

Information for the Press
From Fish and Wildlife Service,
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SHORTEST GOOSE SEASON IN HISTORY

"Alexander County, Illinois," declares Albert M. Day, Assistant Director, Fish and Wildlife Service, "now holds the doubtful distinction of having finished the shortest and most intensive goose hunting season in the history of American shooting."

States Mr. Day, "The season lasted only five half days of 4½ hours each—during which time approximately 375 birds an hour or 5 in each minute fell to the hunters' guns in this restricted area—some 10 sq. miles. The kill reached the staggering record of 5,150 Canada Geese. To this must be added an additional 1,000 cripples, most of which were beyond any hope of recovery.

"On November 24, the first day of the open season, 1,400 geese were killed and on the second day 700. Then the Federal Government took action. Only three more days were granted and the season was brought to a close. But in those five short half days an average of 1,250 birds per day were brought down from the flock, and had the shooting been permitted at that rate the entire flight of some 26,000 honkers might have been completely wiped out during the past open season."

The setting for this organized slaughter of one of America's finest game birds centered around the Horseshoe Lake Goose Refuge, owned and operated by the Department of Conservation of the State of Illinois. The refuge consists of 3,180 acres lying largely within the shallow horseshoe-shaped lake, from which it derives its name. It is an old oxbow of the Mississippi River, and now has a water control structure at the southern tip to maintain desired levels.

In 1927, when the State purchased Horseshoe Lake from a group of sportsmen who had maintained it as a gun club, it was closed to shooting and a program was initiated to grow feed on the island. Unfortunately, when the original purchase was made, little of the surrounding land was included. Small purchases have since been made, but the landowners adjacent to the refuge have found the income from the renting of shooting privileges so lucrative that they do not want to part with their holdings. In fact, the income from geese hunters during the past few years has been far beyond that from corn and other farm crops. Thus the refuge has been responsible for increasing the value of the very lands needed to enlarge it enough to give the birds protection.

This is how the hunting is managed: The State issues licenses to the landowners in the near vicinity of the lake which permit them to construct and operate blinds or snare pits. Under present State law, these may be no closer than 150 yards together. Individually or as clubs, the landowners then permit hunters to use the pits at fees ranging up to \$15 per day per hunter, which in some cases includes board and room. Prior to 1944, as soon as a hunter killed his legal limit of geese, he was replaced by another—at the same fee. Some fields contain as many as 35 pits and as the hunters in the more favored spots kill their limits, they are moved out and those from the slow pits moved in, while still others waiting in line fill the vacancies. Hunters in one pit took 44 geese in one day in 1939.

The kill of geese at Horseshoe Lake during the past few years has been staggering and, in the opinion of the trained biologists of the Fish and Wildlife Service, entirely beyond what the flock can stand. For twelve

years following the establishment of the refuge in 1927, the average kill was 2,300 birds. This was good goose hunting in any man's language, but not dangerous to the flock as there were 50,000 to ^{60,000}~~50,000~~ birds then using the area. In 1937 the take jumped up to 5,000 but in 1938 it dropped back to 1,200. Then in 1939, probably because of poor food conditions on the refuge, the birds moved about a great deal and the kill soared to the all time high of over 17,000 geese.

The 1945 season developed into a battle of wits between the goose hunters and club owners on the one hand, and the Federal and State Conservation agencies on the other. The clubs and independent operators together managed to increase their pits and blinds from 350 in 1944 to 500 in 1945. Hunters clamored for a place in line on the opening day knowing that the season might again be abruptly closed as it was in 1944. Hotels, restaurants and filling stations were crowded to overflowing. Trained observers and law enforcement officers of the Illinois Department of Conservation and the Fish and Wildlife Service were on hand--and badly worried. An estimate made by biologists of the two agencies using an airplane over the refuge and surrounding territory a day or so previous to the opening, disclosed that there were some 10,000 less geese than the year before--26,000 now as compared to 35,000 in 1944, and less than half of the number of birds on the refuge in 1943.

Mr. Day concludes, "Protection and food for winter concentrations must be provided if we are to care for these international visitors during their 6 months' stay in this country. This requires land and water, in large enough units so that there can never again be another Horseshoe Lake

situation. Well-intentioned as its original sponsors were, this refuge has turned into a death trap where constant vigilance and the resort to heroic measures is all that will prevent total disaster."