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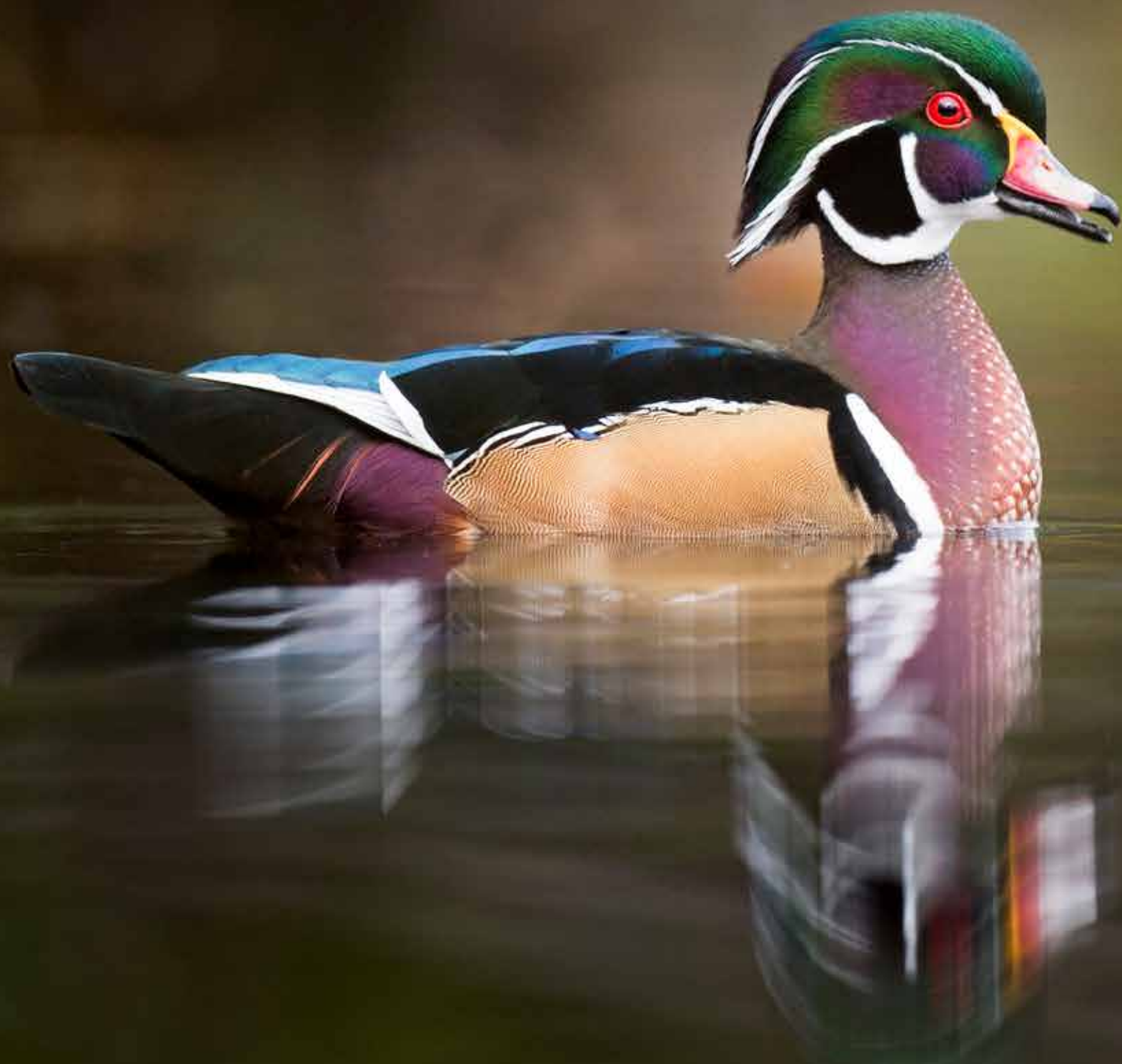
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The Third Dock

