

To hunt or not to hunt...?



Hunters are split in the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission's decision to open portions of the Fern Ridge Wildlife Management Area (WMA) to hunting this season after a four year closure.

In 1979, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODWF) initiated a development program at WMA, located five miles west of Eugene, in an

attempt to increase the waterfowl population in the area. At that time the population was estimated at 300,000. ODWF set a goal to increase that number to 1.7 million.

Although that goal hasn't been attained yet, many hunters began getting impatient this year feeling that the current estimated 985,000 waterfowl in Fern Ridge was good enough.

They wanted to stop waiting and hunt. The Fish and Wildlife Commission said okay, but there will be restrictions.

The WMA East Coyote unit, south of 11th street, will be open Nov. 3 to the end of the season. ODWF is currently planning only one drawing to issue 10 to 12 hunting permits each day for the unit except on Saturday and Wednesday morn-

ings which will be limited to only a few hunters. All duck hunters will be assigned to blinds.

The West Coyote area will be closed from Nov. 1 to March 31 to allow a sanctuary for the waterfowl and Fisher Butte will be open Nov. 1 to Nov.30, but the West Coyote area will be closed from Nov. 1 to March 31 to allow a sanctuary for the

birds.

Waterfowl population counts have decreased dramatically since the 1950s. Population highs had ranged from 30,000 to 100,000 until the mid to late 1970s when the number dropped to a only few thousand.

One of the reasons for this drop has been related to the creation of Ankeny, Basket Slough and Finley national wildlife refuges which caused dispersion among the waterfowl populations, according to Jim Greer, district wildlife biologist for ODFW. Greer says that possible influences have also been linked to migrating flight shifts, poor nesting conditions in the northern regions of the Pacific Flyway and changes in local agriculture practices.

Greer says the 1979 ODFW development program for WMA entailed establishing sanctuary restrictions and developing the water system through extensive irrigation and establishing seven water impoundments. Agricultural development was also initiated, with 100 acres of corn, 250 acres of a sudanmillet mixture and 15 acres of buckwheat currently growing in various stages at the Fern Ridge area.

The program, financed in cooperation with the Army Corp of Engineers, has been quite successful, bringing in 954,266 waterfowl in 1982-83 and 985,000 last year.

Greer says that the ODFW is reopening Fern Ridge this season as an experiment to measure what effect hunting will have on the waterfowl population. Future hunting will depend on the decrease of waterfowl through the season.

He believes Fern Ridge will always have some kind of refuge, but recently there has been a lot of support to open the area permanently although it is Oregon's last existing refuge under sanctuary restrictions.

"What should be foremost is what is best overall for the sportsmen who funded the project," said local hunter, Milton Decker. Money from Oregon hunting licenses has been the total financier of the Fern Ridge area until the Army Corp of Engineers came in.

But Bud Thompson, chair of the Waterfowl Committee of the Izaak Walton Lake conservation organization, believes more time is needed.

"We want the birds to get really established in this end of the valley," says Thompson. "We want to be darn sure that there is some part (of Fern Ridge) that is absolutely safe for the ducks. We don't want them to shoot them all to hell before they get a groove here," says Thompson.



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Wednesday, October 3, 1984