



November 1, 2022

To All THC Members



The Hunter Above

**Harrier Hawk Hovering Over a Very Distressed Blue-winged Teal in the Southern Roost
(All photos in this newsletter were taken over the last two weeks at Thunderbird)**

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**The Hunter Below
Nancy & Thunder @ Sunrise**

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Late Evening Ducks Dropping into the Herlin Pond

The Migration

We watched them parachute down under light north winds, following an ancient migratory corridor along the Colorado River, constant and continuous, for hours on end, hundreds behind hundreds sundown silhouetted, at times clustered clouds of over a thousand, jaw-dropping, breathless. A mass exodus of birds from the north fueled by programmed genetics and parental imprinting, they call it the Grand Passage.

Over the past month on more than one occasion, usually late in the evening after a trailing front we witnessed spectacles that topped my decades of birdwatching and photo-chasing. One evening Nancy and I watching thousands of pintails plummet from the skies into the BC property only to be followed by an immeasurable stream of tree-top high teal that lasted for well over an hour. We walked out in the dark, lights off, whistles and swishes so close we felt like we could reach up and touch the migration.

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**Note the Drab Coloration of the Drake Pintails Making ID Difficult
Currently We Have Thousands Upon Thousands of Pintails on Our Properties
Pintails are Having a Tough Go, So Please Do Not Shoot the Hens
(The pintail counts this spring were very low and if the numbers were 30k less the
pintail season would have been closed for 2023-2024)**

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Black King's Knight Takes Sacrificed White Queen's Bishop to Protect White King

The Chess Match

There are multiple challenges in preparing the habitat every year, every season different. I have always preached you can never win the battle with Mother Nature by trying to overpower her. Best to roll with the punches and adapt. Over the last month we would travel from property to property with the old Bee Gee's song resonating in my mind, "Stayin' Alive." Almost all of our water wells struggled keeping the "groceries" alive this fall. The heat, the evaporation, the scarcity of rains were seriously jeopardizing the duck food we had grown. Matted aquatics would appear overnight begging for water. It was a chess match. Sacrifice this food here, to save the food there. For weeks on end, water streams were diverted into ponds almost on a daily basis. Give this pond a quick drink, then pass the "canteen" to the next thirsty soul. A couple inches here, a couple inches there. Pond favorites, well, they were given a couple of extra slugs of water from the canteen. Slowly but surely, ponds were brought back to "pool level," but it was an undertaking of labor and worry. For those of you new to the club these ponds are not permeant, nor do not magically appear every fall. Going into your ponds this year was a month of new construction, followed by a month of repair to the infrastructure, then four straight months of dawn to dusk efforts every single day pumping water non-stop and manicuring the food. Enjoy!

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Immature Bald Eagle Hunting Ducks at BC



Northern Roost Ducks Fleeing Eagle

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The BC Well - 2,100 Gallons / Minute

(A normal bathtub holds 50 Gallons, therefore the BC Well could fill your bathtub 60,480 times in one day!)

The Drought

Although it is currently raining outside our cabin window at the lodge as I put together this newsletter, we are in the drought of all droughts. Not sure exactly when our 2022 dust bowl settled in earlier this year, but its first victim was the farmers, their corn, milo, rice, even cotton suffered. Cotton a dry loving crop still needs some moisture, but this year it received only a few precious drops of rain. The ranchers saw the writing on the wall next with their pastures turning to toast. Bales of coastal grass usually reserved for helping cattle get through the winter were virtually impossible to buy for summer cattle. Desperate measures call for desperate action and farmers began bailing low protein rice stubble for the ranchers to get them by. Incidentally, studies have shown that grass growing in moist soil units (duck ponds) have an 18% higher protein content than normal pastures. I digress. Next the drought impacted the duck hunter, first by the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) cutting off duck water—all Thunderbird properties have independent water wells and do not rely on LCRA water. Secondarily the drought dried up critical freshwater marshes along the coast. The third whammy, the costs of independent water wells to pump duck ponds. The parched landscape and high energy prices have certainly curtailed many duck ponds in our area, but worry not, the club just went out and took a small business loan. Lol.

