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Policy and Goals on National Wildlife Refuges

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The information that I am to present is the National Wildlife Refuge policy in regard to predator control. One of the goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to perpetuate the migratory bird resource. Since 1983 the policy of animal control on National Wildlife Refuges is to assess the effects of predation on breeding ducks; and, if predators are compromising waterfowl production, controls may be implemented. However, in reading the manual for policy on predator control, I found there are a lot of "hoops" to jump through before starting a predator control program.

Several alternatives of predator control need to be considered. These include: (1) Environmental manipulation, such as eliminating predator den sites, but, primarily manipulation through habitat management. According to the refuge manual, habitat must be adequate for migratory birds to meet the objectives established for a particular refuge. (2) Live trapping and transfer of predators. This requires a lot of effort and only transfers the problem elsewhere. (3) Public or recreational harvest of predators. This practice is conducted at the wrong time of the year to keep predators away from duck nests. I have noticed that recreational harvest of predators makes remaining predators more "trap-wise" requiring extra effort to control. (4) Non-lethal repellants. (5) Physical and mechanical barriers, i.e., electric fencing. (6) Lethal reduction by trapping and shooting. (7) Lethal reduction with chemicals. Toxicants are prohibited on all National Wildlife Refuges for bird and animal control. However, there are specific exceptions usually involving endangered species like the whooping crane or Aleutian goose. In the late sixties 1080 drop baits were dropped from an airplane to eliminate arctic foxes on several islands in Alaska to enhance production of Aleutian geese. During the 70's and early 80's, refuge people from Alaska attempted and in several instances did eliminate arctic foxes from islands without lethal chemicals. However, it was a very labor-intensive project. Yesterday we heard they are again using lethal chemicals to control the arctic fox to raise Aleutian geese.

Approved plans are required for all predator control alternatives with the exceptions of live trapping and transfer, use of physical barriers, and repellants. All approved predator control plans are required to meet NEPA guidelines. One must discuss the proposed alternative or mode of action as well as all alternatives. Lethal control of predators is to be conducted on a site-specific basis and not on a wide-range population reduction basis. Control efforts cannot be implemented without coordination with research and development, and local state conservation agency. This basically summarizes the manual policy on predator control on National Wildlife Refuges.

Since working at Valentine Refuge I have generated a few ideas of my own on predator control and migratory bird production. One can identify major predators and control those species; however, another predator species will attempt to replace them. I wonder just how many predator species are actually available to destroy duck nests. I also believe that ducks, for some peculiar reason, are subject to excessive predation as compared to upland nesting of sharptails and pheasants. We identified coyotes and bullsnakes as our major nest predators on Valentine Refuge. When we reduced coyotes, bullsnakes became the major predator, eating the duck eggs that coyotes were no longer eating. Controlling coyotes without controlling bullsnakes did not reduce overall predation on duck nests.

We have areas on the Valentine Refuge with high waterfowl nesting densities, and it is surprising how few or small the predators can be and still devastate hatching success. A den of weasels in an area of high nest density can greatly reduce nesting success. The problem with long-tailed weasels occurs in mid-June, about the time young weasles become active outside the den. Trapping weasels is not a problem as long as we know they are present. But, in most cases dense cover makes it almost impossible to detect them. By the time you discover you have a weasel problem and find them, it is generally too late to implement control measures--the damage has already been done.

It seems that nest destruction never stops; if it is not one predator then it is another. Considering present land use I am sure that in the future the only way to go is by intensive management; that is, if we are to get duck populations up to objective levels that are on the books today. The only way to achieve high duck populations under existing land usage is to attract high duck nesting densities and keep predators away from them.

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