UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
SEA GRANT COLLEGE
NEWSLETTER

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Of ducks, geese And guns

On a crisp fall morning Watson Stuart and his dog Red go down to the water's edge behind Stuart's home. Stuart readies the boat, loads in his guns. Then he drives a few miles by car to Caroland Farms where he picks up two passengers who have drawn his name from a hat.

Back at the boat, they set off from Bell's Island. By seven they are anchored, the boat is encircled with a floating blind of juniper and pine, and Stuart has put out 40 decoys.

The object of their efforts is the abundance of ducks and geese which pass through North Carolina every year on their way south along the Atlantic flyway. The flyway is one of several in the country.

North Carolina has better shooting than any other state on the Atlantic flyway, according to William E. Hollan, past state chairman of the hunters' organization Ducks Unlimited. There is more opportunity for success, he says, and the setting is unique. Unlike most other states, waterfowl hunting here is done over large stretches of open water, primarily sounds.

While waterfowl are hunted all along the state's coast, Currituck County is considered a prime hunting spot. Hunters come from all over the country. Ralph Barco, who owns a hunting lodge in the county, says his clientele comes from areas as far flung as Connecticut, Illinois, Texas and Florida.

Hunters shoot from private blinds which often are owned by guides. Stuart has been a guide in Currituck County for four years. He and the hunters will stay in the blind most of the day trying to "limit out." At day's end, Stuart returns the hunters to their lodging. For guide service, room and board, each hunter pays $70 (based on double occupancy). The guide gets half of that and must provide boat, blind and decoys. The hunter provides his own license, guns and ammunition.

The actual hunting hasn't changed much since Blanton Saunders, Stuart's neighbor down the road at Poplar Branch, began hunting and guiding in the

Stuart and Red in hunting boat

1920s. Except, he says, there are fewer birds and more hunters now. Saunders remembers flocks of birds that looked "like a squall, they just darkened the sky."

While the birds are no longer plentiful enough to darken the sky, they still rely heavily on the Currituck area. It was, according to Tom Massengale of the North Carolina Nature Conservancy, "the most important unprotected area on the Atlantic flyway." Since 15 to 17 percent of the ducks on the Atlantic flyway winter there, the Conservancy, a private conservation group, acquired land on the Currituck Outer Banks to provide a home for the birds. The Conservancy now owns Monkey and Swan Islands, a total of 5,000 acres of marsh and 1,500 acres of high ground.

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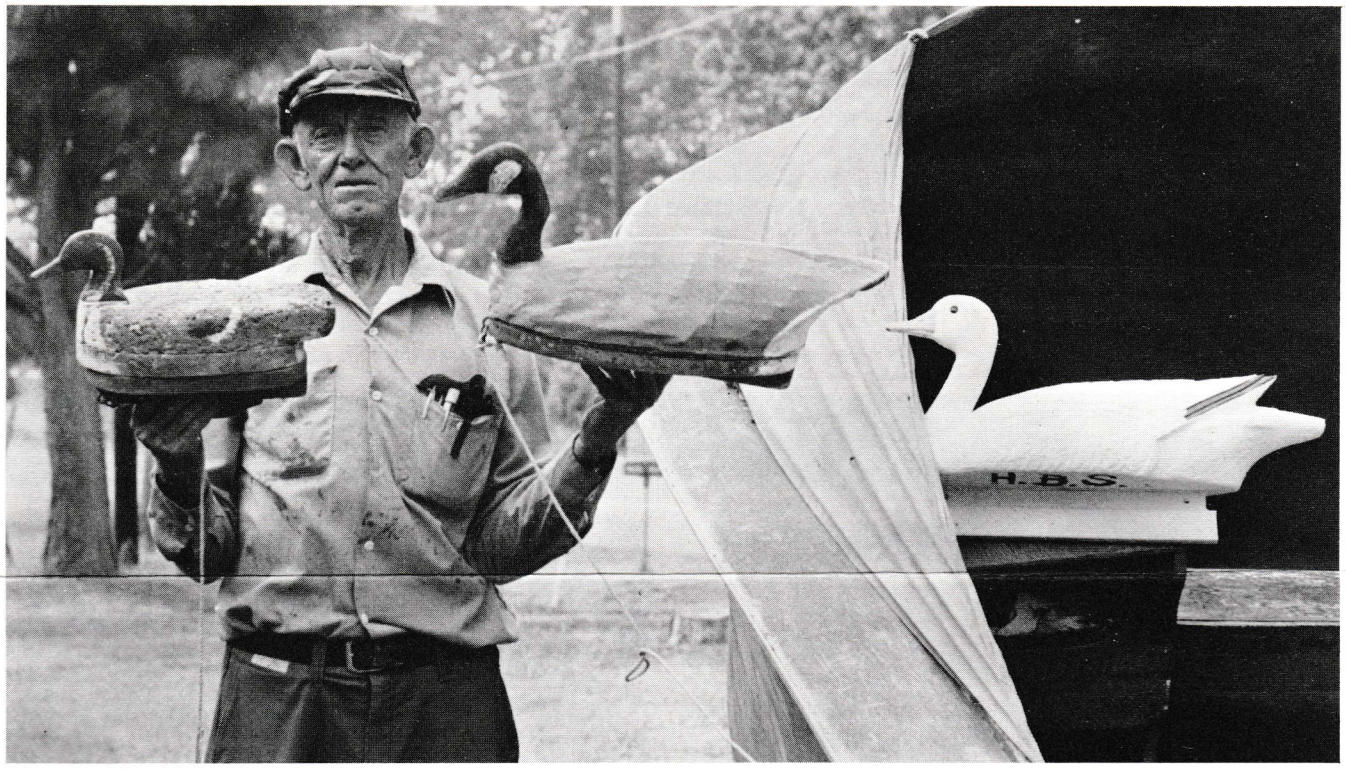

