PAUL MOORE

Hackberry Flat Wildlife Management Area

By Micah Holmes

KALON BAUGHIN

Above: *Seen from the air, one can view the extensive dike work at Hackberry and the attraction it holds for migrating waterfowl and shorebirds.*

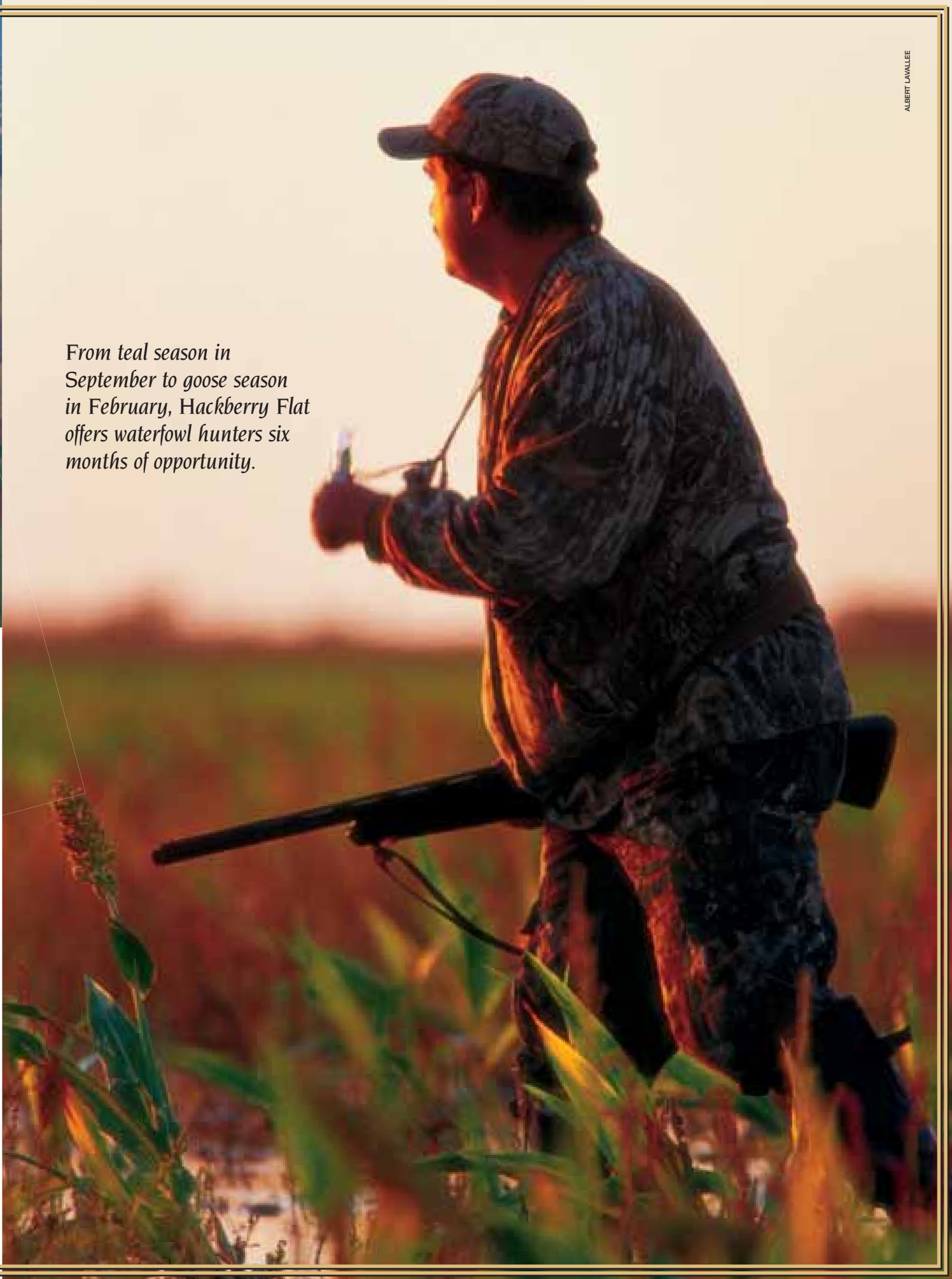
Left: *American avocets are just one of the many species of shorebirds that depend on the massive wetland during their annual migrations.*

It was once just a headache for local farmers. An obstacle that stood in the way of spring planting and fall harvesting. Local lore says the flood-prone soils of Hackberry Flat could swallow up a tractor in just a heavy fog.

