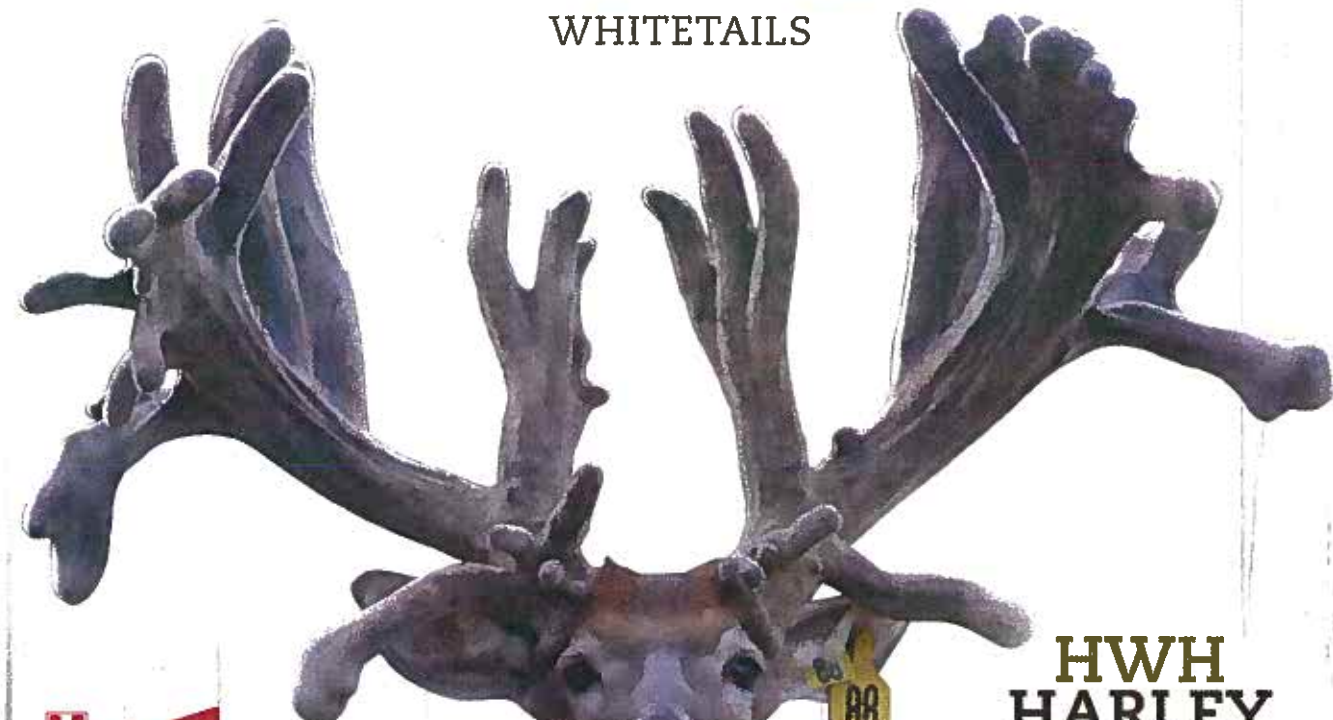


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# TSJ *Lifestyles*

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# Castaway Lodge

*The ultimate in Texas Cast and Blast.*

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY STEVE LIGHTFOOT

**L**ike a lot of sportsmen, Kris Kelley started coming to Seadrift to hunt ducks; the allure of the coastal marsh and all its bounty. Ducks got him here, but it was the fishing that kept him here for good and led to the creation of a sportsman's oasis called Castaway Lodge.

Two decades after leaving Waxahachie for the Texas coast, Kelley has no regrets. His passion for hunting and fishing initially sparked a seasonal guiding operation out of Seadrift that justified spending more time doing what he loved – chasing ducks and redfish. The biggest downside was logistics. With minimal lodging, food and cell phone services in Seadrift, Kelley was spending a lot of time and effort on things outside his control. Too many moving parts.

His business acumen led to the creation in 2007 of Castaway Lodge, a full service base of operations in Seadrift; a logistics hub for anglers and hunters who drive and fly in from all over the country, and Kelley is the air traffic controller.

