

"WETLAND PROJECT BENEFITS NOT ONLY THE WILDLIFE" **by Luke Clayton**

The sun was just beginning to break over the eastern horizon, a welcome sight to Jacob Sands and myself as we huddled low in the marsh grass, waiting for legal shooting light. The temperature was in the low twenties and a brisk northwest wind made it seem colder. Whistling wings could be heard overhead as teal, pintail, mallards and an assortment of diving ducks stirred from their night's rest on the water. Across the wetland, the sound of a big flock of geese, a mixture of snows, white front and Canada's could be heard as the big birds stirred and took flight from their night's roost and headed to a distant field to feed. The day was coming to life and legal shooting time was seconds away.



Photo by Luke Clayton

Jacob Sands takes aim at a decoying pintail at the East Fork Wetlands Project, situated a few miles southeast of Dallas in Kaufman County.

Sands and I were hunting the newly constructed 1,840 acre East Fork Wetland Project, situated just on the south side of Highway 175, a few miles southeast of downtown Dallas in Kaufman County. The project, a partnership between the Caroline Rose Hunt family's Rosewood Corporation and the North Texas Municipal Water District, has already become home to countless migrating waterfowl but the project serves double duty as a natural water cleansing system. Water is diverted from the East Fork of the Trinity River, flooded onto the wetland, filtered naturally and pumped over 40 miles upstream into Lake Lavon. Jacob once hunted this same bottom land with his late father, Bunker Sands, who was well known for his work in wildlife conservation. Not far from the spot Jacob and I were laying in wait for the first flight of ducks of the morning, the new John Bunker Sands Wetland Center will soon be constructed, giving the public and, especially youngsters, a wonderful place to visit and learn about the challenges and importance of water conservation and habitat conservation.

I've had a keen interest in this project from its conception. Living about 2 miles away, as the duck flies, I've had the opportunity to watch the project for the past couple years. Native plants that serve as food for waterfowl were planted in a 20 acre 'nursery' and, from this beginning; an additional, larger 200 acre nursery was planted with plants such as Duck Potato Arrowhead, American Wild Celery, Spikerush and several other plants that are already providing cover and food for waterfowl. From these beginnings, a large scale planting of the entire wetlands is underway. I've hunted ducks on a private lease a couple miles from the project and have personally witnessed an increased number of migrating ducks this winter. From a hunting standpoint, the project is already a huge success but its scope is much, much larger than just hunting. In upcoming years, I can readily see how important it will be for urban folks to have a spot to visit and observe and learn about waterfowl and conserving our natural world.

I enjoyed the early morning shooting in what was probably the most perfect waterfowl habitat that I've had the privilege of hunting. Species such as pintail and teal, which have usually moved out of north Texas by late season for the warmer climes along the coast, had obviously ended their southern migration when they discovered the dense cover provided by acres of bull rushes and other plants, plenty of shallow water and abundant seeds provided by the plants. As Jacob and I drove through the wetland, stopping often for me to photograph the various species of ducks, we spotted a little island packed with birds. At first, observing them through binoculars from a quarter mile away, we thought they were Whistling Ducks but on closer observation, found them to be "Cackler" Geese, a diminutive species of goose with the markings of a Canada goose, not much larger than a mallard drake.

Occasionally, Governmental agencies and private parties have the opportunity to join forces and create something great that perpetuates itself through the years and adds much to the quality of the lives of many. The center will also serve as a biological research field station for college students to conduct wetland studies. In the case of the East Fork Wetland Project and, soon to be John Bunker Sands Wetland Center, the combined forces of The Rosewood Corporation and North Texas Municipal Water District has, hopefully, become a model for similar projects.

I can't wait until this time next year when the Wetland Center opens and school children from all over begin scheduling field trips here to learn to differentiate the species of waterfowl that live year around or, spend part of their migration route at the wetland. I can already envision a new generation of hunters and conservationists learning from first hand observation.

To learn more about the East Fork Wetlands Project, go online to www.wetlandcenter.com

OUTDOOR TIP OF THE WEEK - Now is prime time for maintenance of hunting and fishing gear. Reels should be cleaned and oiled in preparation for spring fishing. Remember to thoroughly clean the bore of your deer rifle before storing it in the gun rack until next deer season. Shotguns should also be field stripped and cleaned and parts covered with a light covering of oil. O-rings on gas operating auto-loaders should be inspected closely and replaced if brittle or badly worn.

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