

Another waterfowl season has come and gone, and it was a good one for many Mississippi duck hunters. But duck hunters are never satisfied with the status quo, so we are continually trying to improve our hunting success. There are several ways to do that: some folks spend the off-season scouting for new locations on public land; some work hard to improve the habitat on their current hunting spots; and some just work on waking up earlier.

However, for many hunters, planning for next season may involve looking for new hunting properties to lease or buy. These thoughts bring up a good question: what makes a good duck hunting property? The answer: location, location, location.

Just as home buyers know location encompasses the quality of area schools, the strength of local businesses, or the proximity of other services or amenities, similarly for landowners or lessees, the word "location" also encompasses habitat. Buyers should know how to look for duck properties, where to look, and what to look for so they can continue to improve and manage habitat in Mississippi for waterfowl.

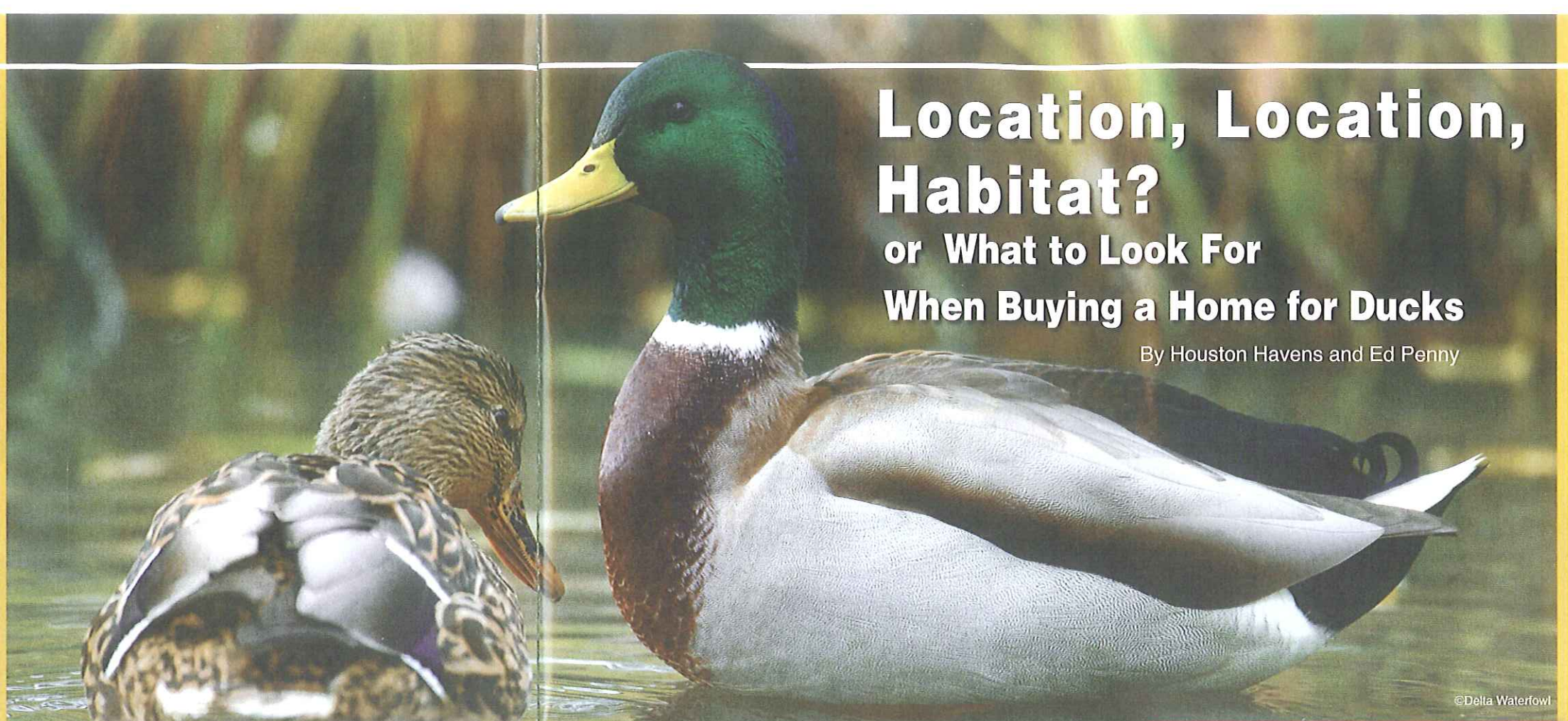
### How to Look

Purchasing or leasing a property for duck hunting is a big decision since it typically involves investing both money and resources. But perhaps most importantly, it involves large amounts of your valuable time. Since most people can't devote all the time that's required to find and buy a home, most folks use a realtor to help them in their decision. Likewise, using a real estate agent who is a dedicated duck hunter and who also knows the land market is important. It's vitally important to fully investigate potential properties on a geographical, ecological, and financial basis, and qualified realtors have lots of detailed information on all these aspects.

As a starting point, online mapping services offer aerial photography, and hunters can look at a property from a landscape point of view to see the types of habitat conditions in the nearby area. Also available are waterfowl aerial survey maps (found at [www.mdwfp.com/waterfowl](http://www.mdwfp.com/waterfowl)) to get an idea of recent waterfowl hot spots. Although these hot spots can sometimes change throughout the winter, looking at multiple years' maps can help you locate good general areas for hunting properties. It's also important to look at online soil mapping applications ([www.websoil-survey.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.websoil-survey.nrcs.usda.gov)) to get an idea of what crops may be grown, as well as to assess water holding ability.

### Where to Look

In Mississippi, the best place to begin looking is the Delta. Other areas like the Tombigbee River system and the Big Black River flood plain also offer good habitat, but the Delta is historically the most important wintering area in Mississippi, mostly due to the amount and diversity of waterfowl

