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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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GAME INVENTORIES ARE DEVELOPMENTS NOT INVENTIONS

The inventory--as vital to game management as it is to merchandising--became an asset in the field of wildlife resources when game managers stopped thinking in terms of wildlife numbers and set out to determine trends in populations, according to John L. Farley, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

For it was then, Mr. Farley points out, that the inventory ceased to be an item of curiosity, a thing of doubtful authenticity, and became a tool of management. It was then the skeptic ceased to scoff and began to work, since the possibility of developing trends had a more logical appeal than any plan to determine numbers as such; it was then that a broad new field of developing trend-determining techniques was opened; it was then that the habits of wildlife took on new meaning, that the strutting of the male sage grouse became important to others than the coy hens, that the coo of the dove and the whistle of the quail told a new and definite story to the game manager.

Now no agency--State or Federal--charged with the management of game would think of attempting to function without a recent inventory or trend study, as many call it, near at hand. Not only is the inventory one of the important tools in the management of waterfowl population in North America, but such things as quail inventories are necessary in fixing rules and regulations for quail hunting in many States; deer inventories are vital for deer management; pheasant inventories essential for pheasant work, and so on through the list of practically every species of game in almost every State in the Union.

The rural postman, whose loyal and efficient services were invoked in the early days of estimating wildlife abundance, still plays his part in making road-side counts. But from the crude and rather tenuous methods first used in "counting the ducks" has evolved a systematic scrutiny of the waterfowl breeding grounds in Alaska, Canada and the United States, a project which calls for the coordinated

efforts of more than 400 specialists, each performing an integral part of a carefully prepared task.

Just when the idea of taking a "census" of wildlife populations was born no one seems to know, for the inventory is a development and not an invention and it is still in an era of change and evolvement. First inventories for game were probably strictly local in nature and probably designed more for range utilization than for game management.

The wildlife inventory as it exists today is only two decades old or less. The winter waterfowl survey, which is an annual inventory made by the Fish and Wildlife Service, began in 1935, taking the place of more or less desultory observations made prior to that time. Other Federal agencies dealing with lands probably made wildlife counts from time to time on specific areas but these were usually for the benefit of the land and not for the game. Many of the States had made some sort of inventories but generally speaking, these were estimates rather than inventories or systematic trend studies.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials say that it was the Federal Aid program which gave the States the money and the inspiration necessary to begin work on methods of determining trends in wildlife population. And as one State developed a technique other States picked it up and in many cases improved on the original development. While each of the 48 States was devising ways and means of meeting its own problems of wildlife inventories, the Fish and Wildlife Service was busy coordinating their efforts and developing other methods in its own field of migratory waterfowl management.

As the techniques improved the inventory became more and more valuable in management, and as it became more valuable more effort was expended on improving the techniques.

At present it may be said that inventory techniques have been somewhat standardized but definitely not stabilized. Better ways are being sought and when found are used.

In practically every instance some peculiarity or idiosyncrasy in the makeup, or habit of the bird or other animal plays a part in the inventory. For example, it was noted that a pheasant does not like wet grass; hence in the early morning hours when the dew is heavy the pheasant is wont to seek dry spots near the road, making an early morning inventory over properly selected routes a good and practical way to compare one year's population with the population of earlier years.

Research also showed that the mourning dove almost invariably does his calling or his singing in the early hours of the day, just before and just after sunup. Hence, the call count along proven routes gives a comparison of the dove population of the area one year with another.

A count of the male sage grouse or prairie chickens on the booming grounds, where these birds are strutting for the benefit of the concealed hens, gives a good indication of the number of male birds in a given area. Knowing the ratio of hens

to males from earlier counts the game manager gets a comparative count of those birds. And so with the sharptail grouse on his dancing grounds, and the woodcock on his singing grounds. The quail is counted by the whistles, the rabbit by night traps or by road side tabulations, the squirrels by their leaf nests and the muskrats and beaver by their houses.

In many instances the count is made on the ground but in the case of deer, antelope, elk, beaver, muskrats, moose and caribou, the count is often made by air. Deer are sometimes counted by pellets dropped and in other cases by tracks counted. When help was plentiful, as in the days of the Civilian Conservation Corps, occasional inventories were made by driving all the deer in an area past a prestationed counter.

Making an inventory by air is in its third phase in most places at the present time. The first phase was that of merely going up, looking around and making a decision as to numbers. The next phase was making the survey along rigid grid lines which often took the workers over areas devoid of the game. The third and present phase is to know the general distribution at the time of the survey and devote the time to flying a definite pattern over those areas.

But regardless of the type of inventory, the place, the kind of game, or the men doing the work, there is one thing in common to all: Game managers are no longer interested in numbers for numbers' sake. Rather thay are interested in numbers for comparative purposes. The thousands of deer or the millions of ducks are not the important data. What is important is whether or not the species is holding its own under current conditions, whether its numbers are becoming fewer or are increasing. When this is known the trend is evident and proper management plans can follow as a matter of course.

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