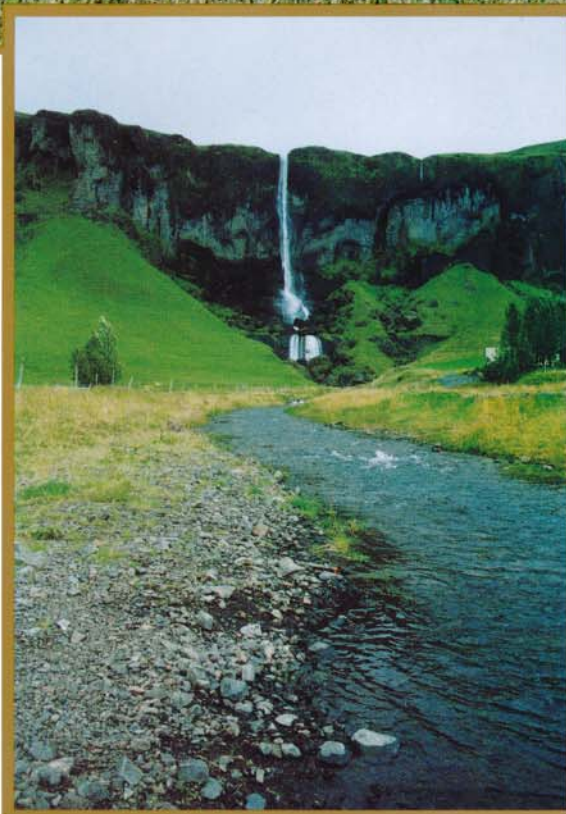


In The Land Of Fire And Ice

by Dr. Lloyd Newberry



We had been driving for 30 minutes, climbing higher and higher into interior Iceland. The green of the August tundra was now changing to sandy colored hills, strewn with rocks, some the size of automobiles. It reminded me of photographs of the moon taken by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin. Surely no living creature would be found here. Kristjan Jonsson, our guide for the afternoon hunt, reached into the glove compartment for his GPS. I could see why. On this gently rolling rock-studded high plateau everything looked the same. And finding our way out in the dark was more than I could imagine. There were no ruts or tracks, just a previously programmed



line on the GPS that Kris followed. There was not a blade of grass anywhere.

Then we topped a ridge and saw below us a jewel of an oasis. A one-acre pan of shallow sky-blue water with a fifty-foot apron of grass, it was the only inviting spot in sight, and you could see for miles in every direction. To the south loomed mighty Snæfell, the tallest mountain in Iceland. The old volcano was snow-capped and made a good landmark. It was late in the afternoon, nearly time for the roost flight.

We left the jeep five hundred yards from the pond. That way it would look like just another rock. Kristjan put three goose decoys out in one corner of the pan. Murray, my hunting partner, along with Kris and I took

position in the short grass facing the decoys. A wicked wind, maybe thirty knots, was blowing over our backs and across the decoys. It was a perfect setup. The pinkfeet would come into the wind, and into the face of our guns. I slid the old Ideal Grade L.C. Smith out of its soft case. Made in 1922, serial #R47190, the 30-inch twelve-gauge was the first choice from my stable, for northeast Iceland's geese. As I dropped a couple of high brass #4 shot into the chambers, I said a small prayer that the old gun would perform well under the shock of these strong

I have seen some stunning, jaw-dropping terrain in my travels throughout the world, but nothing anywhere to top this. Created by underwater volcanoes, eruptions continue to reshape the island today. Along the Ring Road you will travel through sand deserts and then across a rich tundra of moss, lichen, and wild flowers. It's a postcard picture. But look quickly because the next moment you are crossing a ten-mile stretch of barren lava flow. This might be followed by an area where geo-thermals belch steam columns into the sky and old cinder cones



L.C. Smith Ideal Grade with greylag goose.

loads. I also wondered if geese would really come to this shallow pan of water in this high barren terrain. Then I heard the wafting cries of pinkfeet.

Lloyd Murray and I had left Savannah, Georgia, four days before for a long-awaited hunt for Icelandic reindeer and geese. We were met in Reykjavik by our outfitter, Bjorn Birgisson. Depending on the game and season, Bjorn hunts a variety of areas spread out over the island nation, but when he's hunting the northeast corner his clients usually take the short flight from Reykjavik to Egilssatadir. He had suggested to us, however, that we drive the *Ring Road*, Route 1, around the southern and eastern coasts, and continue the ring back to Reykjavik after the hunt. We agreed entirely and now I can't imagine not making this drive.

form grotesque figures across the landscape. We passed the huge Vatnajokull Glacier that was calving off billion ton icebergs into the North Atlantic.

A land of fire and ice it's been labeled, but it's so much more. Sheep graze contentedly on emerald green slopes while colorful Icelandic horses romp and play in the valleys. A thousand waterfalls feed fast-flowing trout and salmon streams that would make a fly-fisherman's heart race. Families of swans and a variety of ducks are everywhere in the bays, streams and pot-holes. Bird life is rich here including cold-water avifauna such as the thousands of guillemots and puffin that swarm around their cliff-side rookeries in the spring.

The bird-life was one reason we had come to this magnificent land of contrasts. In particular, we were after greylag and

pinkfeet geese. And as I am wont to do, I had brought a dandy old double with me. I had such confidence in the piece that I didn't even bring a back-up scattergun. Twenty-five years ago I orchestrated a trade with a gun dealer for two L.C. Smiths. One was this Ideal Grade, the other a Monogram, serial #207831, made in 1907. Both were in pristine original condition. The Monogram is one of 102 guns made prior to 1913 and I don't put it on airplanes.

