An Intersectional Transition to Duck Hunting, a Degraded Sense of Community

A Community Still Defined by Waterfowl Hunting

In his twenties and known for having a good time, Petey had grown up in Sumner and worked a construction job. On a muggy Friday night in August, he came into Foster’s Sportsman Inn with a goose call he had recently purchased. At least ten men in the bar blew the call while Petey showed it off, including me and a man from Illinois who was in town working on a new hunting blind for Habitat Flats.

“It sounds too high to me,” one of the local men grumbled after blowing it.

“No way! It sounds just how it ought to,” Petey disagreed, snatching the call from him and giving it another go.

Once he was done, another one of the men asked, “Do you want to learn how to call? I’ll teach ya if you want to.”

“You wanna get it fired up? We’ll get it fired up in here if you want!” Petey responded, letting loose on the call again.

Once he was done, Elizabeth hollered from a table in the back of the bar, “Don’t start that stuff in August!” Referring to her husband seated beside her, she continued, “I tell him you can’t start blowing those things until at least September!”

While the men in the bar laughed and continued to give Petey a hard time about his new call, the man from Illinois went to his truck to retrieve
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a duck call, and to Elizabeth’s chagrin, the men in the bar proceeded to put
on a display with it. All seasoned duck hunters, they easily made the call
emit the notes and cadences of ducks. Because they did not know the man
from Illinois as well as they did Petey, however, and because the call was not
a new purchase, instead of talking trash, they talked about the intricacies of
calling.

“A lot of guys like those loud calls, but I think you have to tone it down.
[Ducks] don’t like that loud stuff. Maybe if you’re hunting open water, but
otherwise I like something that you can really tone it down with,” the man
from Illinois explained.

“Have you ever heard of Richard Aniston?” Petey asked, referring to a
man from Saint Louis who was known for making and tuning calls. “His
calls sound awesome, but they freeze up almost instantly. I mean, it doesn’t
take anything to freeze them up. Especially when it starts getting a little
cold,” he explained, referring to how the reeds in some duck calls tend to
stick together when they get wet and it is cold outside.

“You know what I do? I blow the spit out of my call every time after I
blow it. I just turn it around and blow it out. I think it helps a lot,” the man
from Illinois explained.

Petey emphatically agreed, “Oh yeah! Some guys, they don’t think they
spit in there, but I don’t care if you just give it one quick blow, there will be
spit in there. You always get spit in them.”

Later that night the man from Illinois exclaimed to anyone who would
listen, “Beer drinking and duck calling. I don’t think I’ve ever been in a
place like this. It just doesn’t get any better!”

Even for a newcomer to the community who had no interest in studying
the links between the community and goose hunting, it was readily appar-
et waterfowl hunting was significant to Sumner and its residents. Besides
the frequent conversations about duck hunting that took place inside Fos-
ter’s, “H.Q. Wild Goose Capital of the World” was painted in white block
letters across the outside of the bar, its plate glass window was adorned with
ducks and geese, and the bench sitting by the front door had a resting goose
for its back. Indicators of the importance of waterfowl hunting to the past
and present of Sumner were also scattered throughout the community. Pri-
ivate residences had waterfowl prints as well as stuffed ducks and geese
hanging from the walls. Driveways around town were filled with duck hunt-
ing boats and trucks adorned with waterfowl decals. Duck and goose decoys
were also popular yard decorations, and some houses were still adorned
with address plaques in the shape of a flying goose that were distributed in
the early 1970s as part of a community betterment project. The giant goose in the middle of the town park was also hard to miss.

As apparent as these ties to waterfowl hunting were, equally as apparent was a shift that had occurred in the type of waterfowl hunting that was especially significant to the community. Sumner was organized around goose hunting from the late 1940s until the early 1990s, but there had been a transition toward emphasizing duck hunting as an activity around which the community was organized.

The landscape around Sumner readily attested to this transformation. Soybean and corn fields were pocked with goose hunting blinds now overgrown with weeds, and intersections in the area were still adorned with faded signs advertising businesses that had catered to goose hunters. Yet mixed with these vestiges of the past were indications of adaptation. Many of the agricultural fields adjacent to the refuge had been converted to duck hunting spots. Pancake flat and surrounded on all sides by small levees so that they could be flooded in the fall to attract ducks, these fields were easy to identify even before they had been flooded. The town’s welcome signs also registered the shift from goose to duck hunting. While the older sign on the west side of Sumner featured Canada geese, four mallards landing into a marsh were on the much newer sign on the east side of town.