Saunders with decoys, some homemade

Also, the National Audubon Society recently was given the 3,600-acre Pine Island in Currituck County to manage as a waterfowl area. Massengale says he hopes coordinated management will be worked out for all three areas and perhaps some of the lands owned by the remaining hunting clubs in Currituck County. The three islands comprise most of the major areas of waterfowl marsh on the Currituck Outer Banks.

Hunting: good, bad news

Hunters in North Carolina killed 30 percent more ducks last year than in 1976. That's more ducks than were killed in any other southeastern state.

One reason the figure went up is that more scaup, a species of duck, stopped off in North Carolina than usual. But Wildlife Resources Commission officials are the first to admit that they really aren't sure why more scaup stopped off on their way south or why the total kill went up so dramatically.

The situation is indicative of the illusive nature of waterfowl hunting and management in North Carolina. Firm figures are hard to come by and the factors which influence bird populations and habits are complex. Bird populations seem to be holding their own, but there are a number of issues which concern hunters, managers and conservationists.

Official records show 276,049 ducks were killed here last year. But one unofficial estimate places the figure at twice that once illegal hunting, exceeding bag limits, time restrictions and shooting over bait, is taken into consideration. Since ducks and geese are hunted in sounds, rivers and ponds, enforcement of regulations in these remote areas can be difficult. And, hunters say more people are hunting.

Birds generally summer in the North and winter in the South. Breeding grounds in the North have been degraded so fewer birds are making the southbound migration than did 50 years ago. And waterfowl habitats in North Carolina are shrinking because of increasing development, though water pollution is not the problem it once was.

The well-being of ducks and geese which pass through the state is thus subject to a complex set of factors. Some informed observers predict the end of waterfowl hunting as it is known today—based on biology, not anti-hunting sentiment. More often though, observers say things are basically fine while cautioning that bird populations and habitats must continue to be protected.

In coastal North Carolina waterfowl are hunted on private gamelands, on public gamelands and in open sounds. From about Oregon Inlet northward, most hunting is done with the assistance of a guide who provides the blind. Currituck Sound, in the northeastern corner of the state, is probably the most important waterfowl hunting area in North Carolina. In the southern part of the state, hunting is carried out without guides.

The federal government maintains approximately 110,000 acres of refuges and 35,000 acres of adjacent lands in North Carolina so that passing birds will have a place to rest and eat. In some cases, hunting is allowed on the refuges. But generally hunting is prohibited within 500 feet of the refuges.

The state manages about 3,520 acres of public gamelands to provide habitat for ducks and geese. Hunting is allowed in the gamelands and some blinds are provided.

Additional refuges where hunting is limited are provided for waterfowl by the North Carolina Nature Conservancy and the Audubon Society. Some private clubs also maintain gamelands though the clubs are not as prevalent as they once were.

Management

The various species of waterfowl are managed jointly by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. Each year the federal agency assesses individual waterfowl breeding populations to establish a framework for seasons and numbers of kill.

Within that framework the state agency sets season dates—November 22 through November 25 and December 6 through January 20 this year in the eastern part of the state—and bag limits. The bag limit this year allows a hunter to take on a given day: five mergansers; five ducks; 15 coots; and seven sea ducks. There are some bonuses and restrictions. For example, redheads and canvasbacks may not be killed this year.

Fish and Wildlife Service statistics show that of 10 major species of ducks, some breeding populations were down and others were up last year. While the canvasback—on which the season is closed this year—experienced a whopping 40 percent decline, many other species increased: gadwall up 31 percent; wigeon, 42 percent; green-winged teal, 53 percent; shoveler, 34 percent; pintail, 14 percent; redhead, 21 percent. Declines of 7, 3 and 5 percent were reported for mallards, blue-winged teal and scaup, respectively.

Grady Barnes, assistant chief for field operations, Division of Game of the Wildlife Resources Commission, says these figures indicate that waterfowl are in basically good shape. The real danger, he says, is the destruction of breeding and feeding grounds. "When you start to destroy that, you're running into trouble." Waterfowl populations will never be as great as they were in the 1920s and 1930s, Barnes says, due to the destruction of breeding habitats farther north. In Canada, for example, where many species breed, prairie lands routinely have been converted to farm land.