How times change. Today the Hackberry Flat Wildlife Management Area provides an important feeding and resting point for thousands of prairie birds and diverse recreation opportunities for people craving outdoor experiences. Located in southwest Oklahoma near Frederick, the legendary wetland has been restored through the generous help of many partners and the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation.

YESTERDAY

The history of the area shows how things often come full circle. When pioneers arrived on the plains of southwest Oklahoma a century ago, they encountered clouds of waterfowl so thick that they reportedly darkened the skies over Frederick. The area's abundant wildlife even earned the attention of President Theodore Roosevelt, who visited and hunted near Hackberry



ALBERT LAVALLEE

From teal season in September to goose season in February, Hackberry Flat offers waterfowl hunters six months of opportunity.

Hackberry Flat Wildlife Management Area

Area Description:

Hackberry Flat WMA covers 7,120 acres of southwestern Tillman County in Western Oklahoma. Located southeast of the town of Frederick, Hackberry Flat WMA is a combination of upland and wetland habitats.

By the Numbers:

Approximately 90 water control structures, 35 miles of dikes, four miles of water distribution canals and 25 wetland units have been constructed to provide wetland wildlife habitat. In addition, there is a pipeline that delivers 2,400 acre/feet of water annually to Hackberry Flat.

Description of Fish and Wildlife Management Practices:

Management efforts focus on producing native wildlife foods such as wild millet, ragweed and sunflower. Agriculture crops such as milo, foxtail millet, Japanese millet, and wheat are planted on approximately 1,300 acres annually. These fields are planted for both dove and waterfowl feeding fields.

Camping and Facilities:

A designated primitive camping area is offered on the area. Both lodging and restaurants are available in Frederick.

ALBERT LAVALLEE

Northern pintails are a common sight on the expansive area. The shallow wetlands attracts the princely ducks and the rich and diverse food sources keep them there.

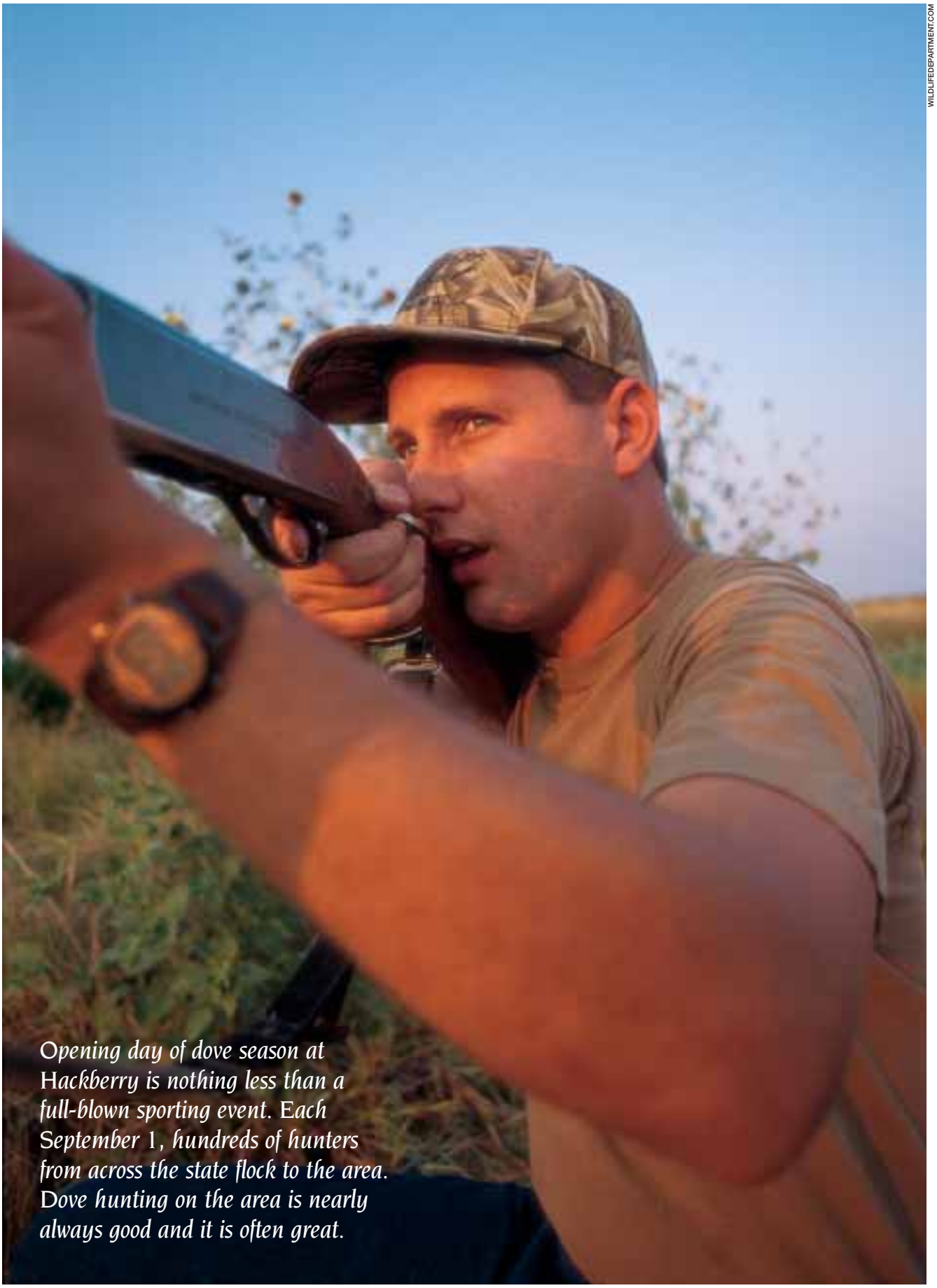
Flat. Along with wildlife, pioneers also found very fertile soils in the area that became known as Hackberry Flat. However, farming the flood-prone landscape proved exceedingly difficult.

