

CONSERVATION

Saving the Ducks

Intelligent Action at Last Being Taken to Save Diminishing Wild Life From Complete Extinction

By DR. FRANK THONE

See Front Cover

WILD ducks, flying northward this spring toward their nesting grounds, will sail over a land that has been dedicated to a New Deal for them and for all their wildlife neighbors in feathers and fur. Not only the "forgotten man" is getting some kind of a break, but also the hunted and harried bird and beast. The Government is "doing something for ducks."

It is high time, too. Our national assets of wildlife are at as critical a point as were our national assets of cash and credit, in those memorable few days when President Roosevelt, remarking that what was needed was "action, and action *now*," proceeded to take drastic steps to pull our drifting economic craft away from the rocks that seemed within an inch of wrecking it. There is a run on the First National Bank of Wildlife at exactly the time when its living assets, partly as the result of past bad policy, partly through unforeseeable natural disaster, are at their lowest ebb. Something must be done, and done quickly, not merely to hold our stocks at their present poverty level, but to increase and restore them to something like their one-time opulent state. It can be done, but it must be done today and not tomorrow.

"Ding" Takes Hold

When the President moved to prop up our tottering banking structure, he used existing governmental machinery to a large extent, putting into it determined and decisive men who knew what needed to be done and would lose no time in doing it. Similarly, when the shaky state of our wildlife reserves made itself evident, an existing agency, the Biological Survey, a bureau of the Department of Agriculture, was put in charge. Or rather, it was continued in charge, for the Biological Survey always has had as one of its functions the study and conservation of game birds and animals. But it was made more efficient through a number of internal changes and innovations.

Also, it was given, as a new chief, a man of determination and decision; one who could find out what needed to be done and would lose no time in doing it. This was Jay N. Darling, better known as "Ding," outstanding American cartoonist.

It seemed rather strange to many, at first, that this primarily scientific bureau of the Government should be headed by a non-scientist, eminent though he might be in another field. But Secretary Wallace, who made the appointment, knew what he was about. He and "Ding" are fellow-townsmen and fellow-newspapermen, and in their years of contact Wallace had known intimately of the cartoonist's keen and vigorous interest in outdoor life, of his decades of leadership in conservation organizations, and of his ability to win the personal loyalty of his associates and to get things going and keep them going full steam.

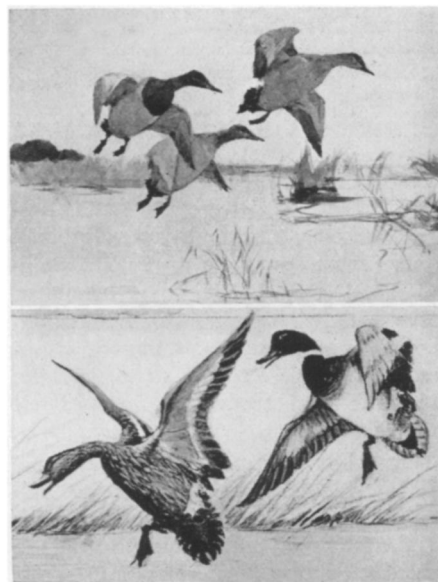
Inventory and Balance

"Ding's" approach to the problem was realistic and businesslike.

"What are we going to do about it?" he asked. "First, let's take an inventory and balance our books, and where the supply is short immediately plan to restore it to a normal stock; where it is plentiful, let's find it out and benefit by it. It is entirely possible to do so without cutting in on the public or private precincts of anyone.

"There are varying opinions as to whether we have more ducks or lamentably less than ever. And the names the two debating teams call each other are something awesome. The facts to convince the opposing factions are not available. Let's get them."

So everybody who had anything to do with ducks was in one way or another drafted into service. Last fall, for the first time, a dollar Federal hunting license was levied, to obtain funds for the building up of a national wildlife domain. This license was payable by the purchase of a "duck stamp" to be stuck on the hunter's State game license. Every purchaser of a duck stamp was asked to report the number



DUCK STAMP DESIGNS

Below, drawing for the 1934 Duck Stamp, by Mr. Darling; above, design for the current year's stamp, by Frank W. Benson, well known wildlife artist.

of ducks he killed. Some squawked; but all reported. Owners of "baiting grounds," where ducks are lured by food spread on the water, were given their license upon agreement that they would report the number of birds killed on their premises. State game commissions were solicited for estimates of game killed, by states.

It was not expected that anything like a high accuracy could be attained by these means, but at least some kind of an estimate could be got together. And there would be the incidental advantage of getting the sportsmen, individually and personally, into the game of "doing something for the ducks," themselves.

But even before the shooting-season census was undertaken, the Biological Survey's own field scientists were out on an even more important job. Together with informed and interested volunteer workers, they were assembling facts about the ducks and other migratory birds on their breeding grounds in the North.

