



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

BUREAU OF BIOLOGICAL SURVEY

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U. S. INVESTIGATORS DISPROVE REPORTS OF DUCK STARVATIONS

Reports of waterfowl starving were unusually numerous during the past severe winter, but as in previous years investigations revealed that in practically every case something besides lack of food was responsible for any serious condition of the birds, the Bureau of Biological Survey today reported to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes.

Many of the recent starvation reports were said by the Federal officials to have been overpublicized in connection with promotional campaigns and efforts to oppose the continuation of the prohibition against using feed as a bait to lure waterfowl to gunners.

Illinois and Iowa Studies Cited

Citing a study made in the Illinois River Valley as an example of its recent investigations, the Biological Survey pointed out that 20 out of 41 specimens of supposedly starved birds were found to have died of lead poisoning. The remaining 21 birds had died of other causes, but many of them also showed characteristic signs of lead poisoning. Examinations showed that eight of the 21 birds were heavily infested with internal parasites, and three were suffering from gunshot wounds at the time of their deaths. Of the remaining ten, seven had a considerable amount of corn, small grain, and other food in their gizzards, thus eliminating starvation as a cause of death.

Studies made by the Illinois Natural History Survey during the past two years were said by the Federal officials to confirm the Biological Survey's earlier conclusion that ducks along the Illinois River are in no danger of starving.

A Survey investigation made on Round Lake near Ruthven, Iowa, last winter in cooperation with the State Conservation Commission showed that about three-fourths of 123 dead mallards found on the area had food in their crops. About a fifth of the gizzards were bulging with food, which could not be digested because the muscles were paralyzed as a result of lead poisoning. All but one of the 123 birds contained shot. Fifty-five had only one shot pellet in the gizzard, but one contained 22 pellets.

One number five lead shot, it was explained, will make a duck sick and often kill it, though usually more are required to cause death. Though a duck may eat many lead pellets, it will seldom recover if it has taken more than four into its gizzard. Post-mortem examinations have disclosed as many as 30 pellets in one bird.

The Illinois and Iowa studies, Biological Survey officials said, have supported similar findings of other wildlife pathologists in different parts of the country where reports of starving ducks have been common in many winters. In practically every case the wildlife technicians have found that causes other than lack of available food have been responsible for the condition of the birds.

Wild Ducks Seldom, If Ever, Starve

Many wildlife experts, the Survey reported, have reached the conclusion that a wild duck seldom, if ever, dies of starvation alone. It is becoming increasingly evident that the only ducks which 'starve' are those otherwise too weak or unhealthy to withstand the severe climatic conditions that prevail for short periods almost every winter in the northernmost waterfowl wintering areas.

It should always be kept in mind that when tens of thousands of ducks are concentrated in small open bodies of water during cold waves, it would be almost miraculous if a number of dead ducks were not readily to be found. In such concentrations there are many individuals that have lived their normal span of life or are otherwise unfit, and it is only natural for them to succumb during the critical season of the year, the report stated.

Lead Poisoning A Real Threat

The apparently increased rate of mortality from lead poisoning, however, presents a real threat to the waterfowl population. Reports from many parts of the country indicate that lead poisoning is the cause of death of about 50 percent of the ducks picked up in sections where starvation was originally suspected. Lead pellets by paralyzing the digestive tract affect old and young, healthy and unhealthy ducks alike. Ordinarily conditions are unusually bad in marshes where blinds have been located in the same position for many years.

The pellets remain in the marshes and are taken by the birds in their search for food or gravel used in grinding food in the gizzard. The prohibition of baiting in recent years has relieved this condition somewhat since the waterfowl are now not unduly attracted by grain to such restricted areas where shot has accumulated over a long period.

Wildlife technicians, it was pointed out, are trying to perfect a shot which will disintegrate after it comes in contact with water, and it is hoped that ammunition manufacturers will soon find it practicable to use such an alloy.