

Looming Crisis

BY PAUL WAIT

Falling waterfowl hunter
numbers threaten the
future of hunting and
conservation



We do not have enough duck and goose hunters in North America. Worse, we've lost hundreds of thousands of waterfowl hunters during an extended period of exceptionally abundant duck and goose populations, lengthy hunting seasons and liberal bag limits.

So why are duck hunters quitting? Why aren't more young people joining our ranks? And what can we do about it?

In this Special Report, we'll examine these critical questions, as well as take an in-depth look at what fewer hunters means to the future of waterfowl and wetland conservation.





Research has shown that access to uncrowded places to hunt is one key to retaining duck hunters.

Fred Greenstade/Delta Waterfowl

Hard Numbers for Hunters

When the 2015 Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey was released that summer, duck hunters rejoiced. The annual survey put the duck population at a record-high 49.5 million ducks. What's more, wetland conditions were good, foretelling a season of abundant ducks migrating down all four flyways.

"Hunters should look forward to another strong flight," said Delta Waterfowl President Frank Rohwer in a press release about duck numbers.

If ever there's been a year to dig out some duck calls, pull on a pair of waders and head to the marshes and timber, it was 2015.

Yet during that same promise-filled season, fewer people hunted ducks than

any year since 1962. In fact, the number of active U.S. duck hunters dipped below 1 million for only the second time in the past 78 years.

The 2015 tally of 998,600 active duck hunters in the United States is less than half of the 2.03 million in 1970.

Until the mid-1990s, U.S. waterfowl hunter numbers fluctuated yearly, moving up and down with the trends in duck populations. But since 1997, when 1.41 million hunters pursued ducks and geese in the states, hunter numbers have steadily declined. Meanwhile, breeding duck numbers have been above 40 million for 12 of the past 20 years. And each year from 2011 to 2016, breeding duck populations topped 45 million — marking the top six years on record for an annual survey that began in 1955.

The trend isn't much brighter in Canada. Hunter numbers dropped in 2015 there, too. Only 167,814 resident hunters bought a waterfowl permit. Waterfowl hunter numbers peaked in 1978 at 505,681. Just 20 years later, Canada had only 178,065 waterfowlers. By 2004, the number had crashed to 134,910 active waterfowl hunters. From there, numbers climbed slightly to 170,333 in 2013, before slipping again in 2014 and 2015.

Added together, there were 1.17 million active waterfowl hunters in the United States and Canada in 2015. No matter how you examine the math, it's an alarming number for people who care about the future of waterfowl hunting and wetland conservation.

Access and Opportunity

So why are waterfowl hunter numbers dropping?

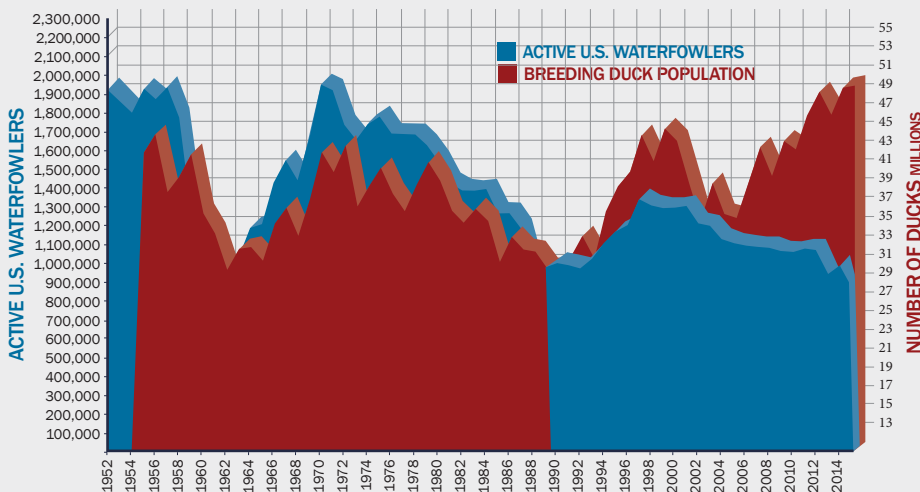
The simple answer, according to John Devney, vice president of U.S. policy for Delta Waterfowl, is that we're not recruiting enough duck hunters to replace those who are quitting because of age or other reasons.