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Ducks Coming Off the Bree Pond
(In one week, the ducks ate 50% of the food in the pond)

The Ducks—And Others—Need Thunderbird More Than Ever

It is an unprecedented drought, the likes I have never seen in close to four decades of management. It is in years like this that ducks need hunting clubs like Thunderbird more than ever. Granted we harvest a lot of ducks, but it is a miniscule amount when compared to how many ducks, geese, cranes, shorebirds, and other wildlife utilize our duck ponds. We currently have easily over 50,000 ducks on our properties with more dropping in every day.

It is Just Not Water

Pond Water is one thing, Premiere Wetlands is something entirely different, and infinitely more valuable to wildlife. Wetlands are one, if not the most, prolific ecosystems on earth. Starting with rich nutrients nourishing zillions of microbes, which in turn feed invertebrates of every order and nurture rich plant growth that not only ducks thrive on, but also sustain other creatures of the marshes including half of the endangered species of North America.

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Fresh Redheads Adding to the Mélange of Ducks on the Forrest East Pond

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Give Thanks

Over the past month I have observed the gregarious antics of ducks. With the exception of the Mottled Duck which is more reclusive, the term "birds of a feather flock together" is never more apropos than with ducks. Ducks love company as do duck hunters sharing wetlands, sunrises, and cupped wings. Ducks work as a unit, in their migration, in their feeding, in their roosting. At Thunderbird we too work as a unit, there is no single ingredient that makes the club fare well. It is a package of cooperation, working as a fine-tuned entity of excellence between landowners, vendors, and the members. We are blessed with unequivocally the best wetlands landowners in the country, our harvest numbers support credence to those strong words. They understand Thunderbird's needs in habitat construction and maintenance, with bird disturbance, and of you the member. We in term need to understand and be respectful of their needs. Be sure gates are closed and locked properly, pickup trash, even if it is not yours, do not drive into prepared crop lands and rut farmers hard work, drive slow when next to cattle, etc. Plain and simple we are guests upon their land.

Finally give thanks. If you should come across a landowner let him or her know how much you appreciate the privilege of being able to hunt and fish on their property, and their commitment to helping wildlife.

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Ducks on the Mallard Pond @ Sunset

Fragile Marsh

In keeping with good stewardship our Marsh Manager, Craig Jones, reminds me to pass on to the marshmen to keep the two marshes we manage unsullied. Scars in the vegetation from ATV traffic leave horrible scars on the pristine marsh and if you break through the thin crust of the upper layer of soil you will find your ATV a permanent fixture of the marsh. Please park on the outside of the vegetation and drag sleds into the marsh. Thanks!



**In the Front Row of Ducks; Pintails, Gadwalls, Redheads, Widgeon, Canvasbacks, Ring-necked Ducks, Ruddy Ducks, Coots, Green-winged Teal, & Blue-winged Teal
Photo taken yesterday on the Forrest Middle Pond**

