

BAYOU BLUES

By Perry A. Scioneaux

For most of my life, when thinking about ducks, my thoughts were warm and endearing. I nourished thoughts about past mornings in the backwaters of Mississippi River tributaries when the sky often was filled with ducks. But for the past three seasons, I have stared at mostly empty skies.

The flocks of ducks in my Louisiana neighborhood have been declining at an alarming rate. And I don't mean only late-migrating mallards. I also include the early migrants such as blue-winged teal, gadwall and pintail.

Today when I think about ducks, and I think about ducks numerous times each day, my thoughts turn to bewilderment, then to anger and utter disappointment over the big business that duck-hunting has become.

I listen to other hunters complain. They mostly blame the sharp decline on global warming (which purportedly holds ducks up north) and no-till crops (which provide food for the "up north" ducks). They blame a lack of rain on the wintering grounds (no habitat to hold ducks) or too much rain (the ducks are scattered).

What angers me is that hunters, aided and abetted by self-serving biologists, place the blame on things we can do nothing about. We cannot change global warming. We cannot force Midwest farmers each autumn to plow under waste grain. We cannot control annual rainfall.

These hunters resign themselves to a bleak fate. To them, waterfowl management is meaningless, a fruitless task. Rarely do I hear discussed the problems we can do something about.

Naturally, biologists claim we still have good numbers of ducks – they're just hanging out in different places.

It all started for me in 1999 on the first morning I witnessed the use of a spinning wing decoy. I watched in utter amazement as group after group of ducks seemingly dropped out of the clouds into the decoys of a nearby hunting party. The group of four men filled their limit in little time.

What transpired in the ensuing days and seasons was phenomenal. Every decoy spread had at least one spinner and some more. Inexperienced hunters who had never killed a limit of ducks were now bagging them with ease. No longer were skills earned through trial and error. No longer were many days in the field required to learn to harvest ducks

with regularity. Keep in mind this was in the South – not the north where studies have shown hunters with spinners harvest ducks at rates several times greater than those without.

What happens to the young guns that now expect easy kills to be part of their hunting experience? Will their expectations be dashed by the reality that with the use of electronic devices comes a price? A price none of us should have to pay?

The spinner was followed by pleas for liberalized regulations that included dreaded season extensions – late seasons on the wintering grounds, earlier opening dates on the northern breeding grounds. To my great displeasure we were given the extensions three years ago. This was accomplished with political pressure placed on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service by southern politicians who wanted their wealthy constituents to have the supposed opportunity to kill late-season mallards. What a folly!

Yes, it has worked, but nothing like its proponents planned. While harvest rates and totals numbers of ducks migrating to the South dropped, the kill in some northern tier states rose hundreds of percentage points in three short years. The word quickly spread.

Hunters today are flocking northward with spinners in hand to cash in on the bountiful combination of opportunity and unsophisticated ducks just beginning to make their first trip southward. Juvenile ducks – the seed from which all future ducks are created – are being killed in alarming numbers. The kill of mature hens is increasing during the early seasons because the ducks lack the markings that make drakes and hens easy to identify. This early season onslaught removes hundreds of thousands from the population – ducks that will never ever fly south as in years gone by to the place that was their destination for hundreds of years.

What can be done? The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should immediately ban any and all electronic devices used as an aid to harvest ducks. This is especially true for spinning wing decoys and anything sharing their likeness.

The service should immediately repeal the framework extensions that pressure ducks for 120 days from the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico within the Central, Mississippi and Atlantic Flyways. This increased pressure harvests ducks at alarming rates in northern tier states and forces ducks to raft miles offshore in the Gulf of Mexico to avoid hunters. This increased pressure causes ducks to seek the safety national wildlife refuges during the day, only leaving at night under the cover of darkness. This added pressure has forced some northern tier states to consider placing limits on out-of-state hunters – and wisely so, I might add. We may even have to reduce days within our allowed seasons to see if ducks respond to decreased pressure. To continue the status quo would be the biggest mistake of all.

We also must eliminate the focus on economics and curtail the big businesses that promote long seasons and high bag limits.

It's time for hunters – the primary stewards of the resource – to demand restrictive changes be enacted immediately. We must then gauge how the ducks respond for several

seasons. We must do so in order that we may enjoy quality hunts as in years past. Not quantity but quality so that generations to come can do so as well.

Let's face reality together. Habitat and the opportunity to do something about it are dwindling at an alarming rate with each season. The ducks cannot sustain their numbers under the intense, unending pressure and onslaught of modern day hunting given the current conditions on the prairie. We must moderate our efforts to ensure the future of our beloved pastime. We must make changes quickly or risk losing our southern heritage passed on from generation to generation that will never to return under the current scenario!

Perry A. Scioneaux, a Louisiana native, has spent more than three decades hunting ducks in various locations across his home state.

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