**OUR 100th. ISSUE!**

# THE TOWPATH TRAVELER

*Volume 100 - 03/23*

## CUYAHOGA VALLEY TOWPATH TRAIL CENSUS MONTHLY NEWSLETTER - MARCH 2023
## (CVTTC)

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## HISTORY & FACTS *of the* MARCH CENSUS

| MARCH | 13-YEAR TOTALS of SPECIES / INDIVIDUALS | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2010** | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| 47 / 1,220 | 46 / 1,327 | 47 / 1,008 | 44 / 689 | 50 / 1,871 | 51 / 1,466 | 43 / 1,078 | 46 / 906 | 47 / 744 |
| **2019** | **2020** | **2021** | **2022** | | | | | |
| 44 / 1,721 | 48 / 681 | 50 / 692 | 56 / 1,221 | | | | | |

*Most Species seen in March : 56 on 03/03/2022.*
*Most Individual Birds seen in March : 1,871 on 03/07/2014.*
*Fewest Species seen in March : 43 on 03/04/2016.*
*Fewest Individual Birds seen in March : 681 on 03/03/2021.*
*Species Average in March : 47.6 Species.*
*Total Individuals Average in March : 1,124.9 Individuals.*
*Lowest Temperature on March Census : minus 2-degrees F on 03/06/2015.*
*Highest Temperature on March Census : 56-degrees F on 03/02/2012 & 03/03/2020.*
*Longest Time Afield on March Census : 9 hours & 55 minutes on 03/06/2015.*
*Shortest Time Afield on March Census : 6 hours & 50 minutes on 03/04/2011.*

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## LAST MARCH'S FIELD REPORT

| 03/03/22 | TOTAL SPECIES: | 56 | START / END TIME: | 6:30am - 3:55pm | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | TOTAL BIRDS: | 1,221 | TIME AFIELD: | 9:25 | FT. MI.: | 13.65 |

**ROUTE:** *Reverse of normal route - Merriman Valley north to Red Lock Trailhead.*

**TEMP.:** *34F ~ 28F* **OBSERVERS:** *John Henry and Douglas W. Vogus.*

**CONDITIONS:** *Cold and gray with plenty of cloud cover; temperatures rising ever so slightly and turning mostly cloudy; intermittent flurries from 10:00am - 2:40pm; Ira Beaver Marsh had two small pockets of open water.*

**TRAIL CONDITIONS:** *Poor; very icy and slick at southern end of trail although the trail was free of snow cover; still stretches of packed snow from Peninsula north to Red Lock; trail thawing in some spots and turning soft and muddy; one sugar maple had fallen across the trail just west of the Peninsula tunnel, a victim of the recent heavy snow, rain, then ice-storm; a portion of the base of the Towpath Trail north of Stumpy Basin has some major shifting and erosion and may slide into the river.*

**RIVER CONDITIONS:** *Still high and swift; creeks feeding into the river still rushing out of the valley hillsides.*

## EIGHT YEARS AGO on the TOWPATH TRAIL

*On March 06, 2015 we had our only sightings of another one of Ohio's beautiful winter duck species, the Canvasback. The winter of 2014-15 was quite cold and snowy, freezing up Lake Erie and forcing any and all over-wintering duck species into the only available open water, the Cuyahoga River. This was an added bonus for the census route coverage, giving us some duck species, like the Canvasback, that prefer large bodies of water like Lake Erie, and affording us species we normally wouldn't encounter.*

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## *MARCH 2023's BIRD SPECIES PROFILE*

### CANVASBACK *(Aythya valisineria)*

**DESCRIPTION:** *The Canvasback is perhaps one of the more elegant ducks; its distinctive structure makes identification simple. Forehead slopes straight down to a long, dark bill. The largest of the "Aythya" species, it has a thick neck and long body.* ***MALE:*** *Chestnut head with a dark crown and forehead, red iris. Black chest below neck line. The flanks, back, and tertials are very pale, almost white.* ***FEMALE:*** *Light brown head and breast with a slightly darker crown; contrasting pale gray flanks and back.* ***IN FLIGHT:*** *Wings are uniform, with only a faint gray wing stripe; males appear dark in the front and the rear.*

