

Subject: AWF report - difference of opinion or ignoring of facts and consequences?

Would it improve Ark. duck hunting to immediately have several hundred thousand more ducks in the state to hunt? Then, read on!

It has been suggested to us that those of us who view the new refuges and sanctuaries as an imminent danger to the quality, if not the very existence, of our duck hunting have merely a difference of opinion with the AWF report which opines that increased duck hunting pressure is the culprit and further opines that the refuges and sanctuaries should be left alone. Since many in this group are relatively new to it and missed much of the initial info, you should be aware that we, too, have done extensive research and investigation, and that we have developed FACTS which clearly show these refuges and sanctuaries to be a significant problem. Furthermore, if we are wrong changing the management of these refuges to what it was until 10 years or less ago should have no permanent effect, but if the AWF is wrong about not doing something about these refuges, they are damning many of us to no duck hunting and perhaps all of us to a lesser quality hunting than we have historically enjoyed.

FACTS:

1. There are 3 sanctuaries involved, Bald Knob, Little Dixie, and Plunkett.
2. Unlike our earlier refuges such as White River or Big Lake which are nearly wholly in natural cover such as timber and lakes, these new sanctuaries are substantially in agricultural land which continues to be farmed leaving not only grain residue where it is combined, but also significant acreages of grain which is not combined.
3. Little Dixie and Plunkett only came "on line" in 1993 with Bald Knob following in 1995. Originally they just flooded with the Cache and Little Red Rivers and dried out when the rivers went down. Since opening, however, they have continually been adding drainage control structures and relifting or pumping capabilities and are now flooded throughout the season with this flooded acreage increasing annually in most years.
4. These sanctuaries now hold significant #'s of ducks throughout the season from Nov. through Jan. with their peak #'s running from 400,000 - 725,000 over the last 5 years accounting for a significant % of the state's total duck population in all these years, 49% or more, sometimes far more, at the peak. One has to go back to 1997 to find the peak population as low as 200,000. (That was the last great or even good season we enjoyed on the lower Black River where we had come to expect good seasons as our norm and great seasons frequently in over 80 years of hunting by us or our predecessors.)
5. The ducks are not leaving these sanctuaries in significant #'s at all when the Cache and White Rivers flood, nor Black River for that matter. All 3 rivers flooded the last 2 seasons with hardly any ducks leaving the sanctuaries and going to the floodwater. (This is truly noteworthy in that historically, without exception, the Cache, White, and Black

covered up with ducks if they were flooded, even in the dust bowl days of the '30's or the worst of populations since. The one verity in Ark. duck hunting was that ducks would go to floodwater, and that floods on the bigger rivers tended to pull them off the smaller rivers.)

6. Once on these sanctuaries, the ducks are leaving in mass only in the event of: A) the water freezing up; B) migration to La. (which may be "A" again); or C) duck season ending for the year. (This and all facts above were derived from federal and state info and reports.)

7. For the most part they are either not flying out of these sanctuaries on a daily basis at all or not flying out until "late in the evening" [after shooting hours]. (Historically ducks flew in and out of the White River Refuge almost daily and a significant portion of these flights in and out and to the ducks' destination occurred during shooting hours.) (Up to this point all of these facts were obtained through federal and state info and reports, but this is based not only on a notation in a federal report, but also from a # of personal observations of people in the areas.)

8. The quality of duck hunting within roughly 35 - 40 air miles of these sanctuaries has **DRASTICALLY** declined during the last 5 years, nosediving the last 2 or 3 and has substantially declined out to at least 50 air miles. The relative mileages are increasing annually to the point where absolutely legendary holes as far away as Weiner and Stuttgart have only fair hunting now, and those of us closer have virtually no decent hunting even in large acreage, relatively unpressured situations. (These facts were garnered through obtaining dozens upon dozens of personal observations or "anecdotes" if you will, obtaining #'s from duck picking services, obtaining observations and #'s from hunting clubs, landowners, farmers and hunters, discussions with state game wardens and even with one high placed federal employee and 2 members of the AWF committee. We did not find a single exception to this within the "dead zone". It should be noted that these mileages are conservative, but it may depend on the direction from the sanctuaries and whether there is a direct migration route such as from one river flowing directly to another, etc. It is our opinion that this has affected the whole state, but we feel we've clearly established the more conservative mileages as fact.)

