

The Icy Winds of Death

The
Armistice Day
Blizzard

November 11, 1940

A day the winds descended,
the heavens rained ducks,
and hunters died.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LOWELL WASHBURN



C

all it a Weather Bomb, Perfect Storm, whatever. By any name, it was the recipe for disaster. Picture this: a powerful weather system swept over the Rocky Mountains, charging eastward. Meanwhile, a Canadian cold air mass was sliding down from the north, while warm moist air pulled up from the south. Any way you looked at it, the developing atmospheric brew spelled trouble.

But no one was looking. The year was 1940. Primitive by contemporary standards, weather forecasting was something many folks put little stock in. According to National Weather Service data, no one was even in the building at Chicago's Midwest Weather Headquarters during the late night hours of Nov. 10.

As the massive system organized during the wee hours of the following morning, its combined energy triggered a storm of fury. Barometric pressures plunged to among the lowest recorded in Iowa, reaching a then record low for November. By then, the storm began to cut its thousand-mile-wide path of death and destruction. Within 24 hours, the system would rank among the most infamous and disastrous blizzards in U.S. history.

THESE ARE THE TALES OF THOSE WHO WERE THERE . . .

For Midwestern duck hunters, the fall of 1940 was warm and uneventful. As the waterfowl doldrums continued into the second week of November, hunters grew increasingly impatient. But the unseasonable weather could not hold out forever, they reasoned.

Cocking an eye to the north, waterfowlers watched, waited and hoped. Sooner or later, the inevitable cold fronts would arrive. Ducks would move south. For those willing to stick to their marshes, the annual Big Push



would be a sweet dream.

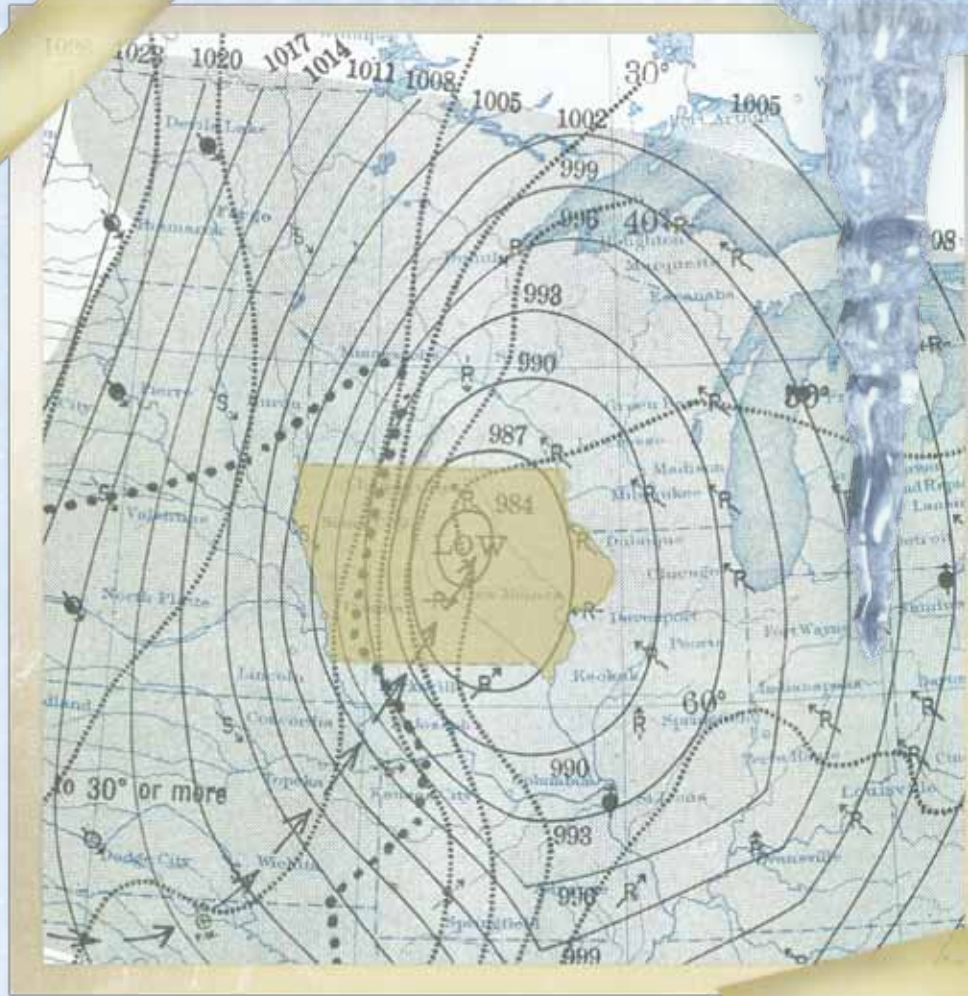
On Nov. 11, 1940, sportsmen got their wish. The weather changed dramatically; and with that change came the most infamous duck hunt in American history.