**LENGTH:** *19" - 22"* **WINGSPREAD:** *28" - 36"* **WEIGHT:** *Males: avg. 2.76 lbs.*
*Females: avg. 2.55 lbs.*

**VOICE:** *The male is generally silent except during certain courtship displays when he peeps, growls, coos, and croaks; female quacks and utters low guttural purring in some displays.*

**HABITS:** *Extremely wary, in fall and winter gathers in large rafts on coastal bays and broad stretches of inland fresh waters far from shore to feed, sleep, or rest. Swims low on water, dives quickly, sometimes in water 20-30 feet deep, but usually in shallower water 3-12 feet deep where it eats roots, tubers, and basal parts of bottom plants, one of its main foods, but also eats some mollusks, aquatic insects, and small fishes; however, staple foods are pondweeds and wild celery, also eats seeds of wild rice and other grasses, of sedges, bur reeds, water milfoil, etc., and various parts of water lillies. Because Canvasbacks use their bill to strain many of the seeds, especially of wild rice, out of bottom mud, they ingest much lead shot and are especially affected by it.*

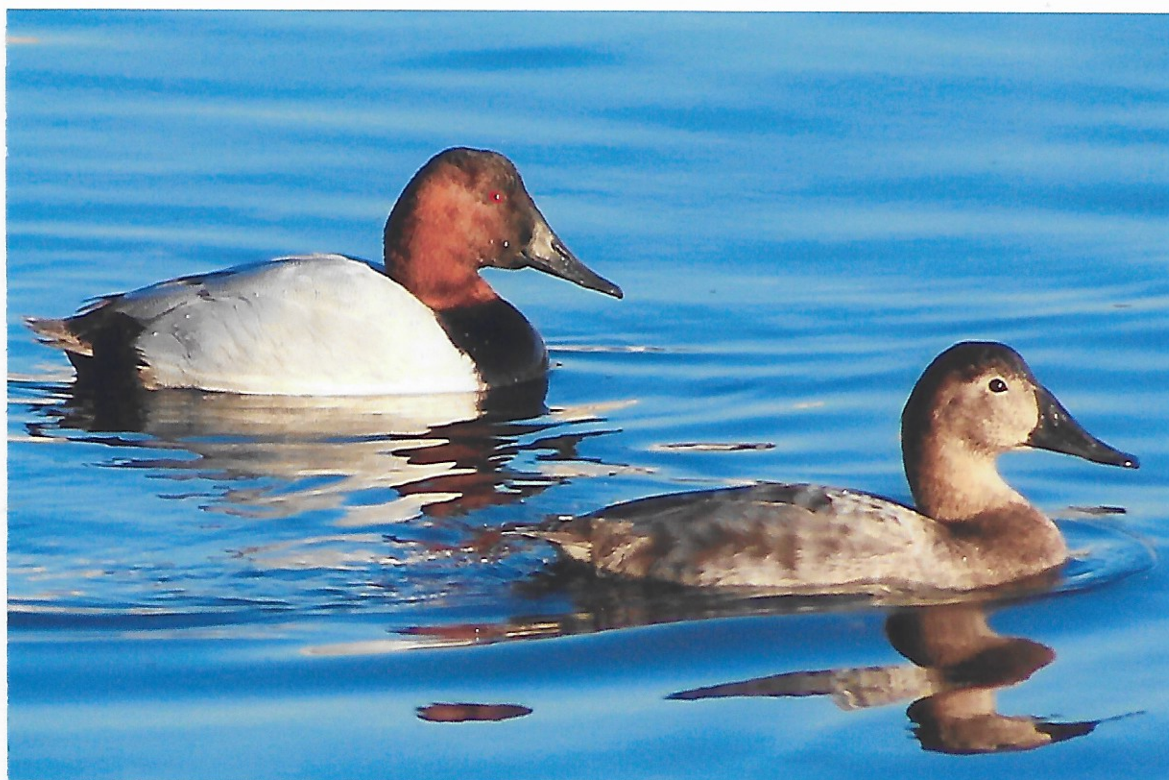
**HABITAT:** ***BREEDING:*** *The parklands of Canada are most desirable, preferring the prairie pot-hole regions of the North, delta areas when water is scarce in these prairie pothole regions, coastal wetlands, and marshes of large lakes scattered throughout the boreal forest regions of Canada and all but the Arctic slope of Alaska.* ***WINTERING:*** *About half of all Canvasbacks found on January surveys winter in the Atlantic Flyway, slightly over a fourth in the Pacific Flyway, and the remaining quarter in between, including Mexico. The largest number winter on Chesapeake Bay, the second largest spend winter months on San Francisco Bay. A "big water" species that prefers open water over small ponds and lakes or rivers.*