Those living, working, and hunting around Sumner also registered this shift. Without question, individuals were well aware of the change in goose migration patterns as well as the increased significance of duck hunting for their community. I regularly heard conversations lamenting the absence of geese, yet conversations about duck hunting were just as common. Describing Sumner over the 100.7 KMZU radio airwaves during the 2015 Wild Goose Festival, Richard Aniston said, “This is duck country. There’s a lot of duck and goose hunters around here, so if you like the outdoors this is the place to be.” Calling Sumner “duck country” would have been unthinkable just twenty-five years earlier when the community was still considered one of the better places in the country to hunt Canada geese, but by 2015 this was no longer the case.

As important as what people were saying about this transformation is what they were doing. The refuge provides some telling figures: 11,581 people hunted geese on the refuge in 1979, and an additional 9,952 were sent “sorry cards” because they had not been selected for a spot to hunt.² By the time I began fieldwork, hardly anyone goose hunted on the refuge. Only eighteen people tried hunting geese on the Swan Lake refuge in 2013, and the number rose to just twenty-eight in 2014. No one hunted ducks on the
refuge while I was conducting fieldwork because it was illegal to do so, but the refuge perimeter was ringed with duck hunting blinds. During the legally prescribed duck hunting season from late October through December, volleys of shotgun blasts repeatedly shattered the quiet of mornings whenever hunters managed to lure ducks within shooting range.

It may seem that a shift from emphasizing one kind of waterfowl hunting to another is a natural or easy transformation with little significance, and men in the community often framed the transformation in this manner. They told me duck hunting was “just something you do,” they were “born to duck hunt,” or duck hunting was “in their blood.” In this chapter, however, I problematize the seeming inevitability of the shift from goose to duck hunting.

Instead of being an inevitable process of adaptation, this was an adaptive process dependent on dramatic landscape transformations to accommodate ducks. In many cases, these transformations were even paid for by U.S. taxpayers. Desires to enable the continued achievement of masculinities associated with whiteness, heterosexuality, reputable classes, and rurality also informed this transition. Put simply, the shift to duck hunting was contingent on a tangle of (non)human beings and things, federal institutions, and attempts to achieve masculinities considered respectable. This transformation also helped undermine the strength of social ties between people in Sumner. Instead of being inevitable or insignificant, this was an entangled process of adaptation that facilitated the rearrangement of the community.

Exploring how a mash of (non)humans, institutions, and rural masculinities complicated by race, sexuality, and class informed the rearrangement of Sumner is particularly significant because relatively little attention has been granted to the intersecting inequalities behind reconstructing and sustaining communities in response to climate change. With few exceptions, researchers have tended to focus on a particular dimension of inequality such as class or gender. These contributions are important, but I argue it is necessary to consider how intersecting inequalities inform and are informed by responses to climate change. As I detail in Chapter 1, inequalities pertaining to race, class, gender, and other forms of difference intersect to simultaneously affect how individuals think of themselves, go about their lives, and arrange their communities.

Over the next two chapters, I discuss two primary advantages to using an intersectional approach to inequalities when considering the reorganization of cultures and communities in response to climate change. First, we
can better consider how the messy ambivalences and complexities of intersecting inequalities influence processes of adaptation. Second, we can also better consider the consequences of adaptations for particular demographic groups such as men and women as well as for differentially situated members within those groups such as men and women with different classes. In sum, we can better understand how inequalities inform and are informed by efforts to reorganize communities by approaching adaptations with an eye toward several intersecting inequalities.

**An Intersectional Transition to Duck Hunting**

Before exploring the significance of masculinities complicated by rurality, race, sexuality, and class, I consider the divergent landscape preferences of Canada geese and ducks. These differences were integrally important to how the shift from goose to duck hunting had taken place. And subsequently, how the community was being rearranged because of this shift. Canada geese generally prefer agricultural landscapes for foraging during the fall and winter. The extensive tracts of land around the refuge that were already being used to grow corn, soybeans, and wheat provided effective places to hunt geese during the goose hunting heyday. Though some types of ducks will feed in dry agricultural fields, they tend to prefer landscapes with water. As a result, agricultural ground both on and off the refuge was being transformed to make it more suitable for the migrating ducks that still came through the area.

On the refuge, 450 acres that were being farmed when goose numbers were high had been transformed into wetlands by 2013, and an additional 500 acres were slated to be converted to wetlands through a $1 million grant from the federal North American Wetlands Conservation Act program. Beyond providing suitable duck habitat, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) supported such changes at the refuge because, in comparison to fields planted annually with soybeans or corn, wetlands increased biodiversity while decreasing fertilizer and pesticide use.

Off the refuge, landowners were also transforming agricultural fields to make them more suitable for ducks. Don explained this process to me when I formally interviewed him. He had lived and hunted near Sumner his whole life, and we had gotten to know each other through the Friends of Swan Lake, a civic group of local residents who partnered with the USFWS to promote public uses of the refuge. While driving us in his green Polaris Ranger along a levee on his farm, he said, “I’ve been hunting here since I was...
six. Dad was part of four guys that had [this area] as a goose hunting camp. I’m fifty-nine, so that tells you how long I’ve been hunting here.”

