Nothing escaped “the winds of hell” and the deadly, suffocating snows that swept across the Upper Midwest on that fateful day in 1940.

by Tom Davis

There was a time, too, when there were no weather satellites, no telemetry to provide data that could be plugged into sophisticated formulas and fed into supercomputers for timely forecasts. Indeed, that the weather could be predicted with any degree of accuracy then – November, 1940, to be precise – seems almost miraculous, meteorology in those days being one part science and two parts the divination of omens, signs and portents. Nothing brings this into starker relief than the fact that, a little over a year later, what appeared on radar to be a swarm of aircraft approaching the Hawaiian Islands was dismissed as some sort of malfunction by military officers who refused to trust this newfangled and unproven technology.

Of course, some things do not change with the passage of
time, and one of these constants is the love of duck hunters for the kind of wet, raw, blustery, thoroughly miserable days that keep normal people indoors with the fireplace crackling and the teakettle whistling on the stove. And just as absence makes the heart grow fonder, the longer the duck hunter is made to wait for such a day, the hotter burns his pent-up desire to escape to the sloughs and bays and marshes, and there – decoys artfully set, blind brushed and grassed, dog expectant and quivering, call poised to be pressed to lips – scan the lowering skies for birds that ride the wind.

The fall of 1940 had been a mild one in the Upper Midwest, an extended Indian Summer of warm temperatures and little rainfall. In other words, the duck hunting had been disappointing. Oh, there had been the usual “local” birds early in the season – teal, widgeon, shoveler, the odd mallard – but without any heavy weather to set the migration in motion, the great flocks of northern ducks were still in the prairie provinces of Canada, fattening up for the long flight south. Hunters throughout the region, from the Dakotas across to Wisconsin, from Minnesota down to southern Illinois, were on pins and needles, knowing that the change in the weather they so dearly wanted was overdue, that it could happen any day.

Finally, on Sunday, November 10, came a forecast that held promise. The outlook was for clouds, snow flurries and colder temperatures. Wildfowlers were ecstatic, and what made this good news even better was that Monday, November 11, was Armistice Day – the predecessor to Veterans Day and, for many people, a holiday. Although as holidays go it was a fairly somber one: The grinding effects of the Depression still lingered in the U.S., and in Europe, where just twenty-two years earlier the eponymous armistice had been signed, war raged once again.

Still, it’s not much of a leap to suppose that the typical waterfowler of the Upper Midwest, upon hearing the forecast on the radio or reading it in the local newspaper, felt blessed – even jubilant. Other concerns were pushed aside; nothing mattered now but getting ready for
tomorrow’s hunt. Decoys, shell boxes, shotguns and calls were checked and re-checked; ditto for boats, motors, gas tanks and oars. Clothes were carefully laid out; sandwiches were made, wrapped in wax paper and refrigerated; thermos bottles were placed next to coffee percolators. The dog was given an extra bait of food, because in a few hours he was going to be one very busy retriever and would need all the energy and stamina he could muster.

The phone lines hummed as hunting partner called hunting partner, their voices crackling with excitement. They knew, with as much certainty as they knew anything, the ducks would be flying, and they aimed to be smack dab in the middle of them.

They got more than they bargained for.

In his magisterial Where The Sky Began: Land of the Tallgrass Prairie, John Madson describes the genesis of a midwestern blizzard as a “tempestuous marriage” of cold, dry, polar air sweeping down from Canada and warm, moist, subtropical air welling up from the Gulf of Mexico. “Since its primary component is wind,” Madson writes, “the classic blizzard is essentially a phenomenon of the open lands—particularly the plains and prairies, where the topography offers little resistance to moving air and the great storms can run almost unimpeded. There may be more snow in northern and eastern forest regions, and certainly as much cold. The difference between winter storms there and the classic prairie blizzard lies in the intensity of unbridled wind that plunges the chill factor to deadly lows, drives a blinding smother of snow during the actual storm, and continues as ground blizzards and white-outs long after snow has stopped falling. Depending on snowfall and wind, the storm may leave drifts three times as tall as a man and is usually followed by calm, silver-blue days of burning cold.”

That, in a nutshell, describes the blizzard that screamed across the Upper Midwest on Monday, November 11, 1940, devastating everything it touched along the way. The winds blasted at a constant forty- to fifty-miles per hour, with gusts in excess of eighty. Over sixteen inches of snow fell in the Twin Cities, while more than twenty-six inches was recorded a few miles up the Mississippi River near St. Cloud. In LaCrosse, downstream on the Wisconsin side of the Mississippi, the barometric pressure sank to an all-time low. The temperature dropped thirty degrees—from above freezing to single digits—in two hours, and continued to plummet from there. Wind-chills were virtually off the charts.

