

Attracting Waterfowl To Beaver Ponds

Beaver ponds provide an attractive habitat for a host of wildlife species including waterfowl. Some of the South's finest wood-duck hunting occurs over beaver ponds. Managed properly, beaver ponds produce excellent duck hunting opportunities at relatively little expense.

Beaver ponds are easily converted into green tree reservoirs or moist soil management units, or they can be planted in Japanese millet and other grains to attract ducks. Beaver ponds can provide an ideal nesting and brood-rearing habitat for wood ducks. Landowners with several beaver ponds will benefit by managing each pond differently.

Green Tree Reservoirs

Green tree reservoirs are seasonally flooded, bottomland hardwood impoundments. Waterfowl concentrate there during fall and winter to feed mostly on acorns. Water is drained from reservoirs usually during late winter or early spring, immediately before trees bud or break winter dormancy. They are re-flooded during late fall following tree growth and acorn production.

Recently formed beaver ponds built in hardwood bottoms may be managed similarly. Install a draining device near beaver dams and allow water to drain during late winter. Remove the device during fall and permit beavers to re-flood the pond.

This technique not only effectively attracts ducks to beaver ponds; it also enhances tree growth. Continual flooding of timber eventually kills most trees. However, by draining ponds during the growing season, trees may be maintained indefinitely.

Agricultural Crops

Many different agricultural crops are suited to production in drained beaver ponds and are eaten readily by waterfowl. Exposed mudflats may be planted in millets, corn, buckwheat, grain sorghums, or soybeans. Generally, ducks prefer grains over soybeans and other legumes.



Corn and soybeans must be planted in rows and cultivated. Other crops may be simply broadcast over exposed areas. One such plant, Japanese millet, is ideally suited to moist mudflats and matures rapidly. Japanese millet may be broadcast over unprepared ground immediately after drainage if coverage of shrubs and emergent vegetation is minimal.

Lower beaver ponds during spring or early summer to allow ample time for drainage and crops to mature once planted. Some beaver ponds are naturally fertile enough to produce good grain crops without the aid of additional fertilizer. Others require fertilization. Collect soil samples from exposed areas and have them tested for nutrient levels. Fertilize according to soil test recommendations.

As crops approach maturity, remove the draining device and allow beavers to re-flood the pond. Some moist soil crops, particularly Japanese millet, tolerate partial flooding once established. After reaching 1 foot in height, millet will tolerate water depths up to one-half of plant height. The drain device can be

raised gradually to increase water levels and reduce competition from flood-intolerant plants, until ultimately the beavers are allowed to flood the pond to its original depth.

Moist Soil Management Units

For years, many landowners have been draining beaver ponds during spring and seeding exposed mudflats in grain crops to attract ducks. While this practice is usually effective, few landowners are aware of the attractiveness, abundance, and importance of native plants to waterfowl. You can encourage many native plants to volunteer naturally by simply manipulating water levels in wetlands; these plants are important food items when available to ducks. Waterfowl concentrate on ponds and other wetlands where natural foods are abundant and frequently prefer such areas over flooded grain crops.

Although rich in energy, seeds of most cereal grains are nutritionally incomplete. Generally, seeds of naturally occurring plants offer essential nutrients deficient or missing entirely in cultivated grains, and they may provide as much, or more, energy than grain crops.

Seeds of native plants usually persist for extended periods, but those of grain crops spoil and deteriorate rapidly once flooded. Unless cultivated intensively, at considerable management cost, grain crops rarely provide as much food as do native plants. Yields of cultivated crops are too dependent on uncontrollable conditions, particularly weather, and seldom produce as reliably as native plants adapted to variable moisture conditions. Most grain crops provide inadequate protective cover for waterfowl, but native plants may be managed to yield both food and cover.

Native plants also tend to support high densities and greater diversity of invertebrate animal matter, an important dietary component for most ducks. Cultivated crops attract few invertebrates, forcing ducks to forage elsewhere to satisfy protein requirements.

Fertile, exposed mudflats regularly produce food for waterfowl when surface water is drained from ponds during spring and summer. Waterfowl biologists term this practice "moist soil management." The particular food plants that volunteer following draw-down will vary from year to year depending upon the timing of drainage and subsequent moisture conditions. Rapid drainage tends to favor extensive stands

of similar vegetation. Draw-down over a longer period or slow drainage usually provides somewhat greater diversity of vegetation.

Install a draining device along stream channels near beaver dams during spring or early summer, and drain all standing water from shallow mudflats. Remove the device during fall after plant growth is complete and allow beavers to re-flood the pond.

After several years without disturbance to the soil, perennial plants tend to dominate and woody shrubs often invade. Once such vegetation covers more than one-half of the surface area, disking or burning may be necessary when moisture conditions allow. Generally, disking favors annual plants over perennials and increases the production of seeds eaten by waterfowl.

Wood Duck Nesting And Brooding

Good reproduction by wood ducks requires suitable nesting cavities located near adequate duckling habitat. Lack of potential nest sites often limits wood duck population. Landowners having beaver ponds on their property can substantially increase wood duck numbers and improve hunting by erecting and properly managing nest boxes.

Beaver ponds with plentiful shrubs and other emergent vegetation provide excellent brood habitat for wood ducks and are ideal sites for nest boxes. County Extension agents can provide construction plans and details for building and managing wood duck nest boxes.

Draining Devices

Draw-down of beaver ponds is facilitated by any device that will allow water to continue to drain and that cannot be easily patched or clogged by beavers. One such device, a three-log drain, is used commonly in the Southeast. Perforated, 4-inch diameter drainage pipe, made of corrugated plastic, is equally effective. Beavers will quickly dam the large open ends, but they usually fail to patch the perforations.

When draining beaver ponds, break the dam along the existing stream channel. The break should form a deep, narrow cut in the dam. Once water flow slows, install a draining device in the break. Check the device periodically to ensure that it is draining properly. When re-flooding is desired, remove the device and allow the beavers to patch the dam.



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