



I Now Believe in Snake Boots

By Steven Bridges

The first day of Mills County dove hunting is seldom a day I bag my limit of doves. Most years, the big waves of northern doves have not yet migrated into Mills County. There are always a few local birds around, but the action is usually pretty slow.

It is a good time to get my hunting gear out and dusted off. If I know the hunting is going to be really slow, I take clay pigeons and a thrower along on the hunt. That way, I know I'll get some shooting one way or another.

I also make sure I have my fishing rod and tackle box ready for the hunt. As a last resort, I can always throw a line in the water. The weather sometimes feels more like fishing weather than hunting anyway.

I had quite a bit of excitement on opening day a few years ago, and it had little to do with doves, clays or fishing.

I had been hunting all afternoon in the shade of a big oak tree next to a stock tank on the XTC Ranch located in northeast Mills County near the community of Caradan. The hunting was normal for opening day. . . slow. I had a few birds in my bag, but nothing to brag about.

I was dozing in the shade when I heard the wee-wee-wee of a dove landing in the tree above me. I looked up and the bird took off straight away from me. Even for a rusty bird hunter like me, it was an easy shot for the top barrel of my little Browning over/under 20 gauge shotgun.

The bird tumbled about twenty yards from me in the tall grass. Never taking my eyes off the spot where the bird went down, I got up and walked directly to the downed dove. I did not want to take a chance of losing the bird in the tall grass.

The dove was right where I had marked it. So, patting myself on the back, I picked the bird up, put it in my game bag and began walking back



Steve Bridges and Dr. Tom Cody Graves measure the rattlesnake.

to my seat. I stopped ten feet short of my chair as something didn't look right in the grass.

My eyes bulged as I looked down to see the biggest rattlesnake I had ever laid eyes on directly in my path. I said !@#\$\$%^&* and jumped what seemed 10 feet in the air. As I landed, I pulled the trigger on the lower barrel of my 20 gauge.

Having already shot the top barrel, I only had the bottom barrel of my 20 gauge left loaded. Lucky for me, my aim was true. The head of the big rattler exploded before my eyes.

It all happened so fast, I didn't even have time to get too scared until after I had already dispatched the snake. It took me a few moments to calm down and take in the size of the big reptile. The snake was in big "S" curls that seemed to intertwine and go on and on. In the middle, he was as big around as my forearm. His head would have been as big as a snuff can if it had still been there.

Then, I remembered my path to retrieve that last dove. My path went right over where the snake had been.

I walked directly out and back, only taking maybe 30 seconds for the round trip. The snake never rattled a warning.

How did I not step on the snake on the way out? Only God knows. I just hope God put his hands over his ears when I yelled !@#\$\$%^&* in surprise at the snake.

HOW BIG WAS IT?

For the record, the snake was 57 inches long and was over nine inches around in the middle.

NOTE: Tall, leather hunting boots provide much better protection against snakes and cactus than tennis shoes. Tall snake-proof boots are even better. Better safe than bitten!

Prime time for doves is also prime time for snakes. After sunrise, they will most often be found in the shade of rocks or near the base of vegetation. Look before reaching under bushes or between rocks for downed birds.