In the early 1900s locals drained the area by constructing a massive ditch, some four miles long, using hand shovels, mule teams and later a steam shovel. For the next two generations, area residents maintained the area as farmland instead of the wetland it had been for so many years.

Over the past century, biologists have learned that wetlands are not only extremely beneficial to wildlife, they

ALBERT LAVALLEE

Those hunters who are enterprising and persistent will have the best success at Hackberry. The long walks in the mud are worth it when shooting time begins. Waterfowl hunters should plan to be mobile and keep a low profile when hunting ducks.



WILDLIFEDEPARTMENT.COM

Opening day of dove season at Hackberry is nothing less than a full-blown sporting event. Each September 1, hundreds of hunters from across the state flock to the area. Dove hunting on the area is nearly always good and it is often great.

also serve as natural environmental purifiers. Unfortunately, Oklahoma has lost two-thirds of its wetlands to agricultural, industrial and residential development. The restoration of Hackberry Flat represents a significant effort to reclaim lost ground, while reclaiming an important part of our natural heritage.

It took a herculean effort to drain the massive wetland and its restoration wouldn't happen overnight. The restoration took three components: the vision to see a wetland that had not functioned in nearly 90 years; the cooperation of a wide and varied spectrum of partners; and lastly, many years of hard work.

In 1993, the Department began purchasing the property, totaling 7,120 acres, from 30 willing sellers. With the help of its many partners, the Department built nearly 40 miles of levees and ditches to form a honeycomb of wetland units that allow managers to flood any part of the area according to the needs of migrating birds. A 17-mile aqueduct connecting Hackberry Flat to Tom Steed Reservoir was a critical component in the process. The pipeline assures a dependable water supply even during dry years. More than nine miles of water distribution canals and 92 different water control structures give managers a wide variety of management options.

It didn't take long for the restoration project to bear fruit either. Within the first year, shorebirds that had not nested in southwest Oklahoma in decades were nesting on the restored wetland.

