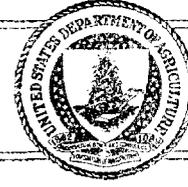




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CCC BOYS HELP SOLVE DUCK
PROBLEM ON ARKANSAS AREA

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How to keep the million and a half wild ducks and geese that winter on the White River Migratory Waterfowl Refuge in central Arkansas at home nights and out of the neighbors' rice fields is a puzzle to the Biological Survey during harvest seasons that are abnormally rainy. With the aid of modern machinery the rice is ordinarily taken in a fortnight or more before the waterfowl arrive on their southern migrations, but when heavy rains delay the harvesting, the birds sometimes eat rice and offer costly competition to the farmers.

Solving this problem is part of the bureau's job in making a success of one of the larger units in the government's nation-wide chain of wildlife refuges. Meanwhile, a pretty problem in water control by government engineers and in waterfowl conservation by government naturalists is being worked out, and with the assistance of CCC boys.

The Arkansas refuge is a narrow strip of land and water, about 30 miles long and 4 miles wide. It includes a sector of the White river and its many bayous, a few miles before they empty into the Mississippi. Travel over the area is principally by water. Characteristic sights are long aisles of cypress trees growing out of flowing water and pin oaks along the shores. Travelers go down these watery streets through a green gloom. At intervals are the houseboats of fishermen who were born and will die in dwellings tied to the banks of the streams.

All around are birds and animals. Wood ducks nest high in tree cavities. There are herons, kingfishers, mallards, teal, muskrats, and water snakes. On the solid ground are deer. Bears clamber through the thickets on the shore. Fur-bearing animals abound. Few American streams have better fishing than the White river as it loops through the region. A happy hunting ground, indeed — and used as such for many years by sportsmen.

A Flyway Bottle-Neck

Early last year the government set aside a large plot in the heart of this region as a sanctuary and feeding and resting ground for a waterfowl population that has been decimated by overshooting and in other ways. Additions to the original purchase are being made slowly, looking eventually to a protected area of 110,000 acres.

A chief reason for government activity on White river is that in this locality ducks and geese congregate in abundance during winter months and on their migrations along the great Mississippi flyway in spring and fall. Waterfowl fly south from the Canadian breeding grounds over a broad front that stretches from Montana to Wisconsin. But before the birds reach central Arkansas the flyway narrows into a veritable bottle-neck comparatively few miles in width. There is a feeding ground more to the liking of the migrants than any other north of the Mississippi delta has been available until recent years, and is now being restored. Farther south the flyway spreads out again.

Not many years ago the Arkansas concentration of wildfowl, still denser than in most American regions, began to dwindle. Overshooting was not the only cause. Surplus water from the overflowing Mississippi had long been backed into the smaller tributaries of the big river by engineers in charge of flood control. Year after year, acres of aquatic plants, ideal food for ducks and geese, were uprooted in floods on the White river. Excellent cover for birds remained, but the meals within its shelter grew meagre. Waterfowl still followed the ancestral flyways and made the usual stops, as the species are likely to do even after food has dwindled at the destination. But the birds fared less abundantly on White river, and fewer returned.

Find Food In Rice Fields

Then pioneers appeared in the feathered community at White river and discovered a new source of food. For a period, duck prosperity shot upward, and the tribes increased. Overcoming their dislike of any sort of open space but the upper reaches of the air, detachments of waterfowl had begun to visit the rice fields adjoining the wooded water courses.

This was more than 30 years ago, and complaints continued and increased up until about a dozen years ago. Old methods of harvesting the rice made it impossible to get the crop in before the birds came from the north. The introduction of modern harvesting machinery, however, enabled the farmers to garner their rice before the birds arrived. Since then the damage during years of good harvesting weather has been confined to small areas. Except in rainy seasons, the birds now feed largely on the waste rice left after the harvest is past, though enough of the conflict still continues to make a real problem for the Federal protectors of the waterfowl.

Viewing their losses, rice farmers during the years of severe damage shot the birds mercilessly. Game laws were forgotten. Or the law was remembered only by farmers who had converted their homesteads into shooting lodges. Instead of taking revenue from the rice crop, farmers began to make money from duck hunters, who were housed, fed, and guided to shooting blinds in the rice fields. The birds countered by appearing on the fields mostly at night. The farmers who depended on their rice crops for a living made a last stand by burning lanterns in the fields all night. A few illuminated rice fields are still a common sight any night in the White river region.

Over this battle, Biological Survey experts have stretched a regulatory finger. Helping the scientists are two camps of CCC boys, one white and one negro, established on the White river area shortly after its purchase. Experts and workers alike realize that the success of the refuge lies in winning a competition. The neighboring rice fields offer a lunch counter to the ducks, but a rival cafeteria is being provided on the refuge. Natural waterfowl foods are being encouraged.

Plant Food For Ducks

The task at the White river refuge is to store flood water so that it can be let at will over the growing places of the aquatic plants on which waterfowl feed. Other nourishment than this marsh fare is being provided, too. Fields of rice have been sown within the refuge. Soy beans, Kaffir corn, sorghum, and other duck and goose foods are being planted on the upland areas.

Refuge engineers can do little to reduce the level of the White river itself. That depends on the behaviour of the mighty Mississippi, which has long ^{been} notorious for its floods. But on most of the 130 fresh-water ponds within the area CCC boys have worked steadily to stabilize water levels. Major problems of hydraulic engineering are involved, and the CCC workers digging sluices and building dams are learning the nature of these problems at first hand.

Some of the small lakes have been made ready for the planting of aquatic vegetation. The best of them are found in an 800-acre demonstration area comprising the most attractive ground on the refuge from the point of view of wild ducks and geese. Here a scenic development is also planned. Pools have been made which will attract wildfowl in season, and on restricted areas there will be picnic grounds for the public and a standing invitation to all Americans to make use of the place.

The results of team work between CCC boys and Biological Survey experts will be evident in a few years when the improvements encourage a repopulation of the duck and goose grounds.