

Waterfowl Hunting Property near Dawson, ND

I am the last of three generations of North Dakota duck hunters. I no longer live in that state, however, and have decided my duck hunting days are over. As a result, I am selling part of a storied hunting marsh located approximately three miles south of Dawson, North Dakota.

This marsh has gone by many names over time. Historically, it was often called either the "Big Slough" or the "Black Slough". Others called it the "DeVore Slough", after a pioneering farmer named Sam DeVore. Most of the wetland, however, is now owned by the federal government and that portion is known as the Kleppe Lang Waterfowl Production Area. I will hereafter refer to it as the "DeVore Slough".

The DeVore Slough is just west of the Slade National Wildlife Refuge. The Dawson Game Management Area is also in the immediate vicinity. As these names suggest, it is a region rich in game and hunting opportunities.

The 140-acre tract I am selling is the most northerly portion of the DeVore Slough. When the wetland is full about 10 acres of grass and trees remain. The rest is water. There is slightly more than a half mile of shoreline and the beach is almost pure sand. Most recently, the water level was very low for a short period in the early part of this century. In general, however, this basin has held a lot of water since the 1990's. When Lake Isabel is full it drains through an outlet that runs under Highway 3 and feeds into the DeVore Slough. In turn, this wetland basin drains to the west through a shallow ravine. Therefore, there is a limit to how high the water can get. In recent decades it has frequently been at or near that limit and that is where it is now.

The Dawson area has long been a mecca for waterfowl hunting, and the DeVore Slough is frequently mentioned in historical accounts. For example, William B. Mershon was an avid and wealthy duck and goose hunter in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He typically spent the autumn months traveling in a private rail car to those locations on the northern plains where the greatest concentrations of waterfowl could be found. Based on his published "recollections", Mershon hunted in the Dawson area from 1883 through 1889. Describing the "Big Slough back of Sam Devore's house", Mershon wrote:

Such clouds of waterfowl as we saw here ... I have never seen before and have never seen since. I remember standing on the edge of the Sam Devore Slough when something alarmed the waterfowl and they fairly darkened the sky when they got up, and the roar reminded me of a heavy train moving at a rapid rate of speed over a long, resonant trestle.

Wm. B. Mershon, Recollections of My Fifty Years Hunting and Fishing, p. 126 (1923).

Much has changed since Mershon's day, but the exceptional nature of the DeVore Slough has not. Harold Duebbert (1929-2022) was a biologist who spent his career with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. For most of that time he was a wetland ecologist at the Northern Prairie Research Center near Jamestown, N.D. His great passion was duck hunting out of a boat. Harold was intimately familiar with almost every large wetland in the state where high waterfowl numbers could be found. In his memoirs, he stated that "[w]hen the water conditions are right" the "size and ecological characteristics" of the DeVore Slough make it "one of the best marshes in the state." H.F. Duebbert, My Lifetime Among Waterfowl, p. 74 (2022).

Duebbert's book contains many references to memorable hunts on the DeVore Slough. Id. at 73-74, 76, 79, 87, 88, 90-91, and 100. A more detailed description is provided by an unpublished report he wrote on October 25, 1982:

The purpose of this message is to describe a scene I witnessed last night at the DeVore Slough south of Dawson, N.D. I had been grouse hunting and just sort of poking around in Kidder County when I decided to check out DeVore Slough. I had great hunting there in 1980 and then in 1981 it went dry. I checked it in late September of '82 and while it had some water there were extensive mudflats and few ducks.

Since then I had not checked it, assuming it was still low. I knew we had 2-3 inches of rain in early October but had assumed it was not enough to raise water in the slough. How wrong I was! The water had flooded back to the emergent vegetation which was mostly alkali bulrush (Scirpus paludosus).

And the waterfowl! It was one of the most moving scenes I have ever seen in my life. The time was just after sunset and the entire western sky was aglow with various shades of orange and pink. Waterfowl activity could best be described as a frenzy. On the water were about 1000 tundra swans in full voice. The atmosphere was clear and blue and the water like glass. The sky was full of geese in various sized flocks, small Canada's mostly and some snows, coming in from feeding in the fields. Many more were on the water I would say conservatively 5,000. The slough contained many hundreds of ducks that I could not identify but I assume a lot were cans. Also mallards by the thousands. Wheeling flocks of mallards totaling 500 birds or more filled the western sky.

My personal observations from the 1960's through the 1980's were similar. Like most wetlands, the DeVore Slough is a highly dynamic ecosystem. It fluctuates between too little water and too much. When the conditions are right, however, it can hold spectacular concentrations of waterfowl. I can remember evenings in late October or early November when I would park along Highway 3 and watch huge flocks of geese and mallards returning to the water after feeding in nearby harvested cornfields.

I was then young and enthusiastic, but during this period my exposure to the DeVore Slough was limited to watching rather than hunting. Although much of the wetland was open to public

hunting, we could not find a way to get on the water. The attempts we made succeeded only in burying our vehicle in mud long before we reached the water's edge.

I began to seriously hunt the DeVore Slough in the 1990's. By this time the water was high enough so that we could use boats with motors to access most portions of the wetland. Getting on to the water, however, continued to be the major challenge. There were only a few suitable launch sites, all on private property. Furthermore, these sites only worked when the water was high, and the best hunting usually coincides with lower water conditions.

This explains why I bought my tract in 2005. It borders the public portions, which effectively adds 848 acres of prime habitat and hunting opportunities. It also provides what I believe to be the best boat access on the entire wetland. When the water is high you can drive on hard ground to the shore and then launch from a sandy shore. Unlike much of the shoreline, there are no thick stands of emergent vegetation blocking your path once on the water. Although it could use some work, I had a ramp prepared by leveling a portion of the ice ridge that has formed above the high water mark. Of course, it becomes more difficult as the water level recedes. Under any conditions short of dry, however, there should still be access if you have the right equipment and desire.

The DeVore Slough is big – up to several miles across. There are many places on the wetland that typically provide the best hunting. The point that extends into the southeast corner of my property is one of them. Many more can be found on the adjacent public portions. All these locations are now covered with deep water and the cover has suffered. When the conditions are right, however, muddy islands emerge that support thick stands of cattails and bullrushes. Equally important, the open water areas support a mass of submergent vegetation, predominantly sago pondweed.

In addition to the abundance of birds it can hold, an unusual aspect of this wetland is the diversity of waterfowl it attracts. I have shot (or at least seen) almost every species of duck or goose you could hope to find in central North Dakota. It can attract impressive concentrations of canvasbacks and redheads. The mallards and geese can number in the many thousands. It also attracts a variety of nongame birds and is well known as a birding hotspot. Typically, there are large nesting colonies of night herons and cattle egrets. You can usually find white faced ibis, together with an abundance of other shorebirds. The only piping plover I have ever seen was by the outlet on the west side. All this is at a low ebb today, but the resilience of wetland ecosystems is amazing. High water is inevitably followed by dryer conditions that lower water levels and allow the vegetation to rebound.

Despite its prominence and location, hunting pressure on the DeVore Slough is typically low to nonexistent. Not many hunters use boats and decoys these days, and those that do have the access problem. Although my parcel serves mostly a gateway to the wetland, the dry ground also provides good pheasant and deer hunting.

There is a wetland easement in place that prohibits the draining, filling, or burning of any portion on which surface water or marsh vegetation naturally occurs. There are no use restrictions on the dry portions. Although there are currently no buildings or improvements, there is ample high ground suitable for construction.