

FELSHER: Ended with empty bag but lots of memories

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down to earth!

Upon opening my eyes, I stared into the face of a large venomous cottonmouth snake coiled not more than a foot away from my face. Positive the “big moment” had arrived, I closed my eyes tightly and braced for the inevitable strike.

“Lord, make a place for me. I’m coming soon,” I prayed, asking forgiveness for all sins real and imagined including some I hadn’t even thought of committing yet.

After what felt like years, I slightly cracked open one eye. Yes, the enormous coiled black snake, about a 25-footer I estimated from that position, still poised ready to strike my nose. Mustering some courage, I peeked with both eyes and noticed something odd. The snake didn’t move. Curious, I rose and poked it with a stick. Nothing happened. I don’t know what caused the 4-foot-long snake’s death. Perhaps, it suffered a massive heart attack as I nearly fell on top

of it, but better it than me!

Getting back to business, I placed the decoys in the pond, crouched in native vegetation and waited for swarms of teal to come into range. I waited and waited. Multitudes of diverse birds flew overhead, but no teal.

As I waited, six otters merrily swam into the pond and played among the decoys. Plastic birds did not impress them as they snatched fat crabs from the bottom in this brackish delta marsh. Floating on their backs, they held each crab with their front hand-like paws and ate it as if eating a sandwich.

Aware of my presence, they took turns watching me. One would approach within a few feet to observe me squatting in the weeds

while the others concentrated on catching dinner. Then, another one relieved the sentry at the observation post as they took turns so each one could eat. For a long time, we just studied each other until they ate their fill of crabs or simply grew bored staring at a soggy, muddy, camouflaged teen-ager trying to sit still in marsh grass while being slowly devoured alive by mosquitoes. As quickly as they had arrived, they disappeared.

About an hour before dark, a pair of mottled ducks landed in the decoys. Not legal during the September season, I simply watched them for a while. Eventually, a small flock of teal darted over the pond in waning daylight. I splashed one and let it float on the surface for

the final minutes of shooting hours. I’d pick it up on the way out.

After floating several minutes, the dead duck disappeared in a huge surface eruption as if a giant bass annihilated a topwater lure. In a flash, the teal vanished, swallowed whole by an alligator, perhaps my earlier reptilian nemesis seeking its revenge.

After shooting hours ended, I paddled back looking into the spectacular cosmic kaleidoscope as another early autumn day ended. Dying sunlight captured the radiant colors of a strikingly handsome drake wood duck flashing low over me as I paddled.

I returned home with an empty game bag, but full of lifelong memories of a day that would never return. Similar days may occur, perhaps even better ones, but never another one just like this one. An old proverb says that a man can never put his hand in a river twice in the same spot. Time, place and conditions change and never exactly repeat.

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