But the day was not what gunners had anticipated. Instead of realizing their sweet dream, hundreds of waterfowlers were suddenly plunged into a horrific, Stephen King-grade nightmare. Although nearly 70 years have passed, the storm stories are still too terrible for some survivors to recount.

Known now as the Armistice Day Snowstorm, the event remains among the deadliest of blizzards to cut its way through the Heartland. By the time it concluded, the storm dropped more than 2 feet of snow, buried vehicles and roadways beneath 20-foot drifts, killed thousands of Iowa cattle, and destroyed incalculable amounts of poultry—including more than a million Thanksgiving turkeys. It gave a yet unrecovered blow to Iowa's apple industry.

All told, the storm claimed 160 lives across the Midwest. Hundreds more suffered severe frostbite or frozen limbs. On Lake Michigan, three commercial

OPPOSITE PAGE: Mason City *Globe-Gazette* news photo from 1981 shows game warden, Jack Meggers, with orphaned white-tail fawn. **RIGHT:** A national weather bureau meteorological map of the Armistice Day Blizzard of 1940. Bureau documents from the era point out that had the storm occurred in January, it would have been passed off as just another blizzard. The outstanding feature of the storm was the warm weather beforehand. A larger November storm, also on the eleventh, occurred in 1911 with greater severity, wider temperature drops and a larger path of destruction.



freighters and more than 60 sailors were lost. Along the Mississippi River in Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota, hundreds of duck hunters lost boats, guns and gear as 15-foot swells near Dubuque and 70 to 80 mile per hour winds swept down channels and across marshy backwaters.

Due to abnormally warm weather and fair skies, most hunters took to the field carrying little more than a light jacket. But as the fronts arrived, the scene changed. Temperatures plummeted from near 60 degrees to below freezing, and then into the single digits—all within hours.

What began as a holiday duck hunt quickly became the storm of the century. Panic reigned on the Mississippi that day as boats, equipment human lives were lost. Stranded atop mud bars and islands, scores of hunters were forced to endure the most horribly excruciating night of their lives. Huddled beneath overturned boats or beside makeshift piles of driftwood, survivors used cigarette papers to ignite meager fires that would save their lives.

Wet and afraid, dozens more perished during the black

night. At Winona, Minn., the city bus barn became a temporary morgue as, one by one, the bodies of frozen hunters were retrieved. Since many duck hunters were from out of town, identification was delayed until bodies thawed and pockets could be searched.

On an island near Harpers Ferry, 16-year-old Jack Meggers was one hunter who fought for his life. A retired Iowa game warden currently living in Mason City, Meggers has spent a lifetime in the out-of-doors. At 84, Jack remains a gifted storyteller with a knack for detail. His best loved tales recount outdoor adventure in strong winds, rough water and portray the vanished spectacle of storm-tossed wildfowl in a bygone era.

But mention the words Armistice Day Snowstorm, and Megger's demeanor immediately takes a quieter, reverent, tone. You can see it in his face as the mind's eye turns back to one of the most incredible events in American weather history.

"It was Armistice Day, now called Veteran's Day, and we were out of school," Meggers begins.

“Me, my dad, and two brothers headed out to an island at Harpers Ferry. It was warm for that late in the fall and we were dressed light. One of the things I remember most is that, just before the storm hit, the sky turned all orange. It’s hard to explain, but I remember thinking that it was really strange.”