“Was it always wetlands like this?” I asked.

“No, it was just dry ag fields when the geese were here. We had six blinds back here. That’s one of the old blinds right there,” Don said, pointing to the top of an old goose hunting blind whose top now stuck up out of a shallow pond. “We manage it completely different for ducks compared to geese. All this here, we don’t hunt it. We use it all as a refuge. The only spot we hunt is back here. You’ll be able to see it here in a minute,” Don concluded, punching the gas on the Ranger.

Although Don had grown up hunting geese in these river bottoms, he had intentionally changed the agricultural landscape into wetlands to make it suitable for duck hunting. And he was not alone. So many were adding water features to dry agricultural landscapes that what amounted to a duck hunting arms race was taking place in the area.

Greg described the obstacles and added expense to access good hunting as we sat across from each other at one of the tables toward the back of Foster’s during our interview. “We still have really good duck hunting, though it’s getting more specialized—if you don’t have the big spreads and the flooded corn and everything perfect, you know. The duck hunting thing, it’s not like it was when I was a kid. It’s changed tremendously in the last three or four years,” Greg said, emphasizing how intense the competition to attract ducks had become.

“Why do you say the last three years?” I asked.

“Because it’s become more specialized. The big dogs are the guys who really have the power and the money and can flood the corn and afford to have an area that’s not in the WRP program, which that’s the thing here. You’re either in or you’re out of the WRP, and if you’re out of the WRP you can put as much corn as you want to flood because it’s your own property. Of course, [under the] WRP you can only [plant] 5 percent [of the land] in [corn], which is still all right, but it’s different.”

The WRP, or Wetlands Reserve Program, enabled local landowners to transform the landscape to make it more amenable to duck hunting. A federal program administered through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, it was another example of a racialized agriculture/conservation program like those introduced in Chapter 1.9 In place from 1990 to 2014, the program paid landowners to enroll landscapes in easements that stipulated that the land must be used primarily for conservation purposes. In addition to reimbursing landowners for any loss of property value that resulted from en-
rolling in the program, the WRP covered the costs involved in transforming agricultural landscapes into wetlands. Given the expenses associated with building levees and installing pumps to convert former agricultural fields into marshes, several landowners in the area had enrolled in the WRP program to cover the costs of transforming former goose hunting spots into duck hunting spots.

The transition from goose to duck hunting was neither easy nor inevitable. Because of the different landscape preferences of geese and ducks, this adaptation involved landscape transformations that, in some cases, were funded by the federal WRP. The question is why did men go to such great lengths to hunt ducks?

In some cases, such as Habitat Flats, the landscape had been transformed so that landowners could generate revenue by continuing to cater to waterfowl hunters, but this was not a universal trend. When I asked why they had transitioned to hunting ducks, men often talked about the importance of maintaining connections with the landscape and their friends. They also said in one way or another that the transition enabled them to maintain their senses of worth. In short, transitioning to duck hunting allowed men to continue doing masculinities associated with respect in their community.

In particular, transitioning to duck hunting enabled men in Sumner to accomplish rural masculinities. As I note in Chapter 1, scholars have written extensively on the topic of rural masculinities. They agree that there is no one way to be a rural man, but they also argue that there tends to be a set of standards that men are expected to achieve because they grew up or live in rural contexts. In addition to being white, working to middle class, heterosexual, and not urban, rural masculinities—immortalized by songs such as Hank Williams Jr.’s “Country Boys Can Survive”—are often characterized by an ability to make a living through hard work and knowledge gained through hands-on experiences and male role models. Rural men are expected to be salt-of-the-earth types who can fish and hunt, do jobs that are physically demanding, operate heavy machinery, and have an in-depth knowledge of local environmental processes gained through years of working and recreating outdoors. There were undoubtedly numerous, complex reasons for transforming the landscape and transitioning to duck hunting, but I argue that the shift to duck hunting occurred, at least in part, because it allowed men in Sumner to achieve intersectional, rural masculinities that they considered respectable.

Don’s comments about his goose-turned-duck-hunting spot provide an excellent starting point for illustrating how this transition enabled the
achievement and reproduction of masculinities. “I don’t do it for the money,” Don explained proudly as we looked out across his duck hunting spot from his Ranger. “As I’ve got older I just like seeing others. The best is when you get to see someone get their first duck. That’s something they’ll never forget. That just makes my season when it happens. Had three of those this year. Yeah, there’s nothing better than watching a young man [pauses] or woman—but they’ve all been boys—get their first duck out of my blind. I just love it.”