**NESTING:** ***NEST:*** *Usually built in bulrushes, reeds, or cattails, over shallow water 1 to 20 yards from edge of open water, built of bulrushes, reeds, sedges, etc. that the female gathers from around nest site; often anchored to surrounding plants or floating mats of vegetation, built up high and lined with down.* ***EGGS:*** *Usually May, rare into June, 7 to 12 eggs, more often 9 to 10, gray-green or gray-olive, usually darker than those of Redheads and Ruddy Ducks, which may lay their eggs in Canvasback's nest.* ***INCUBATION:*** *By female, 23 to 29 days, averages 24 days; young first fly at 63 to 77 days after hatching.*

**RANGE:** ***BREEDS:*** *From Alaska south thru west-central Canada, Minnesota, through the Dakotas, northern Washington, northern Rockies to northern Nevada.* ***WINTERS:*** *From Vermont south to Florida, Great Lakes region, southern U.S. to California coast into Mexico.*

**STATUS:** *Locally common. Canvasback numbers have fluctuated widely due to changing water levels on the breeding grounds and, to some degree, hunting regulations.*

**DID YOU KNOW?:** *The Canvasback's scientific name (Aythya valisineria) is from the Greek "aithya," a seabird; and the species name is Latin, the scientific name given the bird by Alexander Wilson (see: "The Towpath Traveler" from February 2021) because of its fondness for the freshwater plant wild celery, Vallisneria americana (Vallisneria spiralis to some botanists); Wilson misspelled "Vallisneria," but because of the law of priority in zoological nomenclature, Wilson's misspelled name is retained to this day!*



*Elegance across the water - a male and female Canvasback with a head and bill like no other North American duck.*

*(photo courtesy of: Encyclopeadia Britannica)*

***Abundance Codes on the graphs below indicate the best time of year to find the Canvasback in Northeast Ohio.***

| Jan. | Feb. | Mar. | Apr. | May | Jun. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| uuuuuuu | CCCCCCC | CCCCuuu | uuuuuuu | rrrrroooo | |
| **Jul.** | **Aug.** | **Sep.** | **Oct.** | **Nov.** | **Dec.** |
| | | | rrrrruuuu | uuuuuuu | uuuCCCC |

| Code | Meaning |
|---|---|
| CCCCCCC | = *Common to Abundant. Frequently encountered in this region during this time of year.* |
| uuuuuuu | = *Uncommon. Occurs regularly during this time of year but not frequently detected.* |
| rrrrrrrrrr | = *Rare. These birds can occur more or less annually but are easily missed in their scant presence in the region.* |
| ooooooo | = *Occasional. Limited history in this region and are not to be expected.* |
| ******** | = *Accidental. Few records in the past 60 years. Not expected in this region during this time of year.* |
| \|\|\|\|\|\|\|\|\|\|\|\| | = *Fluctuating Abundance. May occur some years yet absent other years. Irruptive or overwintering birds.* |