The winds came suddenly, recalls Meggers. Fierce and chilling, the initial blast was a spearhead for the advancing storm.

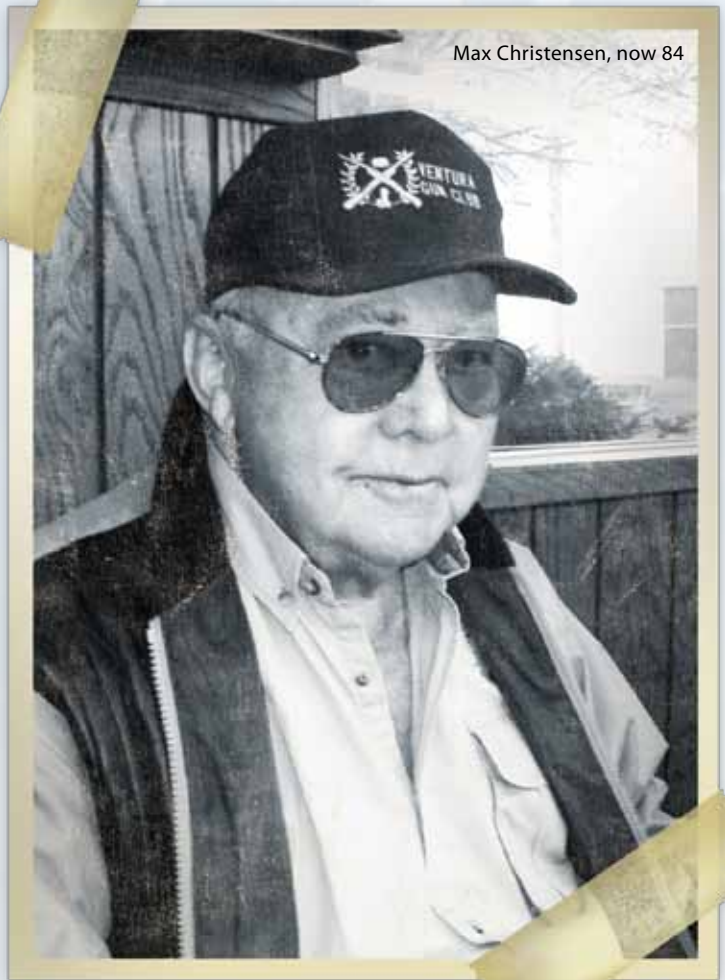
And then the ducks arrived. Not just a flock here or a flock there, but rather hundreds, then thousands, then tens of thousands. It was a scene seldom witnessed, and in sheer magnitude, never to repeat.

“We’d never seen anything like it,” says Meggers. “When the ducks arrived, they came in unending waves and they came in all species.”

“Those ducks were all flying about this high off the water,” he says, motioning to his waist. “And they were all doing about 90 miles an hour with that wind.”

The crew lost no time taking advantage of the astonishing flight. Although waterfowl continued to pour down in unending supply, connecting with the wind-driven birds presented a major challenge, recalls Meggers. The boys concentrated so hard on the task, that none seemed to notice as the winds increased.

“All of a sudden, dad said, ‘Grab the decoys—we’re getting out of here.’ But we were throwing an awful lot of ammunition into the air, and none of us wanted to quit. The sky was just full of ducks,” says Meggers. “Finally dad said, ‘Grab the decoys *now* or we’re leaving without them.’ That’s when we began to see how bad it was getting.”



Max Christensen, now 84

Meggers’ dad made a good call. In addition to raging winds and unfathomable legions of ducks, the storm began to deliver pelting rain, which quickly turned to sleet, then heavy snow. Visibility dropped to near zero as hunters all up and down the Great River struggled—many unsuccessfully—to return to shore.

“It was really rough. By the time we finally made it to the shoreline, you couldn’t even see the shoreline,” Meggers recalls. “By then, the combination of snow and wind was just incredible. Our group made it back. But not everyone did.”