Transforming the landscape enabled Don to continue hunting waterfowl, but it also allowed him to be an effective mentor who provided hunting opportunities for subsequent generations of potential hunters. Not surprisingly, given who tends to hunt in the United States and who tends to hunt in Sumner, this had been only boys. By transforming the landscape and transitioning to duck hunting, Don could socialize boys to like an activity widely associated with rural men who provide for themselves and their families by shooting and consuming waterfowl.

The question still remains: Why go through all the trouble to transform the landscape to enable duck hunting? Why not hunt something else that did not require landscape changes, such as raccoons or opossums? After all, hunting is associated with rural masculinities in the United States regardless of what is being hunted.

The answer revolves around hunting being not just about the reproduction of plain, simple rural masculinity. As I discuss in Chapter 1, what animals are hunted and what methods are used to hunt them are associated with varying degrees of status and worth. Unlike other kinds of hunting that could have been taken up, the transition to duck hunting enabled the continued reproduction of a masculinity associated with respectable classes and whiteness.

Andy’s explanation for why he had started hunting ducks after the geese stopped coming to the refuge helps draw out the racial and class dimensions of this transition. Andy was a middle-class man in his fifties with an average build and a thick brown mustache who came into the bar from time to time. He hunted geese in the area from the 1970s through the 1990s, but now he hunted only ducks. During our interview, I asked why he thought there had been a transition to duck hunting. He said, “Like me, when there weren’t any geese around, they just switched to ducks. Once the geese were gone, that’s all that was left to hunt.”

Andy naturalized this process of adaptation by saying that he and others switched to ducks because that was “all that was left to hunt,” but this was
not entirely accurate. He and other men could have started hunting other animals during the fall. There was a sizable raccoon population in the area, for example, and it was legal to hunt them each fall. Importantly though, hunting raccoons would not have fulfilled the same social functions as ducks. Compared to hunting birds, which has predominantly been an activity carried out by working- to upper-class white men, in the United States raccoon hunting has historically been associated with poor white and black men. Stuart Marks explains this:

Chasing the “coon,” or ringtail, became the domain of slaves, freedmen, and the poorer whites who were into the practicalities of feeding themselves rather than impressing their neighbors. . . . There remains a dimension of racial stigma in the activity, in that rural blacks make up a large segment of the producers and consumers of raccoons.14

Ducks were not really the only thing left to hunt, but hunting ducks allowed men to continue doing a masculinity associated with a respectable class and race. In contrast, and given understandings of what it meant to be a good person who was worthy of respect in Sumner, hunting raccoons would not have enabled men to accomplish respectable rural masculinities as effectively. Perhaps it is not altogether surprising that Andy did not even recognize that transitioning to hunting raccoons was a possibility. To recognize this was an option, he would have needed to start from a different standpoint on what was and was not a desirable practice. According to Andy’s white, middle-class imagination, ducks were all that was left to hunt.15

Carl’s reaction when I asked if he ever thought about hunting raccoons instead of ducks shows that the stigmas associated with raccoon hunting undercut this potential avenue for adaptation even if men did recognize that hunting raccoons was an option. Sitting by me at the bar, he gave me a look of surprise and responded:

Raccoons? Why in the hell would I ever do that? That’s the stupidest fucking sport known to man. There’s nothing worse than walking around in the dark in the woods with branches beating you in the fucking face the whole time. You’re just walking along, and a branch smacks you in the face, and then you trip over another one and fall down in the mud. Then you have mud up to your tits. What a stupid fucking sport.
According to Carl, there was no ambiguity about the merits of hunting raccoons. It was not a commendable pursuit carried out by respectable men. After all, what respectable man would do something so completely undesirable? Duck hunting can easily be described in similarly disparaging terms. It often involves getting up at three or four in the morning to carry hundreds of pounds of decoys through the muck and the mud in the hours before dawn just to lure a bird within shooting range by using a kazoo-like instrument, but I never heard duck hunting described in these terms. Descriptions of duck hunting emphasized the beauty of nature, the skills of hunters, and facilitation of connections with friends. As my dad liked to say when we did not have any luck duck hunting, “A bad day in the duck blind is always better than a good day at work.” In contrast to hunting raccoons, duck hunting was a commendable pursuit carried out by respectable men.

Beyond enabling the accomplishment of a masculinity, with its attendant rurality, race, and class, duck hunting facilitated the accomplishment of a masculinity infused with heterosexuality even though it is an activity predicated on men spending large amounts of time with other men. Unlike hunting animals such as deer, which requires one to remain quiet, or quail, which requires one to constantly move around, duck hunting is like goose hunting in that it is generally stationary with only brief flurries of action punctuating periods of sitting and waiting. To pass the time, duck hunters often talk and joke about their jobs, families, and especially memorable hunts. Like goose hunting, then, duck hunting is an activity that is particularly amenable to building homosocial friendships.

