

## VARMINTS AND WEEDS

By Howard N. Ellman

“Don’t be planting willow trees, Howard. They’ll attract black birds and black birds eat rice.”

I studied the farmer’s face in vain for any hint of sarcasm. I had known him for a year by that point – and it was obvious that he was not making an obtuse joke. He clearly thought that my horticultural efforts threatened our joint enterprise. I owned the land, he farmed it and we shared in the crop, so we each had a direct financial interest in preventing depredation by nature’s thieves, whether furred, feathered or scaled, vertebrate or invertebrate.

How much rice could a black bird eat, I wondered? There were a lot of things I didn’t know about owning a rice farm purchased primarily in the hope that it would prove attractive to ducks, while producing enough income to stave off the financial ruin that a big-ticket impulse purchase can often precipitate. I wasn’t completely to blame for this big-ticket impulse purchase, mind you – at least I had a rationalization that I found comforting. Several duck hunters of my acquaintance, who shared my consternation over the decline of the Suisun Marsh, had said to me: “If you find something good in the Valley, count me in.”

Our chorus of discontent had reached a crescendo during the drought of ’77 when still, cool dry weather, under hazy skies, prevailed throughout a season virtually devoid of visible, respectable waterfowl, while saltwater intrusion from San Francisco Bay raised the salinity level, killing vegetation and rendering the Marsh even more noisome and odiferous than normal. I had hunted on that property for five years, paying an annual fee. The Suisun lies closer to home by an hour or so than anything reasonable in the Sacramento Valley. I had decided to give it a try in order to meet the demands of a young family and an exacting profession while hoping to preserve some quality hunting time. It had been reasonably good the first year, declining each year thereafter until it hit the abyss of ’77, a year that profoundly changed flight patterns in large parts of California permanently.

In any case, the convenience of hunting the Suisun could not compensate for an average of five hours in a smelly blind spent for each spoonbill sighting – and the hope of spotting a bufflehead or ruddy as a bonus. When the ’77 waterfowl season limped to a sorry drought-stricken close, I packed up my gear, declaring firm intention to scout for a place in the Sacramento Valley that might see a real duck during the season – or might be developed for that purpose – and where the water didn’t stink or bear regular slicks of corrosive orange scum. That’s when I got all those promises of partnership, some from

guys with whom I would have been glad to share and who could have afforded it more easily than I could.

When I found a spot in March of '78 that looked pretty good (320 acres, about half of it newly leveled for rice), I made a deposit on the spot. I was rendered temporarily insane by the sight of a concentration of mallards and pintails in the northwest corner of the property on a pond that could not have been more than five acres in size. Even more impressive, the pond held no vegetation at all, just barren red dirt left over by the earthmovers when they benched and leveled the ground a month or so before my visit. Real ducks! What a bonanza!

I learned later that the seller had bought a whole section of rank ground with a drainage slough meandering through it. He decided to split it in half, replace the natural slough with a straight drainage ditch and “improve” the land by grading it for agriculture, despite the poor quality of the soil, hoping to find city boys too dumb to know better, one group of pigeons for each half. I suspect that he doubled his money – although I don’t know that for a fact – while making the ground worse for my purposes than it probably was before he called in the earthmovers. (Several years after my purchase, I found some aerial photos of that meandering slough before it got straightened and I am sure that it was a real winner as a waterfowl magnet. But California seems to be full of guys who can’t see a lazy slough without dreaming of a straight ditch to replace it. Unfortunately, many of these same folks own the earthmoving equipment they need to realize their dreams).

I bit on the east half – my candidate partners all got paralysis of the wrist when it came time to sign checks (we were mired in an economic slump after all) and I ended up owning the whole half section, while gasping for financial air. When the time came to close or walk, I was too far gone to make the prudent decision. Love is deaf to all discordant notes.

That barren five acre pond at the northwest corner turned out to be a “tail-water” area, a low place where the water collected after leaving the fields before entering the drainage slough. As the low spot, the ground stayed too wet to grade and prepare for a rice crop. In short, it was “waste” ground in the eyes of efficient farmers, testimony to bad planning or bad surveying or bad grading. And it was where I decided to plant those accursed, varmint-attracting willows that had my farmer’s knickers in a twist.

