

DU's Hunting Heritage
The Conservator
October 2003
Word count: 2,569
By Bruce Masterman
brucemasterman@telusplanet.com

A heavy rain pushed by a howling southeast wind pounds the marsh on Long Point Bay along the north shore of Lake Erie in southern Ontario.

Huddled in an elevated platform blind made of cattails, bulrushes and marsh grasses, two camouflage-suited men and a yellow lab seem oblivious to the weather as they intently scan the overcast sky. Ten plastic duck decoys bob in the waves beside the blind.

Suddenly, a trio of blue-winged teal skyrocket out of the clouds and head toward the blind. Just as it looks as if they're about to land among the decoys, the speedy little ducks abruptly veer off. They are moving fast, but not fast enough.

In the blind, Duncan Sinclair Sr. and his son Duncan Jr. raise their shotguns and fire. Two fat teal splash down onto the rain-pocked surface of the water.

"Okay, Sky, go get 'em," the elder Sinclair orders his four-year-old lab.

Within minutes, the dog eagerly retrieves the birds, and the Sinclairs are back on full alert, watching and waiting and hoping for more ducks to come into range.

It is the morning of September 27, 2003.

Sinclair Sr., 67, and his 36-year-old son are celebrating opening day of duck season as they have for the past 28 years at the Turkey Point Company, a 2,500 acre private hunting club established in 1885 on the western shoreline of Long Point Bay.

Together, they are observing a history-steeped tradition that's been part of their own family and Ducks Unlimited Canada since Day One – combining a deep commitment to conservation with an ingrained passion for hunting.

Meanwhile, on the same morning but five provinces to the west, 22-year DU volunteer Glenn Dreger, 58, is hunting with his brother in an old burn in the Omineca Mountains of northern British Columbia, trying without success to call bull moose within range of their compound bows.

At the same time in Alberta, Ken Bailey, DU's national director of revenue and membership, and a friend are hunting canvasbacks and scaup at Chip Lake, 130 kilometres west of Edmonton. It's a warm day with mixed clouds and a light breeze. Ducks are flying by the thousands.

Back in Ontario, in the Athens area south of Ottawa, Jamie Fortune, DU's director of regional operations for Eastern Canada, is celebrating a long-standing family tradition by hunting opening-day mallards and Canada geese on beaver-flooded farmland along with his daughters Melanie and Sarah, his brother Joel and a golden retriever named Sam.

And at DU headquarters at Oak Hammock Marsh in Manitoba, executive vice-president Gord Edwards is busy in his office, working on the organization's five-year

business plan. An ardent hunter for almost 40 of his 51 years, Edwards this morning can only wish he was out hunting like so many of his colleagues and members across the country.

Born and raised on the Alberta prairie where his dad taught him and two brothers to hunt, Edwards is a committed hunter/conservationist, just like many of DU's employees, volunteers, members and other supporters. DUC, in fact, was started by hunters 65 years ago, just as hunters created DU Inc. in the United States in 1937.

(DUNCAN: This could be a good place for those figures we discussed).

"We all have hunters to thank for helping to establish DU as Canada's Conservation Company," Edwards says.

During his 27 years with DU, he's noticed an undeniably strong connection between hunting and those who care about the future of waterfowl and other wildlife.

"Hunters take the opportunity to spend time in the outdoors and most learn about the critical importance of habitat to the life cycle of all wildlife species," Edwards notes.

"If society wants to continue to enjoy wildlife, whether they hunt or not, they need to support organizations that conserve habitat. Many hunters come to realize this and demonstrate their responsibility by supporting DU."

The organization acknowledges the role of hunting in its corporate policy, which says, in part: *"We support the sustainable use and harvest of renewable resources based on sound science. We support waterfowl hunting, when conducted in an ethical and sustainable manner, as a legitimate and acceptable use of a renewable resource."*

Edwards says DUC used to be supported by a much higher ratio of hunters versus non-hunters. But the importance of fresh water to Canadians has recently attracted other kinds of supporters to DU "for reasons that go beyond the obvious benefits to wildlife."

"I believe that securing our sources of fresh water is quickly becoming the most important environmental issue to North Americans," he says.

"DU isn't surprised that our mission now has much broader appeal."

The morning shoot has ended – along with the rain – at the Turkey Point Company. Duncan Sinclair junior and senior are back at the lodge, drying out and visiting with fellow members, feeding dogs and enjoying the fellowship that comes with years of experience, years of setting decoys, calling ducks and geese, shooting, eating and – most of all – caring about waterfowl and what it needs to live.

