Cormorants, coots and ducks forage in USL's experimental crawfish pond near Cade. Crawfish research specialist Jay Huner says that many species of waterfowl may be advantageous rather than detrimental to crawfish farmers.

A good side to predators?

Researcher says birds may be a plus to farmers

By Timothy Beacham
Staff writer

CADE — Can predatory birds be an asset to crawfishermen? Although crawfishermen realize the harm some birds do to the crawfish crop, USL Crawfish Specialist Jay Huner thinks they can be helpful as well.

The shallow ponds where crawfish are raised have proven to be irresistible to a wide variety of predacious wading and shorebirds, migratory neotropicals, as well as many types of waterfowl and other game birds.

Huner, who manages the 100 acres of crawfish ponds at the USL Experimental Farm in Cade, says the very animals which frustrate crawfishermen could be a blessing in disguise.

While many wading birds such as the bec croche (white ibis) and gros bec (yellow-crowned night heron) are considered pests to the pond-based crawfish farming community, Huner believes that they can become a financial asset to farmers.

Whereas these two species were once widely hunted, they are now protected under environmental laws prohibiting their destruction.

Unfortunately, they also cause the most damage to crawfish ponds, according to Dane Hebert, president of the Louisiana Crawfish Farmers Association.

Hebert said that these and other species of predatory birds, such as ring billed gulls, eat enough small crawfish to cause some monetary loss for farmers.

But Huner, in an article for Small Farm Today, outlined the value of these and other birds to crawfish farmers.

Huner points out that the thinning of a crawfish population is beneficial to the health of the crop as a whole.

"The growth of crawfish is dependent on how many you have per square foot," Huner said. "Stunting of the crawfish occurs when you have too many per square foot. If you thin them out you have larger, more healthy crawfish."

Also, an increasing demand by the public to see wildlife in a natural setting could be of financial gain to farmers by hosting birders and naturalists on their farms.

"What we have here is an incredibly good spot for birders," said Huner of the more than 28,000 acres of wooded wetland habitat in St. Martin Parish.

A recent birding trip to the farm provided local bird enthusiast Gary Broussard with a good look at a rare visiting cinnamon teal.

On the flip side of the natural experience is hosting hunters. Flooded rice fields used for crawfish cultivation in the spring attract game waterfowl such as ducks and geese during fall and winter migration (hunting season). Farmers can pick up a few extra dollars leasing fields to duck hunters during the winter months.

Huner also points out that the birds attracted to the pond-rice field habitat can help in the retention of subsidies for rice farms.

"Few farms could exist without the current rice subsidies," Huner wrote in the 1994 article, "However, a very valid justification for such subsidies is the wetland habitat that the farmers, especially those cultivating crawfish, provide for the protected wading birds and various resident and migratory birds like shore birds."

Huner also said that this environment is becoming increasingly important to biological diversity as the state's coastal and marsh habitats fall victim to erosion and subsidence.

Organized groups of birders are welcome to visit the experimental farm in modest sizes providing they contact Huner in advance to make arrangements. Huner can be reached at 482-5239.