Relaxing on the back porch of the 5,000-square-foot lodge, which sleeps 16 in bunkhouse style rooms and features all the amenities, you don't see the moving parts. Kelley has surrounded himself with talent, both local and national, and they do their homework to maximize the opportunity for success.

"Breakfast is at 5:15, wheels up at 5:45," Kelley informs us as he prepares to call it a night. "I'm not going to come banging on doors and turning on lights. Set your cell phone alarms for whatever time you need to be up and ready to go."

It's the last weekend of duck season and even though Kelley and his crew have tracked movements of birds daily since late October, they were out scouting the afternoon of our arrival and had formulated a game plan. Kelley tells Roy Biles and me to temper expectations.

"We've been averaging eight to 10 birds per group and the ducks are decoy shy after being hammered all season," he explains as we prepare for the morning hunt.

We'll be going with Kelley and his head guide, James Cunningham, who has been plying the waters along San Antonio



Chris Cady shows off a fat San Antonio Bay drum.





Redfish can't resist fresh crab.



Lizzy brings in a redhead drake.



A woodcraft mural depicts the hunting and fishing at Castaway Lodge.

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Bay and the surrounding area for many years and knows the ins and outs from memory. He used to be a commercial fisherman. He doesn't use GPS, which amazes the younger guides and anyone who's tried to run San Antonio Bay; Cunningham is an old school waterman and one of the best. He deftly maneuvers the airboat in the dark across the bay and into the backwater lakes, a 15-minute ride that ends right in front of a non-descript brush-covered platform duck blind.

Thirty minutes into the hunt, I feel like Kelley has been sandbagging; better to undersell expectations than come up short, I guess. Roy and I both have our six bird limits of teal, which we'll see later on stuffed with jalapeno and pepper jack cheese, rolled in bacon and chargrilled to perfection.

By 9 a.m. we're back at the lodge and Kelley informs us to change to fishing attire. Our guide, Chris Cady, has been scouting redfish and drum and will be picking us up at the dock in 10 minutes. Kelley gives new meaning to the "cast and blast" concept.

Cady is the stereotypical young gun fishing guide: tall, lean, tanned and skillful. He started helping Kelley guide when he was still in high school and has been with him for 10 years. January is typically not prime fishing on the coast. Too many variables, mostly weather-related, but Cady is undeterred. He positions the boat along a shoreline near a cut, stabs a T-handled aluminum push pole into the mud at the bow and lowers the PowerPole at the stern to put the wind at our backs. Cady baits and casts in rapid succession four rigs baited with shrimp and crab and

almost immediately Roy sets the hook on a hefty drum. Within 30 minutes, we've put three drum and a redfish in the box.

We're back at the lodge before noon and it already feels like we've put in a full day. While we unwind and recount the morning's highlights, Kelley and company are still in high gear making preparations for tomorrow. A group from Chicago is flying in later this evening and a threesome from East Texas has just pulled in. It's a cycle that gets repeated throughout the year.

Kelley offers a plethora of cast and blast opportunities in addition to waterfowl and fishing, including alligator, dove and feral hog hunting. He's even specialized in what some elite waterfowl aficionados refer to as "the fly-fishing of duck hunting." A unique approach brought to the Texas coast by Castaway's Wisconsin-based duck guide, Matt Raley, hunters are positioned individually on their back in the decoy spread at water level tucked inside one-man domed rafts called layout boats.

Maybe next year I'll give layout boats a try, but for now, I get the chance to close out this duck season sitting behind a clump of mangrove on the beach at Matagorda Island with Doug Russell and his young Lab, Lizzy. Doug is also cut from that same young gun guide mold and, like Kelley, came to Seadrift to hunt the ducks and stayed.

It's unusually warm for late January, even on the Texas coast, and the birds have little interest in the decoys Doug has presented, nor the lure of his duck call. It's a beautiful day, Doug remarks, just not for duck hunting. Lizzy is anxious to the point of constant whimpering. She has a passion for the retrieve, and I grin at her youthful enthusiasm. Although neither Doug nor I are in a hurry for the season to end, we eventually whet the young pup's appetite with our allotted two redheads apiece. ♡

For more information about Castaway Lodge, visit them online at [www.seadriftbayfishing.com](http://www.seadriftbayfishing.com) or call Kris Kelley at 888-618-4868.



James Cunningham maneuvers around the decoy spread.

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