

Jost: Time for Iowa to heed call of the wild?

By Rick Jost 11 p.m. CDT April 12, 2014



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The ducks were fading like dust in the wind.

Dust Bowl winds of the 1930s, chronicled in John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," vacuumed up the parched topsoil in drought-stricken plains states. The storms filled the sky with rolling black clouds of dirt — "black blizzards" — and scattered the cropland to who-knows-where.

The arid conditions also sucked the life out of a vast region's wetlands and migratory waterfowl.

Until J.N. "Ding" Darling swooped in.

Eighty years ago Darling helped save ducks from approaching the fate of *Raphus cucullatus*, the unfortunate Dodo. The Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist for The Des Moines Register had artfully expressed alarm about the loss of duck nesting and breeding grounds. President Franklin D. Roosevelt took notice and put Darling in position to do something more about it. At FDR's urging, Darling became chief of the U.S. Biological Survey, which would later become the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Darling also led the forerunner of the National Wildlife Federation and created the federal duck stamp program — even drew the first stamp — that financed purchase or lease of millions of acres of wetland habitats in the U.S.

It was, as the Fish and Wildlife Service says, a New Deal for ducks.

Now Iowa could use another Ding Darling to help restore and nurture the state's wildlife.

Where are the deer and pheasants?

A Feb. 26 front-page headline in the Register wondered: "So Where Are the Deer?" The Register's Donnelle Eller reported the sharp decline of Iowa's white-tailed deer.

Iowa's harvest of deer in the most recent hunting season was 99,406. That marked the eighth down year and the first below 100,000 since 1995 — a 30 percent decrease from 2008.

It was no accident; Iowa vigorously whittled the deer population because the critters were damaging crops in the field, gardens in suburbs and cars on the road. There are 92,000 farms in Iowa, according to Iowa agricultural statistics, and the operators of many of them complained of the white-tailed mammals munching on corn and soybeans like candy.

So in an odd twist, deer hunters have expressed concern because Iowa had been allowing too much deer hunting.

Also, pesky little midges had taken a bite out of the deer herd. These "no-see-ums" spread epizootic hemorrhagic disease, or EHD. By most accounts, however, the past year's frigid winter helped reduce this threat.

Full disclosure: The only deer I've hunted were the digital species in the arcade game "Big Buck Hunter."

But years ago I did enjoy hunting pheasants. It was an autumn rite in our state, as sure as college football. All it took was a shotgun, rugged clothing and a license, though a keen dog was helpful.

For farming families, pheasant hunting was a brief break from hard work in the field. For city boys it was a chance to connect with rural roots. And for rural and urban Iowans alike, the hunt forged relationships. Town and country. Domestic and wild. Father and son.

But honestly, the last pheasants I've seen were in a photo last year of Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, and Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, displaying their ringnecks at Hole N' The Wall Lodge in Akron, Ia.

As recently as 2003 hunters shot more than 1 million roosters, or male pheasants, in Iowa. Now hunters in blaze orange are lucky to muster little more than 100,000 birds. A 90 percent free-fall.

So where are the pheasants in Iowa?

Todd Bogenschutz, upland wildlife research biologist at the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, points to extreme and unusual weather patterns: Heavy winter snowfall and very high spring rain totals in the nesting season depress the pheasant population.

In an email he shares a table showing Iowa's worst weather for pheasants over the past half-century. The numbers are alarming. "In a nutshell," he says, "6 catastrophic years in the last 10 yrs since 2001, only 5 catastrophic years in the 40 years prior to 2001."

Of course, weather does as weather pleases. Iowans on their own can do no more about it or climate change than the Crimean army against Putin's troops.

For sure, hunting seasons can be tweaked to take pressure off wild game. But that seems a temporary fix, not to mention a political rabbit hole.

Iowa could secure more public land

Rather, what Darling campaigned to do in the '30s and what Iowa could do now is secure more public land for breeding and conservation of wildlife, including game animals such as pheasants and deer.

