

February 13, 2000

WILY GEESE GIVING HUNTERS THE SLIP; AS POPULATION GROWS, BIRDS FIND WAYS OF ELUDING HAIL OF GUNFIRE

By Aaron Kuriloff Staff writer

DATELINE: SWEET LAKE

Six hunters lay in a rice field irrigation canal, covered in brush. A thick fog obscured their view of the sky, but from the field came the sound of snow geese honking.

The noise rose in volume. Geese -- thousands, tens of thousands -- squawked and cackled. The hunters' eyes roamed the sky, looking for birds on the wing. Hands gripped shotguns tighter. The cacophony rose to a fevered pitch.

Then, suddenly, everything went silent.

For a minute, nothing happened. Then Eric Rue stuck his head out of a shrub.

"Dude," he said. "Turn the tape over."

The tape was an electronic goose call. Ordinarily, trying to attract geese with an electronic call would earn hunters a stiff fine from a Wildlife and Fisheries enforcement agent. So would the shotgun Rue carried, which held more than the three shells typically allowed for waterfowl hunting.

But technically, Rue, a guide from Lake Charles, wasn't hunting. Neither were his clients. According to wildlife managers, they were "volunteering," participating in a federally mandated program to control the exploding population of mid-continent snow geese, which has grown 300 percent in the past 30 years. That growth, biologists say, has occurred so rapidly that the birds are destroying their arctic habitat -- 35 percent so far -- and threatening an ecological disaster for the countless other species that depend on the land.

To control the species, federal officials first tried liberalizing hunting regulations -- increasing daily limits to 20 birds per hunter and lengthening the season. But expanding agriculture along the birds' migration route has provided them with food and helped their numbers steadily increase, despite hunting pressure. Last year, officials proposed what they call a "conservation action" -- essentially an extended hunting season, with extended shooting hours, legalized electronic calls, and no limit on how many birds hunters can shoot.

Officials hope to double or triple the number of snow geese killed by hunters each year, from about 700,000 to 1.5 million or 2.5 million. But hunters say the birds are wary and clever opponents. And that goal might prove hard to reach.

Rue and his clients learned that lesson last Tuesday. About an hour before sunrise, they set up a spread of decoys, large plastic geese, on the rice field. They placed two speakers near the spread and ran the wires into the irrigation canal.

"I've got some portable covers," Rue told the group. "Just find a place where you can sit and pull one over you. You can just lay your gun down next to you. When the geese come, you can just throw off the cover and grab the gun."

The technique worked -- twice. But then, hunting action slowed. Great flocks of snow geese, 300 at a time, flew overhead and out of range -- flapping their way steadily northward. By 9 a.m., Rue pressed stop on the tape recorder, ending the ceaseless honking coming from the field.

"The damn thing gives me a double migraine," he said. "I wouldn't mind so much if the noise was interspersed with a couple of gunshots."

He sat up.

"This is pretty boring right here," he said.

And most hunters weren't expecting boredom. The day after the Louisiana DWF approved the local version of the national plan, hunters from around the state began calling Rue to book trips. They also began hitting local supply stores.

"Everything's sold out," Rue said. You can't get a damn caller. You can't get a tape."

He pointed to his own equipment.

"I know a few of them that might be for sale though," he said

The previous day, Rue had led an expedition over the same field that shot 20 birds. In the ordinary season, that would amount to one hunter's daily limit. Rue blamed slow action on a warm spell that sent geese north early and said snow geese are far too wily to get shot in large numbers, even by hunters using electronic calls and extra shells.

"My goal is to kill 20 per group every day," he said. "Yesterday, I thought that might work out. Everybody got some shooting in. But everyone who calls me thinks they're gonna kill 100 at a time. I'm like 'Look, it's not like that.' If they held this earlier in the season, maybe we'd get some days when we killed more. But, even then, it's not like that.

"We'll do OK, but it's not going to be a slaughter the way people were saying."

Not on Tuesday. By 10 a.m., the hunters were sitting on the lip of the canal, telling dirty jokes, smoking cigarettes and dipping chewing tobacco. A few times, they thought they heard snows honking in the distance. But each time, after they grabbed guns and dove under cover, the sound revealed itself as another group of hunters running an electronic call. They saw a few more birds, but those passed high overhead.

"Snows. I guess that's the reason there's so many," said Otto Candies III, a Destrehan resident and avid hunter.

"They're hard to hunt anyway, and these ones have been shot at all season. They've learned."

"I've been hunting right over there, near 30 or 40 thousand geese, and shot maybe three," Rue said.

They waited around another hour. Rue called a fellow guide on his cell phone. The other party had shot seven geese, bringing the day's total to nine. Above them in the fog, approximately 6.5 million geese continued toward Canada unmolested.

"There's less pressure up north," Rue said. "Here, there's a rag spread in every field. Yesterday, you could hear shooting all around us. The birds learn quick."

"Nobody said they were stupid," Candies said. "I guess that's the problem."