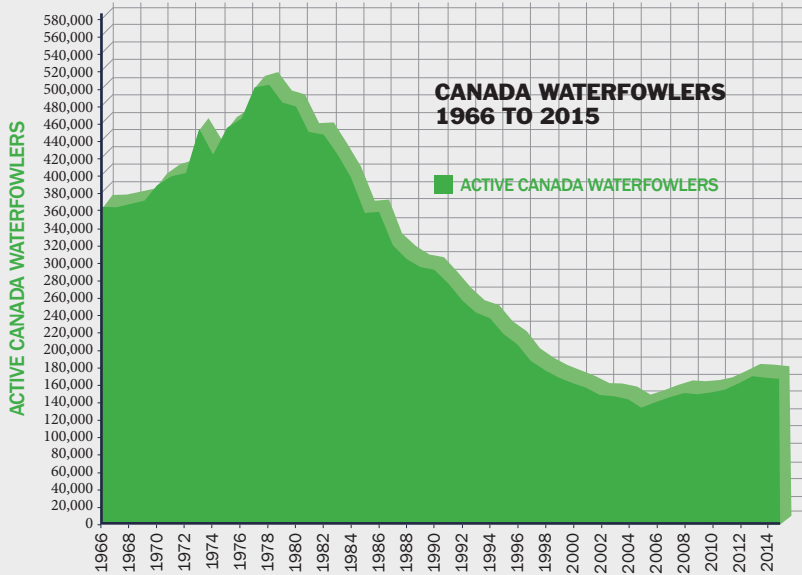
But the duck hunter equation is not that simple, Devney explained.

"Not all duck hunters buy a license and go hunting every year," he said. "A significant portion of the waterfowl hunting population is very fluid. Some years they buy a license, some years they don't. It's probably a third of the duck hunting population, and we don't understand those hunters very well."

Opportunity and access are two major factors for these on-and-off waterfowl hunters, Devney said.

U.S. WATERFOWLERS AND DUCK POPULATION 1952 TO 2015





Access to private land is important to many waterfowl hunters.

Fred Greenslade/Delta Waterfowl

Dr. Luke Laborde, an instructor in the School of Renewable Resources at Louisiana State University, conducted research on waterfowl hunter preferences in 2011, a study funded by Delta Waterfowl.

In a survey of nearly 1,500 responding

hunters from 13 states in the Mississippi Flyway, Laborde asked them to rate the importance of several factors in deciding whether they would hunt waterfowl in a given season.

The respondents ranked “the number of

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Recruiting new hunters starts with mentors who are willing to teach the traditions of waterfowl hunting.

other hunters where I hunt” as the most important factor, according to Laborde.

“Hunting pressure influences the ducks,” he explained. “It also causes frustration when other hunters set up too close. To me, crowding is the bigger issue.”

Laborde’s research uncovered that length of hunting seasons, permission to hunt private land and numbers of ducks were cited as the next most important factors.

Surprisingly, bag limits and the cost to hunt were ranked quite low by the respondents.

“My key research conclusions include that access to uncrowded areas and private lands promotes long-term participation in waterfowl hunting,” Laborde said.

Recruitment Problems

A scarcity of opportunity and access to quality hunting leads directly to a hunter recruitment and retention problem, Devney said. Fewer good places to hunt drives up the cost of duck blind leases.

“You need four or five guys to go together

on a lease, and there’s no room in the blind to bring a boy or a girl hunting,” he said.

Devney points to his own childhood as a perfect example of recruitment failure.

“My grandfather’s No. 1 thing was deer hunting in northern Minnesota. There were a whole bunch of guys in deer camp, but one of the rules of the camp was: No children. As a result, my dad never had the opportunity to deer hunt with his father. So guess what I didn’t do? Deer hunt. My grandfather failed. He didn’t replace himself as a deer hunter. One little decision had a cascading effect.”

