

CANADIAN WATERFOWL BANDING PROGRAM

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This paper presented by Mr. Parker B. Smith for U. S. Game Management Agent Walter E. Price

This paper presented here today for your information and comment is not to be construed as a technical report or guide to all the ramifications of the complex business of waterfowl banding. There are far better qualified men than I to discuss matters of this nature. It is more or less one Game Management Agent's views and observations based upon close contact with juvenile ducks and geese for three summers on the Canadian breeding grounds.

A few years ago, both Federal and State waterfowl biologists felt a need for more information on the breeding, nesting, brood survival ratios, and other related data than was obtainable from sources close at hand. As a result of careful planning, the project we know as the Canadian Waterfowl Banding Program came into being. The job was too complex for the limited personnel available to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, so the interested waterfowling States sent highly qualified men to aid in the successful conduct of the project.

In any project of the magnitude of the joint Canadian Waterfowl Banding Program some criticism is bound to come. Most of the good natured, and not so good natured, grumbling seems to stem from a desire to know to just what use all the data gathered in the past has been put. Others say, "When are the various interested State conservation departments going to have access to this material?"

One answer to the critics is that every year the facts gathered are applied to the intelligent planning of the permissible harvest of waterfowl above the basic breeding nucleus. Another answer is that no two years are alike. No thinking person would base his financial affairs only on good years and forget the bad. We are dealing with a living and dynamically changing natural resource, not some inert material.

One blessing or curse of our advancing civilization and its accompanying horde of citizens is the dragline and bulldozer. A duck's world can be almost completely changed from one season to the next. How will it adapt—can it adapt? These and similar questions must be appraised for an answer. We can't blindly grope our way along and hope for salvation from some indefinite source. We must find our first answers up in that sparsely settled section of our continent which we call the prairie provinces of Canada.

Participation with the various States and dedicated individuals who so ably represent these States is an honor and privilege. They know they are helping perpetuate the great North American heritage of waterfowling. The Federal Government charges the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife with the heavy burden of being the custodian of all migratory species that pass back and forth over the boundaries of our sovereign States. Success in any great venture makes little noise but failure brings a resounding clangor and is long remembered. Cooperation, help, and understanding by all concerned is desirable—it is a necessity to prevent the Canvasback and Redhead going the way of the Dodo and Passenger Pigeon.

It was my privilege for three summers to work on the breeding grounds with some of the finest men I have ever known. They were not looking for glory or a good time. They were honest, hard-working conservationists doing a good job for a good purpose. It would be neither true nor honest to say there were never any personality clashes. There were but like with all men of high principle and purpose the problems were worked out without offending the personal dignity of anyone. Twelve to eighteen hours a day of hard manual labor would wear the patience of the most taciturn of men.

The trapping and banding of juvenile ducks and geese, plus the occasional moulting bird is a dirty, wet and hard job. The making of good drive crew members requires men in good physical and mental condition; men who play a game for the love of the sport, not for the win at any price. They are the

kind of men you want to back you up when fighting against long odds. They are the kind of men you would not be ashamed to have for your friends. I can't and won't tell you it is all hard work with no personal recompense. For the man who is interested in the process of living and enjoys his fellow man, there are rewards far beyond what he would expect in the ordinary pursuit of his normal job.

Some wardens and agents say, "The banding program is only for the biologist—it is out of our line." That might have been true twenty years ago, but not any more. All of us are biologists of a fashion. The local warden or agent represents the various departments or services with which he is connected. Hunters and sportsmen ask questions of a biological nature concerning breeding, nesting, survival and migration characteristics of waterfowl and the great majority can give accurate and factual answers to these questions.

One of the best ways to secure information on waterfowl is from personal observation, from working with the birds in all stages of development and plumage coloration. Warden, biologist, or what not will return to his State and be a better employee because of the experience gained by actually working with the birds he will see again in the Fall. Sending young men to the breeding grounds is a good and wise investment of State game departments for they will get dividends for many years in increased efficiency of their personnel. Experience on banding crews is an education and education is always a wise investment.