***History of the Canvasback on the Cuyahoga Valley Towpath Trail Census 2010 ~ present.***

| | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| JAN. | | | | | | | | |
| FEB. | | | | | | | | |
| MAR. | | | | | | ***12**** | | |
| APR. | | | | | | | | |
| MAY | | | | | | | | |
| JUN. | | | | | | | | |
| JUL. | | | | | | | | |
| AUG. | | | | | | | | |
| SEP. | | | | | | | | |
| OCT. | | | | | | | | |
| NOV. | | | | | | | | |
| DEC. | | | | | | | | |

| | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| JAN. | | | | | | |
| FEB. | | | | | | |
| MAR. | | | | | | |
| APR. | | | | | | |
| MAY | | | | | | |
| JUN. | | | | | | |
| JUL. | | | | | | |
| AUG. | | | | | | |
| SEP. | | | | | | |
| OCT. | | | | | | |
| NOV. | | | | | | |
| DEC. | | | | | | |

**DID YOU KNOW?:**

*As is the case with many ducks that are hunted for sport, the Canvasback has many nicknames, the most common being "Cans." Probably coined by past hunters, as in, "Have you seen any cans out in the bay?" Other names for this handsome duck include Red-headed Bullneck, Bullneck, Canard Cheval, Canny, Canvas, Sheldrake, Gray Duck, Whiteback, Hickory-Quaker and Horse-Duck. Canvasback has been an American common name since 1800.*

| Key | Meaning |
|---|---|
| * | = ***HIGHEST COUNT TOTAL ON CENSUS.*** |
| ***BOLD #*** | = ***HIGHEST COUNT FOR THAT YEAR.*** |

**DID YOU KNOW?:** *Market hunting in America nearly decimated waterfowl numbers as the country's population grew and those people demanded fresh meat? Many are not aware of the historical significance of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 that eventually brought this to end. The following article is by Dr. Mark Petrie of Vancouver, Washington and director of conservation planning in Ducks Unlimited's Western Region.*

## *DUCKS FOR SALE - THE RISE AND FALL OF MARKET HUNTING IN AMERICA*

*Rowing alone in the dark, he reminded himself that there was no money to be made on shore. Beside him lay the gun, two hundred pounds of well-arranged iron and wood that stretched nearly 10 feet in length. He used it only at night and in a narrow skiff that offered six inches of freeboard in the best of weather. Forged in England, the big gun had passed through three generations of men who supplied the Baltimore and Philadelphia markets with ducks shot on Chesapeake Bay.*

*Except for the small raft of scaup, he saw no birds on the journey out. He reached the island just as the tide turned, thankful that the wind hadn't turned with it. It was his sister's boy, fishing blue crab, who'd seen the cans. If still there, they'd be off the southwest shore where the lee was the best and the wild celery thickest.*

*Stowing the oars, he lay prone in the boat. The muzzle of the punt gun rested below the bow, the stock lying on his empty seat. Hanging one arm over the gun, he began to maneuver the skiff using two small hand paddles. The boat's narrow beam allowed him to extend his wrists over the gunnels and work the paddles forward while offering no silhouette to the birds. Face down with eyes closed, he listened in complete darkness. The sound of a thousand Canvasbacks diving on the celery reached him. The boy had been right; the birds were here.*

*Moving toward the sound he'd heard, he passed through a small group of cans that drifted, unconcerned, off his path. These were birds feeding on the edge of the great flock. The real prize lay just ahead. In a minute he was among them, cans so dense they covered the water. Pointing the skiff to the spot where the Canvasbacks were thickest, he turned his eyes away from the breech and slapped the three-inch trigger.*

