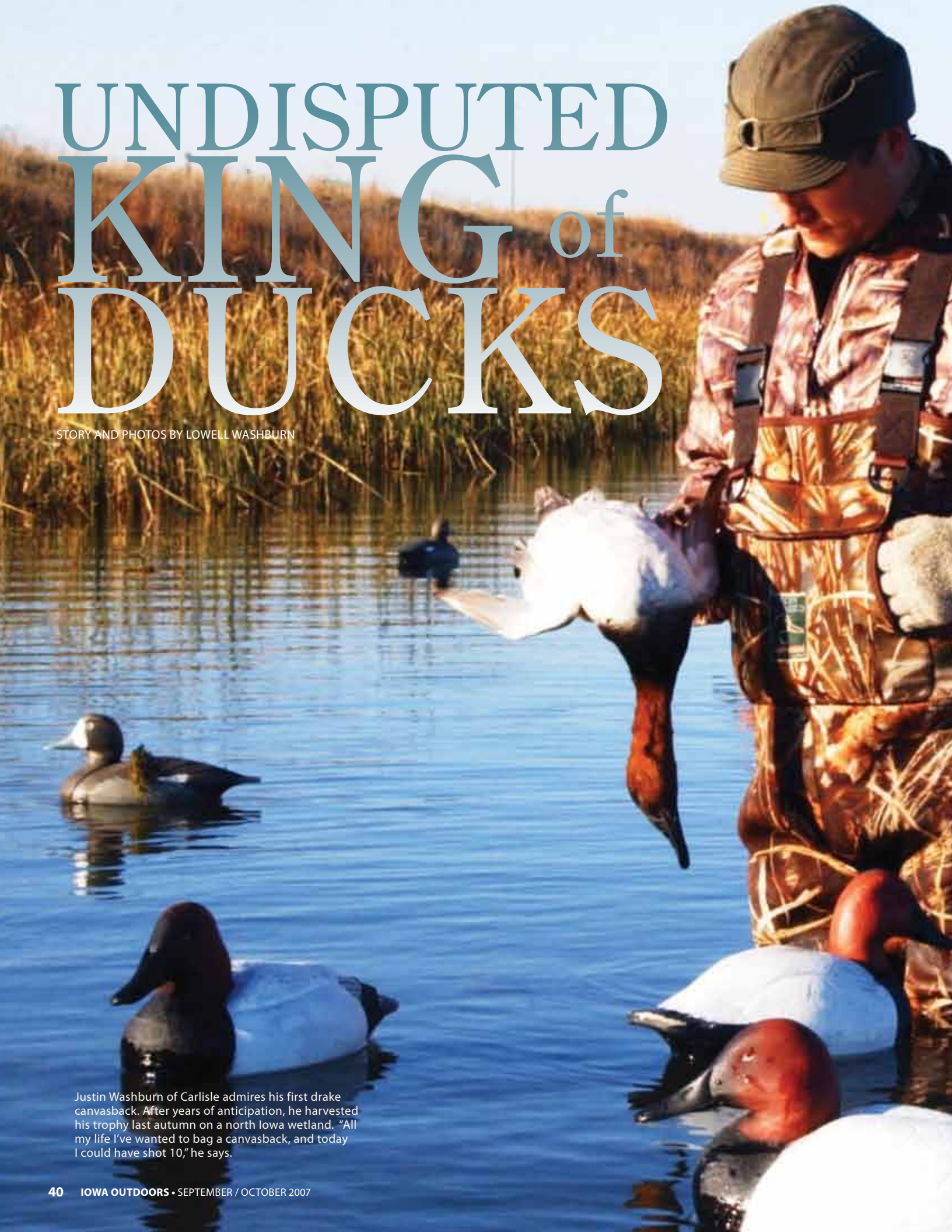


# UNDISPUTED KING of DUCKS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LOWELL WASHBURN

A man in camouflage gear and a cap is shown from the chest up, holding a harvested canvasback duck. He is standing in a wetland area with water and tall grasses. Several other ducks are visible in the water around him. The scene is lit with warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

Justin Washburn of Carlisle admires his first drake canvasback. After years of anticipation, he harvested his trophy last autumn on a north Iowa wetland. "All my life I've wanted to bag a canvasback, and today I could have shot 10," he says.



I may have just shot my last duck of the season. It's late in the year, and today is one of those brutally cold, blue-finger mornings. Wind is roaring out of the northwest and the lake has become a cauldron of dark waves. Nighttime temps dropped into the single digits with wind chills 15 below zero. Local marshes have been frozen solid for a week, and the lowering sky is beginning to spit serious snow.

For local duck hunters, it's the final hurrah. By now everyone has concentrated along protected shorelines of large lakes and reservoirs. It is the only game in town. But even deep water has its limits. When these howling winds finally blow themselves out, even the biggest lakes will ice shut and fall will be over. Things could be a whole lot worse though. The duck in hand is a prime drake canvasback—the King of Ducks.

Arriving on the edge of the winter storm, the drake was traveling alone. Boring straight into the teeth of the wind, it was obvious the big diver was looking for company. I spotted the can' about the same time he spotted the decoys. In spite of the distance, the bird's huge size, powerful flight and fighter jet profile left no doubt as to its identity.

