

THE ARKANSAS REPORT – PART III

By James H. Phillips

(Editor's Note: After receiving widespread complaints about the declining quality of duck hunting, the Arkansas Wildlife Federation earlier this year appointed a "Duck Committee" to "investigate the facts (and factors) impacting duck seasons and duck hunting."

The committee's report is the most important waterfowl-hunting document to be published in decades. In this posting, we examine the committee's insights related to sanctuaries and the planting of grain crops on national wildlife refuges.)

Who is to blame for the declining quality of waterfowl hunting in the lower Mississippi Flyway?

Many southern hunters point the finger at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's management of our National Wildlife Refuges, believing the establishment of inviolate sanctuaries and the planting of grain crops for ducks on refuge lands concentrate the fowl on protected areas away from hunters' guns.

"Few topics have raised the ire of Arkansas duck hunters as much in recent years," notes the Arkansas Wildlife Federation Duck Committee. But the issue is far more complex than most hunters realize – or are willing to admit.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 embodies "what came to be known as the 'wildlife first' mission for the refuge system," the federation noted. "Secondary activities such as hunting are given a priority consideration only when they are determined to be compatible for which the refuge was established. And there, in a nutshell, lies the rub. Wildlife first is the law of the land and sometimes conflicts with hunter success.

"What the duck hunter sees as great hunting habitat, the duck manager sees as prime duck production habitat – production in the form of food to meet the ducks' dietary needs, production habitat in the form of a place where the ducks can pair bond without pressure from hunting and production habitat in the form of a place for ducks to prepare for the return flight and nesting.

"The problem arises when hunters try to reconcile a public management objective with a private one," it emphasized.

For example, “if a private club near Bayou Meto Wildlife Management Area maintains a sanctuary so that it will have abundant ducks for hunting purposes, and then proceeds to hunt those ducks with a relatively small (compared to Bayou Meto) number of hunters, then that club will have succeeded in fulfilling its primary goal of increased hunting success for its members while achieving a secondary goal of allowing more ducks to return to the breeding grounds. The exact same arguments hold true for private groups or clubs that leave a portion of grain in the field. To put it bluntly, the private club is hoarding ducks for its own purposes, although the end result may be a net gain for the ducks.”

Refuge sanctuaries, on the other hand, are not designed that way. “There is no mandate to hold ducks for the purpose of increasing the success of nearby hunters. The mandate is simply to hold ducks for the purpose of getting them back to the prairies in one piece ready to reproduce.”

One “solution” frequently offered by hunters is to abolish sanctuary areas and prohibit the planting of grain crops on refuges.

Both of these can have unintended consequences, the committee noted.

“When traditional sanctuary areas in the White River Wildlife Refuge were opened to hunting and the fields left in moist soil rather than uncut rice, the locals called for the refuge manager’s head. It seems that their hunting suffered as a result.

“All the while hunters to the north claimed that large sanctuary and unharvested rice harmed their hunting.

“Who’s right and who’s wrong? It is entirely possible that both groups are right,” the committee stated.

Another suggestion calls for annually rotating sanctuary areas – a policy the committee opposed.

“Pre-eminent waterfowl biologists who are in no way affiliated with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service tell us sanctuaries should remain in place year after year or risk losing their effectiveness. Rotation of sanctuaries is not an appropriate solution.”

The committee recommended sanctuary areas be studied to determine if ducks imprint on a specific location. Further studies should try “to determine the appropriate size of a given sanctuary without regard to its location. In other words, if the NWR is attempting to send 100,000 ducks back north, then it should design a sanctuary to accomplish that goal, rather than using an arbitrary line to divide sanctuary from hunting area.”

Moreover, it suggested that “fields that are open to hunting on public lands should more often be planted in grains, and the sanctuaries should be moist soil areas.”

Most importantly, the duck committee emphasized, the debate over refuge management should never lose sight of the overweening issue.

“Hunters must come to grips with their own selfishness in asking for virtually infinite access to a finite resource. The primary cause of ducks hitting sanctuaries is hunting pressure. While there are many things that can be done to alleviate the problems created by ducks congregating on sanctuaries, none will have the same effect as a reduction in hunting pressure.”

This can be accomplished, the committee said, by changes in the hunting regulations, including a reduction in the season length and bag limit, limiting access to public hunting areas, restricting the number of non-resident hunters and noon closures on some shooting areas.

NOTE: You can obtain a free copy of the AWF report by writing or calling the Arkansas Wildlife Federation, 9700 Rodney Parham Road, Suite 1-2, Little Rock, AR 72227, phone 1-877-945-2543. We recommend you obtain and read the entire report. It is too important to ignore.

If we take care of the ducks, the ducks will take care of us.
