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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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PLANE COUNTS DUCKS BEFORE THEY ARE AWARE OF ENGINE ROAR

When America's aeronautical engineering wizards designed the RF-80 jet-propelled airplane, they probably had no idea that the craft would ever be used to count ducks.

The Fish and Wildlife Service today disclosed that the jet plane, carrying a special "strip" camera in its nose, performed this decidedly non-military task last month in waterfowl census work over the "Grasslands" section of California's San Joaquin Valley. In cooperation with the California Division of Fish and Game and the U. S. Bureau of Reclamation, the Service has been studying the important waterfowl wintering grounds in the area for the past year.

Roaring 400 m.p.h. at an altitude of 300 feet, the RF-80 jet plane photographed a 22 mile strip of marshes, upon which ducks and geese were feeding. U. S. Air Force pilots Capt. C. B. East and Lt. C. H. Rigsby, of the 12th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, stationed at March Field, Calif., made the run in 3.3 minutes.

They used a Sonne S-7 camera, developed under Air Force supervision for photographing terrain in detail at high speeds and low altitudes. In operation, the speed of the camera is synchronized with the speed of the plane. It takes a ribbon picture 9½ inches wide, showing much detail never obtained in most aerial photographs.

Wildlife biologists have always found waterfowl censusing a problem. The Fish and Wildlife Service has constantly aimed at improving census techniques which would assure the complete accuracy of waterfowl counts. Depending entirely on a rapid eye-summation, the popular method of counting ducks and geese visually from a low-flying plane is subject to some error. Standard-type aerial cameras have often been used as a check on the visual count method, but the Service believes that the "strip" camera-carrying jet plane provides the best check on visual censusing.

The low-flying jet plane zoomed past the waterfowl before they were aware of the engine roar. Ordinary planes, blaring engine noises in advance of the craft can make visual census work extremely difficult. Frightened by the roar of the plane, the birds feeding on the ground often break into flight, escaping the count of the biologist.

The waterfowl census flight of the jet plane was authorized by the Secretary of the Air Force as training in the use of "strip" cameras.

James O. Stevenson and Carl Eklund, biologists in the Fish and Wildlife Service's Office of River Basin Studies, suggested the use of the jet plane and the "strip" camera in the waterfowl census work.

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