An island away from where the Meggers party hunted, a father and two sons were equally mesmerized by the arriving swarms of waterfowl. Lured into staying beyond the point of no return, their shallow draft duck boat proved no match for the wind and waves. As visibility and daylight faded, the hunters found themselves stranded.

“The oldest son was a college athlete,” Meggers says. “When things started getting tough he told his younger brother to jump to stay warm,” as a rain soaking and hours of exposure to wind and snow led to hypothermia. “Every time the younger kid quit jumping, his brother

would punch him. The dad and older brother died on that island. The younger brother just kept on jumping through the night. They rescued him the next day. His legs were frozen hard as wood below both knees and he lost them. He was the sole survivor of his group and he credited his brother with saving his life. The kid said, 'I knew my brother and dad were dead—but I just kept on jumping. My older brother told me to keep jumping so I knew it must be important.'

"That kid was 16, same as me," says Meggers. "I'll never forget what happened that day on the river."

A short distance downstream, four more hunters died during the night on an island near Marquette. In a duck blind at Guttenburg, Earl Butler and Wayne Reynolds narrowly escaped death as they spent the night huddled around a small fire. At Burlington, at least three more hunters perished from exposure or drowning. Unable to stand against wind and waves, several permanent duck blinds were uprooted and blown downstream.

The wrath of the Armistice Day Snowstorm was not limited to the Mississippi River. The early morning hours

of November 11, 1940, found Orville Kinsel heading out to hunt ducks on Wright County's Elm Lake, near Clarion, where he owned a duck shack. His story, recounted in the *Hampton Chronicle* by Ray Baltus, is no less intriguing than of those who hunted larger waters.

"I got up in the morning and it wasn't too bad," recalled Kinsel. "I looked to the west and the sky was green. I started out and that lake was just full of ducks—just swarming with them."

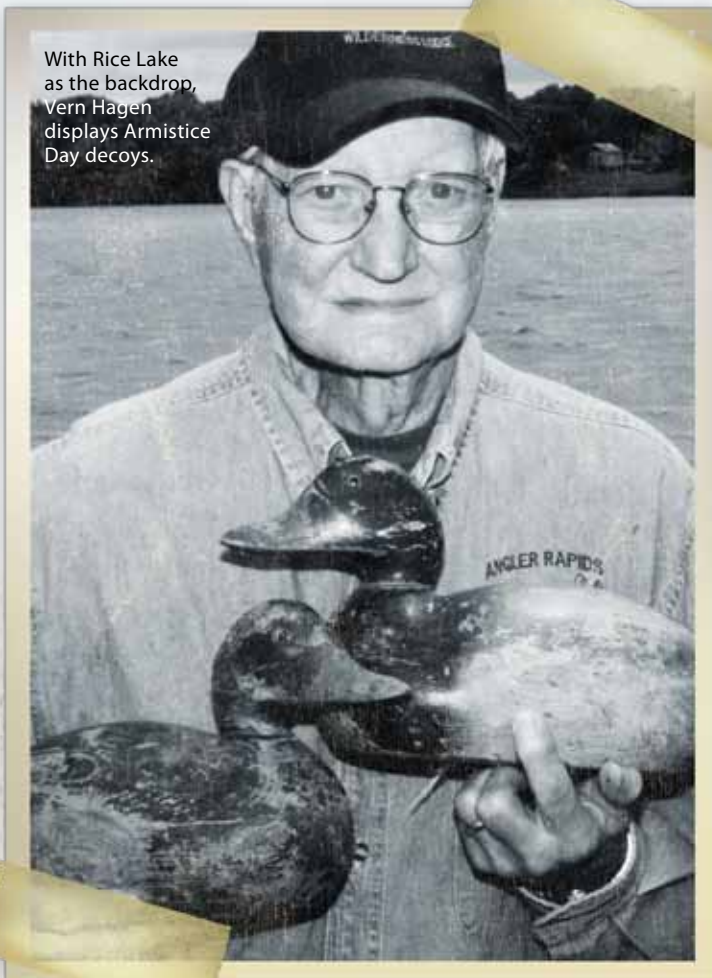
As the winds increased, things began to get wild. With rush beds already flattened by rising winds, lead anchor weights were no longer able to hold his decoys in place. A final clue that it was time to quit occurred as muskrat houses blew off the marsh. Kinsel returned to his shack carrying a coat load of mallards.