TODAY

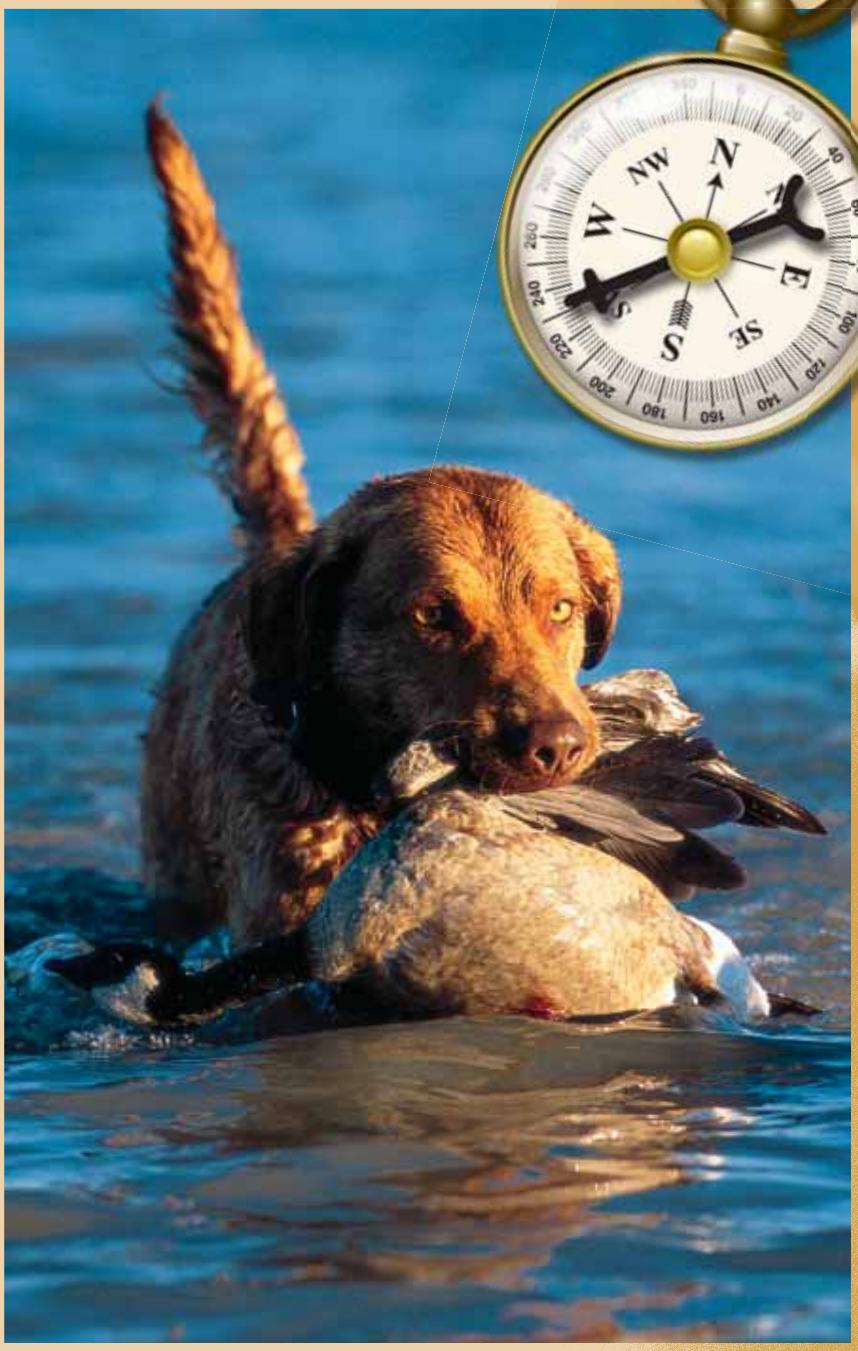
At any time of the year, whether during the muggy heat of spring or the bitter cold of winter, one can find visitors at Hackberry Flat, both avian and human. It is a cyclical ebb and flow. In the fall and winter months hunters chase their winged quarry across the Flat. In the spring and summer

Hunting at "Hack"

DUCKS:

When the water conditions are right at Hackberry, there are often good numbers of ducks there too. One of the biggest challenges about bagging ducks at Hackberry is that are seldom any good places to hide on the flat, expansive wetland units. Hunters have to get creative so they won't stick out like a sore thumb. Layout boats, laydown blinds or makeshift blinds in shallow water can all be effective. As with duck hunting anywhere, scouting is a key to success on the area. Just 50 yards can make the difference between a bag limit and a slow morning.

Duck hunting may not always be a cakewalk at Hackberry, but hunters who come prepared can have fantastic days. There



ALBERT LAVALLEE

is a reason "Field & Stream" magazine named it one of the top 25 public waterfowling destinations in the United States. Mallards and pintails can often be found in large flocks as well as teal, widgeon, gadwalls and just about every other duck in the Central Flyway can be found on the area.

Waterfowl hunting on Hackberry Flat WMA closes at 1 p.m. All hunting is closed on the 1,500 acre Wetland Reserve portion of the area from October 15 through January 31.

GEESE:

Canada, Ross, white-front and snow geese can all be found at Hackberry throughout the year. Large groups of geese often roost on large wetland units, and head out to feed in adjacent agriculture fields each morning. Some successful hunters set up decoy spreads on loafing areas on smaller wetland units and wait for the bird's return in the mid morning.

DOVE:

Everyone ought to go dove hunting at Hackberry Flat at least once in their lives. Opening day offers a fun and festive atmosphere for hunters from around the state. While there may be quite a few hunters on opening day, they help to keep birds moving, which can add up to great wingshooting opportunities. And there is a reason so many hunters have made Hackberry a September 1st tradition – the hunting is nearly always good and sometimes it can be downright fantastic.

Don't forget about Hackberry after opening day, it can be a great dove hunting destination as the season progresses. In fact, you might have the whole place all to yourself, especially if you go on a weekday. As always, a little scouting can go a long way.