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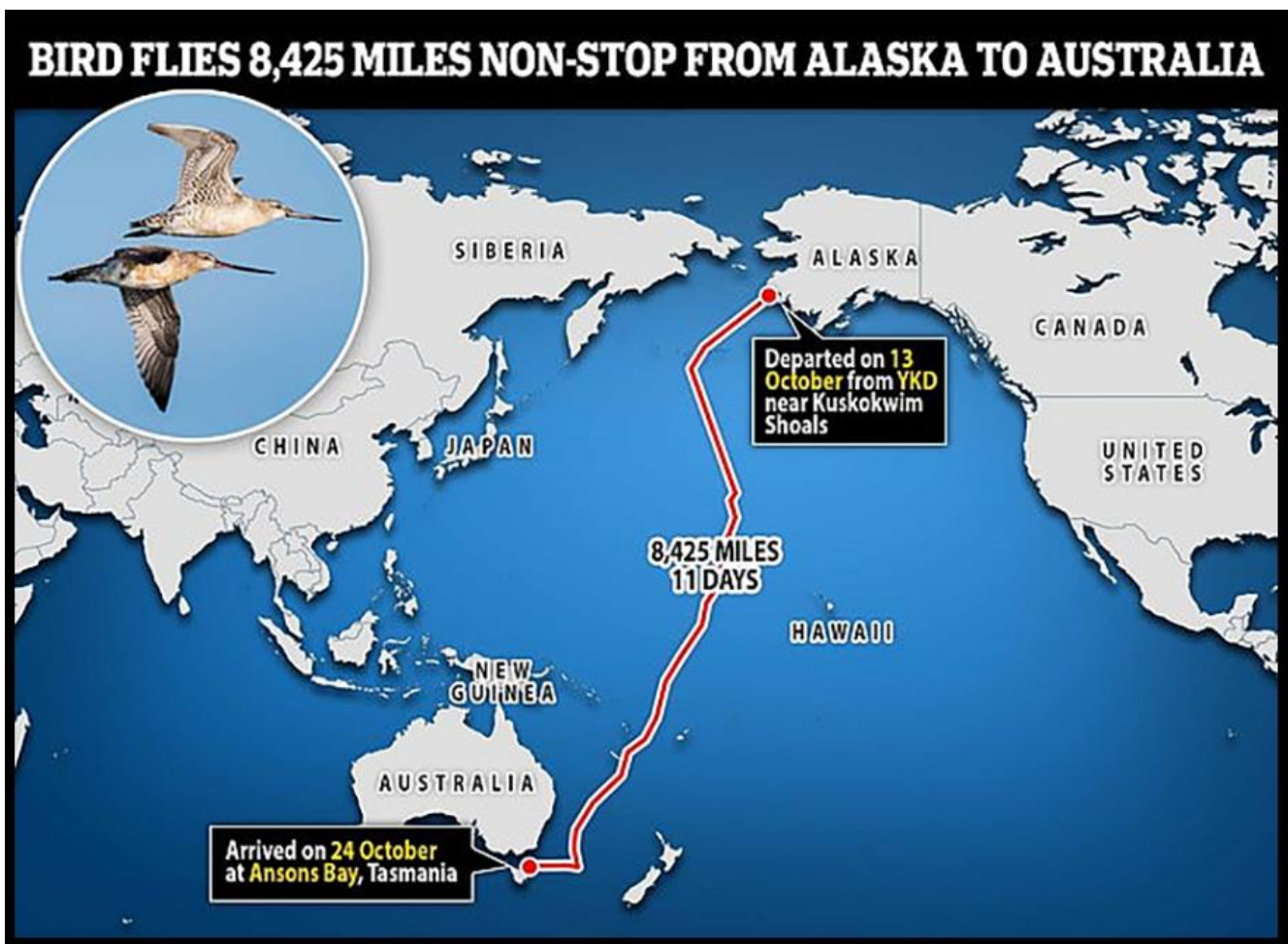
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World Record Migration

This coming Saturday morning as you hold your first duck of the season marvel at this, their long 1,000-to-2,000-mile migration from the Northern Prairie Pothole Region, Boreal Forest, and Arctic Region. The migration of waterfowl and other migratory birds in of itself is remarkable with only a few stopovers, but recently a shorebird overshadowed all migrations on planet earth. A Bar-tailed Godwit fitted with a tracking transmitter made a world record flight of over 8,000 miles in little under two weeks. Imagine a small bird the size of a pigeon traveling that distance non-stop, without drink, without a meal, without a siesta! The young bird of only 5-months took off this October from western Alaska and touched down south of Australia on the island of Tasmania. Simply mind-boggling! Why? Well, you going to have to ask the Godwit.



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Yours Truly and the 2022 Boy Scout Catch of OM

OM Fishing

Not sure if it is global warming—the catch-all scapegoat when Mother Nature goes amuck—but fishing this fall was certainly off the mark. I think we are still feeling the impact of the freeze a couple years back and the abundance of fisherman hammering the fish during COVID. A few highlight reels this fall, but for the most part slow fishing. But fish can swim into the culverts as fast as they can swim away and I have seen some good catches in the winter that defy reason.

Spots Available

ATV and storage manager, David Tyte, has open spots for equipment storage and covered outside ATV storage. If interested please contact David.