To recreate breeding grounds, Ducks Unlimited (DU), a national organization of hunters, has spent millions of dollars to lease and manage land for sanctuaries. Last year alone DU collected $13 million. North Carolina chapters raised over $500,000. (North Carolina traditionally has ranked among DU's top fund raisers on a per capita basis.)

Adaptability

With 20 different species of duck alone—each with different habits, populations and habitats—changes in waterfowl habitats can have unexpected effects. For example, canvasback, the species which is in the most trouble now, seems to be a victim of environmental degradation.

Jack Donnelly, state waterfowl biologist for the Wildlife Resources Commission, explains that due to the elimination of grasses on which the bird once fed, the canvasback has been changed from a plant eater to an animal eater. The bird also requires very particular breeding conditions. "Nobody's really sure what's happened to them," Donnelly says. But they're "not very adaptable and any bird that's not adaptable in these days is in trouble."

Hunter and dog in the marsh

As development—draining wetlands, mining, large-scale land use changes, for example—eats away at natural habitats, private as well as public refuges become increasingly important. But the refuges can have their problems, too. David Lee of the state's Museum of Natural History notes that disease can be a threat to waterfowl which are concentrated on the refuges, but he adds that, unlike the Midwest, North Carolina has not yet had serious problems.

"If we had it to do over again, we'd try to do it a different way," says Donnelly. In effect, the refuges have been too successful and gregarious birds will not disperse. "We've put too many birds in small areas," Donnelly concludes.

Another issue is whether it is unfair to bunch birds up in refuges so hunters know where to find them. Opinions differ on how well the birds handle the threat of hunters near refuges. Lee says that the birds learn to fly high over the borders and spiral down once they are in safe territory.

Of course, clustering birds also affects hunters. Since the birds are no longer spread over such wide areas of natural habitat, hunters have smaller areas in which to shoot. William E. Hollan, past state chairman of DU, says that with increasing numbers of hunters and decreasing hunting area, waterfowl hunting isn't as easy as it used to be.

'The bad guys'

While Lee says management seems to be working for the most part, he says the "bad guys" of hunting—the unsportsman-like hunters—"shoot everything that flies." Because of violations, he says, the real kill is "many fold more than what's reported." A North Carolina hunting guide says the most common violations are shooting over bait or after hours, exceeding the limit and shooting species on which the season is closed.

Enforcement is carried out by both federal and state officials. The problem is that so many of the violations are almost impossible to detect unless an officer is staked out in the marsh watching individual hunters. With fewer than 100 state and federal enforcement agents in North Carolina's coastal area such monitoring would be difficult since there were about 26,000 duck hunters in the state last year.

Though 425 waterfowl violations were prosecuted last year, Donald E. Curtis, chief of enforcement for the Wildlife Resources Commission, acknowledges that not everyone is caught. But he says that given the personnel at hand enforcement is good.

Conservation

Hollan says there is growing sentiment for conservation. For example, he says sentiment at last year's Wildlife Resources Commission public hearings on hunting restrictions was decidedly in favor of returning to stricter bag limits rather than continuing the more generous point system. Under the point system, individual species are assigned a point value and limits are based on total points rather than total number killed.

Though he says it's too late for some states farther north to do much to replace habitat, Otto Florschutz, state waterfowl biologist for the Fish and Wildlife Service, says North Carolina can still defend and improve waterfowl habitat. Furthermore, he says the courts are more consistently backing up enforcement. So, despite waterfowl population fluctuations, he thinks waterfowl hunting will continue to be enjoyed in North Carolina "with a little bit of far-sightedness."

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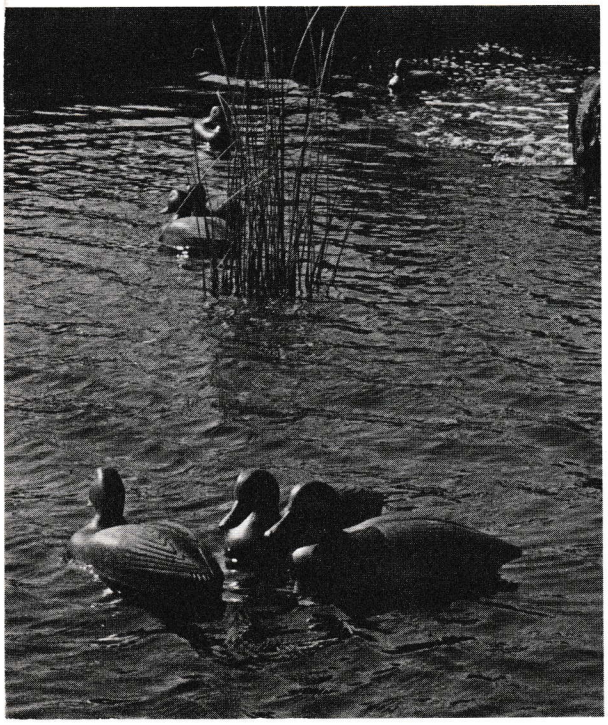

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