A theme that emerged during interviews and everyday conversations, especially for men over forty, is that they liked duck hunting because it was something they could do to spend time with other men who were important to them.

While sitting at the bar one evening, a conversation between Greg and his son James, who was in his thirties, turned to duck hunting.

“You want to go duck hunting in the morning?” James asked his dad.

“We’ll have to break ice, but if we can get some water movement, it’ll be good,” Greg replied. “If we don’t get any, we can just go sit by the woodstove where it’s nice and warm.”

They had prospects for a good hunt, but this was not ultimately that important to Greg. What was most important was that he could spend time with his son. If they had no luck hunting, they could talk by his woodstove.

Ralph also emphasized the significance of homosocial bonding while we talked at the bar one evening. In his seventies, he had been traveling from
southwest Iowa to hunt in Sumner since the 1980s. After we discussed shifting goose migrations and his transition to hunting ducks, I asked why he still came to Sumner since he could easily hunt ducks much closer to home.

“Just to get away really. I love it here. It’s laid back and everyone has always just been really nice,” Ralph said, before admitting, “I honestly don’t really care that much about hunting anymore anyways, but I like to come down and spend time with my buddies.”

Similar to Greg, for Ralph hunting was not what was ultimately most important. What was significant to Ralph was the ability to participate in an activity that allowed him to reconnect with local residents and spend time with his male friends. And duck hunting in Sumner provided a way for accomplishing both ends.

Like other kinds of hunting, duck hunting was largely understood as an activity undertaken by overtly masculine, heterosexual men who were capable, paternalistic providers. Consequently, duck hunting did not draw men’s heterosexuality into question, even though men were hunting ducks at least partly so that they could spend large amounts of time with other men. Comments I heard community members make about hunters and their assumed heterosexuality are illustrative.

During an April 2014 Wild Goose Festival Planning Committee meeting, Susan proposed putting together a cookbook to sell at the festival. She had grown up in Sumner and was now involved with a number of civic groups. In her forties and the youngest member of the planning committee, Susan was particularly adept at suggesting new ways the group could generate interest in the festival. In the cramped city hall building, she said, “I was thinking about a community cookbook. I was looking back through and the last one made in Sumner was in the 1980s as far as I know.”

“Everyone buys cookbooks!” Carol said, excited about the idea.

“Well, I printed off some things as far as information about production goes,” Susan said.

As the stack of papers detailing printing costs and logistics was passed from person to person, Susan expanded on her rationale for wanting to make a cookbook, “When the guys come hunting they always want to take something back to their wives. There’s never anything like that for them to take from the festival.”

Liz, who was in her fifties, offered a strikingly similar appraisal of goose and duck hunters’ sexuality during our interview. A resident of Sumner for more than forty years, when large numbers of hunters still came to the community, Liz, along with her husband, had operated a goose- and duck-
picking business for over twenty-five years. As we talked about their business, Liz clarified her role, “I always cleaned the birds because I wanted them to be oven ready for . . . the hunter’s wife because my theory was if that bird wasn’t clean, the wife wouldn’t let the hunter come back. So I wanted it to be oven ready.” Like Susan, Liz believed goose and duck hunters coming to town were heterosexual. They came to Sumner to spend time with other men, but hunters were assumed to have a wife waiting for them at home. Like goose hunting, duck hunting provided an effective outlet for homosocial bonding that also enabled the accomplishment of heterosexual masculinities.19

Duck hunting was a kind of hunting that allowed men to continue to bond with other men while doing rural masculinities infused with heterosexuality, respectable classes, and whiteness. Much in the way that intersectional masculinities have informed responses to shifting social and ecological conditions in other contexts,20 accomplishing intersectional masculinities helps explain why many men were willing to go to such great lengths to transition to hunting ducks after goose migrations shifted. Unlike other contexts, though, in which culturally legitimated ways of being men were fundamentally transformed so that men could accomplish respectable masculinities as social and ecological conditions shifted under their feet,21 the terms and conditions of masculinity remained largely the same in Sumner. Hunting had been and continued to be centrally important to masculinities. Men just changed the ground under their feet to enable the continued accomplishment of respectable rural masculinities through hunting.

The transition to duck hunting enabled the continued accomplishment of intersectional masculinities, but there were important class differences in how men hunted ducks. It was also apparent that these class differences were not as pronounced as with goose hunting. As a result, and what Greg meant by his reference to “the big dogs” who could afford not to enroll landscapes in the WRP, the transition to duck hunting had facilitated the emergence of new ways of reproducing classed inequalities among men in the community. The transition to duck hunting enabled new ways of doing intersectional masculinities in Sumner.

