

The Flying Duckman ...

Follows the Migration from Mexican Tropics to Arctic Circle

By EVA HAMILTON
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Awakened in the night by the haunting cries of wild geese flying, north for summer, south for winter, haven't you longed to join that winged band's migration?

There is a Rogue valley citizen who does. Every year. He is Robert H. (Bob) Smith, who moved to southern Oregon 13 years ago.

"Where the ducks fly, there flies he; over marsh and over sea," in his Grumman Goose, an amphibian plane. As flyway biologist with the Department of Interior Fish and Wildlife Service, he works the same beat as the birds, following the broad lanes of migration they travel from the Mexican tropics to the Arctic circle. He counts the birds in the Pacific flyway.

Wide Publicity Gained

Nicknamed "The Flying Duckman" from Washington, D.C., to the state of Washington, Smith gained his widest publicity when he "stumbled on to" the almost extinct whooping crane's nesting ground just south of Great Slave lake in northern Canada in 1952.

"We could hardly believe our eyes when we popped on to them," Smith remarked at his Hillside Drive residence, where he makes his home with his sister, Elizabeth, when he isn't "with the birds." Most of the time he is in migration.

"We saw two individual cranes and two young," he continued with his story of the incident, which brought reporters from far away places to meet his plane.

"They wanted to buy the pictures and I guess I should have sold them to them, but they wouldn't have meant anything to them." Smith produced the pictures, and his summation was correct. One needs the eyes of a falcon for this bird counting business. The dots on the glossy print of the marshes could be whooping cranes only to the man who had seen them.

Finds Them Each Year

"Since then, I have never seen them there," Smith added, "but the Canadian wildlife service has found the cranes on the north side of the lake each year."

Why was this particular discovery of such interest to the press?

"Naturalists the world over were interested in the preservation of these birds. Ornithologists had sought their breeding ground for more than half a century," Smith answered.

The importance of the breeding ground discovery, Smith explained, could be guessed by the fact that only a few living specimens of this tall waterfowl remain on the whole of the North American continent. About 30 birds that year spent the winter on the Texas coastal marshes 3,000 miles from the birds' nesting ground.

Considered Step Forward

Discovery of the breeding ground was considered a definite forward step in the preservation of what was considered "America's rarest bird."

With Smith on the history making flight was Everett L. Sutton of Aberdeen, S.D. The two scientists flew 25,000 miles from the States to British Columbia, Queen Charlotte Islands, through the Northwest Territory and the Yukon along the Arctic coast to Victoria Island and Banks Island.

One of the perils of the journey was experienced by the men when they landed the twin-engine Amphibian at Holman Island west of Victoria Island on July 29. The waters were suddenly filled with churning ice, created by the southeast wind. The ice threatened to damage the planes hull and the men were up 48 hours keeping ice cakes away from the plane. A chilling experience for July.

Although the whooping crane discovery brought scientists the most fame, it was not what Smith calls the most exciting experience in his 27 years as a flyway biologist.



Displaying some of his Eskimo trophies, sun glasses, a bow and a fur parka, all hand made, Bob Smith is shown here at his Rogue valley home.

not be further documented because neither Smith nor Chamberlain remembered the name of the Seabee pilot, who moved away from the area before the Wildlife department was able to give the "act of bravery" further recognition.

Experiences Engine Trouble

Smith has experienced engine trouble in the land of the midnight sun. He had to change engines once at the mouth of the McKenzie, dropped half of the tools in the water before he got it fixed, he admitted.

He will be going back to the arctic about the middle of May. He recently returned from Mexico. He has been making the Mexican count for 15 years. Before the rise of Castro, he returned through Cuba and the West Indies. He pioneered the aerial service for the bird count 20 years ago. Before that time the count was made from the surface. The biologists now fly planes at 130 miles an hour at an altitude of 100 feet usually. The count is limited to a strip one eighth mile wide on each side of the plane. Smith always has another biologist with him.

Trip in Freighter Canoe

In this category he places a 1944 trip in a 20-foot freighter canoe, destination Cape Henrietta Maria on James Bay, which joins Hudson Bay. The trip took 64 days and during those 64 days he traveled only 350 miles with two Cree Indian guides. He was actually the first white man to reach the cape since 1900. Others had been turned back by the ice pack. The Indians had been halfway to the area but Cape Henrietta was new country to them.

"It was like stepping back in history at least 200 years to live with the people in their primitive ways. At Lake River, 30 to 40 miles from Henrietta Maria, there was a Hudson Bay store, operated by a half breed. Most of the people had never seen a white man when I first walked in," Smith recalled.

"I was dressed very much like one of them and a bevy of young girls started to meet me (Smith is a bachelor). When they discovered I was not one of them they scattered like a covey of quail. I went into the store and could feel eyes staring at me. I turned to see slits appearing in their teepee homes and knew they were peering through the slits."

