

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

War and Waterfowl

Duck hunting is natural; it is part of our way of life. There is no explaining it, and few hunters could put in words their reasons for wishing to hunt this fall. No explanation is necessary; anyone who has felt a north wind clipping over his left shoulder in a certain hide on a certain marsh understands. But a few duck hunters have become a bit panicky over the prospects of hunting during this year of war. Here are some of the arguments they have given to justify an open season and the use of shells this coming autumn:

1. Duck meat can replace domestic meat in the present meat shortage.
2. Unless we "harvest the crop" there will be an over-population of waterfowl which will:
 - (a) exhaust the natural food supply and ruin the range, as over-populations of deer and cattle do;
 - (b) become a serious threat to cultivated crops;
 - (c) provide an opportunity for the illegal "market hunter" to reestablish himself.
3. Duck hunting would provide a necessary relief for war-torn nerves.

I have no right, of course, to speak of conditions beyond my own bailiwick; my horizon like that of most of us is limited. But my horizon happens to be limited by duck marsh. As far as I can see from my front porch stretches one of the finest waterfowl breeding marshes in the land. I, and the other members of this small marsh-side community, feel a bit closer to ducks, perhaps, than the average sportsman. Ducks are part of our lives, not just for a few days in autumn, but through much of the year. A failure to understand the fascination of ducks and duck hunting does not, therefore, lie at the root of what I have to say for myself and this community in answer to the arguments outlined above.

Wild duck as meat.—I agree that some forms of game should find a place in our war economy, but I do not agree that ducks should be placed on a plane with, for example, deer on an over-populated range. One sporting editor remarks that since duck hunters bag "one duck for every four shells fired, it becomes obvious that they are alleviating the meat shortage at the average cost of about eight cents a pound." Hunters who can bag duck meat for eight cents a pound are few and far between. Dressed for the table, a two pound duck (a good average for mixed bags) weighs one and one-quarter pounds, and provides about a pound of meat (including skin and fat). Shooting dollar-a-box shells, 40 to the bag of ten ducks, the cost of duck meat is sixteen cents a pound in shells alone. But few hunters can shoot ducks on the cost of shells; most must travel a distance to their duck marsh, and the cost in gas, and wear on car and tires is just as much a part of the price of duck meat as brass and powder. Even in this fine duck hunting region duck meat costs the hunter from twenty-five cents to a dollar a pound. Add a guide, club fees, or a rented canoe, as many gunners do, and the cost per pound mounts. Most hunters will admit that duck meat is luxury fare. Whatever the cost per pound may be in dollars and cents (which are plentiful these days) the real cost of wild duck meat is in gas, brass, powder and rubber—all vital war necessities.

The supposed threat of overpopulation.—First, it is true that there has been a general build-up in waterfowl numbers these last few years. To say, however, that failure now to reap the harvest of these gains means destruction of the natural food supply and range is to admit that our restoration program is sadly off balance. Here on the breeding grounds we are still restoring wasted marshlands; we are developing new management techniques; we are controlling the spring fires so disastrous to nesting waterfowl; we are shooting crows wherever

their spring nesting concentrations prove a heavy drain on waterfowl. Have we gone too far in this? Have we already produced more ducks than the country can maintain? The answer is, of course, no. One hears of three-fold and four-fold increases in waterfowl numbers. Increase over what? Isn't it increase over the lowest figure in North American waterfowl history? Populations are still far short of the numbers that poured down the flyways in a not so distant past, even short of the goal set at the beginning of the present restoration program. Among the members of this small marsh community, and they include many duck hunters and guides, there is the general feeling that "this will be a good year for ducks; with the scarcity of shells and fewer hunters, this will be the year ducks can make a real come-back." We say this because we know, despite the annual reports of vast gains, that the marshes reaching from our doorsteps to the horizon are still sadly underpopulated with nesting waterfowl. There are Mallards, yes, and Pintails. But ask anyone on the breeding grounds about the Canvasback, Redhead, Lesser Scaup or Ruddy Duck. They have increased; they have been saved from extinction for the present; but their numbers are still distressingly small and their future uncertain. This prairie marsh, many like it, and still others to be restored could maintain far more breeding ducks than now return each spring from the wintering grounds.

