

WINTER OF '77

In the middle of March, Marvin Pave of the Boston Globe reported that the Cape Cod Museum of Natural History and the Cape Cod Chapter of Ducks Unlimited were responsible for the spreading of 16 tons of corn in prime waterfowl feeding areas on the Cape this winter. Some of the corn was purchased by funds from the museum and from the Massachusetts Audubon Society, but most was purchased by money donated by the public. Volunteers distributed the corn at two major feeding areas, one at Pleasant Bay in Chatham, and the other at Nauset marsh located between Eastham and Orleans. It was estimated that only 5% of the Canada Geese and Black Ducks and other migratory birds were lost this winter instead of half the population that might have perished if the supplemental feeding program had not been implemented.

The February 2, 1977 news release from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service tells how the severe winter's ice and snow prevented the migratory birds from foraging for their normal diet of roots, grass, sea grains, mussels, etc. Migratory birds were weak from travel and found food scarce. They didn't often find alternate feeding areas, and so they suffered from starvation, higher incidence of disease, and died in greater than normal numbers.

Waterfowl also were more susceptible to lead poisoning this year. The ice clogged wetlands drove birds inland to cornfields swept clean of snow by the wind. Waterfowl that eat corn show a higher incidence of lead poisoning. Mr. McCord of the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Wildlife explained by personal communication the reason for this phenomenon. He said that the waterfowl ingest lead shot along with gravel which lodge in the gizzards of the birds. Since corn is harder for the waterfowl to grind up, the gizzard grinds longer and causes the lead pellets to be pulverized into fine particles which readily pass from the digestive organs into the bloodstream, and subsequently poisons the animal. The typical natural food stuffs of waterfowl do not require so much grinding, so less lead is freed into the bloodstream when normal food supplies are adequate.

Lack of snow fall in the pothole country breeding grounds for waterfowl will undoubtedly have adverse effects on next year's productivity.

Game birds also suffered this winter. Some died when the tail feathers of male pheasants froze to the ground. In others, fine particles of snow blocked the nasal passages of quail and grouse, suffocating many. Many starved because their food was typically covered by a thick layer of ice.

If the deep ground frost killed many of the insects lying dormant in the soil, then the songbirds will find food in short supply.

Eagle, hawks, and other raptors were forced further south this winter to escape the raging winter.

In New Jersey, supplemental feeding of Brant was undertaken because they could not reach their usual wintering spots due to scarcity of food enroute. Since there are very few Brant, and many feared there would be further dwindling this year, wildlife officials took steps to save them.

Most species of birds will not receive such aid, and it remains to be seen what impact this year's harsh winter will have on next year's hunting, fishing, and birding.