TECHNIQUES FOR CAPTURE OF WHITE-FRONTED GEESE ON WINTERING GROUNDS

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ABSTRACT

During the fall of 1971 and 1972, the first successful efforts were made to capture and band white-fronted geese on their wintering grounds. Careful observations of feeding behavior were instrumental in developing rocket net techniques that would work with these extremely wary birds. Nets were strategically located in ryegrass fields where geese naturally fed and could be concentrated with judicious scattering of fice. A total of 290 geese have been banded.

INTRODUCTION

Early efforts to capture and band white-fronted geese (*Anser albifrons*) at Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge all ended in failure. Each of these efforts made use of bait to attract specs to a *preselected site* on specially prepared gritting areas of pea and sand gravel. These sites were located within the two 300-acre refuge farm units which were planted to wheat, oats, or ryegrass. The baits used were shelled corn, ear corn, and/or rice.

It was immediately noted that white-fronts appeared extremely wary of unnatural concentrations of these grains and tended to shy away from obvious baiting attempts. The greatest concentration of specs occurred during early October when temperatures were near or above 80 degrees, and geese did not appear even remotely interested in bait. Beginning in late November or early December, the white-fronts dispersed throughout the South Louisiana rice belt and marsh lands, making banding efforts even more difficult.

EVOLUTION OF SUCCESSFUL TECHNIQUE

Commencing with the arrival of the 1971 flock of white-fronts, a concentrated study of their habits began. Observations were centered in the farm units and adjacent loafing areas where the activities and behavior patterns could be monitored. It was obvious that these geese were entirely "at home" feeding leisurely on the refuge ryegrass and in the adjacent fields of second growth rice.

Specs consistently fed into the best parts of the ryegrass stand and could be predicted with good accuracy to return several times to the same location in a field. They would alight in an area fed upon during previous feeding periods and quickly work into the lush edges that had not yet been touched. Regardless of wind direction, they always fed into the wind. These geese were very alert and sometimes even a slight disturbance caused them to move from that part of the field or abandon it entirely for several days.

Feeding movements within the rice fields had no discernable pattern. On cold blustery days, however, almost without exception, one could find specs feeding somewhere on rice gleanings and second growth rice.

It was decided then that in order to be successful in our attempts to entrap white-fronts, we were going to have to take the cannon nets to the geese. Instead of baiting, we would watch for a concentrated feeding area, and then set up the nets and rockets to cover it. To obtain maximum mobility and speed of deployment, a basic set of two 60′ x 40′ nets were prefolded and rolled, and eight WMI recoilless rockets readied to accompany them. It was also decided that the nets and rockets would have to be set up during the time the birds were away from their feeding area during mid-day. This timing eliminated disturbance of the feeding flock.

The procedures for site selection were standardized almost immediately. Observations of early morning and evening feeding indicated the most favorable locations for net emplacements. Nets were set up at approximately mid-day. Fresh droppings from the morning were useful for deciding the best net placement.

The folded nets were placed in a tire track (left from a combine) deep enough to be level with the ground, and then camouflaged with ryegrass laid along the top. It was necessary to place nets so that the birds fed into the throw area of the net without crossing over the rockets and nets. Combine chaff was piled up to mark the corners of the capture area and the detonator was aligned so that the bander could look straight down the length of nets and determine the exact moment when the largest number of birds had worked into the drop area of the nets. At a distance, from any other angle, one could not be sure of a successful shot.

Though as many as 30,000 specs have been observed feeding on the farm units they never did feed in tightly compact groups on the ryegrass as Canada geese do on a baited site. It was, therefore, necessary to monitor the smaller groups of feeding birds continuously and prepare a site quickly before successive feedings depleted the vegetation to a point less than adequate to attract a suitable concentration of birds.

During the final days of the 1972 season, observations of feeding white-fronts indicated they might accept rice bait on the proper site if it was not displayed too conspicuously. Rice was spread on the site so that it did not "mound up" and show above the ryegrass. The outer edges were lightly baited and heavier amounts were placed in close to the concealed net. It was hoped that the geese would just stumble on it and take it naturally as they were doing in adjacent rice fields.

The result was astounding. The first individuals to reach the rice fed exclusively on it, completely ignoring the ryegrass in favor of rice. Their feeding chatter, similar to that of Canada geese on a baited site, tended to attract other geese to the site where they were concentrated long enough for a fair number to be caught.

The use of rice markedly improved our chances of a site "paying off." Using no bait, 54 percent of the selected sites were fired; with rice, 75 percent were shot. Even more significant, over twice as many birds were caught per shot using rice. Though site selection must receive first priority, the addition of rice can greatly improve results.

The best opportunity for using rice as an extra ingredient should be when the birds first arrive and begin to utilize the ryegrass in large numbers. This remains to be tried and may produce exceptionally good results.

It was observed that specs did not return in any concentrations to the same area of a previous "shot." To make the most of every opportunity, two nets were employed to catch as many as possible. In the future, sites could conceivably be prepared with several nets in line or perhaps with larger nets. With the proper application of these basic techniques, the potential for a highly successful trapping program can rest almost entirely on the ingenuity, resourcefulness, and willingness of any future banders.

BANDING ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge is the only Mississippi Flyway management area currently wintering a major white-front flock. The economic importance of this flock has increased tremendously during the last decade. Through banding the void of knowledge that now exists on southern wintering white-fronts can be filled. The 290 geese captured during 1971 and 1972 are the first white-fronted geese banded in the State of Louisiana. They represent a significant step toward efficient management that will ensure the continued survival of this magnificent bird.

SUMMARY

Capture and banding of white-fronted geese is impossible with traditional, baited net-site methods. Careful study of the birds natural feeding patterns in ryegrass will, however, indicate places where the banding net can be taken to the geese. Chosen sites must be quickly prepared and camouflaged while the geese are not using the field. Lush grass is the principal attractant to the site, but larger numbers of geese can be concentrated in front of the nets by judicious baiting with rice. The best opportunity for trapping is immediately after large numbers of geese arrive on the wintering grounds while they are making initial use of grass fields.

LAW ENFORCEMENT IMPLICATIONS OF A WOOD DUCK ROOST STUDY IN LOUISIANA

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INTRODUCTION

Louisiana is a major production and wintering area for the wood duck which has traditionally constituted a large portion of the duck harvest in Louisiana. This paper deals with "roost shooting" of wood ducks which is perhaps the easiest and most popular way to harvest wood ducks. A study lasting from July, 1969 through February, 1971, was undertaken in Louisiana to evaluate the roosting flight count as an index to wood duck population trends in Louisiana (Tabberer, 1972). Data were collected on the effects of natural environmental factors and shooting on wood duck roosting habits.

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