

[From Spring 1994]

Wildlife Study

While hiking around the Wildlife Loop on Chincoteague Refuge, along with the array of swans and ducks, one might also meet a glimpse of two strange wooden boxes. These boxes have been common sightings in the last two months, and if you are an early morning hiker you might also realize that from within these boxes something is watching you as well. They might blink, sneeze or make unusual tinging noises. Needless to say, it may leave you feeling curious and generally unsettled enough to dare knocking on the door.

What you may not know is that you've been walking in an environmental research area. The boxes are part of a human response study which has been in operation since last November. Within the box, a U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service volunteer biologist sits, observes and records waterfowl behavior. The focus of the study has been on the interaction between black ducks and humans and mallards and humans. Time clocks are set and behavior is monitored into miniature tape recorders until an alarm ends the survey. The data recorded compares waterfowl behavior with and without humans. When completed, the study will determine if there are significant changes in waterfowl behavior due to human presence.

Often when you think of ducks, the vision of wings and flight are closely connected. It is a romantic image and rarely associated with thoughts of fatigue or death, but this can be the result of flights due to disturbance. Imagine yourself traveling thousands of miles in search of warm climate and food. You have a very narrow route along the Eastern coastline and few areas to stop and rest. In these areas you feel threatened and are forced to stop resting or feeding. After frequent disturbances you begin to spend more time in alert or escape behaviors. Gradually you become distressed, you are losing body fat and are more susceptible to disease. It becomes less likely that you are going to complete this long journey. That is why it is very important to have areas on Chincoteague Refuge set aside strictly for wildlife.

Recognizing that humans have an increasing impact on, and responsibility to, wildlife and wild lands, means having an awareness of even our most simple actions. Migrations are beautiful, amazing events to witness. Understanding the intricate clockworks of waterfowl makes it an even more dazzling occasion, but flights need to be set by their timing and not ours.

If you were brave enough to knock on one of our boxes, I am sure you were startled to hear it knock back. What may be even more surprising is to discover that not only were the birds being watched, but so were you.

*Ella Belling,
Refuge Volunteer*