

Not a Bad Day—Saturday Morning in January on the Potomac Just North of Washington, D.C.

It wasn't the clean, sharp, brittle cold of further north but it was cold—the damp, unpleasant cold that slowly penetrates your clothes, then your skin, then your muscles, until it finds your spine and settles there. There was wind, too, blowing hard out of the west, and we were on a river which made it that much more uncomfortable. At 5:00 am, the sky was as clear as it gets this close to a major eastern city and, with no moon in the sky, Venus was almost unnaturally bright. In the cold, wet wind and the heavy current from the previous week's rain, we managed to arrange the decoys into some semblance of a spread—what my friend calls an “it'll do” spread—in the downstream lee of a small island close by the Virginia shoreline. By 5:30, we had the camouflage burlap spread over the frame and had arranged some sparse brush along the side of the johnboat. We poured coffee, covered the already wet black lab with a rain jacket to protect her from the wind, loaded the guns and waited for legal shooting time.

The first hint of pre-dawn light lit the bottom of the few clouds suspended just above the eastern horizon a pale, ghostly blue. The bottoms of the clouds glowed faint violet and we could see the black outlines of trees on the islands downriver. Slowly, the violet turned a brighter purple then shifted toward crimson, then red and orange, each shade lingering toward the center of the clouds as the brighter hue warmed their edges like the barely-warm, leftover coals of a morning fire reawakened by breath and fresh kindling. Soon, the fire in the clouds spread to the sky itself, then to the surface of the river and the tops of the trees, the wind rippling the glowing water and branches so that the fire in them danced and flickered. The wildfire spread west up the river, brilliant red-orange light with no warmth. The gnarled, white branches of sycamores growing at the river's edge stood out against a small, tree-covered hill. The fire jumped from the sky and the river into the tops of the sycamores and the white limbs glowed like strange, crooked candles stuck in the shoreline mud. Flocks of little bufflehead ducks skimmed along the water. The fire in the sky and the reflection from the water's surface caught their white breasts and heads and cheek patches, transforming them into showers of sparks blown in front of the fire by the wind.

On the Maryland shore opposite our site, the gnarled, white branches of sycamores growing at the river's edge stood out against a small, tree-covered hill that rose up along the C&O Canal. The fire jumped from the sky and the river into the tops of the sycamores and the white limbs glowed red and orange and yellow like strange, crooked candles stuck in the shoreline mud. Flocks of little bufflehead ducks skimmed along the water. The fire in the sky and the reflection from the water's surface caught their white breasts and heads and cheek patches, transforming them into showers of sparks blown in front of the fire by the wind.

By 8:00, the sky was brilliant blue and the strengthening wind blew out the dawn flames. We were cold. The dog was cold. The blueberry muffins from the 7-11 were frozen. Tiny icicles hung from the reeds and grasses in the shallows. We hadn't seen many birds and hadn't shot any, so we rounded up the decoys and headed back to the ramp. Not a bad day.