

Wetlands for Waterfowl

Good Fences Make Good Neighbours

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Good fences make good neighbours. Few will challenge that statement. A fence is a barrier that will either be an enclosure or an exclosure depending on the need. It may be one of posts and wire constructed to protect the purity of a herd of registered cattle; it may be a fire-guard set to prevent the forward progress of a bush or range fire. A fence may be an inoculation of a serum to inhibit the growth of disease organisms, or it may even be organized and managed wetland areas where conditions may be so favorable that a migrant Mallard or Pintail duck will be induced to stay put rather than forage into fields where unharvested crops of grain lie in swath. Every fence, of course, must be a good fence to provide the service for which, it was intended.

One example of inadequate "fencing" is the kind of provision made for waterfowl with relation to expanding agricultural interests. This situation goes back to the signing of the Migratory Birds Treaty and the Migratory Birds Convention Act by Canada and the United States. Under the act a permit to scare migratory birds causing or likely to cause damage to agricultural interests could be issued by any authorized game officer to a person suffering damage. If the marauding birds could not be scared away, a killing permit could be issued. No thought was given to providing suitable habitat for birds scared away from any given area. This is probably understandable as there were then thousands of marshes and sloughs scattered throughout the settled area of the prairie provinces. The deficiency and absence of natural habitat for waterfowl belonged to the future.

Appearing first in about 1920, the conflict between ducks, Sandhill Cranes and other migratory birds, and agriculture has grown each year in direct proportion to the withdrawal of wetlands from the prairie scene. Encroachment of urban expansion and the desire to bring more arable land under the plow has threatened the very existence of

many forms of wildlife. Naturally they fight back, and in so doing, they have changed many of their primitive habits, especially those involving kinds of food eaten and time of feeding. Ducks, especially Mallards and Pintails, have developed a taste for cereal grains and are quite capable of feeding in the dark. This flanking attack is the reason for the breach between landowners and migratory waterfowl, more pronounced during periods of unfavorable harvesting weather. The damage caused can run into millions of dollars. The fence which seemed adequate in earlier days has not been rebuilt to keep abreast with changing conditions and the demands of civilization.

In a food-hungry world where more mouths appear daily, the philosophy has been to try to meet the challenge by providing increasing quantities of food. The place that western Canada and part of the United States hold as quality grain producers is well known. Land that could economically be brought into production was wrested from the wild, and wildlife habitat and range shrank accordingly. The major grain producing areas of North America are also the cradle of the continental waterfowl populations so that wetland habitat developed for agriculture meant that the birds and other wildlife had to make the best of their smaller holdings.

A changing world with more mechanization and automation brought an additional hunger, that for recreation to make the best use of leisure time. Robert W. Service called this "hunger, not of the belly kind, to be banished with bacon and beans." Mandatory holidays, earlier retirement age and shorter work weeks produced a much greater demand for areas and facilities for hunting, fishing, camping, etc. The value of resources that provide these forms of relaxation is now greater than ever before.

After years of land reclamation and wetland drainage in an effort to produce more food, the ever-rising

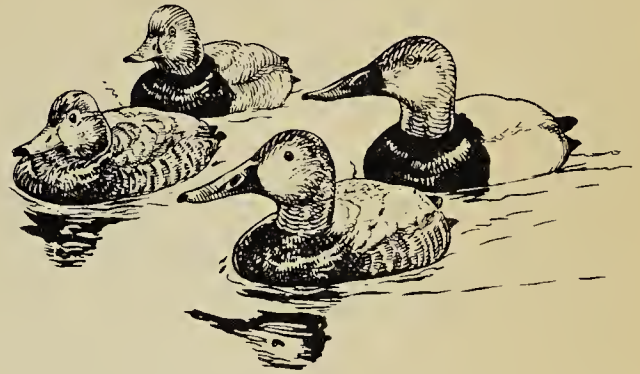
conflict with wildlife would indicate that some soul-searching is required to provide the best resource use. Some drainage has been good business and has proven its worth over the years, but many wetlands re-claimed for agriculture have proved worthless and have had to be abandoned. The fences need re-modelling to meet present day needs.

Basically, the waterfowl problem is one of habitat. Without wetlands for nesting, resting and wintering, waterfowl production drops drastically and there is heavy mortality among the birds which do survive. As a result conservationists are trying to preserve waterfowl by acquisition of suitable wetlands and the stopping of subsidies and incentives for drainage where the practice is harmful to wildlife.

The Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources recognizes that provision must be made for the maintenance of waterfowl habitat and that landowners must be compensated for their part in the program. In short, what is wanted is a secure home for ducks with an increased income for farmers. Most authorities in the wildlife field agree that major flights of continental waterfowl are doomed unless adequate habitat preservation measures are taken within the next few years.

A committee composed of personnel of the U.S. Departments of the Interior and of Agriculture has been set up to confer with the Canadian Departments of National Resources and Agriculture in working out an international arrangement for preserving waterfowl wetlands in both nations. Under consideration, for example, are ways and means whereby farmers receive some added income for assisting with the plan. Compensation payments could take several forms—payment for not cultivating around potholes and sloughs where waterfowl breed, payment for providing open areas for feeding places to hold waterfowl rather than having them forage into swathed fields. In some cases, buying land from the farmer or leasing it for long periods, might be the solution. Besides the direct benefit of added income to the farmer there would be the indirect benefit of

Don't Shoot These Ducks



lessening the conflict between those interested in waterfowl and the farmers whose crops are damaged at harvest time.

The partners in the compact to preserve waterfowl resources include the interested departments of government of Canada and the United States and the corresponding state and provincial agencies. Then there are sportsmen's organizations, farmers and landowners and their cooperative associations, both individual and municipal. Waterfowl, too, will sit in as a full partner and will react according to the wisdom of the decisions made by the other partners. The program is on the planning board and it is most important that the effort be adequate to protect the interests of all parties concerned.

In view of the fact that the program will develop as it proves itself acceptable, there is a need for all those who are concerned to be conscious of the steps being taken and to have a chance to express themselves. To this end it is suggested that every farmer who has an interest in waterfowl discuss the proposal with other farmers, talk it over at municipal council meetings, confer with their federal and provincial government representatives, and the nearest organized sportsman's club. This should be done **now**. Time is the essence with the waterfowl resource.

It must not be too little and too late.