

## Where have all the ducks gone ?

An important ritual at Delta Marsh, going back over 1,000 years, has been the fall harvest of ducks and, to a lesser extent, geese. The influx of birds to the marsh begins in July and peaks toward the end of August. The harvest was clearly important to aboriginal people as indicated by the large number of small arrowheads intended for birds remaining along the shores of Lake Manitoba. More recently, ducks were an important part of the early settlers' diet and a recreational hunt developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Photos from the 1890s typically show incredibly large bags—over a thousand ducks were reportedly killed in a single day's shooting during the 1901 visit to Delta by the Duke of York, later King George V.

When the Delta Duck Station (later renamed the Delta Waterfowl Research Station) opened in 1938, formal estimates began to be made of the numbers of ducks using the marsh each year. In September 1939, Albert Hochbaum reported to the Manitoba Game Branch that 180,000 ducks were in the marsh. Following World War II, the use of aircraft by biologists from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service greatly improved the efficiency of the annual count. Refinements to the census methods were made into the mid-1960s and these have been used consistently by provincial government biologists through 2002. Significantly, early counts excluded Lake Francis, an area on the easternmost part of the marsh, so these values are likely underestimates of the total duck population, as compared to later values which represent all of Delta.

The numbers demonstrate the marked decline in the marsh duck populations from the 1930s to the present. The peak occurred in the mid-1950s during a period of unusually high water that caused vast areas of farmland south of the marsh to be flooded. Ducks flourished on the newly available marshland, and a record of 607,560 ducks were observed on 30 September 1956. In contrast, a mere 17,952 ducks were found in the corresponding count made on 26 September 2001.

What is the cause of the Delta duck decline? Several theories have been proposed and it may be that, in reality, two or more of them is acting simultaneously.

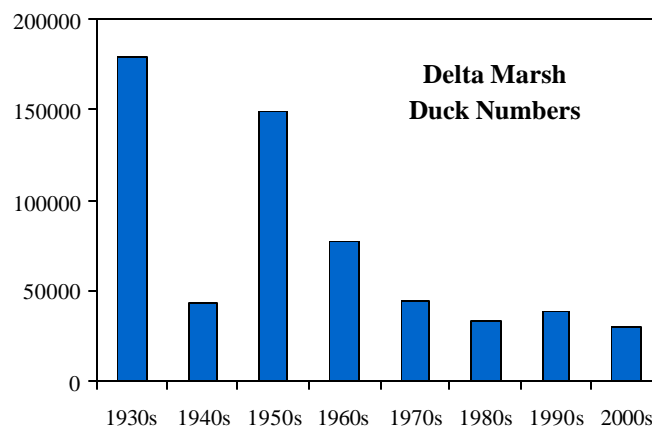
There are some indications that prairie climate trends over the past several decades, especially widespread drought that diminishes the small ponds needed by breeding ducks (such as occurred at Delta in the early 1940s), have affected waterfowl populations adversely. However, this cannot be the whole explanation because sites elsewhere on the prairies have not shown the same declines as Delta Marsh.

Allowing large numbers of hunters to shoot too many ducks can certainly deplete a population. But hunter numbers have been declining consistently in Manitoba for the past couple of decades. In theory, this should have caused ducks to become more numerous. Lack of ducks has further reduced the harvest as hunters lose interest in this recreational pursuit.

Habitat conditions on the marsh have deteriorated. Hybrid cattails have invaded large areas, thus excluding pondweeds and other plants desired by ducks. This has probably been a very important factor in reducing the numbers of diving ducks (canvasback, redheads, and bluebills) using the marsh in the fall.

Agricultural practices around the marsh have changed. Farmers have become more efficient in getting crops harvested and into their bins before the ducks begin to feed on the remaining stubble. Mallards, pintails, and gadwall all make use of unharvested and waste grain during late August, September, and October. As farmers switched from stoking to swathing, from threshing to combining, and to genetically improved crops with shorter growing seasons, they have become able to remove the crops before the ducks can bother them. A final blow occurred when the provincial government discontinued its program of sowing lure crops which further reduced the food supply for field-feeding ducks.