"By then it was snowing," he noted. "The ducks couldn't see anything. They were blind. It came so fast. By that time the wind was so strong I could barely walk in it."

For as long as he can remember, Cerro Gordo County's Max Christensen has been an avid waterfowler. Today, it seems somewhat ironic that Christensen nearly missed out on history's greatest duck hunt.

"I still remember nearly every detail from that day," Christensen begins. "I was a high school senior when the November 11 snowstorm arrived in Ventura. I lived on a farm and we hadn't even had a frost yet. The livestock was still in the fields and all the poultry was still outside."

"I got on the bus at eight o'clock, wearing just a light jacket. The bus driver was Max Millhouse, and I always sat right behind him because he liked to talk about hunting. As we got closer to Ventura, every cornfield had little >



With Rice Lake as the backdrop, Vern Hagen displays Armistice Day decoys.

VERN HAGEN was just 14 when the famous Armistice Day Blizzard swept across Winnebago County's Rice Lake.

"We lived at Joice and I spent the first part of the day in school," recalls Hagen. "The storm hit, and I spent the worst part of it at home. Our family always hunted and fished, but I wasn't allowed to go out that day."

"I was pretty young, and all I remember is that it was a terrible day," Hagen continues. "There were a lot of floating bogs on Rice Lake then. Later, while exploring the lake in a boat, we found six decoys sitting between the bogs. They were all from the same rig. The decoys had either blown away in the snowstorm or just been left there when hunters headed for shore."

In spite of more than a year's research, the factory-made Mason redheads are the only documented surviving relics of the Armistice Day blizzard that the writer was able to document. Complete with original paint and glass eyes, the wooden blocks sold new for around \$7 per dozen. Today, the same decoys may fetch hundreds of dollars apiece. Because of their unique historic value, Hagen's may be worth even more.

cyclones of feeding ducks. The closer we got to the lake, the more we saw. There were so many ducks that it was almost eerie.

“By the time we arrived at Ventura, I already decided to head back home. There were just too many ducks in the air to be in school. Max decided to go with me.

“When I got back home, the storm was coming up fast and my folks were trying to get the chickens inside. We helped, and so instead of being in trouble for skipping school, I was a hero.

“With that finished, we went to a place I called ‘My Slough.’ It was a 30-acre marsh that might have up to 500 muskrat houses on it—a perfect place for ducks,” says Christensen. “It was already snowing when we got there, and at first we didn’t see anything on the slough. I thought, ‘Oh no, the ducks left.’ Then we saw something move, and suddenly realized what was happening. That slough was completely covered in ducks—so many that you couldn’t see any water or make out individual birds. We started shooting then, and it was something. Every duck on that slough was a mallard. We didn’t see anything else. You can’t even imagine what it was like.”

The storm picked up and Max announced he would head back while he still could. “I went to a different marsh closer to home and kept hunting. I don’t think it would have mattered where you went that day, every place was full of ducks. They were everywhere.

“The snow finally got so bad that I had to take my ducks and leave. The walk home was a little over a mile,” says Christensen. “The wind was around 40 miles per hour and the snow was blowing straight sideways. A school bus came down the road, but it couldn’t make it in the snow and had to turn back. Before leaving, it dropped off 17 school kids at our house. They had to stay the night.”

When Christensen entered the farmstead, he learned that a Garner dentist, Doc Hayes had parked in the yard and walked to a nearby marsh. Since he hadn’t returned, the hunter was feared lost.

