Shifting Migration
Are ducks and geese keeping the same schedule?
Star Student

Graduate researcher Mike Buxton has studied ducks for six years with Delta

By Tyler SHOBERG

LEANING INTO THE gale-force wind to keep from lurching backward, the lanky fellow was reminiscent of a large spear braced for charging cavalry. His loose clothing flapped and slapped at the mercy of relentless gusts, one hand grasping the bill of his cap to keep it from flying across the North Dakota prairie.

Mike Buxton gazed knowingly at the half-mile tract of brown grasslands, where his two technical assistants combed for nests. After six years of studying ducks on North America's prairie breeding grounds, this was old hat for the Delta Waterfowl researcher. It was May, and Buxton was itching to finish accumulating the data for his thesis two years in the making.

A few months later, not only did Buxton become a proud owner of a Louisiana State University master's degree, but also the most recent graduate of Delta's own, prestigious "University of Ducks."

Making His Mark

Buxton, 25, has been a Delta staple since signing on as a tech in 2008, the summer after his sophomore year at Paul Smith's College in northern New York. A native of Richmond, Vt., the flatlands of prairie North Dakota are a stark contrast to the thick moose-laden woods of his home state.

He found comfort in the vastness of the prairie, and an instant love in searching for and documenting ducks and duck nests near Egeland, N.D. Working for waterfowl was an ideal opportunity for a lifelong hunter and outdoorsman who cut his teeth chasing puddle ducks on the rivers and fields of Vermont and diving ducks on Lake Champlain.

“I've never been a big-city guy because everything is so close. Out here it's wide open,” Buxton said. “You might have to drive 15 minutes for groceries and an hour for a town with a Wal-Mart, but I've learned to adapt.”

During his first summer, four graduate students were running studies out of a rented house in Egeland. Buxton made friends with everyone in the small town of 20 or so residents, and found a connection to work the following year for another Delta researcher.

By his third summer, Buxton considered the Prairie Pothole Region as a second home, and was comfortable both in northcentral North Dakota as well as areas of Manitoba, Canada, where he helped with...
similar studies. He earned his bachelor’s degree from Paul Smith’s College, and received guidance from Delta president Frank Rohwer, who was scientific director at the time and a professor at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.

“I told him that I’d really like to get a master’s degree in this duck stuff,” Buxton said.

By August 2011, he was enrolled at LSU.

Buxton used the knowledge and skills gained as a tech for his own research. He focused on predator management on low grassland density township-sized blocks. The 36-square-mile parcels had less than 10 percent nest cover, which mimicked a likely future scenario with decreased habitat in the form of disappearing Conservation Reserve Program acreage. Although his findings have not yet been published, Buxton said the results clarify the impact of predators on grassland nesting ducks, and the effects of programs such as predator management.

“Mike’s dedication to his project and to waterfowl management is what makes him one of the best students I have had the pleasure of working with during my 25 years working with many dozens of students,” Rohwer said.

Prairie Pranks

Although Buxton has worked diligently with Delta to better understand ducks, he also reflects on that time with good humor.

A rookie initiation made for a memorable prank during his first summer as a tech. One graduate student’s research involved capturing nesting hens with a large handheld net. Buxton’s bright idea was to prank the researcher with a makeshift nest and deftly placed decoy, but he was in for a surprise.

“Before I could do anything, the grad student called me to go trap a specific bird, but he said, ‘Here’s the thing: you have to do it at 8 o’clock because she won’t be there before and leaves soon after.’ I thought that sounded weird, but another tech and I went out there anyway,” Buxton recalled. “I ran to the nest and threw the net, looked down, and did a double take. It wasn’t a duck — it was a decoy. Obviously, somebody told the guy what I was planning to do. So I ponited that decoy like a football, and when I looked back at the nest there were four of those little yellow rubber duckies underneath.”

The best part: The pranking researcher caught the whole thing on film.

“Yeah, there’s still a video floating around somewhere,” Buxton admitted.

When he wasn’t working or playing jokes, Buxton spent his free time wingshooting. His first outing with Rohwer boating down the Atchafalaya River for the Louisiana teal season opener is burned into his memory.

“It was dark and the Atchafalaya is a pretty big river with lots of bends,” Buxton said. “Of a sudden, Frank’s spotlight went out. He goes, ‘Mike, get on the front and let me know if you see anything.’ I’m like, ‘It’s pitch black. You can’t see your hand in front of your face!’ I still can’t believe we didn’t wind up hitting anything.”

For his part, Rohwer admitted his one regret was nearly bankrupting a poor college student by hooking Buxton on hunting the famed estuary’s backwaters.

“Like a dedicated foolish hunter, he spent far too much of his almost nonexistent spare graduate salary cash to buy a boat,” Rohwer said. “Of course, like most boats older than their owners, it proved to be a hole Mike put money into — but he did have some fine hunts and caught some speckled trout, too.”

Next Step

Now that he’s completed his higher education, Buxton hopes to land a full-time job working with waterfowl. He intends to stay connected with the folks he has run into on his six-year journey, and harvest a few ducks and geese along the way.

“I’m looking forward to the season and spending time hunting in Manitoba and North Dakota,” Buxton said. “I feel very lucky that I’ve had the opportunity to do what I’ve done with Delta Waterfowl. It’s been the highlight of my life so far, and I honestly can’t thank the people at Delta enough for what they’ve done for me.”

Tyler Shoberg is associate editor of Delta Waterfowl.