Hunter recruitment has never been more crucial.

“If we want waterfowl hunter numbers to grow or remain stable, we need recruitment to keep pace with the losses,” Devney said. “To recruit new hunters, we need to foster a social structure and peer support that allows a kid to stay in the game.”

That starts with parents and grandparents who hunt ducks and geese.

“We tell folks to support conservation — to replace the ducks they shoot every year.

We should also be telling them that you must replace yourself as a duck hunter. That’s as big a part of the job as buying a federal duck stamp,” Devney said.

Howie Harshaw, assistant professor at the University of Alberta, is studying hunter recruitment, retention and re-engagement in prairie Canada.

As part of the ongoing research, people who participated in a mentored waterfowl hunting program such as Delta’s First Hunt are being asked to identify what might cause them not to become a waterfowl hunter on their own.

Access and cost are commonly cited, Harshaw said.

“Negotiating crowded hunting areas and finding good places to hunt are concerns,” he said. “The initial cost of hunting is a barrier. New hunters think, ‘Man, I have to get a lot of decoys to be successful.’ ”

The perception that duck and goose hunting not only takes a lot of equipment, but requires a lot of skills to succeed also stops some would-be waterfowlers.

"I've found that new hunters are a bit intimidated," Harshaw said. "How do you call them in? How do you get to the bird? How do I know I'm shooting the right species? How do you know where to go? All of that at once is intimidating."

Long Seasons, Abundant Birds

Falling waterfowl hunter numbers are particularly puzzling when viewed through the lens of recent season lengths and bag limits.

Consider this: Since the 1994-95 season, liberal season lengths and bag limits have been in place — every year. Essentially, an entire generation of waterfowl hunters have never experienced anything less than a 60-day duck season in the Mississippi and Atlantic flyways, while Central Flyway hunters have been afforded 74 days, and Pacific Flyway hunters have 107 days.

When you add special seasons, such as early resident Canada goose hunts, the spring light goose conservation order and September teal opportunities, today's waterfowl hunters have more days to hunt than at any time in modern history.

"There's more waterfowl hunting opportunity on paper than we've ever seen," Devney said.

In North Dakota, for example, some form of waterfowl hunting is open in 10 months of the year. Resident goose season begins in mid-August, followed by the regular duck season, which carries through to January. The light goose season starts in February and runs through mid-May.

The liberal seasons and high bag limits are the result of high duck and goose populations. Giant Canada goose populations have swelled all across the agricultural regions of the north, while snow geese have ballooned to such high numbers that they are ruining their arctic breeding habitat. Meanwhile, with a couple of notable exceptions, duck populations are near or at record high numbers. The 2016 breeding survey put mallard numbers at 11.8 million, the highest number on record.

"And we're still losing hunters," Devney said. "What happens when the prairies dry out and we have shorter duck seasons? It scares me to death. Mallards are doing well, but duck hunters are doing terribly."

DELAWARE CHAPTER A MODEL OF HUNTER RECRUITMENT

Paul Henry never passes up an opportunity to teach people about duck hunting.

"Just about every hunting trip I take, I have kids with me," he said.

When the chairman of Delta's Mid-Shore Chapter in Laurel, Delaware, found out about a friend's wish to breathe new life into an old building, he had a creative idea that promised to not only save the structure, but also turn it into a hunter recruitment asset.

John Burton, a Delta member who loves the tradition of duck hunting, owns a 170-acre island in Rehoboth Bay. Many years ago, it had been a working farm. An old hay barn was the only standing building, and Burton hoped to preserve it.

Henry and about 15 Delta chapter committee members formed a plan, and then gathered up their saws and hammers. Burton provided most of the building materials, while the chapter members put in the labor.

The transformation is nothing short of amazing.

The new building is essentially a fully functioning hunting lodge, complete with beds for 12 people, a bathroom, shower, electricity and a full kitchen.

