

The Next Profit Source

Waterfowl on rangelands may offer landowners added value.

By Charles M. Covey, Representing the Texas Section SRM

It's no secret; times are tough. Each year it becomes more difficult for the rangeland manager to make a profit.

Cattle, sheep or goats may be our mainstay, but diversification will undoubtedly be the word of the millennium. Utilizing the resources that already exist on our rangelands seems to be the key to success. Deer, turkey and quail hunting creates millions of dollars of revenue in Texas and many other states. These species have been capitalized upon and their value taken advantage of.

There is, however, one resource that remains virtually untapped by rangeland managers—waterfowl. Ducks and geese offer amazing opportunities and can become a new profit source for you.

Ranchers already have waterfowl. Ducks are passing through or, in southern areas, wintering on these waters. This increasingly abundant resource needs to be harnessed and its profit realized. There are approximately 16.7 million ducks and 7.6 million geese in the U.S.

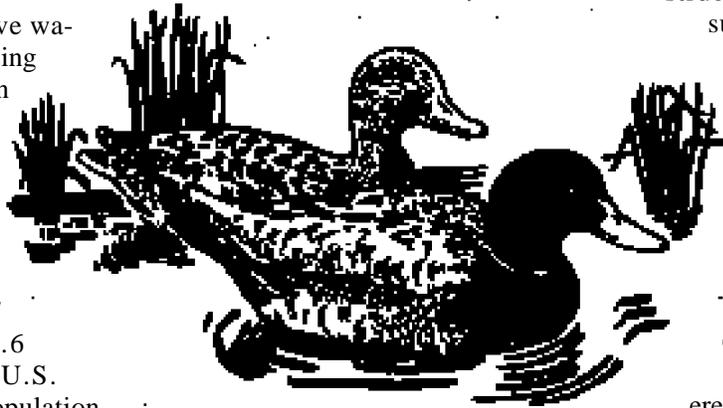
The duck and goose population is growing every year as awareness and management increases. Nationwide 3.7 million hunters pursue migratory game birds. This creates a 3.6 billion dollar impact from migratory bird hunting.

As a land manager you can see that there is definitely room for you to get a piece of this pie. The question—is this worth your time?

Lets use the standard commercial

cow as an example. On excellent range conditions you could possibly run 1 cow/calf unit per 10 acres. If you get 1 calf/year from the cow, you may net \$300 profit. A 10 acre wetland that holds fair to good amounts of waterfowl throughout the season can be leased for \$100 to \$300 per acre or more. This is far more than you could make from any commercial cow. Other options include unguided day hunts for \$100/person or guided hunts for \$150 to \$200/person/day.

Unlike deer and quail, you do not have to manage the whole ranch for waterfowl. You manage a few acres here and a few acres there and leave your livestock on the remainder under normal grazing practices.



Creating Wetland's For Waterfowl

The definition of a wetland is hard to peg. Most agencies and individuals have their own ideas. The basic concept is an area that has hydric soils, hydrophilic plants and a very high water table. Many ranches that support

livestock have some form of water body or wetland. These can be used for hunting, and may hold waterfowl for many weeks out of the year.

The type of wetland best for waterfowl is 1 to 5 feet deep with grass and other food plants that are only under water for a few months of the year. Many of us would call this a marsh or slough.

If you do not have this form of wetland then construction is an option. Areas that have sufficient runoff during the fall and winter can be converted. A dike placed around the potential wetland area will hold the water. A plug will be placed in the dike allowing the area to be drained.

Some people misunderstand the laws pertaining to wetlands. A constructed or artificial wetland is not subject to any federal regulation unless it has been in existence long enough to develop hydric soils and hydrologic plants. Natural wetlands, however, can be under regulation. Check with your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office before building a dike on a soil area that may already be considered a wetland.

There are millions of dollars available for wetland restoration and construction through cost share programs and grants from the NRCS, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ducks Unlimited, State Game and Fish and others. Many of these funding options will combine to build a wetland at a very low cost to you.

Most artificial wetlands could be drained in the early spring. The timing

and speed of the drawdown will have an affect on the plant community. A fast draining in late spring may encourage plants such as cocklebur. Late draining could result in plants such as barnyardgrass. The ideal slow drawdown in March should bring on excellent duck foods such as smartweed. Food plantings will encourage wetland usage by wildlife. Regulations many vary from state to state concerning hunting over food plots .

Benefits From Wetlands

There are other tangible benefits to wetlands besides direct income. The

wetland can serve as a livestock watering facility by way of a gravity fed trough or Noble System. It also traps contaminants and filters sediment to keep surface water clean. The plants that predominate in the wetland ecosystem are excellent controllers of water and wind erosion, holding the precious top soil in place. Other forms of aquaculture such as crawfish or fish farming may be practical in certain situations.

The magnitude of the waterfowl resource and the great economic benefits that can be obtained is huge. To capitalize you can use existing wetlands or create new ones, but contin-

ued success will depend on proper management. Waterfowl and wetlands are compatible with rangelands and can add diversity to your "ranching portfolio" in this new century. Waterfowl on rangeland is the next profit source.

This was the first place paper for the High School Youth Forum presentation competition at the SRM Annual Meeting in 2000 at Boise, ID.

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