Class Inequalities by Any Other Name

“With the ducks this year, there just wasn’t any water anywhere in those [river] bottoms,” Kurt said to me as we sat at the bar following the 2013 duck season. Kurt had grown up in Sumner, moved to Kansas City for work, and then returned after retiring. In his fifties and usually wearing blue jeans, a
flannel shirt, and a camo hat, he was an avid duck hunter who liked to talk about the ins and outs of hunting and cooking wild game.

“Which bottoms?” I asked.

“The ones north and south of here. Well, I shouldn’t say there wasn’t any water. There was some. Those guys at Habitat Flats had it. That’s another thing,” Kurt said.

“What do you mean that’s another thing?” I prodded him.

“Well, they have quite a bit of land around here. I guess it’s good that they pull some ducks in, but there’s some anger towards them. Growing corn, pumping it, and shooting all the ducks around here, you know?” Kurt explained.

Kurt was not the only one with animosity toward Habitat Flats. Other working-class men in the community often disparaged the operation and those who hunted there.

Simon, for example, berated Habitat Flats while we sat at the bar talking about his recent duck hunting experiences. In his twenties, Simon was born and raised in Sumner. During the week, he drove back and forth to a construction job in Kansas City, but he spent most weekends hunting or fishing around Sumner.

Curious about the reason for his animosity, I asked him, “Because they suck all the ducks with their flooded corn?”

“No. It’s because they make it so damn expensive for everyone else to hunt around here. They’re out leasing up all the fields before the year. Giving a farmer $300 with the agreement they can have access in case there are some birds in it later in the year. And you’ll try to go and get permission, and the farmer will tell you no because they already have it leased,” he said.

“Oh yeah?” I asked.

“Yeah. Then I guess opening weekend they had two guys down there. Came in with brand-new, in-the-box guns. Couldn’t even put them together. Had to get someone else to put them together for them. Then, evidently they went through two cases of shells in three days!” Simon said, dismayed that the two hunters needed five hundred shotgun shells to kill their combined limit of thirty-six ducks.

“Two cases in three days?!” I asked, equally shocked that any hunters could be such bad shots.

Beginning to laugh, Simon continued, “Yep. Two cases. Fuck, blindfold me and let me shoot left handed and I could shoot their ducks with less shells than that.”
Kurt’s and Simon’s comments and other opinions on Habitat Flats carried an awareness of the classed disparities influencing where men were able to hunt ducks in the area. Those with enough money had access to large fields of flooded corn where they could shoot ducks regardless of their skills as hunters, while others had access only to wetlands, sloughs, and ponds. And it was not just where men hunted that helped reproduce class differences and inequalities. How men hunted ducks was equally indicative of class disparities.

Some men in the area used water pumps or machines called Ice Eaters to keep water open once temperatures dropped below freezing toward the end of duck season. This was an important advantage because ducks are generally repelled by frozen water. An Ice Eater alone was roughly $800, and they required a power source. Some hunters used generators, but others paid large sums to run electricity to their duck hunting spots. One couple I talked with who owned some duck hunting locations near the refuge said they had spent $70,000 to install electricity so that they could keep water open when temperatures dropped. Obviously, not everyone had $70,000 or even $800 to spend on such amenities, so those without access to this equipment were literally and figuratively frozen out of hunting toward the end of duck season.

Political-economic institutions inform the reproduction of class inequalities, and similarly, duck hunting regulations facilitated the reproduction of class inequalities among duck hunters. Regulations regarding corn were especially significant. According to state and federal regulations, growing corn and then intentionally flooding the field up to the unharvested ears was legal. Consequently, it was legal to spend tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars to build levees around fields, install water pumps and wells, and then plant hundreds of acres of corn just to flood it each fall. On the other hand, buying a ten-dollar bag of corn and then dumping it to attract ducks was illegal baiting. If intentionally flooding corn were illegal or if hunting over dumped corn were legal, it is reasonable to assume that hunting over flooded corn would not be integrally important to class differences and inequalities among men. However, because it was legal to hunt over flooded corn and illegal to dump a ten-dollar bag of corn, hunting over flooded corn enabled class inequalities among men. Upper-class men legally hunted large fields of corn that had been grown and then intentionally flooded, while those who could not afford such amenities were relegated to hunting without bait.

WRP regulations also contributed to this classed disparity in hunting. As Greg noted, there were drawbacks to being in the WRP because of the
use stipulations that came along with the funds accessed through the program. Because the WRP sought to enhance biodiversity and reduce pesticide use, 5 percent or less of the area in the easement could be cultivated annually. If landowners could afford to, they avoided the WRP, left their ground in agricultural production, and paid to build levees around their fields themselves. This way, they could continue planting large tracts of corn and flood it in the fall after the crop matured.