During late season, my rig always includes at least a few canvasback decoys. We usually don't see that many, but when it comes to canvasback ducks, "Be prepared" is our motto. Today I had 15 of the brightly colored counterfeits riding the chop.

Upon spotting the spread, the drake immediately executed a sharp left bank and headed straight for us. Upon arrival, he quickly lowered his oversized, webbed landing gear. But the big duck had come in too hot for an easy touchdown. At the last second he retracted the webs to bleed off more speed with a second pass.

But by now the duck was in our face, and I decided to take the shot head on. I fired, and as the drake folded, inertia took over bringing the bird closer yet. So close that I leaned left to avoid being struck. The drake thudded into the soft bank directly between me and my canine companion, Tucker. We both bore a look of astonishment over this highly unusual development.

Not wanting to shirk his duty as a nonslip retriever, the Labrador simply reached down, picked up the duck, and handed it to me. Neither one of us moved so much as an inch from our seats. If this was indeed going to be the year's final duck, it would be a memorable conclusion to a great season.

No matter who you are or where you hunt, bagging a prime drake canvasback is a signature moment. The dog and I decided to celebrate by consuming the last of our ham on rye sandwiches. Tucker is the only Labrador I know who enjoys a good strong horseradish with his ham. Once



the food was gone, I poured the last half-cup of lukewarm coffee.

As I continued to scan the whitecaps for the next approaching flock, my gaze kept returning to the slain canvasback. As I admired the bird, I replayed a mental tape of what had become a most rewarding Iowa duck season.

As usual, the season began with September teal and wood ducks followed by a severe case of mid-season doldrums. The weather was warm and the migration slow. By late October, most hunters had stashed their duck decoys and switched to pheasants or archery deer.

But good things come to those who wait. Waterfowlers who stuck to their marshes witnessed large numbers of diving and puddle ducks invade the state during the night of Oct. 31. It was the season's most spectacular migration. The flight included everything from redheads to green-wings, mallards to bluebills. Most notable, were the amazing numbers of canvasback ducks.

Appearing from the north in ragged lines and sharp v-formation, the cans' arrived in waves. As new flocks continued to descend on interior lakes and marshes, it soon became apparent the migration had become something out of the ordinary.

Although the regal canvasback is regarded as the continent's premier waterfowl, most hunters have never bagged one. More so than most species, canvasbacks have highly specialized food and habitat requirements. In Iowa, the bulk of the fall migration occurs along the Mississippi River where peak numbers of 250,000 to 300,000 canvasbacks gather late each autumn to feed on submerged beds of aquatic wild celery. But on Iowa's interior waters it's a different story. During most seasons canvasback hunting is, at best, a hit or miss, here today gone tomorrow, proposition.

But just because most contemporary hunters have never had an opportunity to bag this trophy species doesn't mean they don't want to. My nephew, Justin, is a good example. Although an enthusiastic waterfowl hunter for several years, Justin has seen but never bagged a canvasback. When I phoned to report an eye-popping, mega-flight of cans' was occupying the waters of our favorite Honey Hole, he lost no time in making plans to drive up from Carlisle to join my brother Sterling and me for a weekend hunt in northern Cerro Gordo County.

I love it when a plan comes together, and this hunt proved to be one of those times. Saturday dawned clear and crisp. The wind was favorable and ducks were flying in all directions. The first flock arrived at sunrise. Stunning

in the early morning light, there were seven of them. A tight squadron of fighters—all drakes—bore telltale canvas-white backs, bull necks and sculpted chestnut heads. The birds lost no time in coming to the decoys.

"Get ready," I whispered. "Remember, you can only shoot one." Although the daily bag limit on ducks is six, federal law dictates only one may be a canvasback. As the ducks arrived, we shouldered the guns and fired. At the sound of the shots, three magnificent, bull canvasbacks simultaneously fell from the flock.

Sleek and fat, the birds were perfect. My brother and I were pleased, but Justin was downright elated. While Sterling and I mused over the prospects of roast canvasback, currant jelly and wild rice in our Clear Lake homes, Justin was planning a trip to the taxidermist.

The sharp whistle of flaring wings broke our trance, and we returned to the hunt. Justin killed a mallard and then a bluebill. But his eyes rarely strayed from the real prize of the day—his first feather-perfect, shot-over-the-decoys, drake canvasback.

The sun cleared the horizon, and the flight continued. Best of all, the flocks of cans' kept coming. Some birds simply strafed the decoys while others piled in as if they expected to spend the winter. One squadron of 10 nearly took Justin's cap off as they passed within six feet of our cattail blind. For the canvasback devotee, it was the duck show of a lifetime. Justin's grin spread from ear to ear.

"This is just unbelievable," he proclaimed. "All my life I've wanted to get a canvasback duck and today they're everywhere. I could have shot at least 10 by now. This is unreal."

The weekend passed all too quickly. But as the migration continued, flocks of migrating canvasbacks remained a common sight for several more days. By Thanksgiving, the cold weather had set in for real. Another season's Big Push became history as most ducks moved on. Crouched along this rocky shoreline today, only a few stragglers, including the odd canvasback, still arrive from the north.