Nothing escaped the storm’s furious, relentless, indiscriminate wrath. Livestock perished by the hundreds of thousands. So many turkeys died in parts of Minnesota and Iowa that after the storm, farmers were selling whole “fresh frozen” birds for twenty-five cents apiece. The losses to wildlife, especially pheasants, were spectacular. Communications and power were disrupted across thousands of square miles, and transportation was brought to an absolute standstill. Every town and village close to a main road became a refuge as stranded travelers sought shelter from the storm. Countless people opened their homes to complete strangers, providing whatever they could offer in the way of board and room.

But for some there was no shelter, no refuge. Motorists stuck in snowdrifts on remote stretches of road were buried alive in their cars, their frozen bodies not exhumed for days. On Lake Michigan, the freighter William B. Davock was sheared in two by monstrous waves.
The ferocity of the storm was almost beyond human reckoning. There are accounts of farmers who, after checking on their livestock, literally could not find their way from the barn to the farmhouse. Disoriented, pummeled by the wind, with no visible landmarks to guide them and no sense of east, west, north or south, they wandered blindly through a roaring white hell. The lucky ones bumped into something recognizable and groped their way to safety. The unlucky ones didn’t.

Nearly everyone who survived the storm remarked on how incredibly difficult it was just to breathe. The air was so laden with moisture that it seemed as thick as syrup. And even when you were able to draw a deep breath, the cold seared your lungs like a red-hot blade.

This is what thousands of duck hunters, with their wooden skiffs and their cranky outboards and their canvas coats, found themselves caught in. Most of the world knows the midwestern blizzard of November 11, 1940 as the Armistice Day Storm. To sportsmen, it’s simply the day the duck hunters died.

No one really knows how many people lost their lives as a direct result of the Armistice Day Storm. Although Time put the death toll at 159, the actual figure was probably closer to 200 – and about half them were duck hunters. According to John Madson, eighty-five duck hunters perished in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois alone. As he wrote in Where The Sky Began, “Caught by the storm with little warning, they drowned as they tried to reach land, or stayed in their duck blinds as waves tore them apart, or simply died of exposure that night on the river islands out of reach of help...”

If a storm causing as much destruction and loss of life occurred today, someone like Sebastian Junger or Jon Krakauer would write a best-selling book about it. But while it certainly made headlines – a spread in Life was entitled “Midwest Tempest Strews Death By Land And Lake” – America was preoccupied with other matters. After the dead were buried, the damage was cleared and the bereaved had ceased to mourn, life resumed more-or-less as usual. And the weather for the remainder of the winter of 1940-41 was largely unremarkable.

But no one who was there ever forgot it. Nor did their memories, like photos left too long in a shop window, pale with the passage of time. It was the persistence of these memories that, forty-five years after the event, prompted a Minnesota man named William Hull to track down and interview over 500 people who’d lived through the Armistice Day Storm. He then selected 167 of these accounts and assembled them into a book called, fittingly, All Hell Broke Loose.

Now in its eighteenth printing, it’s replete with tales not only of close calls and narrow escapes, but of countless acts of charity, generosity, selflessness and heroism. (There are a number of humorous, Keillor-esque tales as well, such as the one entitled “Three Hours Digging Path to Outhouse.”) Not a few of these stories were told by duck hunters. While the specifics may differ slightly – some recalled seemingly endless flocks of divers like redheads, bluebills and canvasbacks, while others remembered wave upon wave of mallards – they all agree that they had never seen the sky so filled with ducks. They agree, too, that there was nothing in the weather that morning to presage what was coming, that the storm was upon them almost before they knew what was happening, and that it was only by the grace of God that they survived when so many others did not.

Every sportsman who was there has his own wrinkle to add to...
The first thing renowned sporting artist David Hagerbaum remembers about the Armistice Day Storm is that he and his hunting partner, Jerry Gastineau, ran out of shells as wave upon wave of ducks pitched into their decoys. The second thing he remembers is that they got even more ducks on the day after the storm – and they did it without firing a shot. Instead, by combing the banks of the Mississippi River, they found dozens of mallards that had fallen to other hunters, gone unretrieved in the gale-force winds, and eventually drifted into the shoreline willows.

On Armistice Day itself, Hagerbaum, then nineteen, and Gastineau set up on Goose Island, in the Lock 21 area of the Mississippi between Quincy, Illinois, and Hannibal, Missouri. They hunted out of a sixteen-foot jonboat fashioned of one-inch cypress planks, a boat Haberbaum recalls “wiggled like a snake” if you stood at one end of it and flexed your legs.

