he co-owns: Riceland Custom Calls.

I met Daniels interestingly enough on social media through a young man named Jack Cousin. Cousin happened to be a friend of Daniels and is young enough to be his son and my grandson. I met Jack years before when he was a young teenager, while buying a custom-made cane-reed duck call from a local retired dentist who took up the hobby of decoy carving and call making.

At a Ducks Unlimited banquet, the dentist donated a call with free calling lessons that Cousin won. Those lessons and some coaching led Cousin to a few duck-calling contests and, as fate would have it, on a collision with Daniels and some of the state's best callers at the state



Bill Daniels talks the talk.

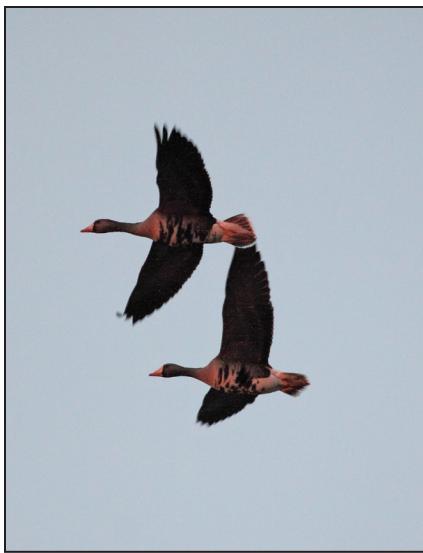
championship in Gueydan.

While out of college between the fall and winter semesters, Cousin now makes a few dollars as a guide in rice country. On his Facebook page, he daily posts limits of specks. I had to ask, "Jack, where are you killing all of those specks?" Long story short, Cousin uses a Riceland Custom Call when calling white-fronted geese and connected me with Daniels, encouraging us to make a hunt together.

The problem was, it was late in the season. The specks had been shot at since September in Alaska and Canada and every state south in both the Mississippi and Central flyways all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. What's more, it was already late January, approaching the final weekend of the Louisiana season.

The specks had long been avoiding pit blinds. Many of the dumb, uneducated juveniles were dead. Now the older patriarchs and matriarchs of the flocks seemed to have mentored those remaining young birds and helped them wise up. They had seen every setup and heard some of the best impersonators up and down those flyways. It wasn't as simple as putting out a few decoys and calling them in.

Daniels exudes confidence not only when you talk with him, but when you see him. He's a big burly guy, pushing 6 foot 3 with his hunting boots on and close to 300 pounds. With his gray goatee beard and sunglasses, he reminds



The objects of affection.

you of a biker in camouflage, except for the fact that his demeanor is as easygoing as Tim Allen's character in the movie *Wild Hogs*.

Daniels assured me while we finalized our plans that we would have a good hunt, saying, "We're fortunate to be able to hunt a big farm. We'll be hunting Lacassane Company land. And if you have enough property and scout them, you'll find the geese basically go to the same place in the afternoon and morning. If you can find a place where they're piling up, layout blinds give you an opportunity to get right in close to where they're staying. You then usually do really well with the decoys and can get them to come in pretty easy."

Entering Rice Country

On the morning of our hunt, I got up at 3:30 to make the two-hour drive to rice country from my home in south-central Louisiana. I arrived right on time at 6:15 and was greeted by Farm Manager Jude Zaunbrecher, who would be hunting with us along with Patrick Martinez, a private chef for the Lacassane Hunting Club.

When we got to the field, the first thing I noticed was what wasn't there. In the headlights of the truck, there were no decoys or blinds that I could see.

One mistake that some duck and goose outfitters do on a regular basis is leave their decoys out. The birds get extremely used to seeing these waterfowl



Daniels bird dogs a pair that fell beyond the Canada decoys.

mannequins in the same place and begin to avoid them.

Another no-no is that as the season progresses hunters get lazy and don't freshen up their pit blinds along rice field levees. As fall and winter rains occur, there is a muddy ring of footprints and four-wheeler tracks around blinds, making the area look unnatural and stick out like a sore thumb.

"The later in the season it gets, the more wary the geese are," Daniels said, explaining why he's so successful at putting his hunters onto specks while we put out decoys. "They pick you apart if it doesn't look natural. They'll spot you and they won't come anywhere near you. We use layout blinds, but with the layout blinds we also use the natural grass on the levees where we're hunting and grass them up real good so they blend in with the field road and levees. The geese don't even know we're there."