Will Delta ever again be the "duck mecca" that attracted hunters from around the world? Probably not, in light of shifting social priorities and the decline in ducks numbers. But many would argue that ducks are important for more than food and sport. The flights of ducks remind us of spring renewal and coming fall, enabling us to reconnect with our natural roots in an increasingly urbanized world. Marsh conservation, through control of cattails and carp, and reintroduction of varying water levels, may have symbolic as well as economic benefits.



## Delta Vice 1901

Early Delta visitors were clearly concerned about gambling, drinking and other vice, as indicated by this heated rebuttal by a newsman from Portage la Prairie to allegations made, in print, by the Delta hotel's proprietor in mid-August 1901:

"Sir: Kindly give me space in your columns to refer to a wholly untruthful attack on my personal character made by Hy. Heyworth.

In a letter to the *Graphic* he says, in regard to the doings at Delta, which have become notorious, that I (*News* representative) was a leading spirit in one of the games two weeks ago last Sunday, as well as on previous occasions. This, Mr Editor, is nothing more nor less than a downright falsehood on the part of Mr. Heyworth, as I am in a position to prove. I did not take part in any gambling game and Mr. Heyworth is to say the least, a falsifier when he says it.

What Mr. Heyworth's object was in making this attack on me I can only conjecture. He says he went through the house at 12 o'clock and found everything quiet and nothing improper going on. He does not say anything about his being there afterwards, nor of his shooting craps on the floor upstairs with the strangers from Winnipeg, nor of how after they had shot craps for awhile he passed a big jug and induced a number of his guests to drink. Probably he was so overcome with the contents of the jug that he has not a clear recollection of what passed at that time.

Since his memory is so short would it be amiss to remind him of his then going down stairs and raising a racket and using profanity which might bring a blush to a hardened blasphemer.

He says he discourages gambling. Probably he does in his sober moments. But if that is the time he does it I can only infer that said moments are infrequent.

He says he refused to turn away boarders at my request. The request was made by others as well as myself, and the said boarders, which he says, he refused to turn away, were the Winnipeg strangers, of wheel of fortune fame, with whom he gambled in his own house in the small hours of Sunday morning, keeping me and the rest of the guests from sleep. Of these Winnipeg gentlemen your readers have already heard.

I have had nothing but the most kindly feelings for Mr. Heyworth in the past, but I feel that his unwarrantable attack on me should not go unanswered. I have lived ten years in town and do not hesitate to refer anyone to any employer I have had in those ten years. As a young man not quite twenty one and valuing my reputation, I resent an attack by such an unprincipled liar and gambler.

In conclusion might I suggest to Mr. Heyworth that instead of trying to discredit the reputation of a young man, that he turn over a new leaf, see that he does not pass the jug too often, try to discourage gambling on his premises, in his moments of exaltation, as well as in those moment to which I have referred, which would appear to be so few and far between.

Should he do this, Delta may regain its reputation and cast off the cloud which Mr. Heyworth and his associates have helped to bring upon it.

Malcolm McBeath"

## Delta Marsh History Initiative

In its heyday, Delta Marsh attracted people from all over the world and all walks of life. Generations of farmers, fishers, hunters, and trappers found themselves in the company of royalty, movie and TV stars, and even astronauts. Today the marsh has seriously deteriorated due to unfavourable water levels, a destructive fish species, overgrowth by cattails, and contamination from sewage, fertilizers, and pesticides.

A group of people who share an interest in the area, the Delta Marsh History Initiative, is preparing to write a book. It will include histories of the prominent people and organizations of the marsh, from the earliest aboriginal inhabitants to the present cottagers, hunters, and scientists. We hope that the book will encourage conservation of this world-class marsh.

### You can help!

- provide photographs, reminiscences, family stories, or any other information pertaining to Delta
- let us know about people who have information about Delta
- volunteer your time to help collect and organize information, contact people, and prepare a book on Delta history to be published in 2004
- make a tax-deductible donation to help with project costs

### Delta Marsh History Initiative

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## Oakland History Book

Orders are being taken for a forthcoming history book for the village of Oakland and district, on the south side of Delta Marsh. (This project is not affiliated with the Delta Marsh History Initiative, whose book is expected in 2004.) The estimated cost per copy, upon publication in December, will be \$85. Those interested in reserving a copy must send a \$50 pre-payment (cash, cheque, or money order), no later than 15 June 2003, to the address below. This will be the only opportunity to obtain copies; no extras will be printed. Be sure to provide a full mailing address, phone number and, if available, email address.

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