Where Ducks Dine

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"CAN" is slang by virtue of abbreviation. It is the term of sportsmen for the most eagerly sought of wild fowl, the canvas-back. The season just past has been for the duck-hunting club-men of California a rather unfavorable one at times, because the ducks were often scattered by heavy rainstorms from their natural feeding grounds in the marshes to the great fields of the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys.

North of Suisun bay, stretching inland for many miles, is a low flat country threaded by tortuously winding sloughs in which the tide waters fall and rise and overflow into numerous ponds. That is the country of the Suisun marshes, a most famous duck-hunting ground, dotted here and there with the club-houses of many gun clubs.

The whole region abounds in vegetation. Tall rank tule and rice grass fringe the sloughs, and in the low lands behind this dense curtain grow all manner of water and marsh plants. Sedges and rushes thrive, wild celery, water hemlock, and water pennywort grow in the wettest places; asters and leather root where the land is a bit higher; while an abounding profusion of sunflowers and sunflower-like plants, twice a man's height, feeding on sunshine, water and fertile soil, run everywhere into a riot of bloom in August and September and at that season color the flat landscape as far as one may see.

Even the ponds are so filled with the rank growth of a species of water plant that the passage of rowboats is completely obstructed. Two months later this plant has largely disappeared. It has been greedily devoured by the various kinds of ducks which seek the marshes in the autumn. The plant by name is the fennel pondweed. Its stems are attached to rootstocks which lie in and on the surface of the firm mud in the bottom of the ponds, and grow upward, forking repeatedly and bearing broom-like clusters of leaves which float just below the surface of the water. The rootstocks and lower portions of the stems are milk-white and tender. The former in particular propagate by means of slender stolon-like structures which develop a tuber on the end. The slender threads which develop one, two and even three tubers at the end are not only borne on the horizontal rootstocks in and on the soil at the bottom of the ponds, but are also produced on the
upright stems and (at the end of the season) on the uppermost leafy portion. The illustration shows such developments. The top portion finally sinks to the bottom, the tubers establish themselves and new plants eventually arise. Flowers are borne at the top of the plant, the “seeds” being shown in the engraving. These “seeds” are produced in great quantity, float on the surface of the ponds, and while very tough coated, are eaten by the broadbill. Of course many sink, in time, to the bottom of the ponds and finally germinate.

The tubers grow to the size or even twice the size of a pea and are surprisingly tender, delicate, and nutritious. To my palate the flavor is something that of a chestnut, the only drawback being the difficulty attending the gathering of them. To stand in water, three or four feet deep, and lift the mud at hazard from the bottom with a shovel is slow, tedious and uncertain as to
results. But the wild fowl in this business have superior advantages. The diving ducks, such as the canvasback and broadbill, eagerly seek these tubers, devoting most of their time, indeed, to this pursuit and without any serious interruption until the fifteenth of October, when the duck-shooting season opens. In diving for the tubers they pull loose at the same time portions of the brittle rootstocks and attached stems, which float to the surface and are also voraciously devoured. These portions of the plant are, however, less desirable and are shared with the non-diving ducks such as the teal and mallard. It is to the tubers particularly that the canvasback owes the fine nutty flavor of its flesh surpassing in the estimation of sportsman and epicure that of all other wild fowl.

The tubers are eaten not only by the game ducks but also by swans and, to the great disgust of sportmen, by the mudhens, which are often so numerous as to “feed out” the ponds. Ducks, particularly mallard, relish as well the roots of nut tule as do also the wild geese. The latter, indeed, make “puddling places” in the tule lands for the ducks. When the geese are in great numbers they eat out the tule so effectively that ponds, often of considerable extent, are formed. The fennel pondweed then comes in and the area of the feeding grounds for the ducks is largely increased.

Although the other ducks possess something of the same flavor so long as the food supply lasts, none equals this particular bird in those points of excellence which make the roasted canvasback the pride of the sportsman’s table. That the “cans” get the cream and the mallard and teal the skimmed milk is the expressive judgment of Jno. K. Orr, a veteran and exceedingly well-informed sportsman, who first shot ducks in the Suisun marshes over forty years since.

Before the ducks come the ponds are filled with the regular masses of the fennel pondweed, as even in its growth as a field of young grain. After the birds arrive the weed is loosened and floats to the surface, the green tops tangled with bits of the shining white stems from below and the scene is then comparable to a grassy field uprooted by nosing swine.

But all good things come to an end, even for ducks, and when the food supply of fennel pondweed is exhausted the canvasback may betake himself to the bay shores in search of other food. Instead of sweet tubers he lives then on clams and similar things, and it is scarcely ten days before he is “fishy.” The bird that was the delight and high pride of the sportsman is now despised. Because of his lack of care in diet, how he has fallen! Canvasback he may still be, zoologically, but surely not gastronomically! He is no longer fit for the table of the epicure.