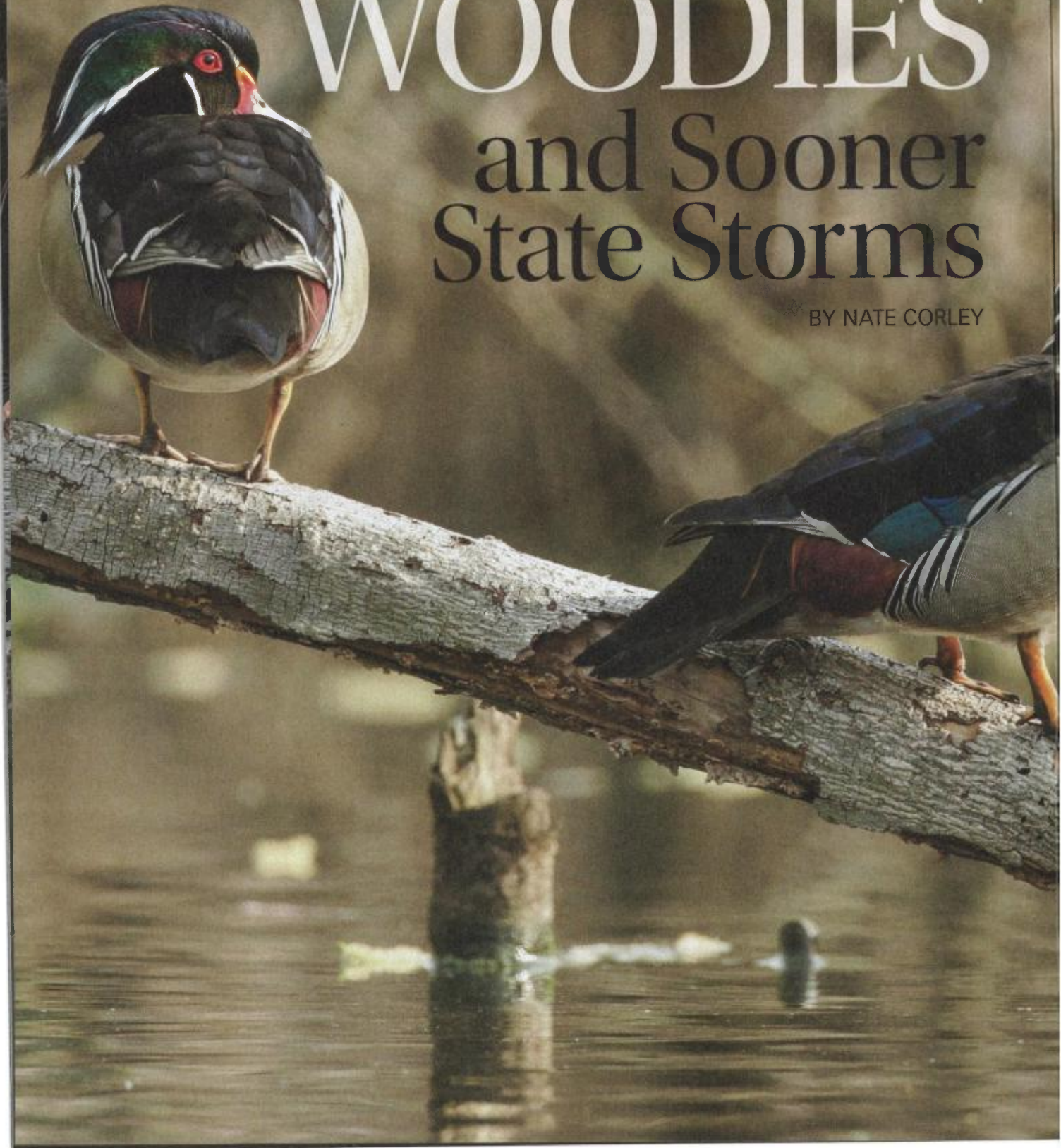


# LONGHORN WOODIES

## and Sooner State Storms

BY NATE CORLEY



**TEXAS WAS DROWNING.** At least that's what it looked like from the windows of the Toyota 4-Runner as we rolled north on U.S. 81. Ditches ran like rivers, cow ponds flattened into reservoirs, wheat field after wheat field transformed into puddle duck paradise: food aplenty, and also plenty of, uh, puddles.

"Looks like you guys had some rain recently," Brad Heidel remarked from the passenger seat. Brad, with Delta Waterfowl, had flown south from the polar reaches of Minnesota that morning and seemed impressed by the sight of "soft" water in mid-December.

"Yep. Plenty of rain," Holder replied, keeping his hands on the wheel and eyes on the road. "Texas ain't all desert, you know."

I smiled from the backseat. This was also my first

trip to Texas, and like Brad, I hadn't expected the prairie landscape to evoke images of soggy western Washington. Just add a few mountains to the horizon and some Douglas Firs to the ditch rows, and we could've been driving on the I-5 corridor.

"So what's this do to the ducks?"