SANDHILL CRANES:

Hackberry Flat offers hunters the opportunity to harvest a sandhill cranes. These magnificent birds are true trophies. Sandhills are nearly always wary and hunters must hide carefully to fool the big birds.

DEER:

Archery hunters will find hanging a tree stand at Hackberry difficult as trees are few and far between, but they will find plenty of deer. Hunters who scout carefully and set up on likely deer trails may just be rewarded with a bragging size whitetail.

QUAIL:

When you think of Hackberry you naturally think of wetlands, but there is also hundreds of upland acres on the area – and the quail population is quite healthy. Hunters who walk the dikes on the northern or western sides of the area are likely to bust a covey or two of quail.

JOHN FORD

KENNY SEALS

Every birdwatcher should plan on making a trip to Hackberry Flat soon. The shorebirds alone will make the trip worth your time.

months birdwatchers travel from miles around to see an incredible diversity of birds.

It is no longer a secret that the area can offer fantastic waterfowl hunting. Hundreds of thousands of mallards, teal, Canada geese, sandhill cranes and other waterfowl descend on Hackberry every fall. The area also offers some of the best dove hunting in Oklahoma. On a good day, you will see thousands of doves.

In less than a decade, Hackberry Flat has become a premier destination for birders. More than 175 species have been identified during surveys, with such rare and uncommon species as the black-necked stilt, long-billed curlew and white-faced ibis being seen, including many that stay to nest and raise their young. The sheer numbers of birds and the relatively easy access make this area stand out as one of the best bird watching locations in the state.

DEAN GRAHAM

While bobwhite quail may not be the first thing hunters associate with Hackberry Flat, the upland portions of the area support healthy quail populations.

TOMORROW

Ducks Unlimited described Hackberry Flat as one of the most significant wetland restoration projects in North America. However, we're not finished with the area's transformation. In the coming years the area will face many more challenges, and more opportunities await our call. In a matter of months, construction will begin on a one-of-kind **Hackberry Flat Center**. The 4,600 square foot facility will serve as a jumping-off point for visitors to the area. Included in the interpretive displays will be information on the area's history, species of special interest and maps to help newcomers navigate the area. The center will also provide meeting spaces for students and a workspace for on-site research. An existing boardwalk will be connected via a trail to the visitor center that will usher visitors into the heart of the wetland. Along with the new center, additional observation towers and viewing platforms are in the development stages. These facilities will provide even more access for visitors to enjoy the area's fantastic bird life.

Hackberry Flat Wildlife Management Area is also becoming a major factor in the in a new and innovative program - the **Great Plains Trail of Oklahoma**. The highway-based wildlife viewing trail will highlight the wide

variety of natural beauty in western Oklahoma. Hackberry Flat will be a major destination for trail tourists, while both raising the awareness about the state's outdoor heritage and attracting visitors from across the nation to southwest Oklahoma communities.

Biologists are also keeping their eyes on the future. Managers are working to increase the native plant food plots on the area, as well as improve hunter opportunity on the area. A large reservoir has been completed on the northwest corner of the area. The reservoir will serve a trio of purposes. First, it will provide flood control and help to protect the area's many dikes and water control structures. Second, it will provide a refuge and deep-water habitat for migrating waterfowl. And lastly, it will allow managers to distribute water more evenly and more precisely throughout the winter months to provide habitat for waterfowl.

Whatever the future holds for Hackberry Flat Wildlife Management Area, one thing is certain, future success will depend upon the cooperation of dedicated partners. The restoration effort of this wetland jewel was not carried solely on the back of one agency or organization and likewise its future will not rest on any one individual. The area will reach its fullest and brightest potential when committed conservationists join together to afford future generations a glimpse of the beauty of Oklahoma's outdoor heritage.

For Additional Information and Area Attractions, Contact:

- Hackberry Flat WMA Biologist
  Kelvin Schoonover
  (580) 335-5262
- Frederick Chamber of Commerce
  105 South Main
  Frederick OK 73542
  (580) 335-2126
  www.frederickchamber.org
- Hackberry Flat Foundation
  110 West Floral, Suite B
  Frederick, OK 73452
- Great Plains Country
  114 South 9th St., Suite A
  Frederick OK 73542
  (580)335-5999
  www.greatplainscountry.com

JERRY OWENS

KIM HART

Above: *The cacophony of a thousand snow geese is certainly a wild and stirring sound. The reservoir on the northwest side of Hackberry Flat is an excellent place to view the four different species of geese that visit the area each year – snow, Ross, white-fronted and Canada geese.*

Right: *The eerie calls of sandhill cranes can be heard over Hackberry Flat each fall. The big birds often roost on the area and feed in surrounding agriculture fields.*