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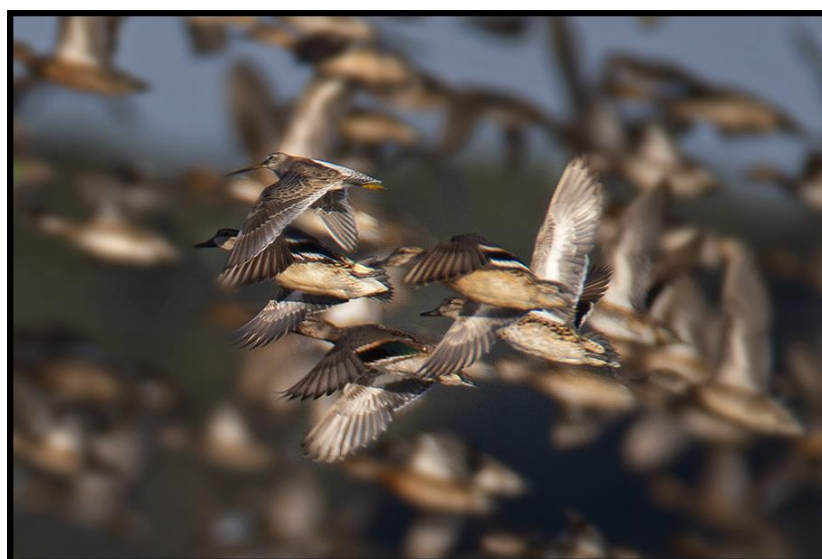
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**You Have a Split Second to Decide, What Duck Do You Shoot First? Second?
Clockwise from Left: Hen Pintail, Hen Gadwall, Hen Pintail, Hen Pintail, Hen Pintail,
Drake Widgeon, Drake Gadwall (Center)**



You Have a Split Second to Shoot at Four Balled-up Teal, Do You Take the Shot?

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By Air, By Land, By Sea

The Craig Jones' Air, Land, & Sea Club

Who will be the first? To shoot a limit of ducks in the morning, then catch a legal redfish, following with some "bacon" on the ground. If Stu was here, he would be a solid hands down Las Vegas favorite. To accomplish this mission, you will need a full tank of gas—both in your truck and psyche—and a lot of giddy-up-and-go Stu style! Be the first and you will grace the cover of next newsletter. Be sure to take photos of your outdoor marathon.

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Remembrance Shrimp Boil for Stu

Speaking of Stu, we still plan to do a tribute shrimp boil as soon as we have a favorable Friday weather.

Opening Weekend Weather Conditions

Bring your lightening rod and rainsuit for the weekend! Thunderstorms begin on Friday and continue through the opening day as a cold front sweeps through Thunderbird. Be careful out there!

Scouting with a Manager

If you would like to scout with a manager on Friday, send either myself or Travis text. One group will head south and another to the north. We will text you back on the Who, Where, and When.

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The Good Migrants

Guests

No sir, not this Saturday. Sunday 10-4.

THC Cane (While supplies last)

Travis and company will be bringing bundles of fresh cut cane for your temporary blinds. The landscape is green, so "match the hatch" with green cane around your temp blinds. Feel free to leave the cane out in the pond or around the pit blinds, but please do not discard your cane on any property or the lodge premises as it makes a mess and someone else has to pick up your "garbage."



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Ducks Dropping into the Gadwall Pond at Sunset

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The Northern Roost Teal, a Surprising Amount of Greenwings Down Early

A Few Pond Highlights

Ducks are on the move and the landscape is changing. Ducks in the thousands, and in some cases tens of thousands are hammering our duck ponds. The Mallard Pond hammered. The Bree Pond hammered. The Herlin Pond hammered. The Remington Pond hammered. The ducks are like locusts, swarming in black clouds and orgy feasting on the groceries we have grown over the past four months. Ducks are flocking into a pond for a few days, then moving to another. Mallard Pond for example had myriad of assorted ducks on it last week, yesterday evening nothing, but fully expect them to return at some point.

We do our very best to have all the ponds their very best, but environmental factors are always in play impacting not only prepping ponds, but also pumping water. I would say this year we have more ponds in tip-top shape than ever before. Read on.



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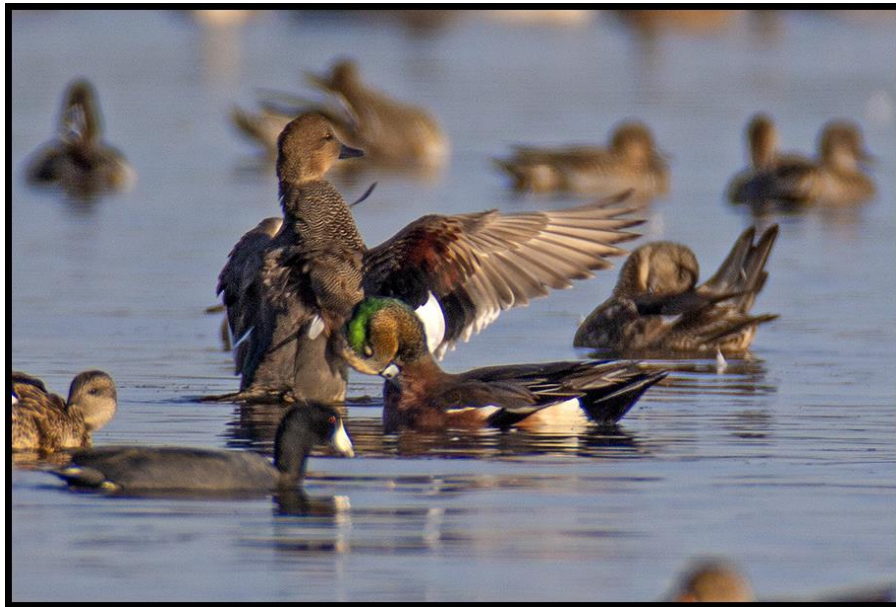
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Migrating Ducks Flocking Next to Forrest West Pond's New Pit Blind