Most ducks, geese, etc., rear their young in the waters that run toward the Arctic. In the Canadian North, and far up into Alaska they breed, and in the northernmost states of our own Union. Along these streams and among these

marshes and lakes tramped and paddled the men of the Biological Survey, observing, counting, taking notes, reporting to Washington headquarters.

What they found was disheartening—in some cases downright appalling. Everywhere the results of over-shooting for many years, of the destruction of feeding and breeding grounds by drainage, and latterly of several successive years of drought, were depressingly apparent.

Empty Breeding Grounds

W. C. Henderson, veteran naturalist and associate chief of the Survey, was sweeping and emphatic in his statement before an international convention of game commissioners: "Without exception, each naturalist who studied conditions in Canada found the breeding stock there insufficient to occupy the areas that are still favorable for nesting . . . The immense breeding area north of the fifty-fourth parallel is beyond the drought zone and is largely in its primeval state, well-supplied with food, and unvexed by settlement, agriculture, or drainage. Its only need for waterfowl production on a vast scale is an adequate breeding population."

And the breeding population was not there. Mr. Henderson quoted one of his own associates, Edward A. Preble, who has known the Canadian duck country for a third of a century. Mr. Preble reported from the field that the territory is now not more than ten per cent occupied.

The depleted waterfowl population



DISTRESS SIGNAL

"Ding" Darling, head of the Biological Survey, is not only an able administrator but an effective propagandist for his cause.

has had a new and extremely dangerous drain imposed during the past summer of great drought, the Survey's field workers found. The worst of the drought area, covering the northern part of the Great Plains in this country and the southern prairie provinces in Canada, contains at least parts of the breeding grounds of most waterfowl species. The Biological Survey prepared a series of maps, vividly outlining the situation. On the outline of the continent, the breeding ground of each species was laid out in cross-hatching. Over this, the area where drought prevented nesting for that species last summer was covered with solid black. The black zones of death blot out anywhere from a fourth to a half the total possible breeding range of some species; and no kind of duck is shown as having wholly escaped this black excise.

South With the Ducks

The Survey field men did not consider their research at an end when the diminished squadrons of ducks flapped southward last fall. They followed them. To the lagoons of Texas, to the marshes of Louisiana, to the reedy lakes of Florida, even to the distant peninsula of Yucatan they followed them, and there they are with them now, still observing, recording, reporting back to headquarters. By the time the ice breaks on northern rivers, and the alders and pussy-willows blossom into the chill early spring air up in Canada, Uncle Sam will know more about his flocks of wild ducks and other fowl than he has ever known before. He will be able to do something about it, with intelligence based on information.

What can be done about it? Several things. If present shooting seasons are at the wrong time, or too long, or allow too large a bag limit, regulations can be changed. If on the other hand the claims of some men are true, that there are surpluses of ducks at least in some parts of the country, then the restrictions can be relaxed a bit, so long as the kill is not allowed to exceed the reasonable expectable increase through breeding.

That sort of thing of course has been done for a long time, though never with as much information as is now being accumulated. But it is not enough. Regulating the killing of ducks does let larger flocks go through toward the breeding grounds, and if those breeding grounds are in the Far North, all is well and good. But if you have a species that has its natural habitat in a

region now largely cultivated or exploited for timber, all is not so good. As "Ding" saltily remarked on one occasion, "Ducks do not lay eggs on farm fence posts."

In the days of our enthusiastic expansionism in farming, something like seventeen million acres of marsh, lake and river-bottom land in the North-Central states were drained and turned into plowland. They produced no more wild ducks or any other game. Last summer, when the drought was at its height, farmers on some of those drained lands went out shooting. They were not shooting ducks. They were shooting their own cattle. To spare them the agony of death by thirst, in a region that once had plenty of water. It was one of the bitterest scenes of the whole bitter drama of our national misuse of land.

The proposal is to get some of that land back into at least a semblance of its natural state. With emergency funds made available at the outset, and augmented now from the proceeds of the "duck stamps" and other sources, a million or more of those seventeen million drained acres, unprofitable, submarginal farm lands now, are being purchased and turned back into marsh and lake. The buying is being done without shouts or trumpeting, and the areas under consideration are kept confidential, lest real estate speculators, who profited by luring the farmers into them, profit again by forestalling Government purchasers and getting the farmers' options first, to hold for a fancy price. But the purchase of the land to give back to the ducks is going on steadily, and the ducks quack aloud for joy.

Not For Ducks Alone

This giving the country back to the ducks is not for the ducks alone. Not even for their companions, the other migratory waterfowl. They are important enough in themselves, but they are also symbols, representatives. They hold proxy for the non-migratory upland birds as well, and for the fur-bearing animals of all places and all degree. Their winnings will be shared by grouse and bobwhite, by wild turkey and deer, by beaver and muskrat, by martin, mink and badger, even by that socially shunned but nevertheless valuable citizen the skunk. In doing something for ducks, the Biological Survey is doing something for all wildlife.

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