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Iowa’s Wildlife Is Increasing

Farmers, Sportsmen are Working with State and Federal Agencies in a Conservation Program that is Getting Results

THE FIRST white settlers to enter Iowa’s tall grass prairie land found a wildlife population vastly different from that of today. There were herds of elk and buffalo on the open prairie, and deer were seen in the openings and along the edges of the groves. Fur-bearing animals, especially muskrats, minks, beavers and otters, were present wherever habitats were available. An occasional black bear was encountered in the timber along the water courses. Wolves and coyotes proved troublesome and made necessary the vigilant care of domestic stock in outlying locations. In the groves and other timbered areas were ruffed grouse and wild turkeys. Here also were many tree squirrels and a few cottontails. There were some quail and the numbers of prairie chickens reported were almost unbelievable.

The Settlers’ Toll

It was wildlife that made it possible for settlers to survive their early days in this new land. The severe cold of winter demanded the construction of sturdy homes. Sometimes two winters passed before it was possible to begin clearing, fencing and cultivating the land. Even after the production of crops there was little chance of marketing the bulky products, for roads were not good and a railroad was not always near. During this period of settlement and early adjustment the utilization of wildlife was essential, and it was taken at a profit. Not only were wild animals utilized directly in the preparation of food, clothing, candles and other items of need, but their skins were of such value that could be made from the sale of skins, many of them turned to hunting and trapping wildlife beyond the demands of necessity. Thus began the depletion of many forms of Iowa wildlife.

Depletion

With the building of railroads and the cutting of roadways the settlers found agricultural operations more and more profitable. New settlers came, miles of fences were built and more land was placed under cultivation. Depletion of such larger forms of wildlife as elk and buffalo was inevitable, as was the restriction of habitats in general. With land values and profits in farm products increasing, more land was brought into cultivation. Wildlife populations continued to decline, the habitats of the animals were increasingly restricted, and the way was paved to overproduction, glutted markets, poor prices and eroded soils. The people as a whole were too close to the operations to realize fully their trends and results, and besides wasn’t everyone making money? Even before the crash conservative administrators suggested a thorough appraisal of our natural resources. The suggestion was followed up and from it sprang “The Iowa Twenty-five Year Conservation Plan.”

Twenty-Five Year Plan

In 1931 the State Legislature instructed the State Board of Conservation and the State Fish and Game Commission to collaborate in the preparation of a long-term conservation plan and program. Those two bodies gathered together the history of natural resource utilization, an analysis of its direction and causes, and a plan for achievement of a more orderly husbanding. Here laid open were such eye-sores as soil erosion, pollution, silting, woodland stripping and destruction of wildlife. A broad, general program was outlined for the following 25 years. There remained, however, more obvious than before the need of active and continued investigation of the basic phases. In wildlife conservation Mr. J. N. Darling came forward with a plan to correlate the efforts of the Iowa State Fish and Game Commission and the Iowa State College along these lines. So enthusiastic was Mr. Darling that he agreed to share in financing the work. A 3-year cooperative program of research and education was completed so successfully by 1935 that the participants were encouraged to initiate a broader program for a longer term of years.

Cooperating Agencies

Federal agencies led by the Soil Conservation Service and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration entered Iowa to cooperate with the state agencies which were already attempting to conserve. The Iowa State Conservation Commission, the American Wildlife Institute, the Iowa State College and the United States Biological Survey agreed to cooperate in a State and regional wildlife conservation program. Provisions were included in that agreement for establishing the Iowa Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit. Since Oct. 1, 1935, that Unit has been actively investigating state and local wildlife problems in relation to management.
It was soon realized that sound wildlife management techniques and practices could not be formulated overnight. A thoroughgoing investigation of each form of wildlife and its habitat was necessary. This task, complicated by the many forms of wildlife and by the various types of habitats, including seasonal and annual variations, simply could not be completed during these first 4 years.

The investigations of the Unit were vigorously pursued along four principal lines: (1) Development and improvement of practical census techniques; (2) determination of the economic importance of wildlife; (3) analysis of factors producing fluctuations in wildlife populations; and (4) the testing and improving of techniques and practices in wildlife management.

All the research findings were submitted in special reports to the cooperating agencies. Through them the findings were adapted to and released for use in the education and action programs of wildlife conservation.

It was soon recognized that the wildlife crop was tangible and that much could be done to restore and conserve it. Because of an effort over a period of several years the Iowa State Conservation Commission now has the laws most needed for the proper administration of the wildlife that it holds in trust for the people of Iowa. The Commission is so empowered that it may adjust the harvest of wildlife to the available surplus, and thus provide for a restrained and orderly utilization of this resource. Conservationists are cognizant of the common-sense value of such a program and lend their wholehearted support to Commission regulations. This exhibits a purposeful form of public unity and cooperation of which Iowans may well be proud. Let us consider cross-sections of the progress that has been made.

About 38 years ago the ring-necked pheasant was accidentally introduced into Iowa. At that time, during a severe windstorm about 2000 birds were released to the wild when their pens were blown apart on the farm of William Benton near Cedar Falls. This original stock has been supplemented by birds set free by state game authorities and citizens. The pheasant has increased and held its numbers better in the northern five tiers of counties than in the southern four tiers, but in several localities of southern Iowa the ringneck is becoming more numerous. Drouth, insect damage to food and cover, over-shooting and severe winters have at various times greatly reduced the pheasant population.