*No matter how many times he went out, he was never prepared for the sound of the gun. Nor did he ever remember the gun's recoil as it slid under his shoulder and came to rest in a bag of sea oats that protected the boat's thin transom. It was only the roar of ducks taking wing that restored his sense of time and place. Straightening up, he reached for his lantern and began the methodical work of retreiving the dead birds. It was New Year's Eve, 1911.*

*Nobody alive in America today has legally sold a wild duck. That bit of commerce ended with the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, a law that expressly forbids the sale of wild waterfowl. But two important books offer us a detailed portrait of market hunting from the early 1800's to 1918. The first is Harry M. Walsh's "The Outlaw Gunner," a classic description of the men who hunted ducks for profit, the tools they used, and the dangers they faced. The more recent book is R.K. Sawyer's "Texas Market Hunting." Although focused on the history of market hunting in Texas, it gives a superb account of how this trade evolved at the national level. In its final years, market hunting developed distribution networks and marketing strategies characteristic of the modern food industry. It also pitted sport hunters against commercial hunters, in a battle similar to the one that continues today between many sport and commercial fishermen.*

*Prior to the Civil War, the impact on market hunting on continental duck populations was probably small. Duck populations were three to four times larger than they are today and sport hunting was almost nonexistent. Most market hunters were limited to black-powder muzzleloading shotguns and the demand for ducks was localized. That was the farmer's market era of commercial hunting. After 1865, however, market hunting joined the industrial age, with predictable consequences for waterfowl.*

*The catalyst for change was the American public itself. As the country became more affluent, the demand for wild game increased. At the same time, two factors related to industrial progress made it possible to increase the supply of ducks from marsh to table. The first was America's expanding rail system. By the late 1800's remote waterfowl hunting grounds were linked by rail to the country's major cities.*

*Second was the development of commercial ice-making plants, which allowed birds to be shipped from distant ports with little risk of spoiling. Factor in a burgeoning population with a growing appetite for ducks, and the die was cast.*

*Market hunting in its most destructive form appeared first in the Chesapeake Bay region. Back then much of the country's population lived a relatively short distance from the bay, and transportation systems that relied on rail and boat were highly advanced. The punt gun, once despised by those who hunted ducks for sport, has become a nostalgic icon of the region's heritage.*

*The largest punt guns had a two-inch diameter bore and could shoot two pounds of shot - the equivalent of about twenty-five 12-gauge shells - each time they were fired. All these guns were muzzleloaders, and like other black-powder guns their effective range was about 50 yards. Some men mounted kerosene lamps on the bow of their sneak skiffs to hold the birds in place before shooting, a method akin to spotlighting for deer. Although the earliest guns were made in England, many were also manufactured in the United States. As Walsh points out in "The Outlaw Gunner," the old story that nuts, bolts, and glass were substituted for shot is a complete fabrication. Real shot was cheap, and such haphazard alternatives would have damaged the barrels of these highly prized guns. And besides, can you imagine that customers paying top dollar for a Canvasback dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria would willingly tolerate picking glass out of their teeth?*

*Although we often associate punt guns with large kills, the reality was somewhat different. Forty to fifty birds was considered a good shot, and one shot a night was often the norm. Although punt guns offered the best means for killing birds at night, better daytime options were evolving for the market hunter. Descriptions of market hunting west of the eastern seaboard rarely mention the big guns, proof that commercial hunters exploiting these new areas had turned to better technology.*

*That technology was the repeating shotgun. Pump guns made their first appearance in the 1880's, and by 1900 John Browning had developed the semiautomatic shotgun. Loaded with new smokeless-powder cartridges, these guns allowed market hunting to be practiced on an industrial scale from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Between 1910 and 1918, Atlry Lankford of Elliot Island, Maryland, would kill 35,000 ducks with his Model 11 Remington semiauto. And he wasn't the only market hunter to make the most of the latest advancements in firearms.*

