



# DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

## INFORMATION SERVICE

### FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release TUESDAY, JANUARY 21, 1941.

#### OLD-TIME MARKET HUNTER REMINISCES; SAYS PROTECTION BRINGING GAME BACK

"I killed more than 1,000 waterfowl in 1 week and shipped the whole lot to New Orleans for \$2.40 a dozen, or \$.40 a pair. That was the largest number of ducks I ever bagged in 1 week."

Cap'n Theodore Johnson leaned over the edge of the levee and spat into the muddy waters of the Mississippi River. Cap'n Johnson, youngest of the 5 or 6 old-time market hunters still alive in the Mississippi delta region, was talking to a representative of the Fish and Wildlife Service. His comments were reported today to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes as a document in American wildlife history.

"In the old days," said Johnson, "a good market hunter down here shot an average of 100 birds a day and thought nothin' of it. On an average good day he bagged between 140 and 150 birds. And it is no exaggeration to say that 25 to 30 birds was a poor day's shootin'."

The old-time market hunter from Louisiana knew what he was talking about. He killed and sold about 10,000 wild game birds each season between 1902 and 1911 and was considered one of the most successful market hunters in the bayous and swamps of the Mississippi delta.

"But mark my word for it," the Cap'n said, "It's a darn good thing the Federal Government started regulatin' the bag limits and seasons, or else there wouldn't be many ducks and geese left to look at today. We were shootin' 'em off so fast the birds didn't have a chance. But with the refuges and the laws, they're comin' back now."

Cap'n Johnson was referring to the fact that in 1900 there were at least 150 million migratory waterfowl in North America and that the wildfowl began dwindling so rapidly that by 1934 there were less than 30 million wild ducks and geese on this continent. Waterfowl regulations recommended by the Fish and Wildlife Service, of the United States Department of the Interior, and the nation-wide system of national wildlife refuges are both playing an important part, he believes, in increasing the continental population of migratory waterfowl, which has more than doubled since 1935.

#### Sportsmen Helped Reduce Population

Just to keep the record straight, Cap'n Johnson also pointed out that not only the market hunters but the sportsmen were important factors in the serious reduction in the population of migratory waterfowl between the early 1900's and 1935.

"What is now the Delta National Wildlife Refuge," said Cap'n Johnson, "right here from Pilottown down the Mississippi River 20 miles to the Gulf and 10 miles east, was the huntin' grounds of the old Delta Duck Club. I saw the sportsmen who hunted there because I was a guide at the club for 6 years and then chief guide for 6 more years.

"Well, sir, I saw the sportsmen shoot their share of game. The daily bag limit was 25 birds back in 1922, but the average hunter killed more than 25 birds if he got his limit. That is, if you count his cripples." To prove his point, Cap'n Johnson said that in 1926, a record-breaking year, the season in bag at the Delta Club which accommodated a large number of hunters was 16,480 wild ducks.

"A poor marksman will fire 50 to 60 shots to get 10 ducks," the Cap'n said, "and he's liable to cripple as many as 15 or 20 birds before he gets his limit."

#### Laws Doomed Market Hunting

The captain stated that the take by market hunters was large until game laws and regulations placed restrictions on the market hunter's activities.

"Settin' up a daily bag limit is what did the trick in the first place," the old-timer explained.

Market hunting then became unprofitable. After including the cost of camping out during the hunting season, buying barrels and ice for shipping the birds, and paying freight charges, there was little profit for the commercial hunter with a curtailed take of birds. Like others, Cap'n Johnson tried "to make a go of it" after the bag limit was set, but he finally turned to other fields.

The sale of migratory waterfowl is now illegal.

#### Game Birds Brought Low Prices

"I started trappin' muskrats and doin' jobs along the River," the Cap'n said. "There was no percentage in workin' for small bags. We didn't get much money for the birds in the first place."

In the New Orleans market, where Cap'n Johnson and other hunters along the Mississippi delta shipped all their wild fowl, prices seldom exceeded 80 cents a pair. "And that was the top price for the best birds," he said.

Green-winged teals were considered "choice" birds and commanded the best prices. Yet, during "one real good season" Cap'n Johnson sold his wild ducks for an average of only 22-1/2 cents a pair. Most of the birds were pintails and mallards. These were called "good" ducks. Shovelers, gadwalls, scaups, and widgeons, which were classified as "common, or trash," ducks sold for 15 cents a pair. "And that was considered good money for them."

Though blue geese have always been plentiful in the region of the Mississippi delta, this species did not attract the market hunters' fire. Geese were too big for the commercial hunters' purposes. "They brought no more money than ducks," Cap'n Johnson recalled, " and fewer geese than ducks would fill a barrel." Obviously, ducks were preferred to geese, since the market hunter was interested in cutting down expenses of buying ice and barrels and shipping the birds to New Orleans.

A large barrel that would hold 30 pairs of geese would hold 50 pairs of mallards or 60 pairs of pintails.

There is no doubt in Cap'n Johnson's mind about the effect that market hunting (and, he insists, sport hunting) had on the waterfowl populations back in the early 1900's. "You could see the birds gettin' fewer and fewer each year," he said. "It was a good thing they started puttin' the restrictions on huntin' and made sellin' and buyin' ducks and geese illegal."

#### Refuges "Good Idea"

One of the things Cap'n Johnson says he can't explain is the rise in the number of blue and snow geese wintering on the Mississippi delta. In 1920, he estimates, there were about 300,000 blue and lesser snow geese on the area. In 1927 and 1928, the number of geese began increasing. Today more than 500,000 of these birds winter on the Delta National Wildlife Refuge. About 95 percent of these are blue geese and 5 percent lesser snow geese. The increase, he said, was gradual rather than by one sharp rise in population during any one season.

Establishment of the Delta Wildlife Refuge on the wintering grounds for a tremendous number of the blue geese of North America was a "good idea" in Cap'n Johnson's opinion. "The refuge has done all the good in the world to protect those birds," he said. "Before, even though they weren't hunted very much, they didn't

have a good place to rest and feed. The sportsmen were shootin' all over the delta marshes and scarin' the geese out to the bars, where the food was scarce and space crowded."

The ex-market hunter is just as positive about the value of migratory waterfowl hunting regulations. "One of the best things ever done was to restrict automatic and pump guns to three shots," he said. "I shot two automatics to pieces while huntin' for market, and I missed few birds, although the average sportsman hunter isn't that good."

The use of automatic and pump guns by careless, inexperienced gunners was to blame for a great deal of crippling and loss of birds, he emphasized. "By restricting the automatic and the pump to three shots, fewer birds are crippled and killed but not counted in the bag."

Cap'n Johnson explained further. "The average man is a poor judge of range and he often shoots at birds that are too far off to kill but within range for crippin'. In the old days, when the birds came into the blind, the hunter picked up his gun and fired a volley of shots into the flock. He hardly took time to aim. Bein' restricted to three shots, today, the hunter is more careful, takes less wild chances, and cripples fewer birds."

"Yes, they're comin' back. But you got to give 'em time, and you got to help 'em. The regulations will give 'em the time, and the national wildlife refuges will help 'em," the veteran hunter said.

"I'll say one thing," Cap'n Johnson declared, "it's a good thing they stopped both us market hunters and the sport hunters before we went too far or there wouldn't be any huntin' left now."

And with that Cap'n Johnson picked up his double-barreled shotgun, stepped into his pirogue, and headed for the public hunting marshes. It was the last day of the 1940 migratory waterfowl hunting season.