Charlie shrugged. "Not ideal. Spreads 'em out, you know? Twenty here, 30 there. But we'll get 'em. These guys know their stuff."

"These guys" were the hard-working guides of North Texas Outfitters, an outfit headquartered somewhat ironically in Waurika, Oklahoma ("really north Texas," the guys would joke). Only a two-hour drive straight up from Dallas-Fort Worth, the guides actually run hunts on both sides of the state line, depending on where they find the birds. Buy licenses for both states, was the advice we'd been given.

The question running through our

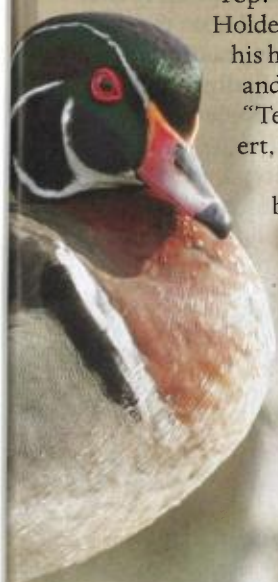
minds as we crossed over the Red River into Oklahoma was whether that flexibility would make any difference. We had driven an hour and a half at dusk through what looked like prime duck country, and other than a few flocks of distant geese, hadn't seen a bird in the sky.

We didn't doubt Charlie's confidence, though. As owner of Sure-Shot Calls, the man spends a lot of time in the duck blind. This was his hunt and his home state.

We were also excited to test out the new Can-Am Defender XMR and North Texas is the perfect place, with "mud and sand for days," as Andrew Howard, with Can-Am, put it. He seemed right on that front. The terrain that flashed by the windows looked like an offroad playground.

#### **THIS IS OUR DUCK HOLE?**

"Here it is, boys," outfitter Dakota Stowers shined his light over the sodden ground, "Let's throw the blinds



on this bank and get brushing.” It was the next morning, an hour before shooting light, and now that we had our boots on the ground, the landscape proved to be everything it had appeared from the windows of the 4-Runner: flat, red, and sloppy.

The duck hole didn't look like much at first glance. Or second glance either. A low spot in cattle pasture filled with ankle-high water and clumps of yellow grass, the puddle seemed to have little to offer passing ducks that they couldn't find in a hundred other fields.

The weather wasn't doing us any favors. Perfectly calm, the forecast called for blue skies and highs in the low 60s—great for hanging Christmas lights, but not for luring ducks within range of a shotgun.

“Ten minutes,” Dakota reported, sliding his phone in his coat pocket. “Let's get in and get comfortable before the show begins.”

Dakota was younger than expected. Just 25, another hunter

had whispered over our late catfish dinner the night before, eyebrows raised. I'd raised mine in return. There were eight of us booked to hunt with Dakota the next morning—most out-of-staters, most at least 20 years his senior—all with high expectations for the weekend.

If Dakota felt any pressure, his body language didn't show it. With everything in place, he was standing at the end of the blind, spitting sunflower seeds, laughing with another guide. Suddenly he tensed. “Right side. Six.” He dropped into a crouch and checked his phone one more time. “We're live, boys. Next pass, take 'em.”

The birds banked at the treeline and swung hard in our direction, slender black silhouettes sharp against the pink horizon. Eight hunters stood and eight shotguns barked as the flock sliced overhead. Three tumbled to the water while a fourth locked its wings and sailed into the trees behind us.

“Mark that one, Trent,” Dakota called.

“Here we go again. Get ready.” This time the pair of ducks committed suicide—backpedaling just 10 yards in front of the blind.

More laughs, more clicking safeties—and more birds in the air.

“Woodies,” Brad remarked from two seats over as we reloaded, nodding toward a belly-up pair on the water. “Both drakes, too. How bout that?” There was no time to reply because already, Charlie was chattering on his Yentzen Classic, and already, the whistle of wings could be heard behind the blind.

This routine continued for the next 45 minutes: tight flights of wood ducks screaming and spiraling over the decoys, shots called on the pass, and close to a dozen gaudily-plumed December drakes finding their way onto the strap. A couple hens snuck into the bag, but for the most part, it was drakes only. A wood duck limit of two per hunter in Oklahoma

Wave after wave followed,  
and soon our little corner of the  
wheat field was a beehive  
**of wings and whistles and  
chuckles and splashing.**



forces you to be selective, but also results in a striking bag when all is finished—more like the take you'd expect from a rainforest parrot shoot than the drab winter plains of the Central Flyway.

"Hey, guys! Look at this," Charlie cradled one of the drakes in his hands, "Y'all wonderin' why this puddle's a woody death hole this morning?" Slowly, Charlie pressed on the crop of the wood duck, and—like a circus sword-swallower exhaling a football—an over-sized brown object squeezed out of the dead duck's beak.

"Pecans," Charlie's eyes twinkled, "This puddle is covered with 'em—look." He gestured to a gnarled old tree in the middle of the marsh. "Add a little water, and you've got wood duck paradise."

"How do they digest those suckers?" a hunter called from down the blind.

"Gizzard grinds it up like nothin,'" Dakota replied, "Like a food processor."

