



# PLANNING AHEAD

Consider all your options before draining winter water

By Houston Havens and Darrin Hardesty

## KEEPING THE WATER

Late-winter draining of water from impoundments with no forethought for offseason management is a common mistake. Water management is one factor waterfowl hunters and land managers can control. / Photo by MDWFP

Late winter is here, and for many who have spent the last several months enjoying the Mississippi outdoors, this could be a transition period, reflecting on recent memories made. Hopefully, there are great stories of successful days afield and maybe a few funny accounts of hunts that did not quite go as planned. Many of us recall hunting camp meals, fellowship with old and new friends, and perhaps even good hunting dog work. For waterfowl hunters, this is also a great time to look ahead to next season and establish future plans for habitat management.

What did you like (or not like) about how this waterfowl season has unfolded? Were there patterns or keys to success that you can make note of for future seasons? Making detailed notes from hunting experiences, both good and bad, can be helpful over time. It is likely easy to remember the previous hunting season or two, but as more seasons roll along, the details fade without documentation.

For the not-so-good aspects of this season, are there factors within your control (like habitat management) that could be adjusted next year? Now is a great time to create a to-do list. These adjustments could be minor things, like holding more or less water in an impoundment, creating more openings in standing vegetation for landing zones, or monitoring moist-soil plants or planted crops more regularly throughout the growing sea-

son. Something as simple as cutting down that one tree that kept ducks from “finishing” in the decoys could be an improvement for future success.

Nearly as predictable as the sound of gunfire on opening day of duck season is the draining of “duck holes” at the end of the season. This late-winter draining of water from impoundments, with no forethought for what management will be done in the coming months, is one of the most common, yet avoidable, mistakes we see. While we cannot control weather or the number of ducks over the decoys, one factor that many waterfowl hunters and land managers can control is water management. There are certainly several good reasons for draining seasonal wetlands in late winter or early spring, such as preparing to plant an early crop or drying the area for levee renovations or



**FLYING AWAY**

After most ducks have migrated out of Mississippi in early spring, numerous other migratory birds will pass through the state on their way north. / Photo by Chris Hutcheson



Holding water until late spring or summer can provide an important habitat for ducks and geese as they prepare to migrate north. Photo by Chris Hutcheson



Shorebirds, wading birds, and other wetland-dependent wildlife will use flooded impoundments in spring and summer.

water-control structure work. However, if the main purpose of the wetland is to produce quality waterfowl habitat, the water there now could be key to producing quality foraging habitat for next winter’s ducks.

Holding water until late spring, or even summer, can provide an assortment of benefits to land managers. The most immediate benefit is post-hunting season water will provide important habitat for ducks and geese as they prepare to head north on their spring migrations. When most managed wetlands are drained after the hunting season, quality foraging habitat can be left in short supply for birds needing to build body reserves for migration. In the wetlands that remain, some residual seeds and tubers, aquatic invertebrates, and a “green-up” of winter weeds and early spring vegetation will continue to provide food for waterfowl.

After most ducks have migrated out of Mississippi in early spring, numerous migratory birds will pass through the state on their long journey to northern breeding areas. The diversity of shorebirds, wading birds, and other wetland-dependent wildlife that will use flooded impoundments during the spring and summer, if available, can be a sight to behold. A waterfowl impoundment with slowly receding water levels will serve as an incredible habitat for many species of shorebirds and wading birds looking for mudflats and shallow pools of water.

For waterfowl habitat managers, holding water into the spring or summer delays



When most wetlands are drained after hunting season, quality foraging habitats can be left in short supply for birds needing to build body reserves for migration. / Photo by MDWFP

the growing season for many “weeds” and can save time and effort by not requiring early herbicide treatments to remove undesirable plants. As overnight temperatures begin to rise later into the year, a slow drawdown of water levels will provide ideal conditions for natural, annual grasses and sedges that are extremely desirable for waterfowl foods. These beneficial grasses and sedges, collectively called moist-soil plants, can rival the waterfowl food production of many planted crops with less costs and higher diversity.

In some cases, holding water all year in one or more impoundments can be an effective strategy for increasing a prop-

erty’s wetland habitat diversity. Wetlands that stay flooded most or all of the year, called semi-permanent or emergent marsh wetlands, can produce valuable waterfowl foods in the form of aquatic plants. These wetlands can sometimes be as (or more) attractive than other wetland types and will often support a wide range of dabbling and diving duck species. Semi-permanent wetlands also serve an important role by providing available habitat during early fall and spring when other seasonal wetlands are typically dry. As with moist-soil management, emergent marsh wetlands need to be monitored for undesirable vegetation and, at times, herbicides might need to be sprayed to maintain desired conditions of the wetland.

Before draining your winter water this year, consider your options and make a

plan. If you are unsure of what a good habitat management strategy should look like for your property, Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP) has wildlife biologists available to help. A biologist can visit the property, discuss your past management and future goals, and make recommendations for how to proceed. Remember that quality wetland habitat begins and ends with water. Deciding how to best use your water to your advantage could be the key to next season’s hunting success.

*Houston Havens and Darrin Hardesty are wildlife biologists who work in the MDWFP Waterfowl Program. They work statewide, assisting private landowners and public land managers with wetland habitat management.*