Was he frightened? "No," Smith said he knew they were not belligerent, just shy and curious. Eventually they stuck their heads out of the teepees, then came closer and closer and finally into the store where they viewed him "as a man from Mars."

On the trip with the two guides, Smith said he soon decided it would be easier for him to learn Cree than to teach them English, so he pursued that approach.

"We got right back to fundamentals," he added. "Our only concern was a place to sleep, something to eat, and a fair wind with which to travel."

James Bay is tide water and it fluctuates 12 feet. He found he could travel about four hours on a tide. Then the trio would go up a little creek to find a camping spot. They found themselves caught in the bay several times. In the canoe they made tea and cooked beans on a little Swedish heater. They always carried fresh water with them. He took along a single barreled shotgun and "we ate all the specimens," Smith interjected.

Everything Goes Into Pot

"Everything went into the pot after the bands and skins were taken. We established a number of new breeding records, on the red throated loon, king eider and old squaw duck, an arctic breeding duck. I also collected marsh and aquatic plants and moss. We were weather bound for a week in one spot and during that period we were flooded out of camp five times."

Smith was operating on the Mississippi flyway when he made this trip. There are four flyways on this continent, the Pacific, the Mississippi, the Central and the Atlantic.

The Wildlife Service had a problem with Canadian geese. The Indians had been shooting the geese for years and keeping the identification bands. But no one had been able to reclaim the bands so no findings regarding migration and breeding grounds had been established.

When Smith got into the territory he collected thousands of bands from the Indians some were wearing them as necklaces, entwined with duck bills. They called Americans "Longknives" and were anxious to trade skins for powder and shot. By collecting the bands, Smith established the fact that geese were breeding in the area in great numbers.

Perilous Feat in Smith's Life

One of the most perilous feats in Smith's adventurous life was brought to attention by his sister, who keeps a scrapbook.

On July 17, 1959, with another flyway biologist, E. B. Chamberlain, Smith rescued a Seabee and his three sons adrift in heavy seas on Great Slave lake. RCAF rescue aircraft had been unable to respond to the rescue call because the waves were too high for their aircraft. The Mounted Police had been asked to effect a rescue by use of a boat, but this, also, was not considered feasible until the waves and wind had subsided. Smith and Chamberlain responded and the Grumman Goose did the trick.

The air-sea rescue was described as one of "exceptional skill and courageous pilot ability involving considerable risk to personal safety." The department expressed disappointment that the "act of bravery" could

"We know we miss some, but statisticians feel we're getting a true index to the increase or decrease of the waterfowl population. We can actually identify just about anything from the air, even a robin in the brush. In Mexico, we find the birds concentrated, several hundred thousand in one spot, 25 different species of ducks, six species of geese. In Canada they are scattered out in nesting grounds."

Basis for Annual Regulations

What is the purpose of all this? It is the basis for the annual regulations which determine the daily limit and the length of seasons for hunters throughout the continent. And it lays the ground work for preservation of game.

The bird population is decreasing in all areas, primarily because of drought, the flyway biologists have found. This condition has existed for several years. "It is an accumulative thing, about which we can do nothing at this time except restrict the kill until the drought ends," Smith lamented. His research shows that ducks in their natural habitat live about three years, geese five. Well cared for in captivity a goose may live 50 to 75 years.

He also likes to hunt and fish. He has found both sports among the compensations he enjoys in his job. He has caught trout "as long as your leg" from Great Slave lake and he has killed caribou. He has had to nose buzzards and man o' war birds out of the way of his plane in Mexico and eagles and hawks in the north.

His work probably is "downright perilous" as the magazine writers say, but the only broken bone he's had he got fixing the television aerial at his home.

