

GEOGRAPHIC NEWS BULLETIN

ON

OLD URGE SENDS "NEW" DUCKS SOUTH

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Astronomers, looking through their telescopes at the big round harvest moon these autumn nights, may be startled to see a flock of wild geese or ducks flying across the moon's bright face.

They're not birds on the moon, though, but earthly wildfowl, obeying that age-old impulse that sends them hurrying southward, night and day, as winter approaches in their far-north summer homes.

"This fall's migration of wildfowl is of unusual interest because for the first time in United States history no shooting of two kinds of ducks, the popular canvasbacks and redheads, will be allowed, and because in a part of the range of the ducks, last summer's severe drought was as hard on them as on the farmers," says a bulletin from the Washington, D.C., headquarters of the National Geographic Society.

Drought Damaged Breeding Areas (Subhead)

"The 1936 drought wreaked havoc in a large proportion of the region in western United States and Canada where the canvasbacks and redheads breed in summer. Marshes and ponds, where the ducks build their nests, rear their young and find their food, were wiped out in many cases.

"Many young and adult ducks died. Others were rescued by government workers, game wardens, sportsmen and farmers, and transferred to game refuges. Small refuges for waterfowl and water conservation in the drought area have been rushed to completion.

"Not only drought, but shooting, disease and the draining of large areas of swamps and ponds for reclamation purposes has steadily diminished the numbers of wildfowl, until the U.S. Biological Survey is seriously concerned about their future. Shooting of migratory waterfowl is closely restricted in ^{both} the United States and Canada.

"It is hoped that the ban on any shooting of canvasbacks and red-heads, which are among the tastiest of all game birds, will give the adults a chance to increase their numbers by raising a new crop of ducklings next summer. Last year about 200,000 canvasbacks were counted on the Susquehanna River flats of Maryland, but it is believed that this represented most of this species left in the world.

Shorter Fall Days May Cause Migration (Subhead)

"What strange urge sends wildfowl migrating southward each autumn and back to their northern nesting grounds each spring still is a mystery. It cannot be a conscious desire to escape winter, for the birds flying south each autumn never have experienced winter.

"Possibly the changing length of daylight in autumn and spring has something to do with it. A Canadian scientist experimented with crows which he kept for several weeks in the fall in large flight cages. Each night as daylight failed, electric lights were turned on, giving the crows several hours more 'daylight' than would be usual for that time of year.

"At the end of November the crows were liberated. Many of them, apparently thinking it was spring, migrated northwestward instead of southeastward as they ordinarily would have done in the fall.

"Whatever the cause of their migrations, wildfowl always follow the same general route in migrating back and forth, scientists have discovered. There are four of these 'fly-ways' north and south across the United States in the regions of the Atlantic Coast States, the Mississippi Valley, the Central West and the Pacific Coast.

"Birds using one 'fly-way' rarely stray into another. Ancestors of the birds now using each fly-way have used the same routes for untold centuries. Existence of the fly-ways was discovered through bird-banding activities and other methods of studying behavior of wildfowl. The 'fly-way' habit is of greatest importance in conservation of ducks and geese, for if birds in one fly-way are greatly depleted, the supply may not be replenished by birds from other fly-ways.

"Why many wildfowl fly in V-shaped formation is another mystery only partially solved. Naturalists believe that it is because this formation enables each bird to avoid the 'wake' of disturbed air from the bird ahead, while still following the leader.

"Migrating birds do not fly as high as one might think when it is stated that they are sometimes seen through powerful telescopes. They fly beneath the lowest clouds, seldom travel higher than 3,000 to 4,000 feet, and sometimes almost skim the surface of lakes."

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