

DUCK BANDING

Len Dreger

THIS SUMMER the Museum assisted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife duck-banding crew. I thought it would be interesting to readers to know how this banding is done.

The season for this type of banding is during the last two weeks of July and the first two of August. At this time, when the ducks are losing their primaries, they are flightless. Different species vary as to the time of eclipse plumage and consequently there are always a few ducks on the wing. During this critical period ducks stay in the larger bodies of water where there is plenty of cover. At this stage, as their only effective means of protection, they become experts in hiding and diving.



—Photo by Dreger.

We made one drive on Eyebrow Lake and another on Chaplin Creek, which leads into Lake Johnson, near Coderre. The drive on Chaplin Creek resulted in trapping over 200 birds. On some successful drives on the larger lakes fifteen hundred or more birds are captured at one time.

A crew of about seven men are employed. A camp is established in the area to be worked. An airboat is used. It is a large flat boat, driven by a propeller and an airplane motor and is quite capable of travelling in very shallow water and able to pass through the heavy stands of marsh reeds.

An area where the ducks are plentiful, and where there is a fair amount of cover is selected. Wire netting about three feet high and

several hundred yards long is strung out into the lake at right angles to the shore. Aluminum rods are forced into the muddy bottom to hold the netting above the water, the bottom of the wire being a few inches below the surface. The purpose of this lead is to drive the ducks to this and then along it to the shore and into the trap. The trap is a circular pen, made similarly of netting, about fifteen feet in diameter, with a narrow entrance of about five inches. Another lead runs parallel to the shore and to the trap. These two leads form a V into which the birds are driven until they reach the trap. The entrance being narrow, they do not find their way out.

After the leads and traps have been set up, preparations are made for the drive. Three men approach in the airboat, from one to two miles back from the net, while other men walk along the shore and join them. These men are dropped off, armpit or waste-deep in the water, and spread out across the area. Rubber boots and heavy waders are seldom worn—an old pair of trousers and running shoes are more suitable and less tiring. Each man carries a noise maker to scare the ducks ahead of him, and a rod with a flag to hold above the reeds so the man in the airboat can tell where they are. The airboat works back and forth behind the men, making a great deal of noise and frightening the ducks towards the trap. As the lead is neared, on or two men are placed near the end, out in the water, to prevent any birds from passing by the end. The drive takes from two to four hours, so by the time the last birds are forced into the trap the men are glad to get out of the water.

When all the birds are in the pen the entrance is closed and the men assume their positions. One man keeps the records, one opens bands and hands them to the two or three banders. Another catches the ducks and, calling out the species name, age and sex, hands them to the banders. As the birds are banded they are released to carry on their normal life.