

Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science

Volume 59 | Annual Issue

Article 65

1952

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Recommended Citation

Faber, Lester F. (1952) "A Controlled Waterfowl Hunting Area Experiment," *Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science*, 59(1), 448-451.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/pias/vol59/iss1/65>

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A Controlled Waterfowl Hunting Area Experiment

By LESTER F. FABER

The demand by Iowa hunters for places to hunt ducks has been on the increase for several years. Since 1943, which is a relatively short time ago, the number of duck stamps sold in Iowa has increased 30 per cent. We have been unable to provide these hunters sufficient space to hunt waterfowl.

Although several thousand acres of marsh have been acquired and developed the last ten years to add to the many acres already state-owned, the demand for space is not satisfied.

Fortunately the distribution of marsh areas in the state is such that, for the most part, there is no great concentration of hunters day in and day out. One area stands out, however, in that the demand for space is a daily problem.

Forney Lake is an 800 acre marsh in Fremont County just north of Sydney. It has always been a good duck hunting spot and is used extensively. Its proximity to Council Bluffs, Shenandoah, Omaha, and several medium sized towns has resulted in a concentration of hunters every day of the season to the point where no one enjoyed good hunting and the method of hunting was actually dangerous.

The situation became bad enough that some corrective action had to be taken.

During the fall season of 1950, on an experimental basis, a controlled hunting plan was established. The idea was not new. It had been worked successfully in neighboring states.

The following plan was put into operation. Twenty-five, three-man blinds were built and installed on 400 acres of the lake. Permits to hunt were granted by reservation made at the Des Moines office by mail between September 15 and October 15, one month and after October 15 and during the season reservations were made at the headquarters on Forney Lake.

Reservations were made for blinds for parties of not less than two and not more than three hunters. During the mail reservation period each request was limited to two dates during the season.

In making a reservation a man had to list his own name and hunting license number and the names and license numbers of the members of his party. If his application was in order, he was sent a permit indicating dates the permit was good and the time he was to appear at the area headquarters.

On the date of reservation the hunting party reported 45 minutes before shooting time. One man from each party drew a number from a basket to determine which of the 25 blinds would be his for the day. Licenses of hunters were kept at the area headquarters and returned to the hunter at the end of the day.

After all blinds had been assigned to parties holding reservations the remaining blinds, if any, were allocated on a first come, first serve basis.

All hunters were required to fill in data cards indicating ducks in bag, ducks shot down but lost, hours hunted, etc. This supplied almost 100 per cent coverage of the waterfowl take aspect of the operation.

The first year 1782 hunters used the area and almost without exception the system was accepted.

In 1951 the same system was again set up except that a charge of 50 cents per man per day was made. Reasons for this charge will be discussed in a moment.

By the end of the second year the plan was so well accepted that it probably will be in operation from year to year.

Admittedly a system of this type tends to make duck hunting artificial. Duck hunters, both old and new, liked the system because more people could hunt on a given day on the same amount of space without sitting on each other's laps. Under a system of this kind a hunter is assured of a place to hunt after driving some distance. The rain and snow was just as cold in a state-owned blind as it would be in any other however.

Data cards showing residence of hunters were not checked for 1950 but were examined for the last season. It was noted that the 735 parties came from 49 Iowa towns and Omaha. The 49 towns were in 26 different counties. These figures give only a general picture since it does not consider repeats. For example of the 633 Iowa parties—349 were from Pottowattamie County in which Council Bluffs is located. Many are repeats who hunted more than two days since there was some space each day not taken by reservations.

The important thing is, however, that in 1950, 1782 hunters and in 1951, 1829 hunters were able to hunt on Forney without confusion, mixup, or swear words and all indicated they enjoyed hunting under this system.

While it may not be of general interest, the economic phase must be considered in any discussion of a system of this type. Any activity whether it be planting game cover or building blinds is controlled by how much it costs and the source of money.

When the Conservation Commission was considering the establishment of the system the second year, the following items were pointed out and must, in any analysis, be included.

1. Extra clerical help is needed to process mail reservations before the season. In 1950, 605 pieces of mail were handled and in 1951, 523. A large percentage of requests have to be returned for more information; many required an answering letter. A filing system must be set up and all requests handled fairly and without error.

2. Two full time men are needed to operate the system on the area during the season. These men process reservations, check licenses, check bag limits, and coordinate the activities of the hunters.

3. Costs of blinds, while not extensive after initial construction, are incurred each year.

In 1950 the cost to the state for each hunter using the area was \$1.34. In 1951 the cost was \$1.20.

Since the system was a special service to relatively few hunters, a charge of 50 cents per man per day was made in 1951. As it turned out, this was only one-half enough to pay the cost of operation in 1951.

Since data cards gave almost complete coverage of activities, the harvest data cannot be compared to other areas or other parts of the state for the most part. The following table includes some harvest data that may be of interest.

In conclusion the system as operated on Forney Lake was satisfactory to most hunters using the area.

Controlled hunting of this type approaches an artificial condition which is not as romantic as regular duck hunting.

Use Data—Table No. 1

	Forney Lake		State-wide
	1950	1951	1951
Number of Hunters	1782	1829	
Per cent of Hunter Successful	57	66	76
Number of Ducks and Coots Taken	1405	2099	
Number of Geese Taken	24	75	
Per cent of Birds Shot and Lost	17	18	
Ducks per Hunter per Day	0.8	1.15	1.39
Average Number Hours Hunted per Trip	6.2	6.5	2.7
Average Party Size	2.4	2.4	
Cost to State Per Man	\$1.34	\$1.20	

Species Composition—Table No. 2

Species	Percentage of Hunters Bag		
	Forney Lake		State-wide
	1950	1951	1951
Mallards	55.0	58.0	53.0
Pintails	6.0	8.0	9.0
Blue-wing Teal	6.0	2.0	10.8
Spoonbill	5.0	3.0	1.8
Green-wing Teal	5.0	3.0	6.4
Redhead	5.0	4.0	1.9
Bluebill	5.0	10.0	5.7
Baldpate	4.0	2.0	1.7
Gadwall	4.0	3.0	1.5
Canvas-Back	Present	P	1.6
Ring-neck	P	2.0	1.0
Ruddy-duck	P	1.0	P
Bufflehead	P	P	P
Wood-duck	P	P	3.3
Merganser	P	P	P
American Goldeneye	P	—	P
Black Mallard	—	P	1.2

To operate a controlled hunting area requires considerable attention to detail and requires a competent coordinating and clerical staff.

As an experiment the plan worked in this case. Whether or not a similar approach should be used on other areas depends upon an analysis of the factors listed in the report and the actual need.

IOWA CONSERVATION COMMISSION
 DES MOINES, IOWA