

# Waterfowl Group Seeks Answers

David Bennett

Unless conditions change soon, the 2003-04 duck hunting season is likely to be another bust. Hunters say this year is shaping up much like the last: a dearth of ducks and rare days of limiting out.

“What everyone wants to know,” asks one veteran timber hunter near Arkansas’ White River Refuge “is where the ducks are? If they’re not flying down here, they’ve got to be hung up somewhere up north, right? I mean, either we’re not getting the nesting numbers or they’re staying up north in refuges. It’s the same thing every year, it seems.”

Delta Waterfowl claims to have the answers and, increasingly, duck hunters around the nation are listening.

It often surprises duck hunters to learn that Delta Waterfowl (DW) is the oldest duck organization on the continent. Founded by Minnesotan James Ford Bell in 1911, DW was birthed 26 years before Ducks Unlimited (DU) came along.

Bell, the founder of General Mills and an avid duck hunter, concentrated on canvasbacks. But when he saw the traditional canvasback population dwindle to nothing around several lakes famous for diving duck populations, he headed north to delta marshes of Canada. When the population there also began to drop, Bell decided to be pro-active and began a variety of efforts to bolster the duck population. He began a hatchery with a goal of releasing three birds for every bird harvested.

However, even the hatchery efforts weren’t good enough. It became very clear as populations continued to nosedive through the dust bowl years, that no one had a good understanding of what was really happening.

Enter Aldo Leopold, the father of modern wildlife management (and author of “Sand County Almanac” among other books). Bell convinced Leopold it was imperative that ducks be studied. So Leopold came to DW in 1938 and from that point on, a course was charted for the Delta Waterfowl Research Station (the station is about 70 miles west of Winnipeg on the shores of Lake Manitoba amid the delta marsh).

“DU was founded in 1937 and their first project was the Big Grass Marsh,” says John Devney, DW director of marketing and development. “That’s about 45 miles west of the DW station. Two organizations were trying to reach the same objectives while taking separate research paths to get there. DU, essentially, was moving dirt while DW was doing the intellectual work through the research program.”

Since then, research has been at the core of DW’s operations to the exclusion of nearly all else.

“The way we do research is different from others,” says Devney. “Others employ a vast staff of wildlife biologists. The way DW does research is we work with universities across the nation and support graduate student research. For example. we might get an

application from someone at LSU wanting to study pintails or a guy at Arkansas State has something else worth looking into.”

Such an approach gives DW a chance to help and mentor students who will be future leaders in the waterfowl management world. It also allows DW to develop the data needed to manage ducks.

“There are many, many DW alumni within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Canadian Wildlife Service, state and provincial agencies, along with non-governmental organizations like DU,” says Devney.

DW’s research data, in many cases, has been the cornerstone of duck and geese understanding. Such research was the impetus for establishing a spring breeding survey. Most of the basic understanding about prairie breeding ecology and even winter ecology has been a result of DW research.

“If you want to conceptualize it,” says Devney, “DW is the R&D arm of the waterfowl management world.”

While once content to stand in the background, DW has recently been more willing to move to the front. Over the last few years, DW has engaged in many issues. Three among them:

- **Conservation policy** -- “When you look at things like how the CRP has impacted breeding ducks in places like the Dakotas and Montana, it doesn’t take long to figure out that key ag policy decisions have a huge impact on breeding ducks,” says Devney. “The CRP has been great, but we also see negatives based on changes to the Clean Water Act.

DW feels it’s critically important to do the research by grad students, but also to act as an advocate for ducks and duck hunters to influence policy makers.”

- **Predator management.** -- “As a result of some of our more highlighted research coming out of the 1990s – most notably predator management and hen-houses – we looked at the world around us and weren’t seeing others in the waterfowl management community picking up on tools we’d developed and proven conclusively. The way things have been done historically is DW would do the research and then the feds and other duck organizations would pick up on our work and apply it to their management.

“Unfortunately, in the cases of hen-houses and predator management, no one picked up on our findings. The feds had no money and the other duck organizations simply showed no interest. In fact, in one case (the organization) not only rejected our findings but launched a campaign against predator management.

“So there was resistance to our getting these tools on the ground. The old DW would have just published our findings and walked away. But now, we believe if we spend the money for the research and develop conclusive solutions to duck

problems, we can't just walk away."

That led DW to launch the Delta Duck Production Program last March. This program uses the tools of predator management, hen-houses, DW's small wetlands conservation program (Adopt a Pothole), and conservation policy to increase duck production and conserve habitat. This is a total break with the traditional DW model, says Devney, and marks the first instance DW has been so involved.

- **Hunting issues.** -- "A very interesting thing happened to us in 1999," says Devney. "As an organization, we operate offices in both the State and in Canada. Our Canadian staff went to the government attempting to establish a youth waterfowling day like we've had for some time in the United States. It's a special weekend season for kids to go hunting."