With methods of hushanding being continually improved, such losses should be minimized.

Guarding Seed Stock

During the extremely cold winter of 1935-36 many pheasants died of exposure, and the poor nesting season that followed did not increase their numbers. Hence the following two seasons were declared closed to hunting, and the seed stock was zealously guarded. In the meantime a new game farm established by the Commission near Ledges State Park produced several thousand young pheasants that were cared for by conservation clubs for a few weeks and then released on farm lands previously prepared for the birds. This has served principally to unite the interest and efforts of farmers, sportsmen and commissioners in the management of upland game birds. The seed stock was guarded carefully against the reduced number of poachers, and the improved cover and food conditions increased natural repro-
duction. This year, 1939, the pheasant population was such that it was deemed advisable to enlarge the shooting grounds.

Greater insight and improved methods have provided for better administration of the quail surplus. When agriculture became established in Iowa, habitats superior to those offered by the unbroken prairie were created. At first quail increased in numbers but decreased later with the removal of brushy fence rows and wooded areas. In 1916 the season on quail was closed, and it was not opened again until 1933 and then only experimentally on limited areas. The soil-erosion control work, has done much to restore cover for quail. The “heaviest population of quail in memory of old time hunters and farmers who have lived in quail territory for years” has been reported this year (1939). That zealous protection of the wildlife seed stock has paid dividends is evidenced in the history of all our game animals.

The Farmer’s Role

The Iowa farmer today finds a new world of interest on his lands. He appreciates wild-life and values it not only for the profits it may bring but also for the recreation gained in observing and hunting it. To insure a continued population of wildlife the farmer now recognizes the part he must play, and hence gives serious consideration to the food and cover necessary to restore, increase and maintain wildlife.

It is recognized that in winter game birds may have great difficulty getting enough to eat. In such times of stress the birds may wander from the home range in search of food, and finding it elsewhere are not likely to return, much to the farmer’s loss. If food is not found, the birds will die from starvation and the continued cold. Without a good food supply in extremely cold snaps, quail may live but a few days and pheasants not much longer. Predators may take many birds that are weakened by starvation and cold. Through such losses the farmer has learned that winter feeding is sometimes one of his most effective conservation measures.

Some farmers leave a shock of corn near protective cover such as thickets, tall weeds or grasses for wildlife. Some men find it more convenient to do this than to leave a row of corn near cover or to build feeding stations.

Many farmers now encourage game birds to seek shelter about their barns and groves during extremely cold periods of winter. Today farmers protect thickets, sloughs, marshes, fence rows and waste areas from over-grazing, burning and other destruction, thus adding to the cover provided by their groves and decreasing the mortality of pheasants through exposure to the cold blasts of blizzards and strong winds. Furthermore, the good farmer profits from moderate grazing and knows that burning of fence row cover does not control harmful insects and weeds. Instead the fire destroys fences and causes weed seeds to germinate in larger numbers.

Farmers know that places for nesting and rearing the young are important. Old stands of grass such as are found along fencelines are known to be especially valuable, for many of the birds nest early before there is a new growth from which to build a nest.

The Sportsman’s Role

The sportsman has learned that much can be done for his recreation by wise personal conduct in the field. He finds a welcome sign each year at the farm home where respect has been shown for the farmer’s property and family, and what is more important, good friends are there to welcome him. He realizes that his sport is worth paying for and finds it of value to remunerate the farmer in some manner for making his days in the field possible.

The sportsman’s code requires a diligent search for injured birds, and a good retrieving dog greatly increases the chances of finding the cripple. The training of a good dog is a pleasure in itself, and its use will bring the hunter increased satisfaction in hunting.

The sportsman does not shoot more than the law permits. He knows that trained observers have spent many hours in the field checking populations so that hunting dates and bag limits may be set to furnish him with the greatest possible number of birds and yet leave seed stock for the next season. He finds obedience of the law common sense and good business.

Where wildlife is found in flocks or coveys the sportsman understands that to tenaciously hunt down and kill each individual in the flock or covey may deprive him of birds to hunt in that locality the following season. Here, as in other instances, the sportsman has come to realize that much responsibility for the success of his sport rests squarely on his shoulders; for regulations, no matter how complete, cannot entirely substitute for good judgment and self-control.

Conclusions

Conservationists throughout Iowa are to be commended for the progress made in the conservation of their wildlife resources. If the courage they have demonstrated during recent years may serve as evidence, there is no question but that they will continue to carry the program forward. Progress has been made, and the way has been opened to new successes.

PREPARING POULTRY

for LOCKERS

If you put poultry in your cold storage locker, it makes little difference in the flavor and aroma when cooked whether you washed the drawn birds with running water or whether you merely “wiped” them dry before freezing them up. The “washed” birds may present a better appearance, however, because the skin is not likely to appear so dry.

These are conclusions reached in an experiment conducted jointly by the Home Economics and Poultry Husbandry staffs of the Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station. The experiment was carried on with 24 roasters, half of which were “wiped” and half of which were “washed.” At the same time a similar number of roasters was wiped and washed and kept at 32 degrees F. to compare unfrozen with frozen birds.