

The King of Marshy Point



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Lawrence King's love for hunting and trapping is what drew him to work at East Meadows Ranch in 1946. But his passion for waterfowl and wildlife is what kept him there all these years.

by KARLI REIMER

ALTHOUGH THE 82-YEAR-OLD KING HAS BEEN MANAGER of East Meadows Ranch — an integral part of Marshy Point Goose Refuge in Manitoba's Interlake region — for 45 years, he has no intention of retiring just yet.

King has done it all. He's met a range of characters through his guided hunting trips and has unforgettable stories of each of them. He has patented two humane

traps, built a community landmark, is a successful wildlife photographer and was involved in the reintroduction of giant Canada geese back in the 1950s when they were thought to be extinct.

Marshy Point Goose Refuge is located on the eastern shores of Lake Manitoba, just south of Lundar and north of Oak Point. The terrain in this area is extremely flat, and Marshy Point is a maze of marshes and shallow freshwater lakes that are connected by channels and interspersed with extensive grassland meadows. This lakeside marsh complex is an important staging area for waterfowl and has also been designated as an Important Bird Area by BirdLife International.

King started working at East Meadows Ranch as a trapper when his family's farm east of the marsh was sold after his father passed away. He learned the ropes from an old Icelandic trapper who had been trapping in the area since the 1920s. At that time, King's twin sister Audrey worked at the ranch too, but in the hunting lodge. The position suited King well as he always loved hunting and trapping and watching the ducks on the farm when he

was very young. "I thought they were something else, and I still do," he says.

When former marsh manager George Kissack retired in 1964 King, who was already experienced and attached to the area, took over the reins. East Meadows Ranch, now owned by businessman Kitson Vincent, is 12 square miles and the refuge is 44 square miles, much of it private land. The refuge started off with the introduction of 11 giant Canada geese in the early 1950s and now sees upward of 10,000 birds every year.

A coalition of Manitoba conservation groups worked on the goose reintroduction project with East Meadows at that time, including the Delta Waterfowl Research Station and the Alf Hole Goose Sanctuary.

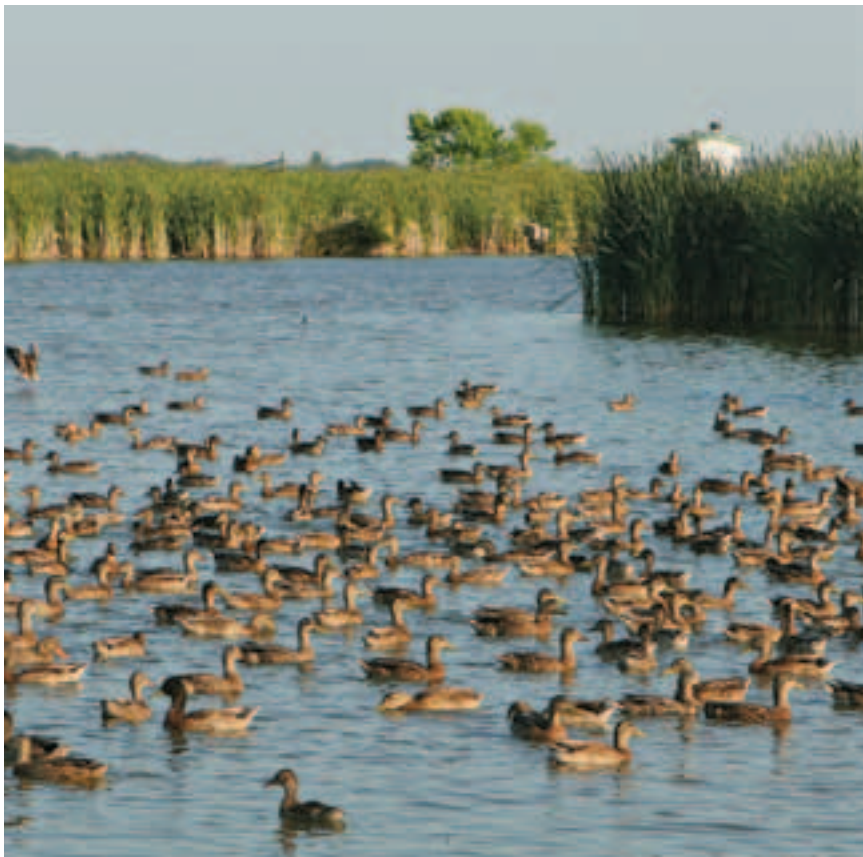
With the previous owner, W.A. Murphy, Kissack, King and others helped push for the area to be made into a sanctuary. "We went around to all the landowners and petitioned them to allow it to be this way," he says. The geese had one wing clipped so they couldn't go south in '55 and in '56 the first group migrated right through to Rochester, Minnesota. A United States Fish and Wildlife

biologist who studied the geese at Silver Lake, a large sanctuary in Minnesota, caught some birds and couldn't believe they were giant Canadas. From there over the decades the population took off because of King's dedication.

At the beginning, no giant Canada geese were allowed to be hunted in the area and they were kept at the marsh late deliberately so they wouldn't be hunted outside the marsh. King fed them until hunting season was over and then they were allowed to go.