We argued long and hard. But as the owner, it was my choice and I made it. He kept farming without trying to dock my share of the crop for the rice the feathered varmints undoubtedly ate, grumbling periodically in ill grace and reminding me of my folly whenever he needed to score a point to balance some oversight on his own part.

By the second season, the red willows I had planted were at least thirty feet tall. Keeping the pond wet all summer induced an explosion of round-stem bulrush that pretty much choked it, with just a few patches of open water left. I stuck a crude platform on the southern margin, a tight fit for two shooters, and brushed it with cut willow branches and

bulrush. Only about a dozen decoys could be placed in that thicket where they could even be seen from the air.

And that platform was good for a mallard limit almost every time out (no more than two days a week, no more than four hours per shoot), even when no one else in the area was getting shooting.

The word spread. In those days, conventional wisdom in rice country dictated the fields should be managed to create “sheet water,” shallow expanses devoid of vegetation with nothing but bare dirt showing on the check dams that divided the fields. When some of the locals began to report on the results I was getting with my rank weed management plan, the gurus of the area pooh-poohed the whole idea as a form of benevolent idiocy that could not be true, as the world was not permitted to depart from their accepted ideologies:

“Who you gonna believe, stupid? Me or your lyin’ eyes?”

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Today, of course, waterfowl managers prefer the natural look and work hard to achieve it, even in large sections of rice country. I do not presume to claim authorship of the idea. Indeed, the accolade of authorship probably belongs to the managers of the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge complex. I frankly did not know what they were doing when I planted my trees, nor did I know what the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or anyone else was doing in any “scientific” sense. I was acting solely on gut feel without study or research.

What difference would it have made if I had been wrong? I gambled nothing more than a five acre corner of a half section that had no other probable use anyway. The gamble paid off in several dimensions – the impulsive purchase, the determination not to try to convert that tail water pond to productive agricultural use and the decision to try red willows as cover for no sound reason other than aesthetics and intuition. But that’s all personal, probably boring and not the point in any case.

The point is this: The regulation of our sport has fallen into the clutches of managers – like my rice farmer in those days and others of like mind – who devalue experience in favor of their preconceived notions, their formulae, supposedly derived from experience but somehow divorced from it. For them, the formulae have become the reality – and real life experience has become the dream of the ignorant. Any experience that departs from the formulae has no value, must be an aberration, may be ignored or decried in favor of goals that have proved illusory in the experience of those who actually go to the marsh and get mud on their boots.

For ten years, we have been governed by a system intended to maximize sustainable kill – a system that has remained in place despite a general sharp decline in both populations and harvest, particularly in the area to which the system is most relevant, i.e., the Central and Mississippi Flyways. We “enjoy” a liberal framework for

the upcoming season despite generally dismal numbers, coming on the heels of a generally dismal mid-continent season.

Do the prospects fill you with anticipation? I suggest that when you look up into the empty skies this fall and winter, you visualize the formulae and bell graphs that the reigning geniuses use when they create the illusion of ducks to encourage us gullible wretches to part with our dollars for hunts and waders and other paraphernalia. So long as we refrain from holding them accountable, they will persist. And why shouldn't they since it is the course of least resistance? It takes courage and a high degree of flak resistance to convey bad news, even when based in the most beacon clear and inarguable truth.

It's time to try something different, time to try being the conservationists we claim to be. Time to break the mold and figuratively plant a few willow trees. How much rice does a black bird eat anyway? What have we got to lose? At the rate we are going, we could see our entire sport go down the drain if we don't change directions.

It wouldn't take much of a gamble or a great innovation probably to correct matters. The system we had before all those formulae and bell graphs took over seemed to work pretty well. The only problem with it was it required the exercise of discretion each and every year, with no system of dogma to fall back on.

And therein lies the problem. So long as the regulators can shift blame to the black box, they need not exercise discretion or take responsibility for a decision – particularly a decision that might annoy someone. Let someone else plant those trees. They've got their cover story and they won't abandon it – unless we make them do it.

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

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