Wetlands, sewer ponds bring waterfowl to state

27 July '88

Sentinel July 27 '88

A Desert Place
Natural beauty through preservation
presented by:
CONSERVATION COMMITTEE OF THE
Cave Creek Improvement Assoc.

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Special to the Sentinel

On reading Saguaro Sam's recent column I was struck by his reference to "Ducks in the Desert." I know Sam was probably kidding, but his words reminded me of one of the great surprises of desert living.

Not only are there "ducks in the desert" (or more accurately, in the wetlands in or adjacent to the desert), but there are a great many varieties of ducks including mallards, pintails (these two in the greatest number), ruddy ducks, redheads, cinnamon teal, american widgeon, ringnecked duck and lesser scaup.

In addition to ducks, there are Canada geese and snow geese, and a whole galaxy of water-and-marsh birds such as grebes, coots, rails, cranes, avocets, gallinules and stilts.

How could all this happen in Arizona, the water-shortage capital of the United States? How can it be that 15,000 licensed hunters bring down close to 100,000 ducks and geese every year in this arid state?

We have already hinted at the answer: Arizona has its wetlands. They are limited in extent, but substantial. These wetlands, consisting of swamps, marshes, rivers, lakes and ponds, are where waterfowl congregate, rest during migration, nest and breed.

Arizona's most important wetlands are located in the White Mountains. Mormon Lake, in the San Francisco Plateau, is the state's largest natural body of water and is likewise of the highest importance for waterfowl.

The sad part of the story, both for the birds and for the hunter, is that natural wetlands are disappearing at a dismaying rate. At one time, Arizona had twice the amount of wetlands that it has now. But "progress" demanded that the state's major rivers be dammed and regulated, with the result that their lower reaches became desiccated, their channels waterless.

Marshes and backwaters associated with the Salt, Verde, San Pedro, San Simon, Santa Cruz, Gila and parts of the Colorado have disappeared, many of them drained for agricultural uses.

Livestock grazing has been a major villain in the elimination of wildlife habitat. Besides trampling nests and eggs, livestock interfere with the breeding process by opening up the grass cover, thus exposing the nests to predators.

Conservationists have had little success in preventing the intrusion of livestock into duck-nesting areas.

Another impediment to duck serenity is the growing use of wetland areas for recreational purposes. Recreational visitors to wildfowl habitat have increased exponentially during the past 25 years, with the result that waterfowl productivity has been gravely disrupted in many nesting spots. Some of the blame goes to dogs, whose unique ability to sniff out nesting ducks commands admiration if not respect.

But not all the news is bad. Ths loss of natural wetlands has been offset to a considerable extent by the creation of artificial wetlands. And herein lies a romantic tale.

The Mexican dons, in the days when they ruled Arizona, faced the problem of watering their stock during the dry season. They solved it with great ingenuity by building 'charcos', or stock ponds, based on earthen dams designed to impound the runoff from rain. These ponds proved so useful that ranchers continued to build and use them long after the Mexican hegemony had ended.

Indeed, the number of charcos increased greatly during the 1930s, when the federal government subsidized their construction. These impoundments were, and still are, highly attractive to waterfowl both as resting places during migration and, in the case of some of the larger ponds, as breeding places.

At any event, charcos and similar impoundments have compensated to a gratifying extent for the loss of natural wetlands.

There is another man-made waterfowl refuge, sewage treatment ponds, which are increasingly common outside large cities.

Despite their function, these ponds have no unpleasant odor. The ponds attract ducks and geese in large numbers since they provide them with a safe haven free from undue disturbance.

Both happy and sad is the story of the wildlife refuges. President Theodore Roosevelt, as everyone knows, was a lover of the outdoors. He lent the great weight of his authority to the establishment of the National Wildlife Refuge system (NWR).

Begun in 1909, the NWR system flourished in the 1920s and early 1930s, when the depressed prices of

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rural land made acquisitions for a refuge system feasible. The result was the establishment throughout the country of hundreds of refuges where wildlife of all kinds could rest, feed and breed without interference by man.

This happy state of affairs came to an end when the reign of economy began some years later. Funding and staffing levels for the NWRs and their administration dropped precipitately and new acquisitions practically ceased. Most facilities are badly in need of maintenance.

State wildlife management areas (WMAs) have not fared well either. Confronted by the fiscal dragnet, a number of WMAs have had to be abandoned. Others are without permanent personnel to administer the protected areas and ensure that there is no trespassing on areas closed to the public.

Nevertheless, despite all the economy cutbacks, Arizona and the United States have one of the world's finest systems of bird and animal refuges. Arizona in particular can take great satisfaction from its unique "ducks in the desert."