

Black duck numbers in decline



(Above) Chris Sharp tags a new bird before releasing it into the wild.

(Right) Sharp examines the differing plumage and wing patterns between the two ducks to determine the species, gender, and age of each duck.



Photos and Story by Mary Barber

(Left) Sharp finishes up tagging one of the new birds before setting it free.



(Above) Chris Sharp and Ross Wood prepare for their day ahead by gathering all of their tools needed. Sharp says that most days amount to waiting for several hours, before quickly bagging as many ducks as possible once they fly into the enclosure.



(Left) One of their bagged ducks is a hybrid black duck, with mallard-dominant traits. It is distinguished by the white bands on its wings, Sharp hypothesizes that this kind of aggressive cross-breeding may have a factor in the declining black duck population.

The American black duck is deceitful to the untrained eye.

In eastern North America, it is the only common pond dweller in which both sexes appear almost identical to the ubiquitous female mallard. The once predominant dabbling duck is now only half as numerous, declining steadily since the 1950s.

Chris Sharp, 32, an environmentalist for Black Duck Joint Venture, or BDJV — an international program formed in 1989 to help ensure security in this waterfowl species — attempts to unearth factors responsible for this degradation. Through a dedicated process of trapping and tagging common waterfowl species, Sharp continues his study through a winter banding project to investigate the black duck's over-winter survival.

“When I talk about the black ducks declining, I don't mean to say they are at risk of extinction, but their numbers are declining comparatively,” says Sharp.

“There are many hypothesis as to why their population is declining. One theory is that because the environment in Canada and the northeastern United States has changed from forests into grassland, mallards favour grasslands and are also less susceptible to human disruptions.”

While driving through the county on assignment, Sharp noticed a large congregation of waterfowl enclosures built into a creek leading off from West Lake. The enclosures were built by local naturalist and salvager Robert Kleinsteuber.

“We're watching the nature channel,” says Kleinsteuber, gesturing through his kitchen window with binoculars in hand. “This place is a bird feeder. It brings in all kinds of birds. Look, right now there's a sparrow flying into the duck trap!”

An enclosure was placed on the county property, based with bird feed to lure in the waterfowl. Once the ducks are in the cage, they can then be corralled into crates where they are then taken through a recording process to document their breed, sex and age. Sharp and his team have made 10 traps at this specific location, each duck caught for the sixth or seventh time.

“We want to catch black ducks because it is the target of the project. But this year, since we are potentially in the last year of the program, we are really trying to catch ducks that have been banded previously,” says Sharp.

“The ducks that we've banded last week aren't as important, but the ducks that we banded last year, or that were banded by some other program, those are really important data points to record. Their known origin, or their age, is really rich data that goes into the survival analysis.”

Because of forest loss and degradation, mostly caused by the expansion of agricultural land, the black duck, which favours forest landscapes, has begun to hybridize with the mallard into aggressive mating evolution.

In recent years, the black duck has shown an absence of migratory rituals often returning to the same marshes each fall which causes starvation over frozen water.

“Black ducks and mallards are hybridizing now, because mallards are quite aggressive while mating. Black ducks are pretty hardy, and will travel farther north than Mallards,” says Sharp.

“Mallards migrate as far south as Mississippi or Louisiana, whereas black ducks only go to upstate New York or Ohio. Some will stay here over the winter, so this winter banding is to study those ducks that remain behind and their survival rate.”