In addition to the lands at the ranch, over 975 hectares are protected within the Marshy Point Wildlife Management Area, a project partnership between Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) and the Government of Manitoba that was completed in 1983. "In '83 when the agreement was signed, I got one heck of a compliment," King says. "The head guy for East Meadows at that time was Peter Curry from Winnipeg, and he said the only way he was signing the agreement was if I was the manager of all the water levels here. Now that was something."

Above (left to right): Lawrence King; the marsh cell east of the hunting lodge at East Meadows Ranch; King with his dogs Lady and Spice; a flock of ducks King feeds in front of his house; King points out a channel on a map that shows the DUC project components after it was completed.



Left: A group of ducks paddle around in the sun in the marsh cell just east of East Meadows Ranch.

Curry's insight on the marsh management proved wise over time. At the time he endorsed King as a manager, Curry was one of Canada's most powerful businessmen. Among his many titles were deputy chair of Power Corporation, Chair of Investors Group and Chancellor of University of Manitoba.

The land around the marsh was all hay and pasture land before the project was completed, King says, explaining that a supply ditch with a pump and three big culverts put in by DUC now manage the water levels of the cells of the marsh. "The project keeps levels good for production and eliminates the chance of disease in waterfowl because the conditions are more optimal," he says.

King is still and always will be a hunter. Although he didn't completely trade in his gun for a camera, photography has also become a big part of who he is. Just like when he's hunting, King is still sitting in a blind waiting for the animals to get close enough for a shot. His house is full of framed photos that he took himself including ones of pintails, wood ducks and white-tailed deer. Now he uses his photographs as a way to raise money for various causes.

Since he still sells pelts at the North American Fur Auctions (NAFA), King, who has always been a sports enthusiast, found out this past May that NAFA asked trappers to donate pelts to help pay for Manitoba athlete Megan Imrie's Olympic biathlon training expenses. "She wants to bring a gold medal home to Manitoba in 2010 so I donated some pelts and a picture too to raise money for her," he says.

King's love of trapping also introduced him to inventing and building his own humane traps. He has patented two in the U.S. and Canada, called the King Power Snare and the King Trap.

What makes the King Trap unique is it traps muskrats in their houses and on the banks and creeks, but it's safe for ducks and geese because they don't get caught in the device. The King Trap also kills instantly so there is no suffering, he says, adding the trap is made in such a way it could be any size, even big enough to trap a bear.

King has also helped with trapper education – teaching youth how to trap ethically and properly. "I did it because I have enjoyed wildlife and trapping all my life and wanted to see younger people doing it and enjoying it as well." Another part of King's duties over the years at East Meadows was patrolling the marsh to keep poachers

Karll Reimer (2)

out when hunting was not allowed and then working as a guide at times when hunters were allowed in. He says this part of his job is what introduced him to some of his favourite memories with the hunters he dealt with. He says one hunter from a nearby town always tried to outsmart him and hunt out of season. King also remembers when a hunter from Winnipeg played a trick on his party by killing a grouse, setting it up like it was still alive, then in front of his group pretending to catch it again with his bare hands. And they all went telling their friends and families they knew a hunter who was so good, he could sneak up on a grouse and capture it with his bare hands.

But King himself has to take some of the praise for the success of the marsh. He prides himself on his knowledge of waterfowl and other wildlife and says he knows the key to a healthy marsh and in turn healthy waterfowl. "All you've got to do is make a marsh that is good for muskrat, and then it's good for waterfowl too. But then you have to manage the muskrat – they're so cyclical."

It was suggested to East Meadows that it would be a good idea to get a muskrat ranch licence. "It was good because with the licence we got a book on muskrat management, which was quite valuable," King says, adding that's how East Meadows became a ranch – East Meadows Muskrat Ranch. "If you count all the muskrat houses in the marsh you can trap five muskrats per house and still leave enough breeding stock for next year. One pair can increase to 30 even after predators have taken what they need because they have three litters per year. When you do trap like that it staves off disease.

It's too hard on the rats if there are too many because they eat out the environment and they can't sustain themselves."

KING SAYS HE ALWAYS HAS AN IDEA OF WHAT'S going on in the marsh and he doesn't believe in trapping too heavily because muskrats are needed for the overall balance of the ecosystem. Since 1946, he says there wasn't much negative change to the marsh until 2003 when cattails took over.

"In 2003 it was so dry and so dense that the cattails were eight to nine feet high. It was a wall of cattail," he says. "I remember worrying about it and what we were going to do about it because it was all over the marsh and it's useless to waterfowl when it grows this thick. A hen and her brood couldn't get through and it was so dense it shut out the water and the pump wouldn't work."

But the muskrats went to work and opened it up and there were soon channels through the marsh again.

Muskrats are important because of the channels and openings in the marsh they create. The year after the cattails took over the marsh, the muskrats continued to help control the problem. There was more water that year, but the cattails were still thick. "The muskrats went into the deepest water where there is less ice and pulled the cattails up from the roots and took them back to their house because they eat the roots. They did it so many times it looked like a mower cut all the cattails off in swaths. That really helped the cattail problem," King says.



