

Bay Area duck hunters celebrate season opener

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As the Bay Area still slumbered under Saturday morning's inky sky, dozens of excited hunters climbed into boats and blinds, celebrating the weekend opening of a tradition as old as America itself: duck hunting.

It's the time of year when the leaves fall and hunters' pulses climb, as millions of migrating birds stop to refuel at the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge in the shadow of Google, Oracle and a metropolitan area of 7.5 million people. And the recent conversion of salt ponds to wetlands in Alviso, Redwood City and Newark has created new habitat — attracting larger flocks.

"There is something sacred about it, a primal connection to our planet," said Austin Payne, 30, a Lafayette civil engineer who works for Ducks Unlimited, the headlight beams of his truck piercing the darkness as he backed his Boston Whaler into a Redwood City slough.

Along Mountain View's Stevens Creek Trail, where a long line of waterfowlers assembled under a crescent moon to await the opening of a gate leading to the blinds, 77-year-old Albert Perkins Sr., of Cupertino, shared friendly banter with his son, their ears cocked to wild voices in the wind.

"Just being out here — that's wonderful," said Perkins, a retired manager of a NASA Ames welding shop who first hunted around San Francisco Bay in 1956. "It's nothing about shooting a gun or anything. I don't care if I kill a duck or not."

Daybreak was a magic moment, the eastern

horizon streaked with gold. Suddenly, the skies awoke, with bird songs piercing the cool air.

In the distance, there was a whistle of wind over wings, music to a waterfowler's ears. Then splashes

as they landed: Ploosh! Ploosh!

Payne found a little stand of grasses to hunker his boat in the slough, down out of sight. He used an iPhone app to check the tide charts, tossed out decoys and prepared his Remington shotgun. His dog trembled with excitement.

On a levee near former salt ponds next to Stevens Creek Trail, Albert Perkins Jr. delivered coffee and doughnuts to his father. Then the two waded into the soft mud with their boat and climbed into a blind.

As the sun rose, hunters worked their duck calls, whistling like a pintail, honking like a goose or quacking like a mallard. In Redwood City's Corkscrew Slough, a small flock banked for a pass, but then sped away. In Mountain View, other ducks landed.

Perkins let loose a broadside. A pintail tumbled like an oak leaf. Then he hit a mallard drake; the family's yellow lab, ZuZu, a blond cannonball, caught the bird on the water's edge.

Unsettling blasts

The sound of shotguns can be unsettling to strollers along

the shorelines. In our crowded corner of the world, there can be misunderstandings -- and a cultural chasm.



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In previous years, nonhunters have damaged boats and tried to keep the area off-limits by securing gates with bike locks. "The city has encroached on the wilderness," said Albert Perkins Jr., a Silicon Valley fencing contractor. "All those buildings over there? They were once open fields."

Refuge manager Eric Mruz said, "People call sometimes and ask: 'Are there gangs?' Or they ask, 'How can you kill birds in a refuge?'"

The shotgun pellets, Mruz added, can't reach the trails.

To be sure, ducks were once far more abundant; the bay was a virtual Serengeti of migrants, its skies black with birds. But commercial hunting emptied the skies, devastating duck populations. In 1911, San Francisco markets handled 300,000 ducks annually.

"And even more ducks were taken by an army of sportsmen," said James E. Cloern, a senior scientist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Menlo Park. "It was an example of overexploitation of a natural resource."

To make matters worse, urban development and the construction of salt ponds in the mid-1800s destroyed an estimated 90 percent of the bay's wetland habitat.

In recognition of the peril, Don Edwards was established as the first urban national wildlife refuge in the United States, spanning 30,000 acres

of open bay, salt pond, salt marsh, mud flats and vernal pool habitats. Located along the Pacific Flyway, it hosts more than 280 species of birds each year.

New preservationists

Hunters now help purchase and preserve habitat. The federal "duck stamps," licenses required for hunting migratory waterfowl, are an important tool for wetland conservation; 98 cents out of every dollar generated by the duck stamps goes to purchase or lease wetland habitat.

Meanwhile, many former salt ponds in the bay are being transitioned to public ownership and restored and managed for wildlife, through the support of such groups as Ducks Unlimited. These shallow ponds now provide roosting and feeding habitat for hundreds of thousands of migrating and wintering shorebirds and ducks.

"Now they're open to everyone," said Paul Dietrich, a retired Palo Alto molecular biologist and veteran duck hunter. "In the old days, it was a pretty exclusive club for local businessmen. You needed to know someone."

Perkins agreed: "They kept leasing out these blinds to the same guys every year. Then the federal government came in. I thought it was going to be real bad. But it improved the duck hunting out here."

"And I can be out here from my house and in the blind in 30 minutes," he said.

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The first State of the Birds Report for San Francisco Bay, released last week by PRBO Conservation Science and San Francisco Bay Joint Venture, concluded that "the good news is that a majority of bird species are doing well after decades of investments in habitat restoration and other conservation measures around the bay."

Only ducks targeted

Only certain duck species can be hunted, and shorebirds are strictly off-limits, Mruz said. During last year's season at Don Edwards, 1,443 hunters killed 1,959 birds, for an average of 1.36 birds per hunter. And to spare the marshland habitat, which is home to endangered species like the clapper rail, hunters must stay in boats or in the blinds.

"The purchase of the required duck stamp has done far more good for waterfowl habitat and populations than any other single step," said Bob Power of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society. "The sport of duck hunting is closely monitored and provides tremendous benefit to wildlife resources as a whole."

And the ducks can be tough targets. They fly fast and in mysterious ways -- often far out of range, across a wide-open sky.

In Corkscrew Slough, near Bair Island, Payne jokingly considered trading his guns and camouflage for a fly rod and sunscreen. The water was glassy. Birds were abundant -- dowitchers and curlews, cormorants and pelicans, plus the occasional great blue heron -- but there was nary a duck. By midday, it was enough to simply take what the beautiful day provided.

The Perkins family was happy, too. Ducks flew by their blind, in knots and speeding vees, their wings and necks outstretched. They took home one mallard, four pintails and several spoonbills -- all to be turned into sausage.

"It's a good day," said Perkins Jr. "But then, opening day is always a good day."

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