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Hewitt C. Wells .

On the outdoors.

Ravens hurting duck population

Some years we look back on the hunting season we have just ended, and the reminiscences are powerful, reflecting a collection of good time. In another year we remind ourselves of long hours on a duck marsh or of tramping miles through tough country and never seeing a game bird. Coming in cold and tired with empty duck straps or game pockets in the hunting vest is usuallet with a philosophy of "inay~em next time it will be better." As we talk with our friends and hunting companions, we try to rationalize why it isn't "the way it used to.be," and to the vast majority of outdoorsmen, it is a mystery, except for some platitudes such as "loss of habitat," "drought," "too much water."

Asking questions of the right people sometimes provides some startling and surprising answers quite contrary to the pat answers bandied about.

A knowledgeable hunter and outdoorsman recently started a conversation of what was happening - why no ducks, why the shortage of chukar and general absence of small game. What he said was so startling that it was hard to believe. His comment was that 90 percent of the nesting puddle ducks' eggs in the Stillwater Management Area alone are destroyed by ravens. He further said that ravens, as well as all of the classification of Corvidae, which include blackbirds and magpies, are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act with Mexico. (The treaty with Mexico is also to protect ducks, but ducks don't nest in Mexico.) It appears that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service became involved in Mexico's effort to protect yellow billed magpies, and in order to simplify the problem of selection of protected species, they arbitrarily included all Corvidae for protection. Under the provisions of the Treaty, special arrangements must be made with the Fish and Wildlife Service to take any action against or toward control of Corvidae in cases of depredation.

In order to get assurances of the correctness of this information, the Nevada Department of Wildlife and the Fish and Wildlife Service at Stillwater were contacted. Norm Saake and Morris Lefever were questioned about the situation. Saake confirmed that predations nests by gadwall and cinnamon teal by ravens is extremely high, stating that the predation of Ravens was particularly disastrous to those hen ducks. The hens are the ones on the nests and are most subject to attack. The situation therefore become doubly critical because of the loss of the hen birds.

Futher discussion revealed that there is a very effective poison called "Starlicide" which was developed to curtail the infestation- of cattle feed lots by starlings. The poison is very selective, making it a useful tool against ravens, which are also affected by the poison. The current problem is bureaucratic jurisdiction and administration, as well as political impact, from do-gooders and preservationists who are oppose to any destruction of wildlife predators, regardlss of their impact on other species. .

As the discussion of predators. with Saake continued, it was indicated that there is evidence that deterioration of sage grouse populations may be a result of activity of ravens. It is already known by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that a large percentage of dove nests are destroyed by Corvidae. The queston of diminishing cukar may also be a result of raven predation, the assumption being that raven activity will follow their food source, and all ground nesting birds are subject to the same hazard.

For many years, the activity of predators has been considered a natural process In the balance of species to the wild. Occasional complaints of cattlemen and sheep ranchers relating depredation of livestock by mountain lions, bears and coyotes have been met with a comment that there is an inherent fact of nature to be expected from a situation of domestic livestock in the habitat of major species of predators. It is gradually becoming recognized by wildlife specialists that someting more than a natural process in the sequence of the food chain is taking place, and the balance of species is getting out of control. The Ducks Unlimited organization is finding out that the acquisition and creation of wet land habitat is not enough to maintain duck, populations in the prairie provinces. Where wet lands and duck habit exist adjoining areas . developed for agriculture, the predators quickly move into the wet land'and prey upon wildlife to a devastating degree. Costly measures such as electro-fencing have been tried to protect the wet land habitat from loxes, cats, and similar predators and has been one of the few effective controls. As far north as Alaska, the activity of foxes in the duck and goose nesting areas are becoming a problem.

If any conclusions are to be drawn, it is that the trained wildlife and habitat specialists are to be encouraged to develop effective answers to the natural balance of species, and that political or emotional maneuvering has no place in solving the extremely complex . relationships in nature, many of which we have no understanding.

Hewitt C. Wells of t3eno has from more than 20 years been involved In hunting and fishing in Nevada. He is a a former president of the Nevada Wildlife Federation.