Consider our state of affairs:

- The Conservation Reserve Program was designed to provide the nation's landowners with financial incentive to idle land, which was a boon to pheasant populations in Iowa and elsewhere. As crop prices climbed, however, much of that land was put back into grain production. That has resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of CRP acres.
- Iowa is one of only a handful of states without a national forest or grassland. "Even Nebraska has some, for crying out loud," says David Osterberg, founding director of the Iowa Policy Project.
- In 2010 Iowa voters approved the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund amendment to the Iowa Constitution. This amendment says that the next time the Iowa Legislature approves a sales tax increase, 3/8ths of 1 cent would be used to support the fund that would establish permanent revenue for natural resources and outdoor recreation programs in the state. It was projected to generate about \$150 million. And so? So, as the DNR's Jan. 15 report noted, "allocations to or expenditures by the funding recipients have not occurred" since the fund's inception. Because there has been no state sales-tax increase.
- Iowa's land area is 35.7 million acres and only 1 million is public land, according to the state's 2013 Outdoor Recreation in Iowa Plan.

But there was no shortage of deer hunters at the Iowa Deer Classic earlier this year. Nearly 20,000 patrons jammed into the Iowa Events Center in downtown Des Moines. There, they engaged with outfitters, guides, gear peddlers, taxidermists, bow-and-arrow dealers, deer blind merchants, deer scent sellers, deer jerky entrepreneurs, and even a smartphone adapter for your gun scope — "with the ability to view and share your footage filmed right from your smartphone," says, an iScope brochure, "it is like social media live in the woods!"

It was a celebration of all things camouflage.

"You can't find a state where you can kill better deer," James Kroll tells an audience at the event. "And I'd like to see it stay that way."

Kroll is a professor of forest wildlife and director of the Institute for White-tailed Deer Management and Research, College of Forestry, Stephen F. Austin State University in Texas. Deer hunters seemed to hang on every word for his presentation: "Understanding the rut."

Kroll is known as "Dr. Deer." Wisconsin's governor hired him a couple years ago to serve as a deer czar consultant to figure out how to replenish the state's white-tailed population. (In Wisconsin, deer hunting likely ranks below only the Green Bay Packers, beer and cheese in popularity.)

The role of private landowners

Over the years Dr. Deer has expressed his disdain for public management of deer. "Game management," he said in a widely re-quoted February 2002 story in Texas Monthly magazine, "is the last bastion of communism." His preference is for private management of deer, and he said those who call for more public lands are "cocktail conservationists."

Then again, Iowa and Texas sometimes don't seem to share the same country (and if some Texans had their way, they wouldn't).

Osterberg, for one, thinks it's up to private landowners to set aside more areas for wildlife because the state won't create more habitat.

"I think we have to depend on private landowners to not devote every bit of land to corn and beans," he says.

Jim Freeland of Corning, a landowner and hunter who also operates a small deer-hunting business, said in a letter to the Register: "Instead of viewing deer as vermin, deer need to be viewed as an enormous economic asset and opportunity."

"Every landowner of any size south of Interstate 80 should be able to pay his property taxes from the income that a hunting lease will produce, yet few use this opportunity. If farmers and landowners were making income this way," he wrote, "they would promote better habitat and conservation practices on their property."

Elsewhere, though, some farmers have pushed economic opportunity to disturbing limits. The Indianapolis Star reported Sunday that a relatively small group that breeds hybrid deer with freakishly big antlers — to be shot in fenced hunting preserves — is contributing to the spread of diseases.

"To feed the burgeoning captive-deer industry, breeders are shipping an unprecedented number of deer and elk across state lines. With them go the diseases they carry," the newspaper reported.

These captive-deer operations have "spread tuberculosis to cattle and are suspected in the spread of deadly foreign deer lice in the West." What's more, the Star found, there is "compelling circumstantial evidence that the industry also has helped accelerate the spread of chronic wasting disease, an always-fatal deer disease similar to mad cow."

And wouldn't you know: Just Thursday the Iowa DNR said the first case of chronic wasting disease in a wild Iowa deer has been confirmed — a deer reported as harvested in Allamakee County during the first shotgun season in early December.

Mutant deer? No thanks. I like my nature, well, natural.

"Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it," Henry David Thoreau wrote. "We need the tonic of wildness."

Want more wildlife? Find the tonic. Create more wilderness.

Call it a New Deal for the buck and the doe.

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