New Arrivals on the Shoveler Pond

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The Appelt Pond, once one of our top producing ponds has in recent years fell of the charts due to a series of unavoidable "natural disasters." American Lotus (water lily) took over the pond with its showy 6-inch yellowish flowers and pads that can grow up to 3-feet in diameter. While good veggies would grow beneath the lily leaves the ducks avoided the pond like the plague with the lily leaves flapping in the wind. You get one try every season to make a pond right, it is irreversible until next year. Over the past number of years, we tried different methods to snuff out the lilies that water gardens sell for hundreds of dollars. Nothing worked until this season, keeping the pond dry as long as possible and then flooding late seemed to put a check on the lilies. The only problem was it also put a check on the good veggies. There are some good aquatics growing in the pond, but it is not solid. The good news is that there is good open water and when Remington and Swale stack up with ducks, as they generally do throughout the season, the pond should shoot well.



Pintails Arriving on the Brooks Pond

The Brooks Pond we lost last season due to an unseen water leak from the water canal into the pond, shutting down any efforts to prepare the pond right. The Brooks Pond for 3 out of 4 First Splits of the season was our top producer. Fully expect it to be a player once again, but it will have some stiff competition with the Forrest Ponds to the east that are currently holding thousands and thousands of ducks.

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More Pintails Rising off the Castle Pond

The Castle Pond, always a dirty little pond. Lol. This year however as a result of flushing large quantities of water out of the upstream Swale Pond, the shallows of Castle are producing food and I see ducks every single time I visit the pond. This does not happen often on Castle.

The Herlin Pond. One day just a body of water and the next fragments of life swirling around my Polaris tires. I knew something good was about to happen. Then in early September lush mats of duck loving food started to appear along with a variety of excellent emergents. Currently the pond is holding thousands of ducks and the neighboring Andi Pond teeming with ducks as well.



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A Summer Sea of Goatweed in the Mallard Pond

The Mallard Pond was way down on the totem pole as we went into the season of readying ponds. We knew the severe drought would most likely strain our ability to flood all the ponds on this property. When I discovered the incredible patch of goatweed in the Mallard Pond, Travis and I decided to manicure the field for doves. The plan, wait until the crouton was mature and about to drop seed, then cut, disc, shred in hopes of pulling in October dove. Old Mother Nature however had different plans and in less than three days it rained 5"—incidentally the only rain we received all summer. The field was a bloody mess and there was not enough time to wait for it to dry out for a dove field. Water was subsequently captured from the runoff in hopes some sort of grocery store would manifest itself beneath the goatweed. It did! And we started to divert additional pumped water into the Mallard Pond. Long story short, when the goatweed was ready to drop its seed, we brought in the roller chopper to knock over the goatweed (legal to do). I remember telling the roller chopper operator that there was an incredible amount of food in this pond and ducks were going to go bonkers in short order. One week later I confirmed my affirmation in a text to the operator "Thousands of ducks on the pond now, thanks for your help!"