“It was warm, in the sixties, when we started,” relates Hagerbaum. “I was wearing cotton long underwear, canvas pants and a canvas coat. By the time we quit, it was well below freezing – ice was forming on the boat – and the winds were horrendous. We had a shanty at the mouth of Mill Creek, and we had to cross about a 300-yard chute of river to get there. It was tough going; the waves were hitting us abeam, and because they were running with the current, it was a real struggle to keep from being swept downstream. Jerry did most of the rowing because I had my hands full bailing. When we finally got across, we ducked into the shanty and built a fire. Then, when we’d warmed up, we set out on foot along the levee. It was a two-mile walk home, and our parents were frantic by the time we got back.

“The ducks – they were all mallards – would drop in, take a drink, and then immediately crawl up on a sandbar to rest. They were wiped out from fighting the wind; in fact, we kind of felt bad about shooting them.

“All in all, the Armistice Day Storm was a great experience for me. I’m glad it happened when I was young and in good physical shape, though. If I had to go through it again at the age I am now, I’m not sure I could handle it.”

Musing on whether a catastrophe of the dimensions of the Armistice Day Storm could happen again, Hagerbaum concedes that it’s unlikely given the vast improvements in gear, clothing, communications and weather prediction that have been made during the past sixty years. But he notes that there’s at least one respect in which the duck hunter of 1940 had the edge over his modern counterpart: “Wooden decoys burn a lot better than plastic ones do.”
On Wednesday, November 13, it was filed from Winona, Minnesota, a Mississippi River town about ninety miles downstream from the Twin Cities. The river there is a sprawling, two-mile-wide wilderness of islands, oxbows and backwater sloughs, and Winona was the epicenter of the disaster: At least twenty duck hunters died within fifty miles of the city.

“The winds of hell were loose on the Mississippi Armistice day and night,” wrote MacQuarrie.

“They came across the prairie, from the south and west, a mighty, freezing force. They charged down from the high river bluffs to the placid stream below and reached with deathly fingers for the life that beat beneath the canvas jackets of hundreds of duck hunters...”

“The wind did it, the furious wind that pierced any clothing, that locked outboard engines in sheets of ice, that froze on faces and hands and clothing, so that survivors crackled when they got to safety and said their prayers.

“Mother Nature caught hundreds of duck hunters on the Armistice holiday. She lured them out to the marshes with her fine, whooping wind, and when she got them there she froze them like muskrats in traps. She promised ducks in her fine, whooping wind, and when she got them there she turned them into boilerplate ice. The men beat on one another to try to keep warm, but it was a losing battle. At about two a.m., the friend uttered one last moan and died in Gerald’s arms. Gerald’s brother held out until eleven in the morning, but after twenty-three hours of exposure he, too, succumbed.

Then, shortly after noon, a small plane flew over. Gerald waved, and the pilot signaled that help was on the way. Rescuers in the government tugboat Throckmorton arrived at 2:30 – half-an-hour too late to save Gerald’s father. They found the boy crouched against a stump, holding his dog for warmth, fighting to remain conscious.

Max Conrad, the pilot who led rescuers to Gerald Tarras, was one of the true heroes of the Armistice Day Storm. Dozens of hunters would later acknowledge that they owed their lives to him. On Tuesday the 12th, with the wind still howling but the skies clear, he took off from his hangar in Winona to help find the hunters who hadn’t come home. Flying a redoubtable Piper Cub – and fighting to make even twenty or thirty knots of airspeed against the brutal headwinds – he scanned the frozen margins of the Mississippi for the living, but often as not discovered the dead.

When he located survivors – they were frequently huddled in the lee of a skiff they’d propped up as a windbreak – Conrad would circle low, cut the engine for a moment, and holler “Hang on! Help is coming!” A few minutes later, he’d return and, like manna sent down from heaven, drop a canister filled with sandwiches, whiskey, dry matches and cigarettes. Conrad would then circle until the Throckmorton or one of the many other rescue boats that had deployed in search of survivors could get a fix on the spot. He kept flying until ten p.m. that night, and he was out again at dawn the following day.

There is no telling how many hunters died for the simple want of dry matches. But even that was no guarantee, as there was still the problem of finding dry fuel to burn. Many a prized Mason decoy went up in flames, and a group of seventeen hunters stranded on the same island took turns shooting down limbs for firewood until their ammunition ran out.

The Mississippi River was not the only place where duckboats became sepulchers, of course. Two hunters died on Wisconsin’s Big Muskego Lake, barely twenty miles from downtown Milwaukee. One of these men was alone in his skiff, trapped by waves and ice. Toward the end, another party of hunters glimpsed him standing in his boat with his head tilted back, his arms stretched outwards, his legs and head huddled in the lee. It was as if he were imploring God – or perhaps commending his soul to Him. While the other hunters, who themselves were fighting to survive, watched helplessly, the man slumped back into his skiff, leaned heavily against the gunwale, and went motionless.

His spirit, like the ducks that drew him out on that terrible day, had flown.

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