Louisiana Canada Comeback

By D. J. Young

The problem of keeping magnificent Canada geese down in Louisiana has apparently been solved at the Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge and Game Preserve.

Long a familiar sight at the refuge and in Louisiana marshes in general, the geese began to be fewer and fewer in 1941. The decline was noted at about the same time that their population began to increase at Missouri's Swan Lake Refuge.

This “short stop” in the normal migration of the Canadas was attributed to protection offered by refuges in the Swan Lake area and extensive farming programs designed to lure and hold the geese.

Concerned with the steady decline in Louisiana, the state's Wildlife and Fisheries Commission, along with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, initiated several programs with the aim of re-establishing a huntable population in the state.

Several plans were tried, and a third one now being used appears to be producing the desired results. It has established a non-migratory nesting colony native to Louisiana.

In the program, initiated in 1961, 26 wild Canada geese were obtained from the Horicon National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin and several more were subsequently acquired from Minnesota and Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. These birds were permanently pinioned and placed in a 100-acre area at Rockefeller.

The first nesting attempt of one pair in 1961 produced three goslings, and during the next seven years the number of nests grew to 95. Goslings hatched in these nests.
are "free flyers;" their wings are not pinioned and they can fly at will. Success became apparent when it was found that these free flyers return to Rockefeller each evening to feed and roost after being observed feeding at great distances from their compound.

The count of free flyers is increasing each year, and Rockefeller biologists say the annual increase amounts to 200 or 300 and estimate there are now about 2,200 Canadas at the refuge. They add that the geese have shown no migratory tendencies.

An effort to increase egg production per bird has been made by removing the first clutch to an incubator. After a short period of time, the hen will lay a second clutch which is allowed to hatch under her. This has the effect of doubling egg production per hen and is merely influencing the hen to do what she does naturally when her first clutch is lost for some reason.

Refuge attendants place stacks of hay for the convenience of the hens, but on a trip the writer made to the refuge with Hugh Wallis, professor of photography at the University of Southwest Louisiana, it was apparent that, while about half of the nesting hens were taking advantage of these ready-made nests, many seemed to prefer to build their own.

The hen and gander stand ready to fight in defense of their nest, and when the hen is out feeding the gan-

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Photos/Hugh Wallis II

Canada hen prepares to settle down on her clutch of eggs. Biologists are able to double egg production by removing first clutch so that she lays a second. At left, hen and gander make threatening gesture when intruder approaches nest.
Above, hen rises from nest ready to resist intrusion, and stately gander is observed near La. Hwy 82. Below, a hen nests near alligator pen fence, and, right, four goslings break shells.
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der remains on guard. The slightest disturbance causes a threatening reaction from both, and it was necessary to remain unseen and use a long-distance lens in order to photograph them in natural action.

Refuge biologists say they plan to continue adding birds obtained from elsewhere with the ultimate goal of transferring some birds to other Louisiana refuges once a suitable level of nesting pairs has been established at Rockefeller.

A home-grown flock of Canada geese is the goal, and statistics seem to indicate a huntable population in

ROCKEFELLER is one of the most important wildlife areas in the United States because of its unique location at the southernmost end of the vast Mississippi Flyway. It borders the Gulf of Mexico for 26.5 miles and extends northward six miles to the Grand Chenier ridge complex.

Located in Southwestern Cameron and Vermilion Parishes, the 84,000-acre refuge was first acquired by the state through the Rockefeller Foundation.

When originally purchased by E. A. McElhenny in 1912, the area was estimated to be wintering grounds for about 7,500 ducks and geese of various species. Through creation of impoundments and weirs to maintain satisfactory water levels the area was made more habitable for wildlife, and aerial inventories now place the waterfowl population at 400,000 in mid-winter.

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