

The Embarrassing Truth (Outdoor Canada March 2001)

Aldo Leopold died more than a half-century ago, but his words ring as true today as when they were first penned in the early 1900's. About hunting, the man widely recognized as the father of scientific wildlife management once wrote: "The hunter ordinarily has no gallery to applaud or disapprove his conduct. Whatever his acts, they are dictated by his own conscience rather than by a mob of onlookers."

He was referring, of course, to hunting ethics, or how hunters behave when no one is looking. Last fall, I had reason to wistfully contemplate those words as I lay sprawled flat on my back in an aluminum boat, staring up at the grey sky and feeling grateful I was alone.

Only seconds earlier, I'd been securely perched on the middle seat of the boat, which was tucked snugly in a patch of bulrushes. I scanned the sky for ducks and geese while Belle, my usually faithful black Lab-golden retriever cross, sat on the stern seat, eagerly waiting for the action to begin.

Then a duck landed with a splash 300 meters away. Belle instantly leaped overboard and started swimming toward the bird. I blew the whistle and called in my sternest tone, but she ignored me. Suddenly, two mallards came out of nowhere. I shot at the lead bird as it hit the one o'clock position. The second duck was directly above me when I fired again. Both shots missed, and the momentum of swinging the shotgun carried me past my center of balance.

I fell backwards, landing heavily on the boat floor amid a jumble of decoy bags, life jackets, lunch, gear and extra clothes. Stunned at my ineptitude, I stayed there for what seemed an eternity, occasionally uttering a half-hearted "Belle, come back here," before clumsily regaining my seat. Belle eventually returned, tired, cold and duckless. I nervously peered around to check for witnesses. Whew, I thought, greatly relieved -- no mob of onlookers here.

Thankfully, the mob was likewise absent on another autumn morning when Belle and I set out in the boat in a pre-dawn fog thick enough to chew. Normally, I would use the light in the farmyard across the lake as a guiding beacon to our bulrush blind, but on this morning I couldn't see it. Finally, after more than a half-hour of vigorous rowing, the shoreline appeared, ghost-like, through the fog.

My heart sunk as a parked van slowly came into view. Darn, I thought, some hunter has jeopardized our morning hunt. But after focusing my binoculars on the vehicle, I sheepishly realized it was mine. Disoriented in the fog, I had rowed full circle.

Again, we set off for the far shore. This time, I strived to put equal pressure on each oar to ensure the boat steered straight. The only sounds came from the creaking oarlocks, unseen ducks whistling by and Belle's tail thumping against the aluminum bow seat.

After 30 long minutes, the shoreline again loomed grey and surreal, and out of the gloom emerged another vehicle. Well, actually the same one -- mine -- again. The sole saving grace: no witnesses, save Belle with her puzzled look.

I once owned a dog named Keesh. One of his faults was that he tended to get too far ahead when we were hunting ring-necked pheasants, flushing roosters well out of range. My remedy: a 20-metre check cord linking us together.

One crisp autumn morning, Keesh and I were hunting among low willows lining a steep riverbank, where the water had frozen along the edges. Suddenly, a cackling rooster flushed five metres away. Feeling rather sporting, I let him fly out before shooting. The rooster was halfway across the river when I fired my second barrel, which was just as ineffective as the first. Unmarked, the rooster flew to the far bank.

I was cursing my marksmanship when I realized that Keesh, who was running full tilt toward the river, didn't know the bird had escaped. Problem was, the check cord was still attached to my waist. Pulled off balance, I launched off the mud-slicked bank, with barely enough time to toss my empty shotgun safely into the willows. Upon landing, I crashed through the ice and onto my back in knee-deep water.

Spitting out muddy water and ice as I hastily clambered out, I still had the presence of mind to have a quick glance around. Again, no mob of onlookers.

All hunters have had experiences they'd rather forget, or wish hadn't happened – even though they have nothing to do with ethics. Combined with other ingredients of the hunt, though, these mishaps are invariably woven into the colourful fabric of the overall experience. They give us stories to tell around the campfire, and they inject some levity into an activity many of us can take far too seriously.

But if you hunt alone, nobody ever has to know about these encounters of the red-faced kind. Unless, that is, you choose to spill the beans.