The elder Sinclair knows more than most about the contribution of hunters to the DU cause. As a former national president (1988-1989) and member of the national board since 1978, he has donated thousands of hours and thousands of his own dollars to the organization and the wildlife habitat it is committed to providing. Sinclair calls hunters "the backbone" of DU.

"I've always considered them to be the building blocks," he says in an interview in the lodge's dining room, complete with pheasant motif window curtains and a glass-enclosed display of mounted ducks along one wall.

"I look at it as a pyramid. We had a good, big base to start with, with waterfowlers who are solid, who are committed, who will be there forever. They'll donate their time, their money, forever. The only thing that will stop them from doing it is when they die."

Sinclair, a family physician in Aylmer (pop. 6,500), is one of a small group of waterfowlers who started the tradition of DU fundraising banquets in Canada. And it all started right there in the Turkey Point lodge diningroom three decades ago, at the same table where Sinclair now sits.

American member Hazard Campbell, a strong supporter of DU Inc. from Buffalo, N.Y., was talking with Sinclair and his friend Jack Rice after a successful duck hunt. Campbell, who went on to become a national president in the late 1980's, invited them to a \$250-a-plate dinner for DU sponsors in Buffalo in fall 1973. Although neither Sinclair nor Rice knew about DU at the time, they readily accepted and found five other local sportsmen to go with them.

On the two and a half-hour drive home to Aylmer the morning after the banquet, Sinclair and Rice talked about how successful the evening had been and how they should stage a similar fundraiser in their region by inviting friends who hunt and fish. The Long Point committee was formed in fall 1973, the first such group in Canada.

Sinclair and the others asked DUC for permission to hold a fundraising banquet, but they were told the organization didn't do that sort of thing in Canada. The committee proceeded anyway and held the first banquet in Tillsonburg, halfway between Aylmer and Turkey Point, in spring 1974.

The banquet raised \$8,000, which was sent to DU Inc. Two years later, Sinclair headed the committee that held the second Canadian fundraising banquet in Long Point. Now, such grassroots events are the cornerstone of DU's fundraising efforts in Canada, raising millions of dollars for wildlife habitat projects.

Hazard Campbell, 75, and Sinclair Sr. still chuckle at the memory of Sinclair's introduction to DU in 1973. When Campbell first mentioned DU to his friend, Sinclair thought he was referring to his old university fraternity Delta Upsilon.

"It was the best thing that ever happened to DU in Canada," says Campbell. "It doesn't seem that long ago really."

A 65-year member of Turkey Point Company, Campbell continues to work diligently behind the scenes to support DU Inc., which he led as president in 1987 and 1988.

In 1994, DU honoured Campbell and Sinclair by dedicating a 160 acre project near Long Point in their names. A few years ago, they jointly received the Bert McKee Wetlands Preservation Award for their tireless and long-standing conservation efforts. The award has been received by only four others, including former DUC president and chairman Arthur L. Irving.

The two old friends still rub shoulders each opening day at Turkey Point, relishing the hunting tradition that brought them together in the name of conservation many years ago. Sinclair can't conceive not being here on the season opener.

"I haven't missed an opening day of duck hunting since I was eight years old," he says.

It's doubly pleasurable, Sinclair notes, to be able to share the experience with his son, Duncan Jr., just as he shared it with his own late father, Charlie, who was taught to hunt by his father.

Just like his father and grandfather, the younger Sinclair has accompanied his dad on duck hunts since he was eight. His earliest memories of his father revolve around DU

banquets and hunting at Turkey Point, where it seems everyone wears DU hats and is involved in DU events.

Sinclair Jr. is the former chairman of the Aylmer committee's Greenwing committee, and actively participates in the Adopt-A-Class program that involves 400 Grade 4 kids. He teaches environmental leadership at the Aylmer high school, focusing on outdoor education and resource management.

For him, DU and hunting has always been a natural combination.

"They went hand in hand, they were synonymous with one another," says Sinclair Jr.

He's asked why DU members are so passionate and generous when it comes to supporting wetlands.

"I just turn that around and say they're so generous because they are so passionate," he replies.

"It's part of our daily life. If we don't look after the things we enjoy, no matter what it is, it's not around for us. We look forward to these feelings, these experiences, from season to season."

To both Sinclairs, it's not surprising that DU members specifically and waterfowlers in general are so supportive – morally and financially – to wildlife habitat conservation.