At somewhat less value, and therefore somewhat less risk,

L. C. Smith until 1950 for a total of 25,812 Ideal Grades.

At the first call of pinkfeet we all froze with faces down in the grass. It was 9 p.m. but there was still plenty of light. I heard the rush of wings overhead and as I strained to see movement through the grass, suddenly they were there. Six pinkfeet banked low over the pan and came straight in to the decoys. "You call it," Kris whispered. That was a nice touch and indicated he had some confidence in our ability, valid or not. As the flight approached the decoys they



Lloyd Murray lifts four greylag from the lush green fields in this land of contrasts.

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Setting out the decoys on a pinkfeet pond high in the mountains. "This is the land of fire and ice . . . rich tundra of moss, lichen, and wildflowers . . . the next moment you are crossing a ten-mile stretch of barren lava flow."

the Ideal seemed the perfect piece for overseas geese. Although produced two years prior to L.C. Smith's 1924 *Long Range Wild Fowl Gun*, the beefy stock, 30-inch London steel tubes, and chokes bored full and full, indicated that it would get the job done. The tight wood-to-metal fit, and richly case-colored oak leaf design on the lock plates, frame and triggerguard, would make anyone proud to be in a blind with it. Its seven and one-half pound weight would help out with the pounding from the heavy loads. Hunter Arms Company produced this piece along with 21,862 more prior to 1945. It was produced by

dropped their landing gear and rocked back. "Take 'em!" I whispered, as I rose on my knees.

The lead goose folded with my first barrel, but the shot caught me so off balance that my second barrel threw shot into open space. We dropped three geese total, not good, but not bad. I had my first pinkfoot so the hunt was successful, but there was plenty more action coming. The geese roost in isolated ponds on these barren rocky plateaus to avoid predation from the arctic fox. They feed all day on berries on the mountainous tundra, but roosting there would invite trouble.



Pinkfeet come to Iceland from Scotland to nest and raise their families in May. They return to the United Kingdom for the winter. Its call is similar to the greylag, but higher pitched.

I was admiring my first goose when I heard the cries again. This time eight came to the decoys and I took a double. Murray also doubled and Kris caught a high bird back pedaling. Five down, now we were doing better. I looked at the old Elsie's stock around the scalloped side-plates for cracks. This is the Achilles' heel for many L.C. Smiths. The stock is weak here from the removal of so much wood, and cracks seem to be an accepted part of the countenance of the gun. No cracks, however, the Smith was handling the heavy loads easily.

The pinkfeet were now coming strong. I don't know how many roost here, but they were coming from every direction. We were taking our time and doing ourselves proud when I suggested we make a

The author (left) and partner Lloyd Murray with pinkfeet taken on a bottom-land farm. This is where you will find them, far from the high, barren land of the greylag.

count of the deceased. There were nineteen bodies on the water and several more to pick up on the way out. In Iceland the goose populations thrive as do the ptarmigan, puffin, and ducks. The populations are increasing annually and there are no limits imposed. But a sane man considers the walk out, the load he carries and future years. We decided that two dozen was quite adequate and unloaded our guns.

The next morning Bjorn inquired as to our desire to do a little fishing. An hour later we were casting spoons into the Selfjot River about three hundred yards from its mouth in the Arctic Ocean. In three hours we caught several salmon and arctic char and Murray was soon preparing fresh filets for lunch.

At mid-afternoon it was time for greylag. Bjorn's clients also shoot white-fronted and barnacle geese, but we had specifically requested pinkfeet and greylag since we had never taken these species. Each are hunted in entirely different locations. The pinkfeet are birds of the central highlands whereas the greylag stay in the valleys and agricultural bottom-lands and deltas.

We made a short drive to a small green field of about two acres. The lush grass bordered a clear stream that meandered

through the center of the valley. We had seen lots of greylags feeding in these fields the previous days, and a quick call to the farmer received an emphatic "yes, please come and shoot them" reply. Bjorn had 36 plastic greylag decoys in all positions, some feeding, some alert. We placed them in two groups and left the center open for visitors. The field was full of droppings and we were equally full of confidence. Everywhere we had gone, whether fishing or sightseeing, geese were working up and down the valleys so we expected action soon.

We climbed down into a depression in the bank of the stream about thirty yards from the decoys. I was about to doze off when I heard the plaintive cry of a loan goose seeking company. I peered up through the grass just in time to see a big greylag hovering over the left side of our spread. Murray swung his gun up and folded the bird. It was again a first species for us. The greylag is the largest Icelandic goose. It's all brown and grey with a white rump and orange bill. It winters in Britain and Iceland. In 1952 the population was estimated at 25,000 birds. It has now increased to 140,000.

I was looking at Murray's goose which had a ticket to the taxidermist when I heard loud and deep nasal gabbling. We hunkered down and four pitched into our spread. Another thirty were circling, but we follow the bird-in-the-hand dictum. I rose and took a pair, not difficult at thirty yards. Murray made an excellent long shot on one that swung high over his end of the field.

During a lull in the shooting we made plans for a return trip in October for ptarmigan. It's another fabulous hunt that Bjorn offers where the game is plentiful and there are no bag limits. I was also enticed by the puffin shooting that Iceland offers. Apparently they are excellent eating as we saw them on the menus in several restaurants. It's a sport best done in May.

But right now we were absorbed with the action at hand. Shooting the magnificent geese *in the land of fire and ice*, and doing it with a vintage double gun.







"A thousand waterfalls feed fast-flowing trout and salmon streams . . ."

Below: My Ideal Grade L. C. Smith with four of the pinkfeet it harvested.