By the time it was time to pick up, we'd added half a dozen mallards and a gadwall to the pile. A fine shoot by any standard, but given the shirtsleeve conditions and stunning prairie sunrise, we all agreed it was a world-class morning in the marsh.

Restaurant options are limited in Waurika, but the joints they have stay in business for a reason. We pulled in for our post-hunt breakfast at a place Dakota called simply, "the truck stop," without any signage inside or out to say otherwise.

But if "truck stop" brings to mind day-old roller grill food and microwaved breakfast burritos, you've got the wrong idea.

"Order the French Toast," Charlie advised as he tossed out the menus, "The lady makes the bread fresh every morning. And don't worry about portion size."

He was right. Bacon slices thick as a Hershey's bar and pancakes the size of medium pizzas soon filled our table, and everything was served with a small side of gravy. Everything. It's not even mentioned on the menu, but don't be surprised when the waitress sets the steaming



© Andrew Howard

white ramekin down by your plate. Just follow the lead of the locals and pour it on top, then get busy with your fork.

We lingered after breakfast—Waurika pace—sipping bottomless black coffee under ancient box TVs

that were tuned 24/7 to Fox News. A Christmas tree flickered in the corner, and outside a steady stream of big rigs crunched in and out of the gravel parking lot. Tuesday morning in Oklahoma—a guy could get used to this.

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**UNFORTUNATE FORTUNE**

The respite gave us an opportunity to chat more with our young outfitter.

Turns out Dakota's not a duck guide by training, he's a certified nurse. He's always loved hunting, and even guided waterfowl hunters part-time during high-school and college, but didn't think he'd ever do it full-time.

"A brutal leg injury for me and the death of a close friend is what got me here," Dakota summed up. The leg injury cut his football career short, and the dear friend and mentor who died unexpectedly left Dakota his entire outfitting business in the terms of his will.

We all nodded, impressed. It said a lot that an older guy would trust a freshly-graduated millennial with the business that represented his life's work and legacy, but his trust was not misplaced. In the two years Dakota and his team have been running North Texas Outfitters, business has exploded. Ten clients a day on weekdays, 30 a day on weekends and holidays, a team of more than a dozen full-time and seasonal guides, bookings a year or two in advance for prime dates. They're killing it, getting hunters on birds consistently, the only ingredient that sets real guides apart from the wannabes.

The next morning proved it again. Dawn found us on the edge of a green winter wheat field. Dakota and his team planted four-dozen honker silhouettes on the south side of a sheet-water puddle and three-dozen mallard full-bodies smack in the middle.

"The silo's are mostly for ducks, believe it or not," Dakota explained as we settled in the blind, "Wigeon love 'em."

He was right. The 10 minutes before shooting light were the substance of a duck hunter's fantasy. Wigeon and mallards spiraled into the hole from unseen heights, splashing down without hesitation. Wave after wave followed, and soon our little corner of the wheat field was a beehive of wings and whistles and chuckles and splashing.

We watched the display with the anxious excitement of year-old Labrador pups until Dakota finally announced it was time to shoot. Fifteen frantic minutes of in-your-face duck action followed, and when shooting stopped and the feathers settled, close to a dozen fat greenheads and an equal number of wigeon and pintails lay dead.

And then it was over. Like someone turning off a faucet, the flights stopped—the field was silent.

"Calm before the storm," Charlie pointed to a wall of clouds looming to the left. "Blue Norther, the locals call these. Could get interesting." Sure enough, as the wall got closer, it took on a distinctive blue/grey hue in the morning sun. We snapped photos with our phones, laughing and pointing and singing that line from "Oklahoma!" ("*where the wind comes sweepin' down the plain...*"), and then stopped short.

The wall of wind slammed into the blinds like a highlight reel of Brian Bosworth's best hits. Decoys flipped, silo's spun, and the blast of

chill air took our breath away. By the time all the gear was tossed in the trailer, our whole party was red-faced, wide-eyed, and desperate for some truck stop sustenance.

The rain arrived as we ate our breakfast. We know rain in the Pacific Northwest: weeks of steady drizzle all winter, soft showers in summertime. This was like someone had pointed a firehose at the Red River valley and let it rip all afternoon. And evening. And night.

When our alarm sounded at 4:30 the next morning, the fire hose was still blasting. We'd planned on trying a quick wood duck shoot before catching flights out of Dallas, but the sandy two-track that led to the pecan grove had transformed overnight into a foaming river. The Defender has a pretty sweet snorkel intake system, but when we saw the bobbing head of a beaver turn back and squint into our headlights 30 feet down the road, we decided it was time to turn around.

Good thing we did. We were minutes away from being stranded by the rising waters. A parallel creek breached its banks just after the Defender ferried the last hunters and their gear back to our vehicles, and the cabin-on-stilts we'd called home for the last three days was suddenly an over-the-water cabana.

"Wet bag," the TSA guy noted a few hours later as he unzipped my carry-on to examine the suspicious looking freezer bags of bloody meat tucked between clothing. "Looks like you had some fun in Texas."

I smiled, "You have no idea."