STORY BY JUSTIN WITT



The alarm is set for 5:45 a.m. but is never necessary. Whenever I am at The Farm in winter it seems there are spirits that wake me five minutes before it goes off. I wonder sometimes if it speaks badly of my faith that I still set the alarm after all these years. Once I've made it from my bunk to the stove and am filling the kettle there is no more room for such thoughts. Philip is usually still snoring. I carry an empty coffee cup over to where he sleeps, shake him by the shoulder until he opens his eyes, then violently pantomime throwing the non-existent scolding hot coffee in his face which invariably startles him awake with a jolt and sometimes causes him to smash his head against the boards of the top bunk.

By the time the kettle has boiled, and we make the actual coffee we're usually dressed and ready to head out. I pour

enough cold milk in mine to cool it down and drink it fast, then step out into the cold to pee while it's still not too much of a hassle. Philip has poured about a half-gallon of his own coffee into a gigantic, insulated plastic mug he bought three or so decades ago at the truck-stop, and he'll carry it and work on it all day long. Occasionally Philip will also carry a shotgun and accompany me for the dawn, but most mornings he is headed to a deer stand in some other nook or cranny of the property, while I hunt my deer throughout the afternoons and across the thresholds of dusks.

Dawn is for the Third Dock only.

Nowhere else on Earth I have walked to in the pre-dawn darkness is as dark as the trail between Camp and the Third Dock. It seems no matter what the weather or moon phase light simply will not pierce the canopy of that forest. I've walked the trail now for over 40 years, yet still feel my way



forward with each step as though at any moment the ground might disappear and leave me falling into the abyss. I do occasionally bump into a pine or find myself in a tangle of brambles before eventually making it the quarter of a mile I need to, arriving at a very particular spot where the forest opens, and the celestial sky illuminates the expanse of Cedar Creek.

Were it not for a dam built by Gregg's great Uncle on the farm downstream, the Third Dock wouldn't be what it is. Upstream and to the West Cedar Creek winds its way through a dense landscape of forest that starts right at its banks but exhibits the usual winding pattern and static width of all the spring creeks in South Georgia. When the dam was built though, a large triangle of woodland was flooded, stretching from Gregg's place all the way through Granddad's and pretty much right to the upstream property line. Over the decades species of trees not meant to stand in water died and fell, eventually dissolving and re-congealing into what is now a sort of maze of channels, reed islands, beaver lodges and what I think is probably some of the best wood duck habitat on Earth.

"Dock" is a bit of a misnomer at this point. Sometime around 1980 Granddad had been inspired to install there what can only be described as a sort of diving board-like structure, a pressure-treated 2x12 affixed between driven posts on the bank that extended out over the water 12 feet with nothing



whatsoever to support its far end. He used it as a canoe launch when he ventured out into the swamp to fish for pickerel or bass, and the first six or so feet of it served that purpose well. For those who ventured beyond that first six feet though, the thing became more like a cross between a diving board and a trampoline. The third dock's position on the North side of the creek is less than optimal for a right-handed shooter anyway, since 99% of the birds are coming from upstream and as such the swing is from right to left; but it is what it is. We don't own the other side of the creek.

Resident wood ducks inhabit what we call "The Swamp" throughout the year, but when we're lucky migratory woodies come in winter from the North. And the colder the winter is, the more of them arrive to swim the banks probing for acorns, seeds and whatever else it is they eat. These and the residents roost each night upstream in the woods but most of the food and safest places for them to swim around looking for it is in the open water to the East. The Third Dock sits right at the transition between these two zones, right where the funnel opens from forest creek to flooded swamp, and although plenty of the

ducks choose to fly over the treetops behind me there are plenty still who prefer the course that remains over water.