*For those who couldn't afford the new shotguns, or who preferred a quieter approach, there was always the duck trap. Such traps were simple to build and were usually constructed of chicken wire and wooden stakes. Most were baited with corn. Catches of 40 to 50 ducks a night would have been common since a single man could easily maintain a dozen or more traps. The economics of this method are obvious when weighed against the punt gun - as are the safety advantages. Most of the ducks banded today are either captured in traps identical to the ones used by market hunters or are netted off the bow of an airboat at night using powerful lights to confuse the birds. Both these methods were invented by the market hunter, which is an interesting irony for modern-day waterfowl managers.*

*As repeating shotguns and rail lines encouraged the spread of commercial hunting, virtually all the great waterfowl migration and wintering areas came under fire. The Gulf Coast of Texas and Louisiana, Reelfoot Lake in Tennessee, the Illinois River Valley, Minnesota's Heron Lake, California's Central Valley, and even Klamath Basin in Oregon were all heavily exploited. Put the right market hunters in a room and you'd get the first map of our nation's most important waterfowl habitats.*

*By the 1890's, the level of commercialization had become astounding. Game merchants and shipping companies began to employ 'commission hunters,' who were paid a percentage of the proceeds from their kills. These men hunted nearly year-round and followed the birds throughout their migrations. Employers supplied them with repeating shotguns, some of which held up to 11 shells, and shipped ammunition to their bases of operation. At the pinnacle of this highly organized commerce sat the Canvasback.*

*Most of us are generally aware of the value placed on Canvasbacks during the market hunting era. Brother, that ain't the half of it. If the market was right, a pair of 'prime' Canvasbacks might be sold for the equivalent of $100 in today's currency. That was many times the price paid for lesser species such as pintails or wigeon. But even more fascinating is the national trade that grew up around the Canvasback and the regional distinctions in flavor and price that drove the market, all of which is so well chronicled in Sawyer's book. Though waterfowl routinely appeared in humble kitchens and in the country's best restaurants, the quality of the birds varied widely among these venues.*

*Let's just admit it. Many of us who have shot a can are a little disappointed in the culinary experience. Sure they're good, but no better than a corn-fed mallard or a pintail that's stuffed itself with rice for three months. Why all the fuss? Well, the fuss has a Latin name - Vallisneria americana, or wild celery. Canvasbacks are very partial to this plant, and those that dined on it acquired a flavor like no other duck in the world. Wild celery is highly sensitive to changes in water quality, and pollution has eliminated much of it since the market hunting days. At present, your odds of shooting a Canvasback that has orderd only from the wild celery menu just aren't very good.*

*Where a Canvasback was shot was of keen interest to game merchants, fine restaurants, and food critics. Areas that harbored large amounts of wild celery, such as Susquehanna Flats on upper Chesapeake Bay, Wisconsin's Lake Koshkonong, and Lake Surprise in Texas, were well known, and birds shot on these waters fetched the highest prices. These birds were destined for the finest restaurants in New York, Baltimore, and Chicago, while cans shot outside of areas of wild celery production were more likely to enter local markets.*

*Hindsight and modern biology tell us that this trend couldn't last. But it was social pressures rather than biological statistics that ended market hunting, or at least forced it underground. The same affluence that produced such wide demand for ducks also produced something else - leisure time and the means to enjoy it. The number of people hunting waterfowl for sport increased dramatically after the Civil War. At first, the line between sport and market hunters was blurred. Bag limits were nonexistent and sport hunters routinely killed far more birds than they could eat. Many of these birds were sold to defray the costs of the hunt.*

*As market hunting intensified, however, conflicts between these groups were inevitable. Many in the sport hunting community were wealthy businessmen with strong political contacts. As their duck hunting declined, they began to focus their political clout on the market hunter and his allies. Until the 20th. Century birds were the sole responsibility of the states, and federal regulation was absent. Laws to regulate hunting appeared as early as 1832, when Virginia banned the shooting of waterfowl at night. Other states enacted similar laws, but they were rarely enforced. What's more, these laws were aimed not at ending market hunting but at restricting where and how it might be practiced. They did nothing to stem the increasing commercialization of waterfowl.*

