

[Conservation] Geese Or Gas?

Wildlife and the demand for oil in a confrontation on Alaska's North Slope **By Chris Madson**



NORTH AMERICA'S DUCK FACTORY IS FAMILIAR COUNTRY. The goose factory is another matter. While some of the larger races of Canada geese share the duck nurseries of the prairie potholes, the smaller races of Canadas, the snows, and the whitefronts push on into places few white men have ever seen.

Even the names are exotic-La Perouse Bay, Akimiskl Island, the Great Plain of the Koukdjuak, Queen Maud Gulf, the Kuskokwim Delta. Teshekpuk Lake is the most interesting.

Teshekpuk Lake is on the coastal plain of Alaska's North Slope, about 70 miles east of Point Barrow and less than 20 miles from the Beaufort Sea. It's a big lake, covering a little over 300 square miles, but it's not much over 40 feet deep at its deepest spot, a gigantic puddle lying on the permafrost of this tableflat piece of tundra.

Those of us who live in more temperate environs are inclined to think of the arctic tundra as an immense stretch of grass and sedge with each acre pretty much like every other acre. Those of us who watch the *Discovery Channel* are encouraged to imagine untold millions of birds, caribou, wolves, bears and other wildlife swarming over this expanse of natural pasture under the midnight sun, prospering in the wilderness beyond the reach of human enterprise. It's a wonderful illusion. But in fact, much of the tundra is a desert in nearly every sense of the word-dry, wind-swept and almost devoid of life. Scattered through this

desolate emptiness are a few corners where the lay of the land combines with the right watersheds and weather to create a garden. These are the spots that make it into the wildlife videos. The area around Teshekpuk Lake is one of them.

The lake has a caribou herd named after it. The herd moves through northwestern Alaska, coming to the area around Teshekpuk Lake in the spring to calve, then summering around the lake where the wind off the ocean gives them relief from insects and lush stands of grass and sedge provide forage. The herd has generally grown over the last 30 years-in 2002, the population was estimated at more than 45,000 animals. A second herd ranges along the Canning River to the east of the lake.

Biologists estimate that more than six million shorebirds of at least 30 species use the shallow marshes and grasslands for nesting and brood-rearing. The lake offers important breeding habitat for snowy owls, peregrine falcons, gyrfalcons, and rough-legged hawks and supports nesting populations of three loon species.

Fifteen species of ducks migrate into the Teshekpuk Lake area for the summer. The most common are pintails and longtailed ducks. About 18,000 pintails generally nest in the area, although that number may rise significantly in years when drought forces pintails to over-fly the prairie potholes far to the south. About 14,000 long-tailed ducks typically nest in the area. All of this would be wildness enough, but Teshekpuk Lake

has another claim to fame—its geese. Up to 2,000 snow geese have used the area during the summer, while white-fronted geese have recently averaged about 20,000 birds with a peak of 35,000 in 2002.

These flocks tie Teshekpuk to the sunny south. The brant migrate along the Pacific coast, wintering as far south as the tip of Baja California. Many of the white fronts winter in the Central Valley of California, but others migrate through the Central Flyway, arriving at last on the Gulf coast of Texas and eastern Mexico.

How significant are these numbers? Over the last 10 years, an average of 14 percent of all the brant on the Pacific coast spent at least part of their summer on Teshekpuk. In that same time frame, this population of brant has been declining by about two percent a year, so their wellbeing on the summer range is particularly important. The Pacific population of white-fronted geese has been rising steadily over the last 10 years, but the mid-continent population has been declining by three percent a year—the production and survival of white-fronts at Teshekpuk is important to waterfowlers across the western half of the continent.

A wilderness at the end of the world should gain a certain degree of protection from politics and industry just because of its location, but insulation from those influences is hard to come by, even on the North Slope. As early as the 1920s, rumors trickled south about crude oil bubbling up out of the ground, and in 1923, President Warren Harding set aside a huge block of northwestern Alaska as a naval petroleum reserve to guarantee a supply of fuel oil for America's fighting ships. It covered 23.5 million acres, the largest single piece of public land in the United States.

In 1976, Congress took the reserve out of the hands of the Navy and turned it over to the Department of the Interior. Four years later, Congress authorized the sale of oil and gas leases in the reserve, and in 1994, oil companies drilling just to the east of the Teshekpuk discovered the largest pool of oil that had been found on the North Slope since Prudhoe Bay. Oil

companies took a renewed interest in the reserve. Just after the elections in 2000, Congress passed a bill calling for more exploration of the area, and Bill Clinton signed it into law on his way out of the White House.

The Bureau of Land Management, the agency in charge of the reserve, has been working toward leasing since the mid-1990s, issuing an environmental impact statement on drilling in the area in 1998, then offering an update of the EIS last June. The update was required because further exploration had uncovered an awkward fact—most of the oil in the petroleum reserve is in the northeastern quarter, right under Teshekpuk Lake and the crucial wildlife habitat around it.

The BLM's "preferred alternative" is to offer 97 percent of the petroleum reserve for oil and gas leasing. The list of possible impacts oil exploration, drilling and production could have on the tundra and its wildlife is extensive. Ground operations are allowed only during the winter when vegetation is dormant and the ground is frozen and better able to withstand the passage of heavy equipment. The drillers build ice roads at this time of year where traffic is heavy, and they need water to make the roads. The BLM is proposing limits on the amount of water that can be taken from lakes with fish in them.

Management of hazardous waste, garbage that may attract bears and smaller predators, and even noise is required. Location and design of permanent roads, drill pads, pumping stations, living areas and pipelines are controlled. The BLM is proposing special stipulations to protect sensitive species like spectacled and Steller's loons and yellow-billed loons. Flying over the area may be restricted. During the summer, drilling from new pads and heavy construction are prohibited in goose molting areas.

In spite of this show of concern for wildlife and habitat, many conservationists are worried about the proposal to drill in the Teshekpuk area. The base of their concern is in the BLM document itself. Here is what the BLM says about its ultimate mission: "A balance must be achieved to provide opportunities for

successful oil and gas operations while providing maximum protection for the environment and local residents."

The "balance" between environmental concerns and oil extraction that is emerging on BLM holdings like New Mexico's Otero Mesa, Colorado's Roan Plateau and Wyoming's Red Desert isn't encouraging. Faced with intense demand for permits from energy conglomerates and pressure from the current administration to clear the way for production, the BLM may not have either the manpower or the will to impose serious restrictions on energy development.

Research on the North Slope has shown that caribou cows stay at least a mile from any exploratory drill pads, roads and pipelines, especially during the calving season. Nesting success of black brant in oil fields averages about half their success in undisturbed habitat, at least in part because oil operations tend to attract predators. Brant populations have remained stable around the active oil fields on the North Slope, but scientists believe that's because brant are moving into the area from more remote, more successful breeding areas. This "sink effect" may already be affecting populations of Pacific brant, and at some point, it could even influence numbers of white-fronts and nesting ducks in the area.

Permits on more than 90 percent of the Teshekpuk Lake region would be a gamble on a huge scale. We don't know precisely how wildlife in the area will react to another expansion in North Slope oil and gas operations. If this oil and gas field were the solution to America's energy problems, the risk might be worthwhile, but the oil reservoir under Teshekpuk, as massive as it is, hardly touches our thirst for fuel. At our current rate of consumption, it would provide us with about 100 days of gas.

Of course, the hard facts of energy supply and demand carry little weight these days. We're a nation of addicts. We don't care about the caribou on some arctic shore, the clouds of shorebirds, or the flocks of pintails, brant, and white-fronts laying in fat for the long migration south. We'll give it all up for another fix.

What a shame.