

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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ENDANGERED MEXICAN DUCKS RELEASED ALONG RIO GRANDE RIVER

Eighteen endangered Mexican ducks were released into the wild on the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico recently, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Lynn A. Greenwalt announced today.

Greenwalt said, "This duck has all but disappeared from American bird-life as a wild breeding species. Since the 1940's its decline has paralleled man's draining of marshes and sloughs, and a general lowering of the water table in New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas through dredging and channeling of rivers."

Mexican ducks, today numbering only about 500 in the wild in the United States, formerly were common all along the Rio Grande to northern New Mexico. Today they are extremely localized in southeastern Arizona, southern New Mexico, and central west Texas. They are faring better in Mexico where an estimated 15,000 live.

The change in available wetland nesting space has also prompted cross-breeding of Mexican ducks with mallards. The Fish and Wildlife Service established a brood stock of Mexican ducks at the Bosque del Apache Refuge in 1965 and also began a research program to identify the specific type of nesting areas needed by Mexican ducks so they can be separated from the more numerous mallards and retain their pure characteristics.

The Bureau of Land Management--an agency of the Interior Department, as is the Fish and Wildlife Service--is restoring nesting areas on public lands in New Mexico.

In the nine years of captive propagation, 185 Mexican ducks have been raised and 127 released into the wild.

Currently eight breeding pairs hatch about 30 ducklings each year at the Bosque del Apache Refuge. The first eggs are removed from the nest, hatched in an incubator, and raised in a brooder. The hen is then permitted to lay and incubate another clutch of eggs. Her brood is raised in the pen with her.

Her first brood of ducklings raised in the brooder are returned to the pens at the age of four weeks. When they are about 14 weeks old and able to fly, they are released into the wild on the refuge. They are banded for identification. Six have been recovered since 1965, five in the Rio Grande Valley near the refuge and the sixth about 200 miles north, suggesting those released were not migrating.

The captive propagation program was characterized by annual failure of released ducks to nest for seven years from 1965 through 1972. However, in the 1973 nesting season, five pairs of released ducks nested and raised young in the wild on the Bosque del Apache Refuge--the first documented observation of program success.

The nesting has allowed Fish and Wildlife Service biologists to observe the behavior of this endangered duck, and already they are learning more about the species' nesting habits. It was traditionally reported, for example, that the Mexican duck would only nest under or near cottonwood trees, common along the Rio Grande. The five nests established on the refuge showed no distinct preference for cottonwoods--which abound on the refuge--but displayed nesting preference in dense escape cover adjacent to water--a factor which could allow for an easier rebuilding of the wild population of these ducks.

Prospects for the eventual recovery of this wild species are considerably brighter now that documented nesting in the wild has been observed. The Fish and Wildlife Service hopes to be able to define more precisely the nesting requirements for this species and then protect or reestablish suitable natural nesting spaces on the Bosque del Apache Refuge.

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Biologist Gary Zahm releases Mexican Ducks raised on the
Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico

