

YOUTH WATERFOWL HUNTS PLANNED ACROSS MANITOBA

By
Robert D. Sopuck

Brother Tim and I were sleeping soundly when the door to our room burst open and we were treated to a cacophony of quacking duck calls followed by “Hurry up. Get out of bed. It’s time to go hunting!” We opened our eyes and groaned when we realized it was 4:30 in the morning! And these were teenagers urging us old folks to get up! Now that’s a switch but the excitement of duck hunting will do that every time. Welcome to Waterfowler Heritage Days!

Waterfowler Heritage Days introduces young hunters to the excitement and responsibilities that go with hunting. Many thanks to Hon. David Anderson, Canada’s Minister of the Environment and his Manitoba counterpart, Hon. Oscar Lathlin, for making this possible.

The purpose is to introduce youth to the concepts of ethical utilization and stewardship of waterfowl and other natural resources, encourage youth and adults to experience the outdoors together, and to contribute to the long-term management of the waterfowl resource. Indeed, waterfowl hunters have a long and proud history of waterfowl conservation. This is more than just another outdoor experience, however, but serves to preserve a tradition that has been handed down for generations by Prairie people.

The Delta Waterfowl Foundation, The Manitoba Wildlife Federation, The Netley Marsh Waterfowl Foundation with the strong support of the Manitoba Department of Conservation and a host of sponsors and dedicated volunteer committees have organized five youth waterfowl hunting events over the last two seasons.

The excitement and enthusiasm among the young participants was illustrated last year by dozens of teenagers (yes, teenagers!) getting out of bed by 4:30 in the morning. By themselves, no less! Setting out the decoys in the morning darkness, watching the eastern sky brighten, and hearing the rushing wings of the ducks heightened the anticipation. And a bird in the hand to admire rounded off the morning. Event volunteers often went the extra distance and sought sponsors who provided take-home items like duck calls and camouflage kit bags. At one event I overheard a thrilled youngster exclaim as the gifts were handed out, “Gee! This is better than Christmas!”

One of the unexpected benefits of these events was for the volunteers. Many have vowed to make their participation an annual event. Volunteer committees work to encourage local youths to participate, assign mentors to the hunters, line up the hunting spots, and ensure that all of the participants have the required hunter safety certification. The first day features a safety lecture, clay pigeon shooting to sharpen up the “eye,” talks on hunting traditions and regulations, waterfowl identification, and supper. Hunting commences the next morning. After a “hunter’s breakfast,” the mentors will ensure that their young “charges” are set up in the marsh by first light. Parents may remark on how difficult it is to get teenagers up that early but in the words of one of last year’s

participants, "I never woke up that early before, but it was worth it and I can't wait to go again."

Once in the "blind" it will be up to the hunter to shoot straight and with a keen eye. To further emphasize safety, the mentor will always be within arm's length of the hunter, the hunter will only be allowed one shell in his or her shotgun at one time, and there will only be one hunter allowed per mentor. The mentor also takes lots of pictures so the young hunters will have a permanent record of their new experience.

Successful events have a number of common features:

- Every youth had one adult mentor to look after them before, during and after the hunt
- The event started with safe gun-handling sessions, discussions of hunter ethics and responsibilities and some shooting practice
- Blinds were carefully picked and all shooting was done over decoys
- Everyone cleaned birds and the weekend wrapped up with a wild game dinner

A conservation feature was introduced in the Minnedosa area this March. Youth from the previous fall's hunt were assembled at the Delta Waterfowl Foundation field station near Minnedosa and spent the day putting out "duck tunnels." These are nesting structures that provide mallard ducks with safe homes for nesting. "Hunters take but hunters have a responsibility to put back" is the clear message to the kids.

Regarding the Provincial Hunter Safety training course, once the list of participants has been finalized, dates and instructors will be arranged and the cost will be \$20.00. It must be noted that this is a one time only fee and the Hunter Safety certificate is valid "forever." All mentors must have at least the Federal Possession Only Licence. The Federal Possession and Acquisition licence is also valid.

The interest in these events is high and so far in 2002 there will be hunts at Delta Marsh, Minnedosa, Netley Marsh, and on private land around Oak Hammock Marsh. Other events will be organized as the time draws nearer. Participants will be able to choose from one of the first 3 weekends in September depending on the area. Costs are yet to be finalized pending sponsorship arrangements but should run in the \$25.00-\$30.00 per hunter range.

Anyone who is interested in finding out more about can contact Jim Fisher at Delta Waterfowl Foundation (877-667-5656), Reg Wiebe at the Manitoba Wildlife Federation (633-4868), Brian Hagglund at Manitoba Conservation (467-9314) or Eric Abel in Minnedosa (867-2373). You can also check out the Delta Waterfowl website (www.deltawaterfowl.org) which will be featuring regular organizational updates. See you there!

Robert D. Sopuck is a Vice-President with the Delta Waterfowl Foundation (www.deltawaterfowl.org), a member of the Wildlife Information Network of Manitoba.