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BAITING, NOW BANNED, LED TO KILLING
OF MORE THAN 660,000 DUCKS IN '34

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More than 660,000 wild ducks were killed in the United States last year by 44,000 hunters on areas where bait was used to attract the birds, according to reports compiled recently by the U. S. Biological Survey.

Now outlawed by the Federal Government in order to reduce the annual kill of ducks, baiting was allowed during the 1934-35 hunting season only under permits that prohibited shooting after 3 p. m. Issued without charge, the permits required that the holders keep daily records and make detailed reports at the close of the season. Federal officials did not check up on the accuracy of these reports.

The Biological Survey issued 3,003 permits, of which 126 were surrendered and 3 canceled, and for about 170 of which no reports were received. Permits were issued in 36 States. The holders, says the Bureau, reported that 44,349 gunners on the baited premises killed 661,204 ducks, 11,140 geese, and 739 brant.

The heaviest kill of ducks on baited premises in any one State, according to the reports, was in California, where 10,476 hunters killed 209,097 ducks. Illinois came second with a total bag of 161,935 ducks by 12,958 hunters. Other States where permit holders reported total kills of more than 20,000 ducks were: Washington, where 2,477 hunters killed 74,528 ducks; Oregon, with 2,421 hunters and 62,183 ducks; Maryland, with 4,371 hunters and 34,146 ducks; and Missouri, 1,804 hunters and 20,538 ducks.

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The largest kills of geese with the aid of bait were reported from Illinois (4,079), Maryland (3,038), and North Carolina (1,426).

Mallards made up the largest share of the bags from the baited areas, the total of 237,893 including 135,710 reported from Illinois. Pintails were next with a total for the country of 187,452, which included 127,958 reported from California.

Among the species protected by a special daily-bag limit of 5 last year, those suffering the heaviest losses where bait was used were: Scaup, 29,834; shoveller, 16,239; canvasback, 7,450; and redhead, 5,539. The largest number of shovellers for any one State (12,151) was reported from California. For each of the others of these species the largest kill was reported from Maryland -- scaup, 8,854; canvasback, 3,447; and redhead, 4,073.

Effects of Baiting Investigated

Though practiced in only a few areas at the close of the World War, baiting, once started, soon became widespread. Gunners who baited had a tremendous advantage over those who did not, and when one hunter started baiting others shooting in the same area felt more or less compelled to follow.

Opposition to baiting grew until, in 1933, an investigation was requested by the board of sportsmen and conservationists then advising the Secretary of Agriculture on matters pertaining to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Conducted by 12 naturalists of the Biological Survey in all parts of the country, this investigation revealed an adequate supply of natural food for the birds and showed that baiting had many serious effects. The practice, it was found, not only affected all the common species of ducks and geese but had its most injurious effects on the canvasbacks, redheads, scaups, and other diving ducks that have decreased most alarmingly.

Steps were taken to regulate the practice in 1934 by allowing baiting only under permit, with restrictions, and the necessity for a reduced annual kill this fall has made it advisable this year to prohibit all hunting on baited premises.

The investigators in 1933 reported "as much natural food today per bird as there ever was," but they found that baiting on a shooting area often attracted the birds away from a good supply of natural food and held them in areas that were not naturally adapted for wintering waterfowl. To some extent the urge to migrate was lost, and the birds, thus delayed in their flight, often suffered from cold and starvation. "Probably 95 percent of all who bait," the investigators reported, "cease their 'feeding' within a week or ten days of the close of the gunning season."

Most serious of the effects of baiting was the increase of the total number of birds killed by hunters, especially when bait was used in connection with live decoys, batteries, and scull boats. Bait, the investigators reported, quickly tamed the birds, and when a large number of decoys were used it was common to see the ducks alight within a few feet of the blinds. Often the birds were tamed so completely that a flock fired on sometimes returned for a second and even a third bombardment.

Other injurious effects included lead poisoning of diving ducks. Year after year shot accumulated on the bottom of heavily baited areas and birds picked up shot pellets for grit or mistook shot for seed. Baiting was also opposed by some on the grounds that it permitted an undesirable commercialization of wild fowl and that it encouraged a disregard of bag limits and other game-law regulations on areas where baiting resulted in large concentrations of the birds. There was evidence, too, says the Biological Survey, to indicate that baiting materially aided and encouraged the game bootlegger.