For their efforts, DW was jumped by everyone from rank-and-file animal rights groups to a Canadian pediatrician association who claimed that putting firearms in youngsters' hands was a health risk.

DW looked for allies but there were few. Basically, DW along with some very small organizations pushed the youth hunt through. Devney says he and his colleagues learned a valuable lesson.

"What it taught us is that there are perhaps just as many challenges facing duck hunters as ducks. And there wasn't an organization out there consistently promoting the rights of duck hunters. At that point, we made a decision to fight for duck hunting."

Devney says Arkansans readership may remember animal anti-cruelty legislation being pushed during the last state legislative session. "That was a veiled attempt by animal rights interests to strike at ranching as well as hunting, fishing and trapping. DW got involved with the Arkansas Farm Bureau very early on to fight (and eventually defeat) that legislation.

"The way we look at it is DW must collaborate with likeminded folks who are users – not abusers – of natural resources to fight these big battles with the foes of hunting. The Arkansas case is a perfect example of how we can help. We don't have a bunch of money to contribute, but we can give scientific foundations and experience we've garnered from dealing with 'anti's' in Canada.

"However much we contributed, the Arkansas Farm Bureau did a wonderful job of exposing who was behind that legislation and what their objectives ultimately were."

DW's appeal is mostly to hunting enthusiasts and new members and chapters are joining rapidly. The organization's profile has risen dramatically over the last couple of years and membership has jumped from 3,000 to over 35,000.

"Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri and Tennessee are among our top membership states," says Devney. "I think what's happening is guys are drawn to DW because we have a clear, no-nonsense approach to the issues facing ducks and duck

hunting.”

One of the clearest issues is predator management. Devney says DW has “proven a smart way to spend money to increase duck populations is to deal with predators.”

Not all agree. It is no secret that predator management has been a huge point of debate between DW and DU.

There’s a lot of conjecture and opinion, but DW believes that good duck seasons only occur when lots of baby ducks survive on the prairie. When you have good production, everything else is irrelevant, he says.

“So, instead of worrying about weather and how the feds are managing refuges, we prefer to go to the source. When there are complaints from Southern hunters about short-stopping ducks on refuges in Iowa or Nebraska, they’re pointing at the wrong place. The truth is that for 90 percent of the prairie-nesting ducks the short-stopping occurs right at the nest. What I’m saying is in most areas of the prairie, 90 percent of our ducks’ nests are destroyed by predators. If we’re leaving 90 percent of our production in shattered eggs to the benefit of predators, we’re losing before the flight south even starts.”

In 1994, DW set out to look closely at the predator management (trapping) issue. The first three years of the project, DW tested on 16-square-mile sites. The next year researchers worked a 36-mile site, a township. Both of those studies were done in North Dakota. DW then went to a more fragmented landscape in southern Saskatchewan. The last project was just concluded on one-square-mile sites in North Dakota.

“By taking the simple step of predator management (in all locations and tests) what we’ve been able to consistently document is a two or three fold increase in duck production. We took areas that weren’t producing enough ducks to keep pace with annual mortality and turn them into net exporters of prairie ducks.

“Predator management (naysayers) claim dollars invested in predator management won’t serve the long-term needs of waterfowl hunters. Plus, they say to kill raccoons to save ducks is unethical. Interestingly, raccoons aren’t even indigenous to the prairies. We’re dealing with a non-indigenous species. We’re just advocating a very targeted approach to reducing predator populations during peak nesting season to increase duck numbers.”

Devney says DW’s booming membership is comprised almost entirely of hard-core duck hunters.

“That’s the only guy who supports DW. We’re not likely to get the soccer mom in Iowa. The last couple of duck seasons have been well below expectations. Hunters are looking for explanations. Guys, particularly in the Mid-South, are becoming far more interested in issues relating to duck breeding grounds. They want straight talk from the prairie and we’re in a position to deliver it. Also, we can provide solutions to the low duck production currently taking place.”

What kind of organizational structure does DW have?

“When you look at administrative and overhead, DW is about as skinny as you’ll find,” says Devney. “We have the two national offices and regional directors located in Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi and Tennessee. Those directors are the ambassadors for DW and trying to establish chapters.”

As far as chapters, DW is different in how its chapters function.

“This isn’t a social event. The chapters are able to retain or direct up to 25 percent of the event proceeds. That’s very different from other organizational chapters. A DW chapter can say they want to support prairie predator management work and they can direct their money there. Many other chapters prefer to take that money to conduct mentored youth hunts. That’s great – whatever they want to do is fine.”

For more information on Delta Waterfowl, visit [www.deltawaterfowl.org](http://www.deltawaterfowl.org)

John L. Devney  
Group Manager-Communications, Marketing & Development

PO Box 3128  
Bismarck, ND 58502  
Phone 701-222-8857  
Toll Free 888-987-3695  
Fax 701-223-4645

[jdevney@deltawaterfowl.org](mailto:jdevney@deltawaterfowl.org)  
[www.deltawaterfowl.org](http://www.deltawaterfowl.org)