Daniels and Zaunbrecher used a few different brands of decoys along with three different species on our rice field layout hunt. We set out about three-dozen whitefront decoys from three different makers, along with a dozen Canada decoys and a few odd snow goose decoys. All of the decoys were full-body, which gave the field a realistic presentation in the soft light of morning.

According to Daniels, this was the first year they used Canada decoys in their spreads. Southwest Louisiana is known to get lesser Canadas late each winter,

and along with snow geese they can be an added bonus during speck hunts.

"We actually killed 32 of the lesser Canadas this year," Daniels said. "We call them cacklers. But I tried mixing in the Canada geese with our speck decoys and it seems to be working pretty well. The general thinking here for ducks is later in the year you take away duck decoys. But what we've found speck hunting is geese seem to be piled up in groups the later in the season it gets, so we put out more decoys. We generally start out in the early part of the season using one or one-and-a-half dozen. And the later it gets, we'll use three or four dozen."

Zaunbrecher left to hide the pickup truck while we set up the field. And by the time he got back, it was 6:38, well past legal shooting light when we slid into the layout blinds with geese flying in the general area.

Specks On The Move

It was my first time hunting geese in this fashion, so I decided to practice shouldering my gun a few times. Daniels said it wouldn't be a problem, because the geese would be close when the shot was called.

With the layouts closed, we disappeared into the levee, becoming the root system of the natural grass cover. And with three specks checking out the field overhead, Daniels and Zaunbrecher began to call.

Daniels who holds four state cham-



The author, left, with Daniels and hefty straps of specklebellies.

To Russia With Love

Several years back, Bill Daniels decided he wanted to get into the call-making business, so the champion caller approached James Myers who at the time was making Myers Custom Calls. During contests, Daniels would use Myers' calls, and he helped him design some of them.

The two friends teamed up, and in 2010 together they formed Riceland Custom Calls. Daniels says the calls have caught on regionally and are gaining an international audience. Riceland calls are currently distributed in Russia more than anywhere else. It seems our Russian counterparts around the globe are as fanatical about hunting waterfowl as Americans, particularly white-fronted geese.

One of the most distinguishing features about the call is the $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch gut, where other call makers use a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch. What waterfowl hunters will first notice about RCC calls is how little back pressure is required to get the rollover needed to mimic the yodels of a white-fronted goose.

For more information about Riceland Custom Calls, visit their website at ricelandcustomcalls.com.



Daniels' wall of calling titles.

pionship titles and two world titles sounded like the white-fronted goose version of Grammy Award-winning New Orleans trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, kicking out notes that flying creatures with orange legs love.

The three geese dropped from the sky with their wings on their butts and feet sticking out in front of them.

"Take 'em," Zaunbrecher said.

Martinez hustled out to pick up the three geese as we prepared for another group off in the distance that seemed to be turning toward the field. The outcome was nearly a repeat of the first bunch.

Louisiana's daily bag limit on specks is two. Hunters are allowed to harvest three dark geese total when Canadas come into the mix. But these birds count against your speck total, causing some of the locals to pass on them, preferring the white-fronted goose as table fare.

It took only a couple more efforts and we had our four-man limits. The geese were totally bamboozled by the late-season layout and decoy tactics as well as by some stellar calling by these rice-landers. Not wanting to wait around for a bonus Canada or snow, our hunt was over with the sun barely above the eastern horizon.

We removed the decoys, wiped down the crime scene, picked up spent shells, and snuck out the same way we came in an hour earlier with the goal of not disturbing the geese. There were still two days left in the season to hunt. Why ruin a good thing by hanging around?

During the 2013-2014 Louisiana waterfowl season, reports about ducks were mixed. And in spite of some of the coldest weather in years that normally pushes high numbers of ducks down, many hunters in the bayou state struggled, particularly those who hunted public lands.

By contrast, the white-fronted goose season was one of the better ones, with regular limits taken by hunters who mastered the drill. My late-season hunt with Daniels showed me he definitely knows what he's doing. And it also doesn't hurt that he speaks specklebelly as a second language. He certainly proved he had the chops on this morning.

