

Migratory Bird Treaty Act sets the ground rules for waterfowl hunters

by Rob Barto

As daylight slowly dwindles and temperature drops, our thoughts turn from chasing salmon and halibut to chasing moose, caribou and waterfowl. As an avid waterfowl hunter and enforcement officer, I'd like to discuss some of the sticky points about the many laws enforced under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA).

The original MBTA was enacted by Congress in 1913, but it was judged unconstitutional because it didn't address commercial hunting of waterfowl. In 1918 Congress passed a revised MBTA that with several amendments is the foundation for our present migratory bird laws. Basically, all "international" birds that migrate between Russia, Canada, Mexico and the U.S. are protected under federal law, including migratory game birds such as ducks, geese, swans, doves, pigeons, and cranes.

Let's take a look at how the MBTA regulations would cover a trip out Mystery Creek Road for some waterfowl hunting. Before departure, hunters need to purchase both federal and state duck stamps at the post office or sporting good stores. For a duck stamp to be valid, you must sign your name in ink across the face of the stamp. The stamp itself does not need to be attached but does need to be in your possession while waterfowl hunting. It's also good to pick up a copy of the waterfowl regulations, put out by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and generally available at sporting good stores or the Fish and Game headquarters on Kalifornsky Beach Road in Soldotna.

Once in the field, you need to know what species can be hunted and how many of each you are allowed to possess. This is usually the first place that people go astray.

Field possession is best described as the total amount of waterfowl one individual is allowed to have in hand while in the blind or walking to and from his or her vehicle or camp. For Game Management Units 7 and 15 (the central and northern Kenai Peninsula), a hunter is allowed to walk from the blind with eight ducks, four dark geese, three white geese, eight common snipe, and two sandhill cranes.

While hunting with other individuals, you may carry their birds out for them. However, if you are walking out at different times, the person carrying the birds must have in his or her possession a slip of paper with the absent hunter's signature, date, address, and the number and species of each bird being brought out. This prevents the warden who checks you in the blind, or en route from your blind to your vehicle, from seizing all your birds and writing you an over-possession violation ticket.

Possession limits off the hunting grounds are the next sticky point. Possession limits come into force when hunters either reach their personal residences or temporary lodging such as a motor home, duck shack or tent.

When staying at a temporary residence, hunters are allowed to have the full possession limit of waterfowl; in Game Management Units 7 and 15 a hunter would be allowed to have a total of 24 ducks, eight dark geese, six white geese, 16 common snipe, and four sandhill cranes. However, all birds in camp must be clearly labeled with the hunter's signature, date and total number of species and birds.

The best way to do this is, upon arrival at your camp, write down on a piece of paper the date, total number and species of all the birds you shot during the day and place this paper with the birds.

Once in camp, hunters are allowed to field dress waterfowl, but for identification purposes, a fully feathered wing or head must be left naturally attached to the bird. Hunters are not allowed to bring from the field any breasted birds. Birds that are eaten in the field are no longer part of your possession and do not have to be recorded.

I realize that this is only a fraction of the regulations governing waterfowl hunting, but as an enforcement officer I find that these are the most frequently violated and least understood regs. Hopefully this article has given you a better understanding of these regulations.

If you have further questions, feel free to contact me or any of the other officers here at the Kenai

Refuge. Our telephone number is 262-7021.

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Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.