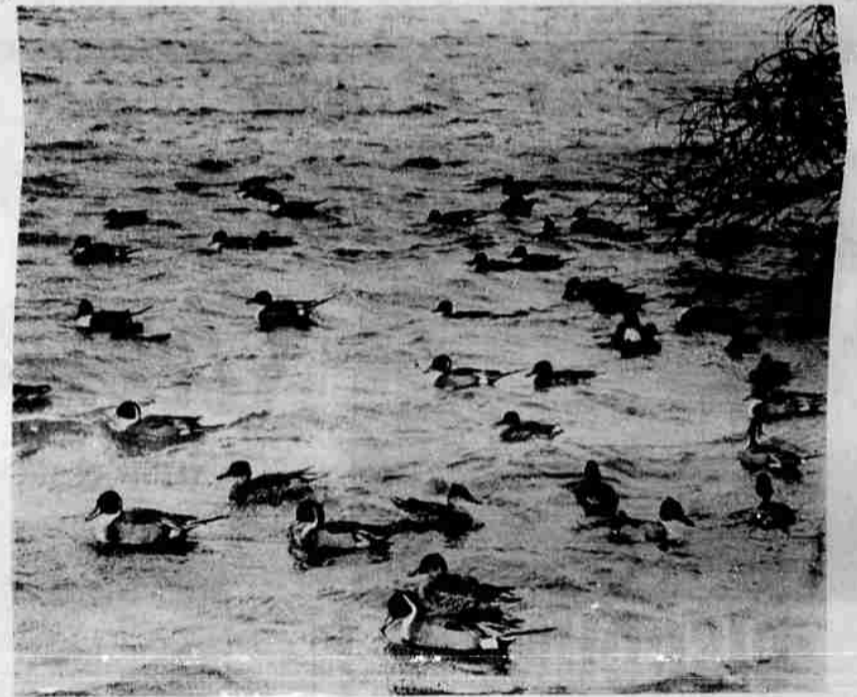
Hunting, Fishing In Blood

Between flights he is never idle, this Dartmouth grad of 1932. He's a native of Iowa and there is "hunting and fishing in his blood." Between summer and winter flights, he makes short trips into Klamath Basin one of the most important spots in the Pacific flyway; into Warner Valley and Tillamook in Oregon and the Brant bays in California. When he isn't counting birds he's writing about them or other game.

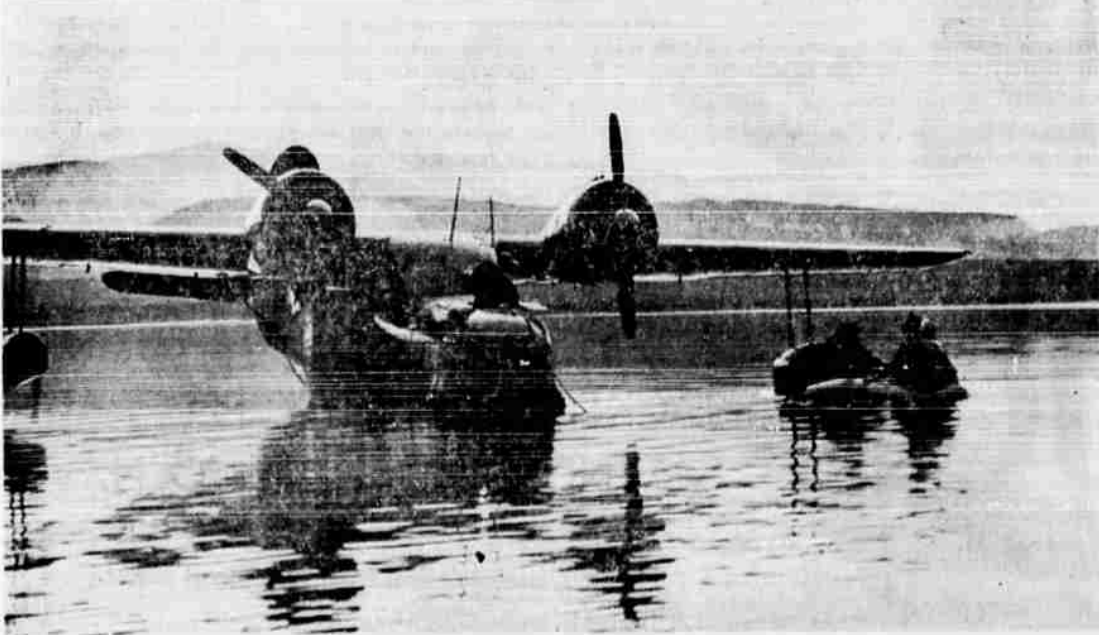
Right now he is working on a chapter, "Northern Watersheds and Deltas" for a book, entitled "Water Fowl Tomorrow," to be published by the Department of the Interior. But he's getting that look in his eye that indicates he's getting anxious to take flight and find just where the reeds bend over some waterfowl's sheltered nest. Whether it be "Of Weedy lake, or marge of river wide, Or where the rocking billows rise and sink. On the chafed ocean side" - to quote William Cullen Bryant's "To A Waterfowl," written, no doubt, when no one envisaged a time when it would be necessary to count ducks and geese to avoid their extinction in America.



This is the marsh near Great Slave lake where Smith and his companion spotted the rare whooping crane. It is the white dot in the lower left hand corner of the picture, which was taken by Smith while flying over the area.



Open water ducks, blue bills and pin tails, swimming in Manitoba waters. They are also common in the Klamath country. (Photo by Frank Dufresne, Fish and Wildlife Service)



Smith is sitting on the nose of his Grumman Goose while companions man the rubber raft near the Arctic Circle.



Smith poses here with a caribou bagged in the far north. Hunting and fishing are his favorite hobbies.