Mallards, Pintails, Black Ducks, and other species in some localities will feed upon cultivated crops this autumn and winter. Even during the years of the "duck depression," damage to grain fields in some localities was a problem. Such farm feeding is not evidence of depleted natural food supplies. In this region, Mallards and Pintails annually feed on stubble fields, despite the fact that their loafing waters provide a plentiful stand of wild duck food. Now, as in the past, this is purely a local problem; it will not be relieved by placing control in the hands of gunners. Crop damage is most serious in a delayed harvest. This year the harvest in some regions will be delayed because of shortage of man-power. If duck hunters truly have the welfare of ducks and crops in mind, they will give their spare time to help with the harvest in regions where there is a combination of man shortage and farm-feeding waterfowl.

I doubt that any force can again bring wild ducks to the market table. There has always been, even during the scarcity of ducks, an underground traffic in wild duck, but the stringent laws and the strong public opinion against the sale of wild ducks are such that talk of the return of the market hunter seems the mere shout of the propagandist, not a valid threat.

Recreational value of duck hunting.—Most of us agree that duck hunting is one of the finest "escapes from the toils of life." But it is doubtful whether the recreational value of duck hunting in war time is worth the cost in time and in essential war materials. Duck hunting as recreation this autumn is a matter for the individual and his conscience. However few or many shells he may be allowed, it is for him to decide how many shells he will use, and how much time he can spare from the task at hand.

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This last decade has seen a remarkable cycle of events. The danger of the extermination of many duck species was recognized nine or ten years ago. A tremendous effort was then begun in the United States and Canada to restore the dwindling populations, and ducks have since shown encouraging gains. As part of the restoration program, stringent restrictions were placed upon seasons, number taken, and methods of hunting. Some of these have recently been relaxed. There is now pressure for further relaxation—for longer seasons, bigger bags, for the return of live decoys and baiting, and for the opening of refuges to shooting. Such demands are a natural accompaniment to the up-swing in waterfowl numbers. But these demands are coming while we are at war, and I doubt whether there

are hunters and shells enough to constitute any serious present threat to waterfowl. The real threat is not in the number of ducks which might be shot this autumn but from war-time changes in policy which might seriously affect ducks in a post-war world.

As this issue of the *Wilson Bulletin* appears, the regulations for the new season are on paper. We have confidence in those who plan them. We are content to count officialdom among our members, as indeed it is; yet if we as ornithologists fail to put forward sound, democratic opposition to the sportsman pressure groups, we are no less responsible for imprudent changes in policy than the groups which forced them through. It is our responsibility, individually and collectively, to keep informed on the waterfowl situation just as we keep up to-date on developments in nomenclature or life history study. And it is our obligation through the remaining years of war and after the war to take an active part in the planning and maintaining of sound waterfowl policy.—Albert Hochbaum.

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE
Frederick N. Hamerstrom, Jr., *Chairman*

REPORT OF THE AUDITING COMMITTEE

The Auditing Committee has checked the accounts of Gustav Swanson, Treasurer of the Wilson Club for 1942, and the financial report published in *The Wilson Bulletin* for March, 1943, and hereby expresses its approval of the state of these accounts.

Respectfully submitted,
CHARLES F. WALKER
THOMAS H. LANGLOIS

August 12, 1943

AFFILIATED SOCIETIES

We are glad to report that the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology has recently voted to affiliate with us, and we hope to have an account of their organization in a later issue.

An increasing demand for news of the affiliated societies has come from the Wilson Club membership. Suggestions and data should be sent to Dr. Gordon M. Meade of Rochester, New York, Chairman of the Committee on Affiliated Societies. We present below brief accounts of the history and aims of the Virginia Ornithological Society and the Inland Bird Banding Association.

THE VIRGINIA SOCIETY OF ORNITHOLOGY was founded in December, 1929. Because of transportation difficulties the annual meeting was not held in 1942, and it is doubtful, for the same reason, whether it can be held this year. Activities therefore, have centered around the publication of the mimeographed bulletin *The Raven*, and the Society has such an enthusiastic group of members that the cancellation of the annual meeting has had no serious effects. Local groups in such cities as Norfolk, Richmond, and Roanoke continue to get together for meetings and for field trips.

The officers of the Society are: President, A. O. English, Roanoke; Vice-president, William B. McIlwaine Jr., Petersburg; Secretary, Dr. Florence S. Hague, Sweet Briar; Treasurer, T. L. Engleby, Roanoke.

In spite of the fact that bird observation in Virginia goes back through three centuries, only certain small areas of the state have been thoroughly worked. There is a great deal still to be learned about distribution in Virginia—even of some of the more common birds—and the chief task which the Society of Ornithology has set itself is the gathering of data on which an accurate and comprehensive publication on the birds of Virginia can be based.—Florence S. Hague, Secretary.