This provided a decided advantage for duck hunting compared to land in the WRP, because large fields of flooded corn amount to an all-you-can-eat buffet to migrating ducks, as an owner of Habitat Flats described it in a Twitter post. “With rain on the way tonight, time is of the essence! #duck-buffet.” The post included a photo of a corn planter being pulled behind a tractor with a massive, tilled field in the background. Duck season was still five months away, but by October the field would be a large tract of flooded corn ready to attract ducks.

Kurt and Simon, making their remarks about the patrons of Habitat Flats, indicated that hunting ducks over flooded corn had become part of what it meant to be upper class. Conversely, not having such access implied to men that they were not part of this class. Ben and Darren’s conversation before the start of a Friends of Swan Lake meeting highlights this point.

“I’ve been watching ducks tornado into Habitat Flats the past few nights,” Ben said to Darren excitedly, in a reference to how large flights of ducks landing into a small area can look like a tornado. “I mean, they’re just funneling in there!” Ben, in his thirties, and Darren, in his forties, had grown up in the area and currently worked in agriculture.

Nodding his head knowingly, Darren agreed, “Oh yeah.”

Beginning to laugh, Ben concluded, “If I hunted there it’d have to just be one shot each time a group came through. That’s the only way you’d get your money’s worth!”

By fantasizing about intentionally prolonging a hunt at Habitat Flats because of how expensive it was to hunt there, Ben linked an ability to hunt over flooded corn with being upper class. To him, not being able to afford such hunting meant that he was not part of this class.

Understandings of rurality often infused how local men thought about the classed dimensions of hunting over flooded corn and about those who hunted at Habitat Flats. I do not know whether the patrons of Habitat Flats were primarily from rural or urban areas, but according to many local men, those who hunted at Habitat Flats were primarily urban men described as “corporate,” “suits,” and “city boys.” By portraying themselves as better duck
hunters than the supposedly urban men at Habitat Flats, local men constructed respectable rural masculinities even though they usually did not have access to the best hunting spots in the area. Simon’s comments are telling because he was emasculating the men who hunted at Habitat Flats by emphasizing their inability to properly assemble or use their fancy new guns. Jay had a similar take, saying he would not want to hunt at Habitat Flats because the men who hunted there were “New Yorkers who probably didn’t know which end of the gun to shoot.” According to such accounts, those hunting at Habitat Flats were not really any better than local men even though they had better hunting opportunities. In fact, they were lesser men because they needed the added, classed advantages of flooded corn to kill their ducks. After all, Simon could have shot his limit of ducks at Habitat Flats “blindfolded” and “left handed.”

Although some in the community were angered by the privileges enjoyed by those who hunted over flooded corn, not everyone saw problems with it. Fred described attracting ducks with flooded corn as “part of the game,” for example. Meritocratic understandings of work, wealth, and class championed in the United States informed why some in Sumner thought this arrangement was acceptable.

After acknowledging that the WRP use stipulations angered some in the community, Greg said, “I don’t see anything wrong with it myself. My thing is, if you make enough money to buy whatever you want to, you should be able to enjoy it.” Instead of being upset, Greg felt that men with money had worked to earn it and should therefore be able to enjoy it however they liked. Of course, explaining disparities in hunting practices through work ethics ignores the realities of wealth accumulation in the United States as well as how state regulations concerning corn were centrally important to the class disparities of duck hunting.

Class disparities in hunting methods were not as apparent with goose hunting from the 1950s until the early 1990s. Besides a gun and some shotgun shells, no specialized equipment was required to hunt geese. Stan put this succinctly at the bar one afternoon. He recalled, “Hell, all you’d have to do was go stand out in a fencerow and wait for some geese to fly over. You didn’t need decoys or calls or any of that stuff.” Similarly, I can remember using worn out tires cut into thirds as decoys when hunting geese near the refuge with my dad as a small boy. Used tires were not exactly high-cost, high-tech, high-quality hunting equipment, but that did not matter, because even during the early 1990s there were enough geese that expensive equipment was not required. Because attracting geese to hunting locations did
not require additional landscape transformations beyond annual cultivation practices, goose hunting in the area was relatively inexpensive. The going rate for a spot in a blind near the refuge was just two dollars a day.

