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10-10-45 *lt*

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Advance Release to the SUNDAY PAPERS OF OCTOBER 14, 1945.

Unless something is done about building more "duck hotels", the hundred million waterfowl now streaming back from northern nesting grounds can pretty well be considered a ceiling on duck populations in the United States, Dr. Ira N. Gabrielson, director of the Fish & Wildlife Service, reported today to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes.

The 100,000,000 figure, Dr. Gabrielson said, represents four times as many ducks as there were ten years ago.

"The reason for such gratifying and unprecedented increase," Dr. Gabrielson reported, "is largely due to what I call 'duck hotels', places where hungry and tired ducks may come to rest without fear of being riddled by shot and where the table is always set with aquatic plants of the type preferred by waterfowl.

"These wildlife refuges--285 of them--are the safety zones which enable the winged hordes to make the long passage from Arctic nesting grounds to the tropics in the fall and to allow their safe return in the spring. Strategically located along the waterfowl flyways all the way from Alaska to the Florida Keys and from New England to California, these outdoor hostleries beat the duck depression of a generation ago. Today they are the chief reason why the wildfowl hunting regulations are liberal and why the shooting season is 50 days longer than was once allowed. They explain also why such species as canvasbacks, redheads, ruddies and buffleheads, once completely protected, are now on the open list."

The most alarming waterfowl scarcity ever experienced in this country began some thirty years ago when a long series of droughts dried up thousands of prairie sloughs and potholes, the report explains. But even before Nature turned against the ducks, man was doing a lot of damage. Drainage promoters were trying to create new farm lands from swamps and lakes. By 1920 they had drained a hundred million acres. The combination of withering sun and the ditch-digging machinery of man seemed bent on destroying America's waterfowl. It looked like ducks would go the way of the billions of Passenger pigeons that had once darkened the sun for hours in their flights.

"Hunters of a decade ago will recall the drastic curtailment in their hunting privileges," said Dr. Gabrielson. "They will remember when the open season was being cut from 107 to 30 days, daily bag limits reduced from 25 ducks to 10, and of how baited shooting grounds and live decoys were banished.

"They will remember, too, that when the shadow of extermination threatened our waterfowl one of the first moves to stop the downward plunge was to save every existing marsh from needless exploitation. The next, and most important development was the sale of duck stamps to sportsmen, the receipts from which helped buy

defunct drainage projects and bankrupt farms, and to flood them again with life-giving water. That was really the move that brought the ducks through the crisis, and started them on the upward trend again."

Fish and Wildlife Service experts handled this vast job of creating food and rest stations for the ducks. Crews of biologists and engineers surveyed many areas. Lands were selected and purchased, water levels and duck foods restored. The result ranks as one of the high-lights of wildlife conservation.

"I wish I could say we had all the 'duck hotels' we need," says Dr. Gabrielson, "but it isn't true. For one thing, additional hunting pressure on the waterfowl has reached a point utterly without precedent in our history. Even last year when gas was rationed, shells scarce and the best of our manhood overseas, the number of hunters in the field broke all previous records. The return of our war veterans will most certainly add from 30 to 50 per cent to our growing army of gunners.

"But that's not all. They're talking about a vast drainage program in the marshes of Louisiana, which, if carried out, will raise havoc with the present magnificent flight of waterfowl down the Mississippi Valley. Reclamation projects from the Atlantic to the Pacific are very much in the public eye. Lessening natural food supplies have forced the ducks and geese out onto agricultural lands, creating a serious depredation problem. In the middle and southern sections of our country, where waterfowl spend the winter, we have particular need for additional refuges."

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