Soon January blizzards will rage across familiar landscapes. No matter. I'll still have plenty of pleasant autumn memories to keep me warm. The thing I'll remember most about this season is the rare thrill of decoying canvasbacks and the timeless expression on a young hunter's face when he finally met the undisputed King of Ducks. 🦆

**OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM RIGHT CORNER:** Wildlife biologist Bill Ohde bands a drake canvasback on the Upper Mississippi River. The can's primary breeding grounds are in prairie Manitoba. Each year, as the birds move southward during fall migration, up to 80 percent of the entire population will stage in Iowa along the Upper Mississippi. Band recoveries reveal that upon leaving Iowa, the birds take one of two routes. One path leads to coastal wetlands in the Gulf of Mexico. The majority of canvasbacks, however, head east from Iowa toward the famed habitats of the Atlantic seaboard's Chesapeake Bay.

The reason so many canvasbacks are attracted to Iowa is the abundance of wild celery along the Mississippi. But scientists worry that concentrating up to 300,000 of the birds into one spot could spell trouble. Should an oil or chemical spill occur near the feeding grounds, it could not only mean the loss of thousands of birds, but result in the destruction of hundreds of acres of forage as well. During the 1960s, a spill killed 10,000 waterfowl.



“We offer no apology for thus elevating the lordly canvasback to a classical role, for among duck-minded people he has long been the ‘gold standard’ against which all lesser fry are weighed and measured.” —Aldo Leopold, (1887-1948) Iowa-born conservationist and author of the classic, *A Sand County Almanac*. Leopold was born, raised and now buried in Burlington.

### CANVASBACK DUCKS PROVIDE GOLD STANDARD FOR EARLY AMERICAN HUNTING

**SWIFT OF WING AND UNIQUE IN PROFILE**, canvasback ducks are prized beyond measure.

Hunting with handmade bows and flint-tipped arrows, American Indians first realized the species’ potential. Prehistoric hunters fashioned life-sized, realistic decoys from tule or cattail stalks colored with natural pigments or covered with canvasback skins.

Tender roots and shoots of aquatic wild celery are the canvasback’s favorite food. Pioneers were quick to discover the flavorful flesh surpassed other wild fare. As civilization spread along the Eastern seaboard, the species became the foundation for an infamous era of commercial gunning. Perhaps nowhere on Earth was the shameful extravagance of market hunting carried to greater extremes than along the mighty Chesapeake Bay. For a few decades, these vast waters became the backdrop for the greatest duck hunt the world has ever known. Unfathomable numbers of migrating canvasbacks arrived from the north each winter to feed on 100-mile-square beds of wild celery.

Here, among the shallows of the famed Susquehanna Flats, professional hunters plied their trade with deadly precision. When the morning’s shoot began, disturbed flocks resembled undulating plumes of smoke as they rose and fell across the Chesapeake. On a good day, a single gunner would bag more wild ducks than modern hunters take in a lifetime.

At Boston, Philadelphia or Washington markets, prime celery-fed ‘cans fetched twice the price of lesser fowl. Small wonder why professional hunters soon called canvasbacks *The King of Ducks*.

The impressive flocks captured the attention of pleasure hunters, too. Listed among the canvasback’s ardent admirers were presidents Ulysses S. Grant, Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland.

As settlers moved into Iowa, they quickly capitalized on the territory’s rich waterfowl resources, including abundant canvasback ducks. Although there were no seasons or limits, wetlands were abundant and pioneers simply hunted for food. As post Civil War railways surged west across prairies, for the first time, market hunting in Iowa became practical.

Although ducks were sold at markets in Iowa’s larger population centers, such as the Quad Cities, most were shipped to Chicago or New York. The slaughter was appalling.

According to historian Jack Musgrove, market gunners near Spirit Lake bagged 2,000 to 3,000 ducks per hunter per year. Other “professional” market hunters tallied averages of 100 or more per day. At Clear Lake, migrating ducks were shot as they flew over the lake’s west side Sand Bar peninsula and hauled by horse and wagon to Clear Lake for sale in local markets, or railed to Chicago. Green-winged teal, mallard and canvasbacks were regular seasonal menu items at Main Street’s Lake Hotel.

In Iowa, as elsewhere, the King of Ducks reigned king of the market. While fresh mallards sold for \$7 a dozen, canvasbacks brought \$15.

Although the market gunning carnage seems excessive and inexcusable, in early America, our vast treasure of natural resources was considered limitless. As the folly of this logic became evident, market gunners were legislated from existence.

While early commercial hunters exacted a heavy toll on canvasback populations, their combined impact was minuscule compared to the havoc wrought by drainage of prairie nesting grounds and degradation of wintering areas.

**WORTH A READ:** *A complete history of Iowa market hunting can be found in Jim Dinsmore’s **A Country So Full Of Game**, available from the University of Iowa Press. 261 pp, 19 photos, 28 drawings, 13 maps, \$17.95 paperback. Order at 800-621-2736.*



