



Jeff Gudenkauf

“It is not too lyrical, I hope, to say that the Stuttgart region has become one of the wonders of America. No place else can the wild duck be seen and heard in such profusion. To go into a marsh before daybreak, listen to the chatter of great rafts of ducks on the water, watch them as they soar gracefully in the sky with whistling wings and see the morning sun bring out the brilliant colors of their heads, wings and breasts—that’s living.”

—Ralph Coghlan
St. Louis Post–Dispatch
December 30, 1949

*This book is dedicated to the past, present and future stewards
preserving the places where wild ducks go.*



of the United States Navy. Ross and the Adams brothers are partners in the popular Banded brand of hunting products and apparel and often host TV personality Chad Belding and *The Fowl Life* show for various hunts throughout any given season. Joe Balog, waterfowl editor for Realtree.com, who tagged along for a *Fowl Life* hunt says, “Our camp was the world-famous Prairie Wings; it’s the place most duck hunters think heaven likely looks like. The woods are custom-made for hunting. The lodge is posh, but doesn’t make you feel bad for getting it muddy.”²⁸

Mallards are hunted hard in this area due to the abundance of private duck clubs and leases surrounding 33,832 acres of public hunting ground. The pressured conditions force these clubs to adjust their routines to hold ducks throughout the season. Whicker says, “The ideal situation for us is when Bayou Meto WMA is dry for the first part of the season and as the season progresses it floods and brings a larger concentration of ducks to our area. That scenario can sometimes sustain our hunting for the

Prairie Wings lies just west of Bayou Meto WMA. (Tom Rassuchine/tomrdesigns.com)





sacred ground for the moments he's had on hunting and fishing excursions with family and friends. Even today, he delights at a first-timer's reaction to the place, which he also considers the best living classroom on the planet.

"Back when I was younger, I'd take a lot of friends. And I know in fishing it's the same as hunting. It's about habitat and knowing where to go and knowing what to do when you get there," he said. "I've got some friends in Ohio that would come down here and they say, 'George, this beats any damn thing I ever seen. We don't have no ducks. I never seen so many ducks.' Even on days when we would struggle to kill a limit of ducks they would just nonstop be coming over. They'd say, 'Where are they going?' I'd say, 'They're going to the rest areas. They came over here, and it's too much shooting. They're going back.'

"Behind my cabin a mile long and a half mile wide is a rest area—never hunted. They feed the ducks, or there's fields there. But it's not about the food like people think. It's because they don't get their ass shot! They stay in there, and the ones that aren't killed, they learn that when they go to the public shooting ground or in the clubs, right where they're at, they get their ass shot. So they all go to that rest area and they'll sit out there. I'll watch them, and it's almost hilarious."³⁵

Like many dyed-in-the-wool Arkansas sportsmen, Cochran is passionate about preserving these scenes for succeeding generations. He spearheaded an effort to get the Government Cypress section of Bayou Meto designated walk-in only to reduce boat traffic; he also sponsors an annual volunteer cleanup day every summer. Still, he worries for the future of his beloved hunting ground and the time-honored way of life it supports.

Lexicon

Gillett (jil-ETT)

Locals applied for a post office under the name of Leslie but were denied, leading them to choose the name Gillett in honor of Francis M. Gillett. Gillett was a financier who spearheaded completion of the railroad into the town in 1895. Even with a suitable name in hand, it took two tries to get the town incorporated; the first attempt in 1895 failed to be completed, while the second, presented a decade later, was approved by the Arkansas County Quorum Court in 1906.



Crocketts Bluff Hunting Lodge went on the National Register of Historic Places in 2008. (Tansill Stough)



Bag limits didn't exist in Arkansas until 1915, when the state's conservation agency set a hunter's daily harvest at twenty-five. (Courtesy of Museum of the Arkansas Grand Prairie)

124 created an agency with authority to set permit fees, bag limits, and hunting seasons, as well as levy fines for transgressors thereto. The act also set the limit for ducks at twenty-five per day.³

Most of Act 124's other provisions were of much wider interest than that which created the new commission. Even to those who took note, it hardly seemed a body of much consequence. The entity was comprised of five governor-appointed commissioners of four-year terms, except in year one where two commissioners were appointed to serve only two-year terms. All positions were voluntary; even travel and other expenses incurred during the dispensation of official business would not be compensated unless and until the commission collected enough money from fees to cover them.

Among its stated powers and responsibilities were promoting and assisting with stocking fish and creating game preserves in public and private

lands (though expressly prohibited from spending any public money to do so), supervising and directing enforcement of game laws, making rules and regulations for proper enforcement of Act 124, and hiring game wardens.

Hamstrung as it was by financial restraints and virtually toothless in its authority—game wardens lacked so much as the ability to arrest violators they came upon in the field—the commission's early years were challenging. Of the roughly \$17,800 collected in permits the first year, only about \$8,400 went to operating costs due to insufficient appropriations. Fines collected amounted to a paltry \$163. The commission even faced a court challenge by a taxpayers' group in 1916 that kept it from spending even the modest funds it did have.

The commission pressed on nonetheless, working with legislators to amend what was set forth in Act 124. These recommendations made up Act 133, passed by the legislature in 1917, and included such things as