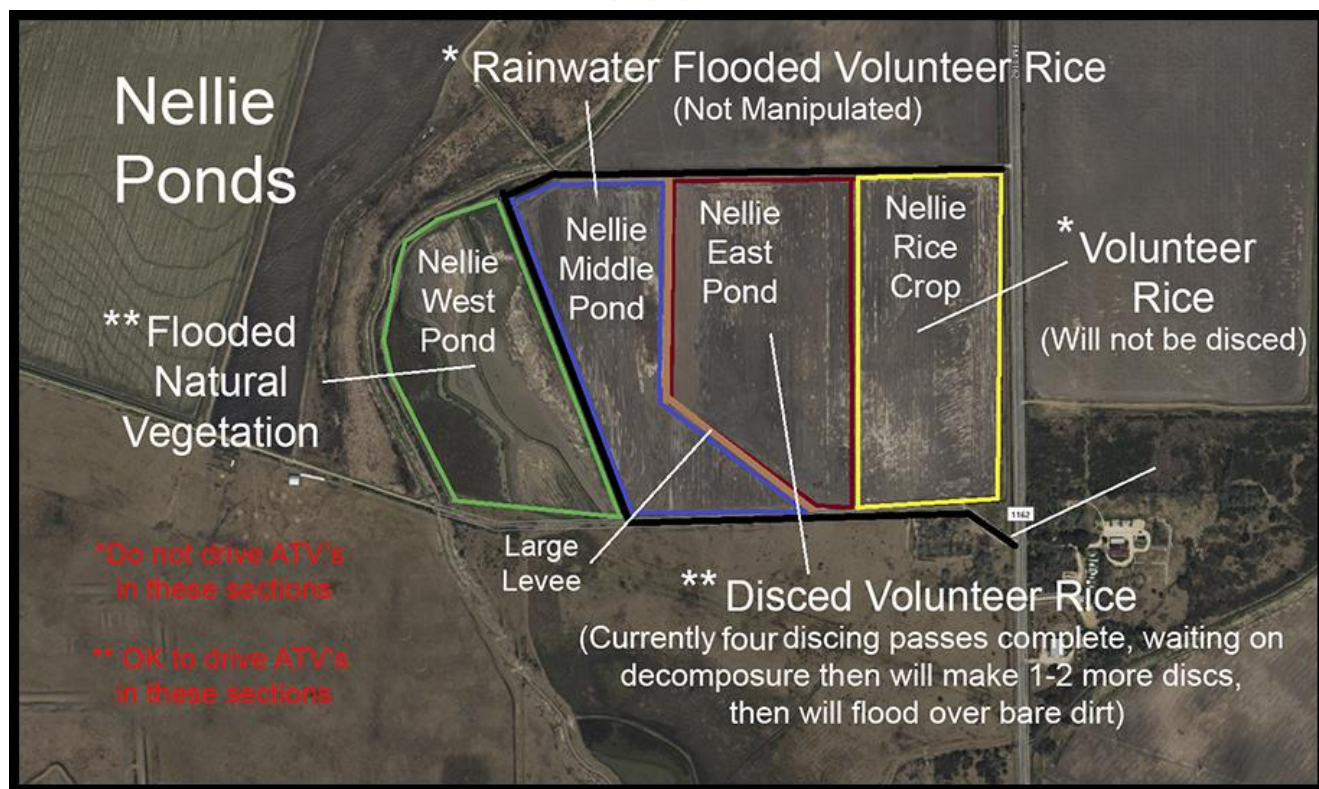
Roller Chopping the Flooded Mallard Pond

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Nellie Ponds

The Nellie Ponds, this season there was fair amount of discussion between vendors, landowners, even game wardens about the flooding of the Nellie Ponds this year. The problem, the only single rainstorm we received in four months fell right before we were going to prep the ponds leading to a second crop of volunteer rice. If farm crops have seed or food in them, you cannot go in and knock them over for open water and flood it, for this is considered baiting. This includes rice, corn, milo, even planted millet. Taking it a step further you cannot drive ATV's into standing crops and knock over the plants, this is also considered baiting (see map above for two areas not to drive in). We chopped and chopped the volunteer rice in the Nellie East Pond and with today's rain it will rot the remaining rice seed. The landowners have graciously agreed to build the low spots in the road running along the northside to allow for a proper flood. Once the north road is built up, we will flood both Nellie Middle and Nellie East Ponds. Most likely the ponds will not be flooded until the Second Split of the season.

The Road Pond, a late bloomer every season but as we saw during teal season it came on strong. I have been seeing a lot of ducks tucked in the wild millets and grasses in the back. It should be a solid pick this season, but will be a little difficult to scout due to all the emergents in the pond.