Most mornings half the birds come by while it is still far too dark to shoot, the sound of whistling wings being the only perceivable evidence of their passage. But as the light begins to trickle in and the horizon to my left floods with pink, the outlines of their bodies against the sky start to take form. The residents come by in twos or threes, sometimes as many as a half dozen. The migratory birds, when we have them, can sometimes blow past 20 or 30 at a time. And while a few might drop in here and there to feed the transition zone, most of these birds are headed for the lake, and they are moving fast.

Fifty miles an hour may not seem like much in the way of speed when we're watching cars go by from a distance, but when a wood duck crosses what amounts to about a hundred yards of shooting window at that speed it's a whole different story. The mathematics are inexact—with both the stretch of visibility and the speed of each flight of ducks being variables, but on average my calculations indicate about a four-second window from the time I first hear them coming to the time they



are gone. I'm usually there for an hour though and there are a lot of four-second windows in an hour.

The plumage of male wood ducks is difficult to describe, not so much in that one has trouble with the particulars but in that there are so many particulars any attempt to turn them into a cohesive series of words leaves one begging for a photo or a painting instead, all vocabulary falling short of the task as medium. The only place to start, the only anchor in a male wood duck's features are his eyes, orange with black pupils, but an orange so orange it makes deer hunting vests look like camouflage. From there we move on to the bill, another hue of orange tipped with black, and then the crest of the forehead a mix of iridescent greens with a hint of blues and purples mixed in like some ephemeral psychedelic effect. Two thin white stripes separate three sections of these colors and all of it spills off the back of the bird's head like Viking hair. The throat patch is white as well and has one arm that curls up towards the eye and another to the back of the neck. Then comes the chest, perhaps the drabest part of the duck, which isn't saying much,

being an amber brown with speckled yellow dots. Yet another white stripe separates this from belly feathers that display thin, parallel lines of cream and black from bottom to tips, at which point they widen and become black and white.

Holding one of these birds in my hand is the closest thing I can think of to an experiential proof of existence for the Universal consciousness some call God. The idea that such a living work of art could come about through purely random processes is simply ridiculous.

As is the case with many waterfowl, the females are set up more for camouflage than for dance. Unlike most waterfowl however, woodies are the only species of duck in North America to regularly produce two broods per season, and they do not mate for life. They nest in tree hollows and cavities high above the forest floor, and the males abandon the females at the start of the 30 or so days it takes their eggs to hatch. I can't say it is the main reason I hold them in such high regard, but somehow the absence of lifelong partnership and the raising of the ducklings only by

the females makes me feel almost like they are upland birds in waterfowl format.

Even without the ducks though the Third Dock at dawn has always been a gem in the gravel field of my life. The things I have seen there over the years stand out in memory like moving paintings, animations of the Glory of Creation itself. Just the sunrise and its light, every morning a new configuration of colors being laid out by some artist whose inspiration never dies or for that matter even takes a break. All the birds it seems are in their most vocal state at dawn. "Wake up! Wake up!", they cry in so many languages I can't keep track of who is who beyond just the few I know quite well like the kingfisher and the dove. There are cranes and herons, cardinals and finches, blue jays and robins; I once had a woodcock come past headed upstream just as it became light enough to identify him by his silhouette, doing that floppety-jagged flight line they have that looks like a yo-yo being wielded by a drunk.

Sometimes in the middle of my hour I'll hear Philip's rifle go

off somewhere up behind me on The Farm. Then I know there's work to be done. He's found his buck. There's the tractor to be started up, knives to be sharpened, meat to be butchered and packaged for the freezer. I never feel any rush to head back up though. He'll be waiting for me in the cookhouse with fresh coffee and a smile when I arrive.

And if I'm lucky I'll be myself arriving with a woodie or two hung from my belt. ☺

Justin Witt is the founder and operator of Hemispheres Unlimited, a worldwide informational resource and booking agency representing the best fly fishing destinations on Earth. His writing has appeared in The Flyfish Journal, The Drake, The Angler, The Virginia Sportsman and a variety of literary journals. He can be found at home with his wife and daughter in Rio Pico, Argentina, where he runs a lodge and helps anglers stick hooks into trout.