"Remember now, this building is on an island, so the guys had to bring everything over on boats, and it wasn't an easy project to do," said Matthew Kneisley, Delta's Northeast regional director who supports the Mid-South Chapter.

The chapter has been mentoring youth hunters for several years, but the island provides an ideal environment for people to

Mid-Shore Chapter youth event chairman Scott Green, left; John Burton, center; and Paul Henry stand on the porch of the lodge on Burton's island in Rehoboth Bay, Delaware.



With a new lodge that sleeps 12, the 170-acre island provides an ideal setting for youth hunts and other events.

enjoy the outdoors, Henry said.

"I don't know that you could find another piece of property like it," he said. "We've put a lot of time and energy into it, and it's something we're very proud of. The entire project is about spending time with kids and teaching them about duck hunting and conservation."

In February, the chapter hosted a youth hunt on the island, which has an inland marsh, as well as several shoreline areas of the bay to hunt waterfowl. Henry, chapter youth event chairman Scott Green and others mentored young hunters who took wood ducks, mallards and buffleheads.

Henry was beaming, just like the kids. "I get more excited for the kids when they get a duck than I do when I shoot one myself," he said. "When they make a good shot, I'm always high-fiving and fist-bumping." — *Paul Wait*



The Funding Conundrum

Initiated in 1934, the Federal Duck Stamp Program has raised \$962 million for wetland and waterfowl conservation. By law, 98 cents of every dollar must be spent to acquire and conserve habitat. To date, more than 5.7 million acres of habitat have been permanently protected.

The funds have largely built the National Wildlife Refuge System, which hosted more than 50.2 million visitors in 2016. Of those visits, 2.43 million were for hunting. Clearly, in addition to habitat benefits, the NWRS provides critical access for waterfowl hunters.

Not surprisingly, federal duck stamp sales have declined right along with hunter numbers in the United States. Duck stamps are required for all waterfowl hunters age 16 and over. Stamp sales peaked at 2.41 million in 1971-72, a season with 1.99 million active waterfowl hunters in the United States. Sales fell to 1.29 million in 1992-93, but rebounded to 1.72 million in 2013-14.

Ken Richkus, deputy chief of the USFWS Division of Migratory Bird Management, said that from 1952 through 1999, surveys showed that 15 to 20 percent of stamps were sold for “non-hunting” purposes.

More recently, an even higher percentage of federal duck stamps sold are not for hunting purposes, he said.

While the additional boost in \$25 duck stamp sales benefits waterfowl hunters, the decline in hunters is worrisome, Richkus said.

“Hunting participation is something we’re all concerned with and care deeply about,” he said.

In a recent change, money in the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, which comes from duck stamp sales and import duties on arms and ammunition, can now be used for habitat easements and leases. Before 2014, all monies were required to be used for land purchases to add to NWRS acreage.

Easements and leases certainly help



raise ducks, but they aren’t always lands open for public hunting. In 2016, the fund used \$12.2 million for land acquisitions, and \$47.2 million for small wetland easements and leases.



FOODIES, WOMEN ADD TO WATERFOWL HUNTING RANKS

Teddy Kelley

and dropping birds for 11 seasons now. Waterfowl hunting is a key part of her lifestyle. She even runs training drills for her family’s 6-year-old Labrador retriever.

When she was interviewed for this story, Belke had just returned from a ladies-only hunt in Kansas. She serves as a field pro for Tanglefree, and is a tribe member for Sitka Gear.

Belke is one of an increasing number of female waterfowl hunters who have become role models for ethical hunting and conservation through social media. She has 30,000 followers on Instagram (@nicolebelke), and shares hunting photos on her own website, too.

“I really wish people who don’t hunt would have this experience,” she said. “I want people to see all of the different sides of hunting and appreciate it.”

According to the National Shooting Sports Foundation, women are a growing segment of the overall hunting

population. NSSF research cites the family aspects of hunting as a key driver in participation.

That’s certainly the case for Belke.

“I hunt with my husband, father-in-law and my son,” she said. “There’s just a great dynamic about sharing a hunt with your family.”