CONCLUSION: After taking into account these facts, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to conclude anything other than these sanctuaries are having a devastating effect on a sport we all love. Let me reemphasize: this is not based on opinion.

ISSUES: The AWF report takes the position that the sanctuaries under their present management are good for the resource, i.e., ducks. Is this unquantifiable and arguably marginal benefit to the ducks worth decimating duck hunting over a large part of Ark. and adversely affecting it over a larger area? If it is, wouldn't ending duck season altogether be even better for the resource and the logical extension of their argument?

CONSEQUENCES: If we are correct, and nothing is done to change the way of doing things, the following problems either are occurring or may likely occur:

- 1: The ducks may lose their imprinting for their traditional migratory routes and haunts and instead imprint on these sanctuaries in growing #'s & %'s.
2. A cataclysmic epidemic could occur when these mammoth #'s of ducks are concentrating annually in the same places which could kill off thousands of ducks.
3. Duck hunting could be lost as a sport in a large portion of Ark. and diminished severely in a much larger area, if not the whole state.
4. Outstanding public hunting areas such as Hurricane Lake/Henry Gray, Black Swamp/Rex Hancock, Shirey Bay-Rainey Brake, will continue to be duck deserts even when conditions are favorable, and others such as Bayou Meto and Felsenthal will be impacted.
5. Large acreages of duck habitat, far exceeding that in the sanctuaries, could be lost because the quality of hunting there is not sufficient to be worth the cost of managing, maintaining, or developing that habitat.

If we are wrong, then what will it hurt to change the way these refuges are managed since ducks got along quite well without them for less than 10 years out of the last several thousand?

POSSIBLE ADVERSE CONSEQUENCE: As a side note, virtually all of our interviewees and correspondents also mentioned that ducks had just started working differently in a # of ways and none of them for the better. To a person they credited this to habits they'd developed staying in these refuges and imprinting on conditions like that. I suppose too much pressure could explain this phenomenon as well, but many of these persons were extremely knowledgeable duck hunters of many, many years experience, and what they described was different than the call shy, hole shy, or decoy shy pressured ducks we have all seen in the past by which we ID'd pressured ducks. Admittedly we can't say that this rises above the level of opinion even though we consider this extremely informed opinion.

CRITIQUE: There is no doubt the AWF put in a great deal of time and effort on their report in studying this issue, but we did too, particularly with regard to the sanctuary issue. Even though we would all agree that pressure is inimical to really good duck hunting, it is clearly their opinion and opinion only that pressure is the major controllable problem to Ark. duck hunting and what should be done about it.

We don't claim to have all the answers and would admit that there are probably other factors, including pressure, at work in this decline and some long term factors such as shortstopping ducks in grained or other sanctuaries up north which could impact hunting here even more severely on a long term basis. (If any of you have not received copies of our maps of all the federal refuges and grained refuges which could allow ducks to stairstep their way down the flyway, let me know, and I will send them to you.) We do

think pressure problems, if any, would have to be addressed on at least a flyway, if not national, basis to have any significant effect here or any where else.

However, the AWF report makes a glaring error in ignoring the FACTS which have been developed about these new sanctuaries and their substantial deleterious effects which are killing many of us right now and which is far more severe in consequence than any increase in pressure . It also ignores the profound consequences if we are right and they are wrong while ignoring the relatively benign consequences if the opposite is true. (Additionally there are other criticisms which could be made as to certain aspects of the AWF report, but these are not entirely germane to this issue.)

If telemetry studies are necessary, they should be to establish the status quo management of these sanctuaries, not to justify a change when the facts are so overwhelming that it is necessary.

BOTTOM LINE: The AWF has made suggestions about what may or may not be a problem and what may or may not be appropriate or effective as solutions. We are talking about a factual, documented problem, the solution to which would immediately free up several hundred thousand ducks for Ark. duck hunters. If my area (lower Black River) or your area got even 5% of these ducks, it could make for a respectable season: imagine what 20% would do.

FINAL: I am attaching a copy of our report with the annual #'s and direct quotes from state and federal sources in case any of you don't have it. Also we will very soon be coming out with a list of suggestions for appropriate action and management of these sanctuaries so as not to unfairly impact the sport we love. These suggestions would have been out several months ago, but one of the AWF committee members asked us to hold off until their report was done because "we would like it so much."