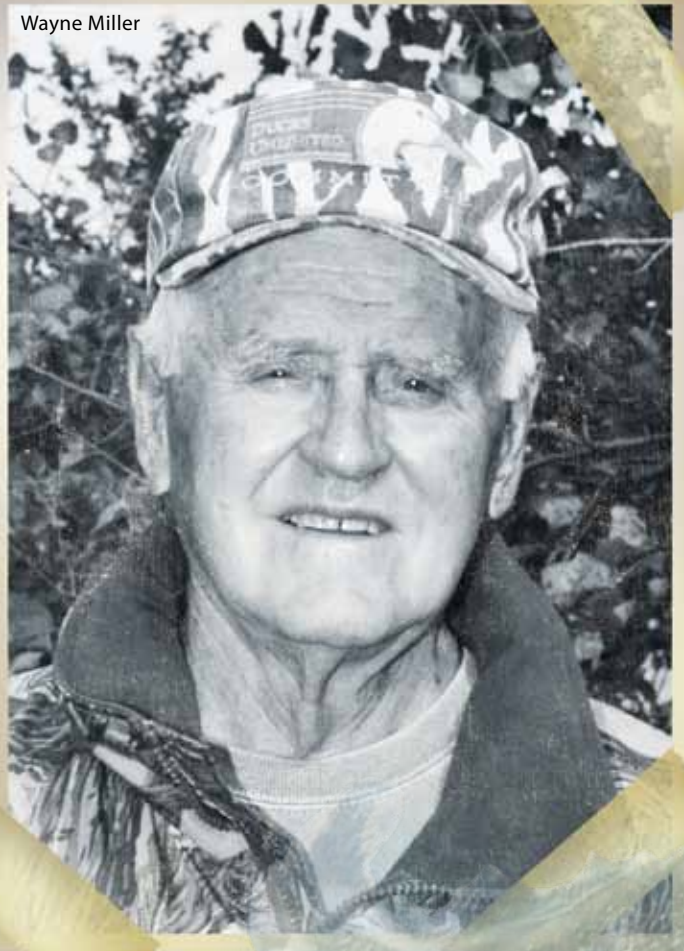
“I knew I had to try and find him,” relates Christensen. “I was young and didn’t think of the danger. I had a good idea of where he would have been hunting and started up a fenceline that led from the buildings. I don’t think I could see more than 15 feet in front of me, that’s how bad it was.

“I found Doc Hayes on that fenceline. He was just standing there, stuck in a drift. He couldn’t move. When I got up to him, he just started crying. ‘I thought I was dead,’ he said to me. I took his gun and a big bunch of ducks and we started back. I told him to step in my tracks. I broke the trail, and our tracks would disappear almost instantly.

“When we got home, my dad and all those school kids were already in the basement picking my ducks. I don’t know how many mallards were down there, but it was a lot. It was really something. We still had fresh tomatoes from the garden, all those ducks, and snow drifts piling up outside,” says Christensen.

The next day they shoveled out Doc’s Cadillac, which

Wayne Miller



was buried in the yard. “When we reached the road, something moved in the snow. I had shoveled out a live coot. That bird had lit on the road and become buried in a drift. The coot was just fine and flew away.”

Although Armistice Day, 1940 remains best known for its memorable, often tragic, duck hunts—not all wildlife accounts focus on waterfowl.

Wayne Miller, a 16-year-old at the time, rode out the storm’s fury on the family farm located in northwest Iowa’s Emmet County, near Ringsted. What he remembers most are the pheasants.

“The day started out warm, then suddenly turned cold and began to snow. Our farm had a good thick grove. Pheasants were soon piling into that cover and they even sought shelter in the straw piles—anything to get out of that weather.

“When the storm was over there were big drifts and lots of dead pheasants. People gathered up a lot of those birds and brought them over to our farm,” says Miller.

“We stacked them in the hay mow above the barn. It was warmer up there and the pheasants began to thaw out. Anyway, a bunch of them came back to life. When we went back up there, they were flying all over the place. We opened the big [hay loft] door and released around fifty of them. It was quite a sight when all those pheasants flew out of the barn.

“It was an incredible storm and everyone thought the pheasants would be wiped out. But there was lots and lots of habitat back then and the pheasants came back in a hurry.”

While hardships are etched in the survivor’s minds forever, severe storms—many stronger than the Armistice Day Blizzard—continue to pummel the land. But modern weather forecasting and rapid communication now prevent much of the human catastrophes. And for that, survivors and all outdoor lovers are thankful. 🐓

Winter-killed rooster pheasant.
Losses ran high during the
Armistice Day Blizzard of 1940.

