

YOU DON'T NEED THE WEATHERMAN

By Howard N. Ellman

To tell which way the wind blows.

Bob Dylan got it right. Anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear, all connected to a functioning cranial apparatus, can decipher the obvious from empirical observation without the assistance of those claiming superior intellect or specialized training. And a normal layperson can make reasonably accurate predictions, based on that sort of input.

The spring breeding pair counts prompt my resort to Dylan in this instance, while confessing a certain cynicism that thrives in a swamp of experience – namely having supposed authorities slather me with pronouncements that proved less than accurate rather consistently over the last several years. Let's begin with what we know for sure.

Our California mallard breeding pair counts are down roughly twenty-one percent from last year. *Perhaps more telling, they have reached the lowest number ever recorded since scientific spring counts were first compiled.* Other species that breed in this state fare no better. As I write this, a similar picture emerges from the Dakotas, Wisconsin and other areas of the upper Midwest, the sole exception being Minnesota.

I have commented before on the terrible problem that this sort of news creates for the “regulators” and the leaders of our associations. For how can they possibly ask their constituents to accept the truth and perhaps not make the contributions, buy all the licenses, stamps and gear that sustain the lifestyles of the “truth” tellers? They must think up some sort of story to lull the faithful into a false sense of breathless anticipation, conducive to the reckless expenditure of hard-earned cash.

The dire situation this year calls for extraordinary creativity, for any normal layperson would be inclined to assume that the numbers described above portend a season significantly worse than last – a prospect almost unimaginable in many areas. After all, how can anything get worse than virtually no shootable ducks? Yet we seem to confront that very prospect, unless the breeding pair numbers, the most accurate of the counts (according to what the experts tell us when they like those numbers), are somehow misleading.

Factor in an extra wildcard. This is, of course, a presidential election year. By all accounts, the incumbent is in a spot of trouble and could get voted out. He must win the states at the southern end of the Mississippi Flyway to hold his office. He should succeed there as he has in the past.

But what if the federal regulators annoy the numerous and influential duck hunters of those states – and the commercial interests that live off the duck hunters – by acting in the interest of the waterfowl resource in light of the lousy numbers, mandating a short season and low limits? If Se. Trent Lott could bully the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service into granting a season extension to satisfy a few of his wealthy waterfowling constituents, is it a stretch to assume that a sitting president might do the same? Perhaps you believe that he could or would not. You have a right to your opinion. Mine is opposite.

As for creativity, the California Waterfowl Association is apparently prepared to suggest that *strong brood production* overrides or cancels out the effect of low breeding pair counts. *But brood production is not officially counted.* Field biologists base their estimates on (sharp intake of breath) anecdotal evidence.¹ You know that the situation is extreme when CWA is forced to take a party line based on stuff that can only be described by use of the unmentionable A-word, to reject supposedly the best population evidence available to us. Thus, the type of evidence deemed too weak even to consider when the issue is the lethality of spinning wing decoys (to pick a telling example) is good enough to support advocacy for a longer season and higher bag limits than our most reliable counts would otherwise justify.

I am no weatherman – but I know which way the wind blows. Here’s how I read the air currents: The feds will come up with a creative excuse for a liberal framework. Claiming to act in conscientious regard for the low breeding pair counts in this State, CWA will nonetheless recommend to our Fish & Game Department a season more than eighty days long with a seven bird limit (five mallards, two hens), to end late in January with an even later youth hunt. Or, the Association will coyly suggest that it could accept a four mallard limit in exchange for a one hundred day season – as though the process of setting season length and bag limits were a bargaining exercise between hunting organizations and the regulators, without regard for the birds.²

And that’s not all that blows in the wind. With a more than 20 percent reduction in our local breeders, the upcoming season will prove to be worse than last. Perhaps much worse as the increase in ground planted to rice this year over last will add significant acreage to the ad hoc sanctuaries that develop on rice ground flooded by the rain or for stubble decomposition. The frustration and disappointment thus engendered will cause angry hunters to clamor for another round of season extensions, programs to

¹ I have checked with several field biologists on this one. The consensus is that brood production has been good in some places, poor in others. No one was willing to hazard even a guess as to the statewide impact – or whether net production exceeds that of last year, except on particular tracts with which the biologists were intimately familiar. I know that production is up on the small property that I help to manage. I also have heard that it is down on other properties in our area and on some of the large sanctuary areas in the Valley.

² Most biologists agree that it is season length rather than bag limit that creates hunting pressure. For CWA even to suggest a one hundred day season when our local counts stand at an all-time low would set an all-time high in irresponsibility. Indeed, given the population numbers, it is difficult to understand why we are not back to the ’91 regime of a 60-day split season and a three bird limit, with the season ending in mid-January.

open the sanctuaries, etc., anything to kill more ducks – *and no person in authority will have the guts to confront them with the fact that bird shortage is not a problem readily corrected by killing more of them.*

Once again, all the pieces are in place for a ceremony of denial, an abdication of stewardship responsibility in order to provide a promise of short-term gratification implicit in the long season/high bag limit scenario. The promise, fraudulent on its face, is pernicious in every aspect. Not only will it engender the ill-will born of unfulfilled expectations, it will lead to more pressure on the birds than is appropriate under the circumstances, thus further deferring any possibility for recovery.

No one will be happier than I if my predictions prove to be wrong. But I don't expect to be wrong. I acquired my pessimism the old fashioned way – by earning it. As they say, experience is what you get when you were hoping for something else. The voice of experience speaks. You need only feel the breeze to hear it clearly.

Howard N. Ellman, a San Francisco attorney and co-founder of Madduck, is the author of "The Wayfarers," an historical novel. Autographed copies are available by contacting Hillyzk@aol.com.

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