You ask, "What is the long range use of all the banding and nesting records from the breeding grounds?" Without going into a lengthy explanation, the answer would condense to this—after reliable flyway patterns are established from band recoveries of banded juveniles reliable brood population figures can be determined from aerial surveys. Reasonably predictable flight number figures for each flyway can be determined from the population figures, and in turn a realistic season and bag limit may be established with a minimum of time and expense. The best data is obtained from the returns of banded flightless young birds of the year. There is no doubt that they were hatched within ten minutes of latitude and longitude of the banding site.

The Canadian Waterfowl Banding Program is one of the most important practical ways we have at present to form a basis for the information we need to intelligently manage waterfowl. Data must be gathered in bad years as well as in good to get a biometric equation to fit all predictable exigencies. In the long run, the various States will reap the benefits of the joint efforts of both Federal and State agencies.

The Bureau employs competent personnel to supervise the over-all planning of the program. They use the same basic techniques that State game departments use in determining local game nesting, breeding and migrating habits. The only basic difference is that one is on a local scale with many problems and the other is on an international scale with relatively larger problems.

Prairie banding on the working level can be described as drive crews for juveniles, drive crews for moulters, dog catch crews, and special bait station crews for all classes of birds. The backbone of the effort—the infantry—is the tired, muddy, but nevertheless indispensable drive crew. I have a sentimental attachment for the drive crew, so bear with me if I slant a little in their direction.

Usually, drive crews will be given a definite objective, to wit—band as many canvasbacks and redheads as you can—pay particular attention to divers—don't pass up anything worth the effort. So armed with the tools of the trade—nets, wire, poles, traps, boats, and hope, don't forget hope in large volumes, they eagerly set forth. If all goes well and a sufficient number of bandable birds are located, the crew goes into frenzied action. The birds are herded into a close bunch, leads and traps set, and then the delicate job of shooing the little ducklings into the trap commences. Most of the time if there is more than one duck, you have more than one duck's opinion of where he should go. It becomes a struggle of man's mind and strength over a duck's intelligence and fortitude. Don't bet any money on the outcome of this clash of wills. As the struggle reaches the climax, the crew relies on the experience of the crew-leader. After the results are tallied, the crewleader's intelligence sometimes comes under a shadow of suspicion even by the crewleader himself.

After about two weeks of banding and eating fine dust, the crew becomes a smooth working unit. By that time, every crewmember knows what the others will do under any given set of circumstances. There is usually an unofficial and good natured competition between crews to see which crew will band the most birds. At the end of the banding season when the crews return to Regina, scores are compared—some with a little tinge of pride, some with chagrin, but all with the knowledge of a job well done.

The supervisor of the banding teams assigns territories of prime importance to the crews. Ordinarily, the assistant crewleader of one year returns as crewleader the next year to the same area with which he is familiar. This arrangement saves much fruitless searching for broods in nonproductive country. Provincial conservation officers have noted during their patrols the most likely areas of duck production and can aid the crews by directing them to known duck broods. Nearly all these officers are anxious to help in the banding program. Many valuable and lifelong friends are made among our fellow conservation officers north of the border.

The young of some species of ducks look very much alike to the casual observer. Pintails and baldpates resemble each other, some individual canvasbacks and redheads are hard to tell apart, and the green-winged and blue-winged teal are separated by bill characters and size. A waterfowl man really doesn't know his ducks until he has worked with the young birds.

Eclipse plumage in some species can cause confusion in identification. The breeding grounds are the best places we know to observe large numbers of ducks in this summer coloration. One can become familiar with the courtship antics of the ruddy male arrayed in his reddish-brown feathers and his bright blue bill. The lowly coot takes on dignity with its brood of the ugliest youngsters in birddom.

The breeding grounds have been the subject for many scholarly papers and will be for many more. There is a wealth of material for talks to be delivered to sportsmen's groups. The clear skies and bright sunshine enhance the quality of color slides that the photographically inclined bander may care to take. Potholes, sloughs and lakes created as a result of glacial action help make the prairie sections of Canada places of wild beauty and home to thousands of wildfowl.