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Checking the Crops @ the Massive Southern Roost Pond

The Southern Roost is filled with two primary plants, duck salad on top and chara below. While duck salad is an ok duck food, chara is an excellent duck food and the only ligament algae type plant that ducks chow down on. The rains of today should have opened up some additional water and put a pounding on the duck salad. Ducks are just now hitting the pond and when the geese arrive the pond will turn into a major roost.



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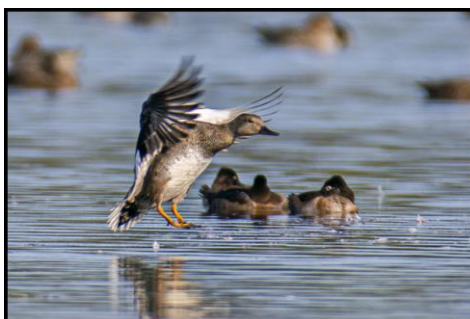
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Teal Landing on the Swale Pond Flats

The Swale Pond, like the Remington Pond earlier in the season, turned chocolate on us. Rather than dump almost 3-weeks of water into the Gulf from a strained well trying to keep up with all the ponds, I decided to deploy a different strategy and save the water. I brought in a backhoe and blocked a few low water locations on the pond then proceeded to pump more water into these shallows while at the same time flushing water out of Swale into the downstream Castle Pond. The strategy worked for the most part and I would say 50% of the pond is producing good duck food. As of last week I was seeing large flocks of ducks on the pond. One note of caution, the pit blind in the center of the pond may be underwater with today's rains.

The Stu Pond will not produce much food this season being a first-year pond, but its proximity to the Herlin Pond and Matagorda Bay will none-the-less give us a number of great hunts this season.



Stu Dropping in for a Look

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Our Trouble Waters

Going into the meat of our duck season we have only a couple ponds in what I call "offline" out of the copious number of ponds "online." Here are the two ne'er-do-well ponds that may still produce a good hunt or two before seasons end.

The OM Lodge Pond sits in a bowl and there is no way to dump dirty water, much like we did this season with the Remington and Swale Ponds, in order to replace bad water with good water. We explored pumping the pond dry with the help of Mustang Corporation, but the major league energy prices at the time could not justify the means. So early this year we installed a number of diversionary structures to divert dirty water from entering the pond and waited for it to dry up. At the time the pond was over 4-ft deep in the center filled with lethal chocolate soup. On average the pond dropped 1-inch every couple of days over the summer. As it lies, not counting today's rains, it is no more than a foot deep in the center. If it continues to draw down sand flats will begin to form and teal may begin to roost on the pond and grovel for invertebrates late in the season. Another positive note, the efforts earlier this year to divert dirty water elsewhere and dry up the pond may indeed grow Sago Pondweed next season and attract flocks of Canvasbacks.

The HL Thunder Pond is the only pond in the club where we do not have the ability to pump well water into it. We had a number of outstanding teal hunts in September, but the drought has sucked the rainwater out of the pond. Today's rains could have recharged the bar ditch around the outside of the pond and like the Lodge Pond give the ducks sand bars to roost on.

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Ducks Over Cattail Breaks in the Greenwing Pond



The Hammered Remington Pond

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My Health

Two years ago, about this time and with most of our duck ponds online, I was summoned to the hospital to begin the fight of my life, odds stacked against me with Leukemia and Bone Marrow Cancer. I was putting the final touches on tending ponds when I received the 24-hour notice to pack a small bag as my treatment room was ready, assorted chemo-cocktails on the shelf.

Fast forward a year later, I was out and about making habitat, thankful to be alive, but in a weakened state and having to wear my "Darth Vader" mask to protect me from not only diseases, but common airborne bacteria and fungi. Then one day I fell sick, weak, hardly able to move, blood pressure sky-rocketing, temperature dangerously high. Emergency room, then isolation room with a parade of doctors and nurses trying to figure out what was broke and save the "Man of Steele." Exhaustive tests and studies were done to find the kryptonite, but nothing showed up on the

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radar screen. The old saying "time heals" could not be more appropriate as the old jalopy hung in there. Just maybe I had pushed on the throttle a little too hard.

Fast forward to this season, I am back at it, but this time with a governor on the pedal, my dear wife Nancy. Doing her best to make sure I do not dive head first into the muck too hard, at times an ungovernable task. It has been my distinct pleasure to serve the club and wildlife we help. Hold on to your seatbelt, **it's going to be a good one!**



Be Safe Out There, Be Thankful, and Be Kind

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