

Dogs in the Duck Factory

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Hunters who are enjoying this year's near-record crop of waterfowl may tender part of their thanks to some prairie-bred dogs who have played an important part in the joint Canadian-United States waterfowl management program . . . This year (1956), retrievers and spaniels were used in the banding programs of the Canadian Wildlife Service, co-operating with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, provincial game branches, Ducks Unlimited, and the Wildlife Management Institute. Most of the dogs were used in special study areas spotted across the southern parts of the Prairie Provinces in the area which has become known to conservation people as the "duck factory."

Kindersley, Saskatchewan, is the site of one of these study areas. Here biologists of the Canadian Wildlife Service have been using dogs for the past four years. This year their partners were Rusty, a four-year-old Labrador-golden retriever cross; Widgeon, a Chesapeake Bay retriever, and Chips, a Labrador retriever pup.

The importance of the part the dogs play can best be understood by looking at the purposes of the special study areas. The first objective is for ground crews to determine, by census, the size of the breeding populations in May and June and the number of young produced in July and August . . . It is necessary to find out approximately what proportion of the ducks actually on the ground is recorded by the aircrews who conduct continent-wide surveys to determine waterfowl population trends and upon whose data hunting regulations for each year are largely based . . . The comparisons between the two figures assume, of course that the ground crews are getting accurate counts of the birds present. Without dogs, the men have always found it difficult enough to feel they were making a complete count even when they are "working" pairs of breeding ducks. With broods, the problem is greater because of the first sign of any disturbance mallard and pintail hens are liable to leave the water and head across country with their broods. If the dogs were

not used to find and retrieve at least some of the members of these broods, they would go unrecorded.

The second objective of the ground study areas is to keep in close contact with ducks through the season, and to work on specific phases of the life history of one or several species. Dogs are a valuable asset, finding nests both by accidentally flushing the hens and by scenting them. Last spring at Kindersley, Widgeon found four mallard hens on their nests, thereby saving the crew the trouble of setting traps to catch and band them. The birds were first located by scent at distances up to 10 yards, and then either caught in the brush or picked out of the air.

It is in the banding of broods, however, both on the study areas and by roving crews, that dogs really come into their own. Since 1954, all the organizations banding in Canada have directed their efforts toward getting adequate samples of flightless young mallards. This species is the most abundant North American duck as well as the biggest contributor to the hunter's bag. In Canada, it is also the species causing most of the damage to the western farmer's swathed wheat and barley crops. But the type of banding done in the past voluminous as it has been, has yielded little information about the relative importance of the route taken and the wintering areas used by mallard populations from specific portions of the breeding ground. More of this information, as well as data on variations in shooting pressure from year to year, is still needed to bridge the gap between waterfowl surveys and hunting regulations.

At Kindersley, more than 3,000 flightless young mallards have been banded in the past four years by Canadian Wildlife Service crews using dogs like Rusty, Widgeon and Chips. Another 2,000 have been caught by herding or driving broods into traps. The dogs were used only on small sloughs containing fewer than half a dozen mallard broods. Traps were used for larger numbers on areas large enough so that the mallards would condescend to remain while a trap was set up.

Most of this banding was done

in a block of agricultural land some 10 miles square, and it was accomplished by one crew in 1953, two in 1954 and 1955, and three in 1956. The crews have consisted of one or two men and a dog, although one man has sometimes handled two dogs. The daily catch has ranged from two to 75 mallards per crew and has averaged 29.

To get a well-distributed sample of young mallards, just about every slough in the area has to be worked—whether or not the birds are seen in it. In many cases a mallard brood loafing on the shore will turn around and walk into the grass as soon as a vehicle stops or a banding crew appears; such a brood is seldom noted until the dog starts retrieving individuals from it. On sloughs with no emergent vegetation, mallard broods on the water will usually head for shore if they feel that they can escape unnoted. If not they may head for the deepest water, where they have to be carefully herded to shore either by wading or by canoe before the dog can work effectively.

When on land the dog works the near-shore cover on the first trip around the slough, and then the area up to 300 yards back from shore on the second coverage. As a dog approaches a duck, his tailwagging ceases up until he is at close range; then he suddenly comes to an abrupt halt, tensely waiting a few seconds for his eyes to see or his ears to hear what his nose tells him is there. He then pounces in the general area, locates the duck, works it out of cover and carries it to the nearest handler.

It might seem that when working with these "upland waterfowl" the

field men should be able to do their own duck catching, but this is not possible. One reason is that the birds usually rush into the thickest-cover bushes, grass or standing crops. Another reason is that they seldom stop near the water's edge, and within a matter of minutes may be scattered within a one-mile radius of the shore . . . And if the crew needs another excuse, they can only admit that they just don't have the nose for the job. The field books show that while each member of the two-man crew was finding one mallard, the dog had found and caught eleven. When dogs learn to attach bands and keep the records, biologists will be out of the mallard-banding business.

While dogs work best on land, they are also efficient in shallow water. After a duck has dived three or four times, the dog is usually in a position where he can put his head under water and come up with the bird. In water deep enough so that the dog has to swim, he can still scent birds in dense aquatic vegetation, but here it is usually the handler rather than the dog who does the actual catching.

Training dogs for this work differs little from that required for field trails . . . Any retriever with a good nose, basic obedience training and at least a rough idea of hand signals should develop into a good duck banding dog if he has what a dog handler calls a "soft mouth" and if he is otherwise gentle with live birds.

As this season progresses down the flyways, hunting dogs from many of the 26 states visited by Kindersley-raised mallards will be retrieving banded birds that have once before been handled by one of three other dogs—Rusty, Widgeon or Chips.

1957 Summer Banding

by DR. STUART HOUSTON

My summer banding excursion resulted in a total of 1845 birds being banded, (about a thousand less than last year). These included 876 Ring-billed Gulls, 342 White Pelicans, 110 Common Terns, 75 Double-crested Cormorants, 73 California Gulls, and 10 Franklin's Gulls. The latter were banded at Beaufield Marsh, south of Perrobert on June 25th, and the

next day Frank Switzer and I took part in a drive of moulting ducks with Bernie Gollop's Canadian Wildlife Service crew aided by Tom Sterling's Ducks Unlimited air boat. A by-product of this drive was 24 adult and 34 immature Eared Grebes. Five moulting male Ring-necked Ducks were also banded.

Little Quill Lake showed a sur-