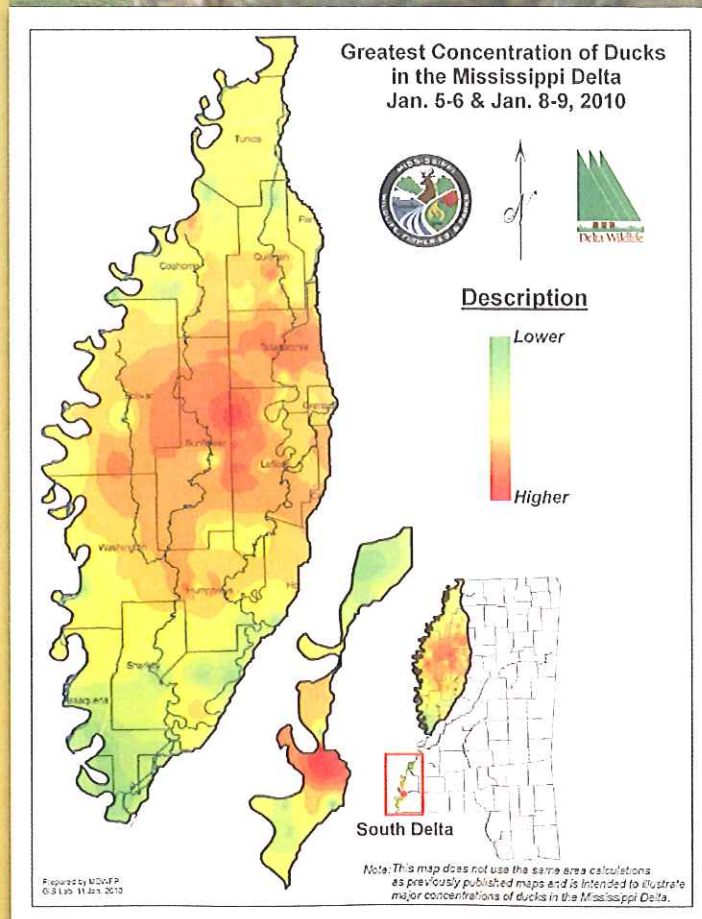


# Location, Location, Habitat?

## or What to Look For When Buying a Home for Ducks

By Houston Havens and Ed Penny

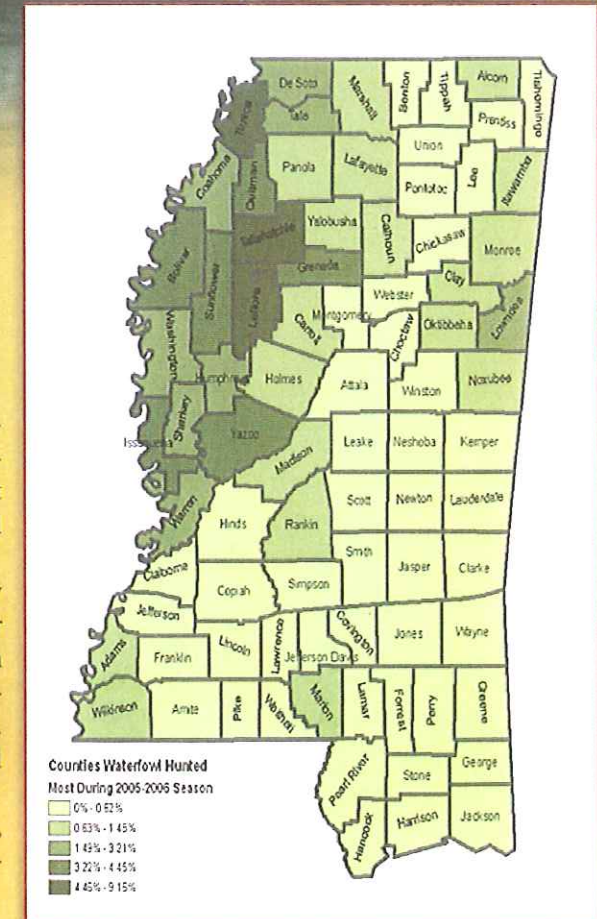
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*Left: Tallahatchie and Leflore counties typically have abundant waterfowl habitat during winter. Aerial waterfowl surveys show these areas as having the highest abundances of ducks in the Delta. Right: Logically, these counties are the most hunted areas.*

habitat. Even in the Delta, however, there are areas that are less productive for waterfowl due to the lack of natural wetlands and annually flooded habitat. River systems with oxbows and other adjacent natural wetlands offer important clues to the likelihood of annual flooding.

A wetland property in close proximity to a river system will likely be used by ducks traveling the channels. "Hunters should look for areas with a good mixture of woods, natural wetlands, and open water such as oxbows or rivers, and perhaps most importantly, large-scale, waterfowl-friendly grain production," said Jacob Sartain. "Soil types are the next part of the equation, so look for heavy soil types that have a cropping history of soybean and rice production. Today's farming practices, which typically include land leveling, can make it difficult to tell where old sloughs and lake beds once existed, so look for heavy clay soils."



Hunters tend to think about the factors influencing their success on a smaller scale than they should. Waterfowl are very mobile, and the sites they use to meet winter needs are affected by much more than a single duck hole or property. When Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks biologists fly aerial surveys during the winter, it's evident that duck numbers, and particularly mallard numbers, are greatest in areas with "landscape-scale" flooded habitat.

Sartain suggests contacting owners who have surrounding fields that are not being flooded and inquiring if they may be leased or even offering them payment for pumping in exchange for hunting.

"In most cases, Mississippi landowners have an interest in conservation and hunting and are willing to listen," he said.

It cannot be stated strongly enough that you should get to know local waterfowl hunters and work together to create a landscape that is attractive to waterfowl. Ducks that don't have a nearby place to find sanctuary won't likely remain in an area when hunting season begins, so hunters should look for landscapes with intensively managed public and private lands with refuge from intense hunting pressure.