Another population where hunting is gaining new members is the “foodie movement.” Foodies are people who want to know what they are eating and where it came from.

Hank Shaw, a wild game chef and author of three wild game cookbooks, including “Hunt, Gather, Cook” and “Duck,

Nicole Belke is among an increasing number of female waterfowl hunters.





Fred Greenslade/Delta Waterfowl

Geese loaf at the Colusa National Wildlife Refuge in California. U.S. Refuge System lands are purchased by federal duck stamp dollars.

“The majority of our money is going toward easements now,” said Eric Alvarez, secretary of the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission. He also serves as chief of the Division of Realty for the NWRs.

“We’re conserving the best waterfowl habitat, and being open to hunting is one of the criteria. These properties have to provide a public use component.”

Adding more land to the refuge system

poses a difficult challenge for managers, according to Richkus.

“Refuge system operating budgets have fallen since 2010,” he said. “We’re doing more with less.”

As a result, management duties at some refuges are being neglected, and tough cuts are happening at others. Access is compromised, water levels are not being maintained for hunting and waterfowl plantings are not being sowed.

“Maintaining our hunting heritage is important,” Alvarez said. “Historically, we’ve looked to expand waterfowl hunting opportunities. If we’re going to continue to be relevant, we need to continue to try to grow our hunter base.”

Fewer hunters are also buying hunting

Duck, Goose,” tours the United States hosting gourmet wild game dinners.

“Hunters make up a significant portion of my audiences,” he said. “I’ve found a lot of people are picking up hunting in their 20s and 30s for culinary reasons.”

Shaw also runs Hunter-Angler-Gardner-Cook (honest-food.net), a website filled with recipes and tips to hunt for your own food.

“A lot of people who’ve seen the recipes on my site want to go hunting,” he said. “People are hungry for good, solid recipes, and that gives them social license to go shoot ducks.”

Many foodies live in urban areas and don’t have a hunting background, Shaw pointed out. However, they often have the economic means to hunt. And with knowing where the meat was taken as a justification, more of them are taking to the woods and marshes.

“If the public knows you are eating what you are chasing, they are cool with the idea of hunting,” Shaw said.

— *Paul Wait*

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licenses and state waterfowl stamps, too, which leads to less public land to hunt. In addition, many state-owned properties are not being maintained for hunter opportunity.

“We need to make sure we have a baseline of places to hunt, like refuges,” Devney said. “The infrastructure is failing our public-land hunters. We need to reprioritize our investments to manage for waterfowl hunting.”

Finding Solutions

In Canada, steep declines in hunter numbers throughout the 1990s prompted the federal government to propose Waterfowler Heritage Days, a season exclusively for youth hunters.

“Anti-hunters used the media and started petitions to oppose it,” recalled Jim Fisher, director of conservation policy for Delta Waterfowl. “Delta rallied the troops and got people to back Waterfowler Heritage Days. We were very instrumental to passing it.”

But an even more impactful result came from that battle.

“It led to Delta launching mentored hunts,” Fisher said. “We decided to take kids on the special season hunts in 2001, and that led to Delta’s First Hunt program. That was the genesis.”

First Hunt is the largest waterfowl hunter recruitment program in North America. Since 2003, Delta’s volunteer chapters have hosted 934 First Hunt events, with more than 43,500 participants.

Delta’s grassroots network of volunteers mentor new waterfowl hunters using guidelines developed by the organization. Every year, from Nova Scotia to Alberta, and from Texas to Pennsylvania, First Hunt teaches the traditions of waterfowl hunting to thousands of people.

Originally focused on youth, First Hunt has expanded in scope to serve university students, women and families.

“Anyone who has an interest in waterfowl hunting, we’ll take them,” Fisher said.

Introducing new folks to hunting is a critical step, but so too is continued engagement by mentors. Some Delta

chapters have begun year-long mentorship programs, where the participants can shoot clay targets, make hand-carved decoys, fix up duck blinds, build and install wood duck nest boxes and yes, go hunting. Some chapters even take the same new hunters out several times.