Travel in Canada's prairie provinces is similar, in many ways, to that in our own West a few years ago. Many of the conveniences of life that we take for granted are lacking in many parts of Canada's Middle West. These deficiencies are being overcome in a rapid and vigorous way. A friendlier group of people you will never find. They accept you for a friend until you prove otherwise. Canadians are smart, industrious, and willing to help a stranger in the spirit of the frontier. You will find they are interested in you and what you are doing. At the slightest provocation, they will drop what they are doing to try to help.

Living conditions for banding crews vary with the section of the country in which they are working. Most of the towns have hotels, some have modern motels, all at reasonable rates. Some crews prefer to live under canvas out in the field and come into town on the weekends for showers and real beds. It all depends on the preferences of the crewmembers.

Western Canadian cooking doesn't compare with the products of the restaurants of New Orleans or Biloxi, but it is nourishing and we haven't lost a crewmember so far. One Louisiana member of my crew brought his dark roast coffee with him as an antidote against homesickness. It must have worked for he attacked a skunk. I will leave it up to you as to who won the encounter.

Men who work outdoors and are used to the little discomforts of life will have no trouble adapting to the prairies. A little excess poundage will be removed here and there and leg muscles will get hard. You will be surprised to find that you have muscles you didn't know you had.

All of the effort expended by the aerial reconnaissance, drive, moult and dog crews does not wind up in some dark basement. The results are a very valuable management tool to aid in setting the bag limits and seasons as well as an indicator to sporting clubs, motel operators, sporting goods dealers, and hunting guides to plan their year's operations. This has a direct relation to many waterfowling States' economy.

The aesthetic value of hunting and fishing has been displayed before you by well known writers and it needs no elaboration by me. Sure, we like to hunt and fish; we like to eat and sleep too, but eating and sleeping are not in much danger. We are conservationists in the finest sense; it is our work; it is our life.

Participation in the program helps each conservationist to understand the problems a duck faces just coming into a harsh, competitive world. He will understand the problems and chances of a duck ever reaching adulthood, and its chances of ever returning to the ancestral home in the North. It would be an unusual man indeed who could not return home and not be an ardent advocate of waterfowl conservation.

PUBLIC RELATIONS—ITS VALUE AS A TOOL OF ENFORCEMENT

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I am most appreciative for the opportunity of speaking to you today and wish to extend special thanks to Bill Davis and his committee. I realize that many of you have given up some fun along the Mississippi Coast to attend this session, but rest assured, there is ample time left to take care of what money you brought.

The role of public relations in the game and fish law enforcement program is far more important than most people realize. Not only does good public relations allow you to do a better job of apprehending violators and gaining court convictions; it also works to reduce the desire of the hunting and fishing public to violate the law in the first place. Certainly without good public relations your job would be far more difficult.

In preparing this paper I caught myself wondering just what is meant by public relations. I knew that it meant the working with the public to gain greater support for a program, but for a formal definition I turned to Mr. Webster. His definition stated: "The activities of a corporation, union, government, or other organization in building and maintaining sound and productive relations with special publics such as customers, employees, or stockholders, and with the public at large, so as to adapt itself to its environment and interpret itself to society."

Certainly the above definition includes the work of the conservation officer for he deals with a special public and finds it necessary to mold this public to an understanding of the job to be done. For anyone to think that he can do the very best work without public understanding and acceptance is ridiculous. Too often in the past conservation employees, both in the enforcement and technical field, have gone about their duties with an air of the "public be damned". This attitude not only hindered the specific task of the individual but cast a reflection on the entire organization for which he worked. Experience is a good teacher, and through the years qualified enforcement officers have learned the value of a cooperative public and have found the job of game law enforcement much easier where a good public relations program is in effect.

Who is responsible for the administration of a good public relations program? Some employees seem to think the job should be handled entirely by the Information and Education Section; others feel that the supervisors should take a part, while more and more are coming to realize that everyone is responsible if success is to be had.

For any employee of an organization to think that he is unimportant in a successful public relations program is a grave error. It has been proven time and again that all the good work of an entire group can quickly be destroyed by a caustic remark of one individual. No sound public relations program can be administered without a high spirit of cooperation of everyone within the organization.