*By the early 20th. Century, sportsmen had been joined by groups such as the Audubon Society and even several of the nation's newspapers in calling for an end to market hunting. Federal involvement finally came in the form of the Lacey Act. Passed in 1900, the act outlawed any interstate bird traffic that violated existing state laws. Constitutional challenges to federal authority and a lack of funds for enforcement guaranteed its failure. A market hunter might have looked over his shoulder, but never took his finger off the trigger.*

*The feds tried again in 1913 with passage of the Weeks-McLean Act. This law transferred responsibility for migratory birds from the states to the federal sect. The final chapter was written in 1918 with passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which was signed by the United States and Great Britain (on behalf of Canada). The act increased federal jurisdiction over migratory birds and finally provided the dollars necessary for enforcement. Market hunting quickly moved from a profession to a criminal enterprise.*

*Looking back a hundred years, it's hard not to speculate about the toll market hunting took on waterfowl. Sawyer cites several examples of the slaughter - 5,000 ducks shot in a day on the Susquehanna Flats, 1,000 ducks shipped every day from Reelfoot Lake, 100,000 birds marketed from Currituck Sound, 1,300 mallards killed by one man in seven hours, 3 million ducks killed in one year in Louisiana. Even given these numbers, it's difficult to pinpoint the impact that market hunting had on continental duck populations. The damage done by commercial hunting would have varied widely among species and would have depended on their flavor, their wintering distribution relative to major markets, and their reproductive capacity to replenish the ranks. That said, there seems little doubt that Canvasbacks paid a terrible price.*

*So much of the narrative around market hunting centers on the Canvasback. Compared to many species, the bird seems ill suited to the demands placed on it. Since 1955, when we began estimating the size of duck populations, Canvasback numbers have fluctuated between 400,000 and 800,000 birds. That's not a large number when you consider that over that same period*

*Mallard numbers fluctuated between 6 million and 11 million birds. Canvasbacks typically breed in permanent or semipermanent wetlands, while most dabbling ducks rely on seasonal wetlands that often go dry. Permanent wetlands are also much more difficult to drain, and we've lost fewer of these habitats. If Canvasback breeding habitat has fared better than that of most duck species, you have to wonder whether their numbers were ever that large to begin with. I'd wager that breeding Canvasback populations didn't top 2 million or 3 million birds in many years, far fewer than our most common duck species today. There's simply no way they could have withstood the pressure of commercial duck hunting.*

*Market hunting would persist between two world wars. Economic hardship and underground markets kept many men in the game, and the 1918 law only drove up the price. Still, the days of unfettered slaughter were over. In the end, the American people recognized that waterfowl were to be valued but not sold. For that we can be thankful.*

**DID YOU KNOW?:** *Another stop on Michelle and I's 2012 trip East on our honeymoon was the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum in Havre de Grace, Maryland. Located on the banks of the historic Susquehanna Flats, the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum houses one of the finest collections of working and decorative Chesapeake Bay decoys ever assembled. The museum was established in 1986 as a private, non-profit institution existing to preserve the historical and cultural legacy of waterfowling and decoy making on the Chesapeake Bay. The exhibits in this museum are top-notch with a complete history of the Market Hunting days that are equally fascinating as they are appalling, all in a beautiful bayside city. <decoymuseum.com>*

*Captain Slaughter takes to the water! Punt guns were meant to take as many ducks as possible in just one shot.*

*(photo courtesy of: Boone & Crockett Club)*

*Overkill for a burgeoning nation - it's easy to see why wild duck numbers started to plummet with advanced weaponry.*

*(photo courtesy of: Ducks Unlimited)*

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