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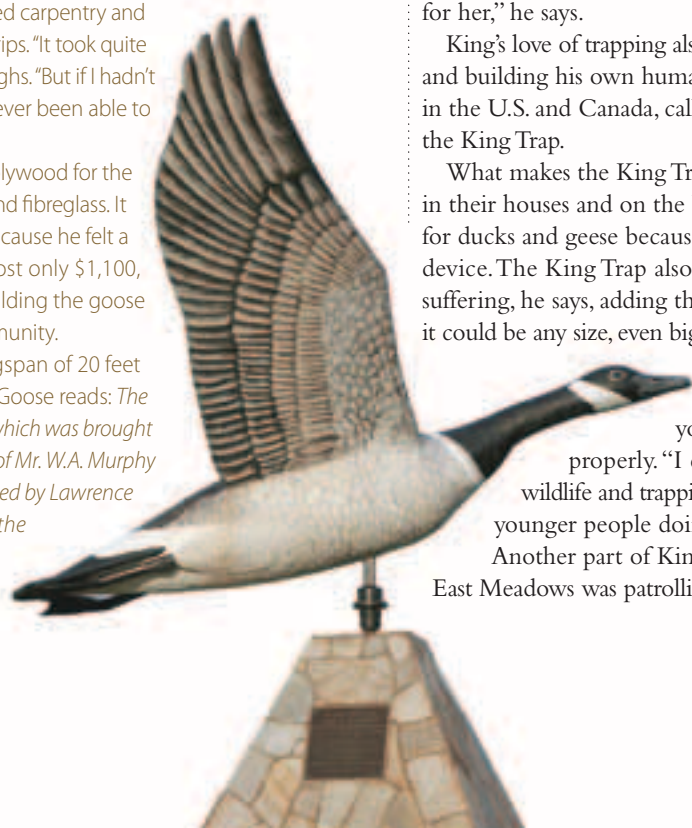
Lundar's giant goose

Any visitor driving through the small Interlake community of Lundar, which Lawrence King fondly calls home, will quickly spot the large giant Canada goose statue on Highway 6. "I built the big goose in Lundar," King proudly says. "The Lundar Area Development Board wanted a symbol for the town. I was on the board and we decided a giant Canada would be a great symbol for the community."

Before the statue was built in 1978, King loved carpentry and was hung up on making a boat out of cedar strips. "It took quite a while because I was such a greenhorn," he laughs. "But if I hadn't had built that cedar strip boat, I would have never been able to build that goose."

King started by making a silhouette out of plywood for the statue. The rest was constructed out of metal and fibreglass. It was his idea to make it move with the wind because he felt a big gust could knock it over. The materials cost only \$1,100, and King says he didn't charge for his time building the goose because it was a way to give back to his community.

The giant goose is 18 feet high with a wingspan of 20 feet. The bronze plaque on the front of the Lundar Goose reads: *The giant Canada goose, symbol of our community, which was brought back from near extinction, through the foresight of Mr. W.A. Murphy & Associates. Statue was designed and constructed by Lawrence King, painted by Marlene Hourd, sponsored by the Lundar Area Development Board, 1976-77. Plaque donated by Mr. Peter Curry.*



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“It was a pleasure to work with DU – they were extremely helpful... Before DU, the marsh was in very poor condition and wasn't good for waterfowl or wildlife at all.”

– LAWRENCE KING

ANOTHER DRAMATIC CHANGE AT MARSHY POINT IS that it is no longer one of the best canvasback marshes in Manitoba, King says. “Someone told me there used to be thousands of canvasbacks out here. Canvasbacks eat sago pondweed, but in '55 high water killed it all and that may be why the populations of canvasbacks aren't there anymore.”

Comparing a map of Marshy Point from 1952 and one from just after 1983 shows how some of the channels have doubled in size. As water levels rise, the beneficial vegetation gets flooded and dies off – and that's not good because it's important for waterfowl, muskrats and other species. That's why ever since 1983 the DUC project has been “so great” because King can now manage the water levels and prevent vegetation loss from happening.

“The success here has been outstanding with waterfowl and wildlife, but it couldn't have been achieved without the farmers and landowners within the sanctuary allowing for the project to go ahead,” King says. “Without Ducks Unlimited it wouldn't have been so successful either. The government provided a game warden for three years once the area was declared a sanctuary to help out. It was a pleasure to work with DU – they were extremely helpful. It was a co-operative effort. Before DU, the marsh was in very poor condition and wasn't good for waterfowl or wildlife at all.”

DUC is currently in the process of rebuilding some of the works of Marshy Point as their long service has put them in need of an upgrade. As for King, he still works seven days a week – although he takes his own advice and refrains from working when it's extremely hot out, but he wouldn't have it any other way. King has no intentions of retiring any time soon, even though he often gets asked when he thinks he will step down as manager of East Meadows. He says he loves it so much he would be bored without his duties, which still include guiding hunters through the marsh, monitoring the water levels and feeding the ducks and geese in front of the hunting lodge.

“As manager, you need to be here all the time because there are so many things that happen that require your immediate attention and that's why it's such a great job for me,” King says. ✕