A 2000 study by Wildlife Habitat Canada (WHC) calls hunters "a proven powerhouse" within the diverse conservation community, even though they represent only five percent of the total population. The study reveals hunters have directly contributed more than \$335 million – and 14 million hours of volunteer time – to conserve, restore or protect more than a million hectares of wildlife habitat in Canada since 1985.

Those figures don't include hunter support for DU and the Nature Conservancy of Canada.

The total contribution also excludes almost \$600 million in hunting licence fees, some of which is used to support other provincial and federal programs benefiting all Canadians, nor does it include about \$600 million invested in the Canadian economy annually by hunters on equipment, travel, lodging and other expenses.

"Should other sectors of society rise to the challenge of matching the habitat conservation efforts of hunters, the future of Canada's wildlife would be secure," wrote David J. Neave, WHC's executive director.

DU's Jamie Fortune, based in Ottawa, says that while the study's results are impressive, they are "only the tip of an iceberg."

"Hunters understand the link between wildlife and habitat," he says.

"Hunters are generous with their time and money, and the impacts of their contributions touch the entire Canadian countryside, benefiting all species of wildlife and people."

Fortune, 43, says his professional career with DU and – before that – with Wildlife Habitat Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, has been shaped by his interest in hunting, fishing and other outdoor pursuits. Hunting, he says, is part of his heritage, dating back to when his Irish ancestors pioneered in eastern Ontario in the 1830's. Fortune represents the fifth generation of his family to hunt on the same properties.

“Interestingly, there is more wildlife today than there was at the turn of the century,” he notes.

“When I stop and think that we are hunting in marshes and beaver floods that were once hayfields, and hiking through white pine and oak stands that used to be cow pastures, I am reassured that our landscapes can recover if we give them a chance.”

In Edmonton, 17-year employee Ken Bailey sees evidence at work each day that many people – hunters and non-hunters alike – are eager to help make that happen.

Bailey, a hunter for 31 of his 45 years, is responsible for managing DU’s national fundraising and membership programs, including special events, major private and corporate gifts, planned giving, retail programs and licensing and royalties. He’s also in charge of recruiting, servicing and stewardship of the membership base.

“As an organization whose roots are in the hunting community, we’ve long cherished our relationship with sportsmen,” he says.

“Over the years, DU’s support base has evolved, however, to include non-hunters as an equally important, and growing, segment of our support base.

Bailey says the two groups set aside any differences they might have, choosing instead to embrace their shared habitat-based values. The winner, he notes, is habitat.

Glenn Dreger of Kamloops, in south-central B.C., got involved with raising money for habitat 22 years ago when he was recruited to chair the city’s first DU committee and dinner.

Since then, he’s remained active, volunteering for the Greenwing program and being a self-described “bag man,” soliciting donations for two local fundraising events each year.

To Dreger, becoming involved in DU was a natural progression from being a hunter since he was a teenager. Now his grown daughter, Heidi, also hunts and volunteers for DU.

Dreger views hunting as a way to enjoy nature while honing his senses to levels that he otherwise wouldn’t reach.

“The hunter goes from being an observer of wildlife, to being part of it, as he is in a predatory role,” he says.

New Brunswick hunter Barbara Jamieson, 64, and her husband Carl – both longtime DU members and volunteers – enjoy watching waterfowl and other wildlife on a DU wetlands project on their farm at Sheffield, a pastoral farming community beside the Saint John River 25 kilometres east of Fredericton.

The farm hosts many waterfowl species that travel the Atlantic Flyway – from Canada geese and black ducks to goldeneyes and wood ducks. The Jamiesons don’t hunt the DU project.

Although they love watching the birds in their vivid plumage in spring, autumn really sets their hearts beating. Opening day of duck season on October 1st can’t come soon enough.

“The first and second days of the waterfowl hunting season are considered holidays at our home,” she says.

For the Jamiesons, DU and hunting truly is a family tradition.

Their grown children, Chris and Jennifer and their respective spouses, are strong DU supporters and hunters. All six grandchildren are Greenwing members. A two-year-old granddaughter wears a DU bathrobe and pulls a DU wagon.

Jamieson's brother-in-law and his two grown sons also hunt and support DU. And her younger brother, David – whom she taught to hunt as a boy on the family farm – lives in Edmonton where he is involved with DU.

Jamieson says none of them are particularly aggressive or compulsive when they hunt.

“If we do not get our bag limit, we are quite satisfied with just the outdoor adventure and are ready to go hunting another day.”

Hunters across the country couldn't agree more.