

As they say, every mistake is an opportunity to learn. In the newspaper business, every clarification or correction is evidence of that process in action. In last week's column I goofed on the description of an area where my dog, Whiskey, was retrieving ducks for a group of hunters with Gordie Montgomery of Gordie's Wildlife. The resulting characterization from my sentence was that we were hunting over an entire field of planted millet that had been mowed. Photos with the story showed that to be inaccurate, but the problem with the description is that it would be illegal to hunt ducks over a mowed seed crop. Montgomery works closely with wildlife law enforcement officers in counties where he guides and they're aware of what he has in the works, so the erroneous sentence wasn't much of a legal problem for him, but it definitely was not a good impression to leave with people and was misleading for readers. What Montgomery has done with the field where we were hunting and the entire 500-plus acres he manages on the property (exact location withheld) is a great example of what can be done to enhance lands for waterfowl. So I'm taking advantage of my goof to write about what I didn't have room to bring up last week some of the rules around waterfowl hunting. The rules in question involve the act of baiting as it relates to agriculture. Any waterfowl hunter knows you can't hunt waterfowl with bait. Waterfowl hunters also know that agriculture fields are great places to hunt waterfowl but there are limits on which fields are legal to hunt and it's up to hunters to know the rules. Agricultural lands, and by extension lands managed to attract waterfowl, have to be approached carefully for hunting. Debate sometimes arises about interpretations of the rules set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Waterfowl can be hunted over standing crops that have been flooded or over crops that are "normally harvested" and then flooded. But hunting waterfowl over a crop that has not been harvested but that has been manipulated (rolled/disc'd) is considered baiting under the regulations, according to Fish

and Wildlife. If youâ€™re interested in the full set of rules, they can be found online at fws.gov/le/waterfowl-hunting-and-baiting.html. That word â€œnormalâ€• is often where debate rises about agriculture fields and properties managed for waterfowl and hunters. â€œBasically, if you planted it and put on seed, you need to leave it alone and not do anything with it,â€• said Josh Richardson, migratory waterfowl biologist for the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. But, he added, â€œThere are some gray areas.â€• â€œGenerally, most folks, if theyâ€™re active enough in waterfowl hunting and land management to create food plots, theyâ€™ve looked at the rules and talked to wardens or people like myself and theyâ€™ve got pointers on the subject,â€• he said. Consulting with biologists and law enforcement officers is a key element in any project like this. Both Montgomery and Richardson said as much. The state manipulates areas and floods them in Wetland Development Units. For the most part, the department uses â€œmoist-soil managementâ€• to encourage growth of native marsh plants like smartweed that produce plenty of wild food for waterfowl, Richardson said. Every few years, plots have to be managed to prevent problems, like cattails or undesirable weeds taking over, and they might be planted, he said. â€œEight, 10 feet tall,â€• Montgomery said of the cattails that choked out his marsh area for more than a decade. â€œThis year was only the second time in 10 or 12 years you could get that big tractor in here. The cattails just shaded it and kept it so wet all the time, but conditions were just right this year.â€• A solid mass of cattails doesnâ€™t help migrating waterfowl much, and the plants are notoriously resilient. Montgomery said he sprayed the field with herbicide once, then again about 3½-weeks later and let it sit again. Then he used a Cultipacker to mash down the dead plants, burned them off, then cross-disced and prepared the field for planting with golden millet. He strip-sprayed areas to remove some of the undesirable weeds that returned as the millet grew but left plenty of natural cover and browse, too. He also created open holes where ducks could land and loaf. Before the

millet started to put on seed, his tractor time was finished. “Yeah, I’ve got some unreal labor hours put into this marsh,” he said. But he also added, “It looks like a completely different property now.” Different, and with dozens, if not hundreds, of migrating ducks on it most days, I would add. Anyone who has been around Montgomery for any time knows how much he enjoys working the fields, watching things grow and observing the wildlife that follows his tractor work. Most of the millet still is standing in the flooded field where cattails once dominated. There also are strips and patches of native weeds, no cattails, but much of the millet crop was knocked down by “thousands, clouds” of migrating blackbirds early in the season, he said. “That’s kind of hard to watch after all the time you put into it,” he said. “I didn’t know if it was going to be all gone or what, but it ended up that they helped us. They land on it and knock it over as they feed, but they waste a lot of the seed. Once it’s knocked over they don’t come back to it and they move to another spot where it’s standing.” Ducks are doing roughly the same thing now, coming through in waves large and small, cleaning up the seed left by the blackbirds. The ducks use the area to feed, and loaf, and then they move on to other spots “at least, the ones that arrive when Montgomery or his hunters aren’t around. Guide Gordie Montgomery of Gordie’s Wildlife can be contacted at mail@gordieswildlife.com or 918-557-4791. Kelly Bostian 918-581-8357 kelly.bostian@tulsaworld.com