### What to Look For

#### Management Capability

Ducks need water, food, cover, and sanctuary to thrive while they're in Mississippi. Sometimes landowners can have all these things on their property without proper management, but that's usually not the case. Thus, managers should assess the property's wetland management potential.

Obviously, water availability is the most important thing for waterfowl management. Some properties in river flood plains flood naturally almost every year, but many properties must impound water through water control structures. Thus, a property should have functional water control structures with risers that allow water levels to be managed properly.

Wells and functioning pumps (electric or diesel) can be a great asset as well, particularly during dry winters like the

one we just experienced. During the property investigation, it's important to test wells and pumps or obtain recent documentation of completion. It's also important to have a structure that can house hunters and store heavy equipment for habitat management.

A current trend in the Delta is converting retired catfish ponds into waterfowl hunting properties. While they are not immediately ready for wetland management, these fish pond complexes can be easily developed into quality waterfowl habitat by repairing levees and installing proper water control structures to facilitate proper drainage.

During property assessments, develop a detailed plan for both improving and managing the property. Quality waterfowl habitat can be developed on most wetland properties, but keep in mind the costs that will be associated with the improvements. Just as with all other investments, it can sometimes be difficult to realize a return. But without a proper plan, it is almost impossible.

It may be wise to maintain active waterfowl-friendly farming on the property to help pay for waterfowl management. In addition, landowners should also work with government cost-share programs or conservation easement programs to develop a property. These landowners should understand all management requirements or restrictions before entering into long-term agreements or conservation easements.

#### History of Use

"If you build it, they will come." This quote can sometimes ring true for waterfowl hunting or habitat management, but it's always good to know the duck-use history of a property before purchasing or leasing. This importance of a long "duck history" is often overestimated, but high duck use in recent years can be a good indicator of future success. However, a good plan and hard work can develop a great duck hunting property in areas with little prior use.

"For most folks, it's important to keep your expectations realistic when purchasing a property," Sartain said. "If it's completely raw with no hunting improvements, and assum-



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ing the proper steps are taken, some ducks may use it during the first year; but within three to five years, things will really start to shape up.

"On the other hand, a more developed property or completely developed property may yield instant success as long as the habitat is properly maintained."

#### Conclusion

As you can see, there are many things to consider when purchasing a property for waterfowl hunting. History of waterfowl use, habitat management capability, soil type, and water availability all relate to location. So, what's true for home buying is also true for buying a "home for ducks:" location, location, habitat. For more information on what makes quality waterfowl habitat, or for information on cost-share programs, contact the MDWFP at (601) 432-2199. Wetland management information is also available online at [mdwfp.com/waterfowl](http://mdwfp.com/waterfowl).

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## COST-SHARE PROGRAMS FOR WATERFOWL HABITAT

### Mississippi Partners for Fish and Wildlife

If a wetland property needs infrastructure work, the Mississippi Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program can help.

Biologists will visit the property to assess conditions and make recommendations.

Applications are accepted every spring and summer, and projects are ranked by the Wetland Committee.

Upon approval, landowners and leaseholders can receive water control structures free of charge, provided they pick up and install the structures at their own expense.

MPFW also offers cost-sharing for wetland management activities such as disking, mulching woody vegetation, and herbicide spraying.

<http://mdwfp.com/waterfowl>

### WETLAND RESERVE PROGRAM

The Wetland Reserve Program is available for land enrollment through your local Natural Resources Conservation Service.

This program pays you to take your land out of production and pays for reforestation and hydrological restoration (100 percent cost-share for permanent easements and 75 percent cost-share for 30-year easements).

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/wrp/>

### CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM

The Conservation Reserve Program is available for land enrollment through your local Farm Service Agency office.

This program has various practices for reforestation, shallow water management, and perennial grass establishment.

CRP pays you to take your land out of production for a period of time and cost-shares establishing a natural cover type.

<http://www.fsa.usda.gov>



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Water control structures like the examples shown above are valuable wetland management tools. Boards are stacked in grooves to allow varying water depths during winter and appropriately timed drainage in the spring and summer.



Shannon Churn