Although shooting geese as they flew by had been an effective strategy, trying to do the same with ducks is less effective because they are much faster and tend to cruise at altitudes well out of shooting range. To lure ducks within shooting range, hunters use decoys that cost from $50 to more than $200 a dozen and duck calls that cost from $20 to more than $150 apiece. Combined with the costs involved in landscape transformations, this made duck hunting far more expensive than goose hunting ever was. Three days of hunting at Habitat Flats at $2,100 was on the high end, but even on the low end, hunters from out of town paid between $100 and $200 per person for a single morning of hunting in a blind with a guide. If hunters shot their limits of mallards and pintails, which are the largest duck species, this works out to roughly $116 to $16 per pound of duck meat.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, residents indicated that duck hunters tended to be from a higher class than the goose hunters who used to come to the community. Though residents were aware of these class differences, they very rarely labeled them as such. Similar to how residents obscured the significance of the institutional dimensions of class in Chapter 1, they only alluded to, purposefully talked around, or even explicitly denied there were class differences between goose and duck hunters.

During our interview, I asked Don if there had been any consequences for the community because of the transition from goose to duck hunting. He said, “Yeah, people would come in and the goose hunting was so much—you know, I’m tickled to death that we’ve got the ducks, and I hope we can continue to have them, but the goose hunting brought in so many more people, you know, because there was three blinds on every 160 acres. Where the duck hunting, you know, is more . . . clubs. It’s an expensive deal. You know, where all the property is owned and it’s not leased out [trails off].” Don tried again, “Duck hunting is a [trails off].” He paused to think. “It’s more of a [trails off].” Finally he said, “I’m trying to think how to say it.” Failing to find the words to convey what he was thinking, he changed course and quickly concluded, “It just costs a lot more money to duck hunt than it did [for someone] to come up here with [their] dad in 1970.”

It was as if class were an unspeakable or potentially unthinkable word. Although Don was directly referring to the classed dimensions of duck hunting and how it could be cost prohibitive to the working- and middle-class men who used to come to the community, he did not say “class.” He
pondered for some time how to convey that goose hunting had not involved such clear class disparities before concluding that duck hunting “just cost a lot more money.”

Similarly, during my interview with Fred and Jan, Jan came to a point where she was talking about class differences between goose and duck hunters. Seeming to imply that duck hunters tended to be from a higher class than goose hunters, she then explicitly denied this was the case.

“You know, the thing with the goose hunter, typically we’ve seen, or at least I think I’ve seen, is goose hunters are a little different breed than duck hunters,” Jan said. “Goose hunters, they’re a little more laid back. They’re a little more involved. You know, they want to go hunt, and then they’d go to town and they spend a little money in town and they get acquainted with people. . . . Duck hunters are very private people as a whole, I see. They’re more money. They seem to be a higher—and I don’t mean—I don’t mean a higher class. They just spend more money.”

Though Jan denied there were class differences between the goose hunters of the past and the duck hunters of the present, she brought up these differences later in our interview when she said that goose hunters “tended to be a little more blue collar.” While Jan denied there were class differences between goose and duck hunters, her use of “blue collar” highlighted the shift in the classed masculinities enabled by the transition from goose to duck hunting. Working- and middle-class men living in Sumner still accessed duck hunting spots by drawing on their connections throughout the community, but a large portion of the working- and middle-class men who used to come to town to hunt geese were priced out of hunting ducks near Swan Lake.

Class was talked around, but residents were right about the classed dynamics of the shift from goose to duck hunting. There were undoubtedly upper-class goose hunters in the past, and a few working- and middle-class men still came to the community to hunt ducks, but a comparatively large proportion of the men who had come to the area to hunt geese were from the working and middle classes. Upton Henderson’s study of the economic impacts of goose hunting around the refuge supports this point. Of the 181 hunters he surveyed during the 1963 and 1964 hunting seasons, 28.2 percent were laborers, 5 percent were civil servants, 4.4 percent worked for schools, and 1.7 percent were servicemen. Conversely, just 21 percent were described as professionals or businessmen.

The shift to duck hunting refashioned the meanings of waterfowl hunting as well as class in the community. Goose hunting was a relatively inex-
pensive undertaking accessible to men from a spectrum of classes, but duck hunting was a much more cost-prohibitive activity that was wildly expensive if one wanted access to the best hunting spots and equipment. Consequently, waterfowl hunting was now associated with class inequalities. Further, what it meant to belong to the upper class had also been transformed. In large part because of hunting regulations that concerned corn, the ability to hunt over large swaths of flooded corn had become part of what it meant to belong to the upper class. To those like Kurt, Simon, and Ben, not having access to such hunting spots meant they were not part of this class.

The shift from goose to duck hunting also undermined what Emile Durkheim refers to as social integration, or the degree to which individuals feel as if they are part of a broader community of people. Recognizing this consequence of the shift from goose to duck hunting further highlights that an adaptation tied to masculinities with intersections of race, class, sexuality, and rurality had important ramifications for how community was rearranged and sustained in Sumner. In other words, it draws further attention to how intersecting inequalities, adaptations, and community are linked.