

Waterfowl experts support predator work

■ Trapping crucial in wake of CRP drop, researchers say in Delta article

Herald Staff Report

JAMESTOWN, N.D. — A group of retired scientists say land-use changes on the North American breeding grounds may force waterfowl managers to choose between controlling predators and watching duck populations plummet.

One reason for their concern, the experts say, is an ethanol-fueled demand for corn that's likely to result in a reduction of grass nesting cover across the U.S. side of the region.

Arnold Kruse, John Lokemoen, Ray Greenwood and Alan Sargeant were part of the team of researchers working at the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center in Jamestown. The center was formed in 1965 when U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Harvey Nelson assembled a team of researchers to study the prairie ecosystem.

One of the things they learned is that mammalian predators take a big bite out of duck production. In an interview that appears in the current issue of Delta Wa-

terfowl magazine, they expressed concern about the impact of predators on populations of ducks and other ground-nesting birds.

"Our research showed there's a big problem with predators out there," Sargeant said in a Delta news release. "The problem has not gone away. There are still lots of things eating lots of other things out there."

CRP bolsters ducks

Since 1985, millions of acres of cover in the Conservation Reserve Program have buffered hens from nest-raiding predators such as fox, raccoons and skunks. Research conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service showed that CRP added 2 million ducks to the fall flight each year since 1992.

On the downside, North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana, three states that since 1994 have produced as many ducks

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Herald file photo

▲ Predator trapping has helped improve nesting success in areas where it's practiced, such as this managed site near Cando, N.D. That applies not only to waterfowl, but to upland species such as sharp-tailed grouse.

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as prairie Canada, are expected to lose a minimum of 930,000 acres of CRP by 2010, more if the ethanol-driven demand keeps corn prices at current levels. An additional 434,000 acres of land was converted from native prairie to cropland between 2002 and 2006.

"CRP has kind of lulled everyone" into a false sense of security, Kruse said. "If we lose this CRP, the predator thing is really going to stare us in the face. Corn's gone up a dollar a bushel over the last year. That means we're going to lose a lot of CRP nesting cover."

Management need

Without intensive predator management, ducks will suffer, Sargeant says.

"We've been blessed with CRP for quite a few years, but now what are we going to do for ducks?" asks Sargeant, an authority on the impact of fox and other predators on nesting ducks.

Countless studies have confirmed that predation is the cause for most nest failures, but waterfowl managers have shied away from predator management because it is viewed as politically incorrect. Greenwood says concerns about predator management as a tool are nothing new.

"Predator management was

portant part of the ecosystem, preying on vulnerable breeding hens and ducklings. We kept the pot stirred with new findings and new research. But it's really not in vogue to kill, so I think the emphasis on predators has slid."

The bottom line, Sargeant says, is that predator management works.

"You get rid of predators and things start to happen," he said. "Yes, it costs money to manage predators, but it costs money to pay taxes, it costs money to burn, it costs money to start your truck and drive out to see if your habitat is in place and your fences are up."

Feasible option

The researchers expressed frustration that their findings on the impact of predators haven't been put to work on a large scale, saying intensive-management practices such as predator removal are a cost-effective way to supplement habitat.

"If you're going to pump money into habitat, crank it against what you're going to get out of it (in terms of ducks)," Sargeant said. "The fact is, if you want to make the habitat work, you better think about some teeth."

Delta Waterfowl has been managing predators in North Dakota since the early 1990s, and this year expanded its predator-management research program into Saskatch-