“The more we engage people in the program, the more likely they will become waterfowl hunters for life,” said Matthew Kneisley, Delta Waterfowl regional director for several Northeast states.

In 2016, Delta initiated six-day youth hunter camps in Ontario, where young people complete their safety certifications through an in-depth program about conservation, firearms safety and hunting techniques. Two camps were held, and two more are planned for this year. Delta also collaborated with other conservation partners to deliver a three-day youth camp in Alberta, as well as host a hunter training workshop in British Columbia.

In addition to hands-on training, Delta is working to make it easier to



Todd Broussard of Abbeville, Louisiana, shares a waterfowl hunt with Anna, his 14-year-old daughter.

Waterfowl hunters enjoy the camaraderie of a morning in the duck blind.

become a duck hunter through policy work, Fisher said.

Delta successfully lobbied Manitoba last year to reduce the minimum hunting age to 10. British Columbia also has a 10-year-old minimum, while most of Canada allows hunters to start at age 12.

Fisher would like to see the minimum age reduced or even eliminated throughout Canada. Introducing hunting earlier is important, and he pointed out that 39 U.S. states have no minimum age requirement.

“Once kids get into other activities such as team sports, it becomes harder to get them to hunt,” he said.

Delta is pushing for provinces to offer apprentice licenses. The measure would allow younger kids — ages 10 and 11 — to try out duck and goose hunting during Waterfowler Heritage Days under the guidance of mentors without having to pay the cost of hunter safety courses.

Not all of Delta’s efforts are focused on new hunters. The organization is actively working to make being a waterfowl hunter easier for everyone, Fisher said.

“We’re bringing some new ideas to Canada,” he said. “We’re lobbying for things like senior hunting licenses and lifetime licenses. We are trying to get electronic licensing to make getting the proper hunting permits easier, too.”

Harshaw’s research suggests some of these ideas would retain current hunters, and probably even help former waterfowl hunters re-engage.

Hunters he surveyed cited the regulatory environment and licensing difficulty as reasons they quit waterfowl hunting.

“The long shadow of Canada’s failed gun registry still exists,” Harshaw said. “Resentment still exists, and people cite that as a reason not to hunt.”

Fisher too, said the long-gun registry imposed in 1993 hurt waterfowl hunter numbers, robbing the next generation of not only mentorship by veteran hunters who quit, but also by taking away a critical component for every waterfowler: a shotgun.

“The government was encouraging people



Fred Greenslade/Delta Waterfowl

to take guns in to be destroyed,” Fisher said. “Some of those duck guns were lost, and they were not able to be passed down to the next generation.”

Delta lobbied government leaders to abolish the registry, and in 2012, it was eliminated.

“The long-gun registry was a knee-jerk reaction by the government in reaction to school shootings,” Fisher said. “It had nothing to do with duck hunting, but it sure had an impact on it.”

And just like in the states, the number of duck stamp sales in Canada impacts conservation. Wildlife Habitat Canada, the federal agency that appropriates duck stamp revenue, invests in waterfowl conservation programs. Fewer hunters means less money for wetlands and waterfowl hunting.

Looking to the Future

Losing waterfowl hunters without replacing them is a downward spiral. Waterfowl managers throughout North America have recognized the trend.

“All of us have to be aware of the problem,”

Devney said. “We have to work on the three things we can manage: Opportunity, access and increasing recruitment.”

Opportunity and access take money and continual vigilance to defend against threats to waterfowl hunting. Delta has the expertise to work for access and to create new opportunities. The Duck Hunters Organization is proud to continually fight on behalf of its members — and all waterfowl hunters — anytime, anywhere.

First Hunt will continue to be a vital tool to bolster the ranks of waterfowl hunters. But every person who tosses out decoys and shoulders a shotgun has the ability to recruit new hunters.

Now more than ever, it’s imperative.

“If you can’t replace yourself as a hunter with your own kids, look to the next level — your nieces and nephews, neighbors, friends and co-workers,” Devney said.

The future of waterfowl hunting depends on us. ▲

Paul Wait is editor and publisher of Delta Waterfowl.