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MALHEUR BLITZEN, SUPER WATERFOWL RESERVATION

Ding Darling Gets His First View of This Vast Area
Restored for Birds

These Wildlife Articles Are Written
by

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"This is the place I'd like to stay," said Ding, as he aimed his camera right and left at different duck families swimming in and out among the reeds. It was his first sight of the wide stretches of Malheur, a vast swamp area that had dried up and was now being re-flooded. This was his introduction to thirty miles of ponds and ditches in the Blitzen Valley, the water supply for Malheur Lake, which he had bought from funds squeezed out of the government sack. Too bad the birds didn't know of Ding's devotion to their cause. They would have flocked at his feet instead of flushing and hiding as he sneaked upon them with his camera.

J. N. (Ding) Darling grew up in the middle West where he hunted ducks from boyhood. Then as the ponds and lakes dried up and waterfowl vanished, he was awakened to their loss. He flooded the periodicals of the country with cartoons of scores of gunners drawing a bead on a lonely mallard. For years he fought for shorter seasons and smaller bag limits, but the duck population kept on sinking lower.

Then a call came from Washington, D.C., asking him to take the position as Chief of the Biological Survey. He accepted in March 1934, the position, at a great personal sacrifice and for a year and a half devoted his entire time to the cause of wildlife conservation. During this period more has been accomplished than in the fifteen

years previous.

The story of Malheur Lake is typical of the unfortunate situation of waterfowl throughout North America. This was established as a federal reservation by Special Executive Order of President Theodore Roosevelt on August 18, 1908. The whole area was "set aside for the use of the Department of Agriculture as a preserve and breeding ground for native birds." Before this it had been the rendezvous for plume hunters who slaughtered various birds during the breeding season for the millinery market. From now on, Malheur Lake would supply waterfowl to help stock the whole Pacific Coast.

Next the question arose as to who owned the bed of Malheur Lake, the State of Oregon or the United States. A bill was initiated for the sake of the birds, transferring any interest claimed by the State of Oregon to the federal government, and put up to a vote of the people. The voters should have signed the birds over to the government because it was equipped to take care of breeding areas. B

But a bunch of settlers and promoters from the lake region raised the battle-cry of "Birds or Babies, Which?" The babies won. Or did they? The picture of alkali flats and deserted cabins told its own story.

With the coming of the land promoter, a more insidious disease fell upon the feathered residents of the lake. He was a canker in nature's balanced system, a schemer who persuaded state and county governments that vacant desert lands could be turned into prosperous farms, that ponds and marshes could be drained and add agricultural wealth to the communities.

In this period, civic organizations, chambers of com-

merce, and even the railroads fell in with the idea of inducing settlers from the middle West and East to come out and locate on remaining public lands throughout the dry sagebrush country and especially in the sub-marginal areas. Common sense would have told even a casual observer that these were not fit to support families. So

So this promotion fever swept through the western country, eating away the feeding and nesting places of the migratory flocks. Water birds could not live without homes. This false land promotion was an epidemic that would not merely kill a few birds for their plumes, but it would take everything in its way. And woe unto the next generation.

The picture that followed this promotion flurry was one of desolation, deserted shacks with a few starving cattle standing expectantly at the back door, silent school houses with owls roosting in the belfries, wind blowing sand straight across the bleak spaces- lonely, lonely. It was a pathetic ending of the efforts of misguided men to make homes.

Malheur Lake formerly had two water supplies, Silvies River that flowed from the north and the Blitzen from the south. In a series of years of lessening rainfall in the mountains, the streams dwindled. All the water was taken out for irrigation. The lake receded and dried up. A lake without water meant death to the waterfowl.

With the purchase of the P Ranch and the Blitzen watershed by Mr. Darling, the water began creeping out over the bed of the lake. In the fall the ducks and geese had a great celebration.

Now, things are fairly jumping around the lake and in the Blitzen Valley, and this area is headed for the greatest waterfowl refuge in the country. Stanley Jewett, who is steeped in the bird tragedies of Malheur, is superintendent. It's a new era with CCC boys working on headquarters buildings, roads, dykes, and stretching a fence around the whole border for a sanctuary instead of a stock yard. These young fellows are getting a different slant on the world and a kick out of this kind of wildlife. The most fun of all is banding ducks out in the middle of the marsh and learning about all kinds of other birds. These boys may never want to go back to Chicago. Malheur the unfortunate is at last returning to her own.