

# Ducks and Rice Are Staples in Stuttgart

By Glen Sparks

Every fall, as the air gets cool, the ducks head to Stuttgart. Flocks fly near the giant grain silos just west of downtown.

Stuttgart, a city of about 9,400, calls itself the “duck and rice capital of the world.” Hard clay underneath the topsoil makes this area ideal for growing rice. The place also seems ideal for migratory birds escaping the cold in Canada. The city lies on the Mississippi flyway, near the meandering Arkansas and White rivers. The Bayou Meto and several lakes make the Stuttgart region that much more inviting to waterfowl. Ducks also like to gobble up any remains from the summer harvest of rice.

As the ducks flock to Stuttgart, so do hunters from across the country and world. Among the “big names” who come to hunt are Vice President Dick Cheney and Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, say city officials.

“We really don’t need to advertise the duck hunting here,” says Stephen Bell of the Chamber of Commerce. “It’s pretty much on reputation. There are times it seems like the whole town is in camouflage.”

The duck hunting season adds \$1 million a day to the Stuttgart economy, says Bell. That’s quite a chunk for a city whose budget last year was just \$10.7 million. That’s why city leaders keep their fingers crossed that there will be enough ducks for a full 60-day season every year.

To kick off the season, Stuttgart throws a big party during the week of Thanksgiving. Crowds fill the downtown streets to celebrate the Wings Over the Prairie Festival and the World Championship Duck Calling Contest. The city even holds a Queen Mallard Pageant. The local chamber organizes the festival, which last year cost about \$370,000 and netted a \$135,000 profit. “It’s better than a bake sale,” Bell jokes.

Many hunters pursue their quarry at one of the approximately 70 commercial and private duck clubs that lie within a 45-mile radius of Stuttgart. Farmers and duck-club owners use pneumatic tubes to flood acres of fields and timberland to lure the ducks for the hunters.

When the hunters are not sitting in duck blinds, they gather at Mack’s Prairie Wings,

a business on the edge of town that is dedicated to serving waterfowl hunters. What started as a small store downtown in 1944 has grown into retail and warehouse space that’s almost as big as two football fields. Mack’s does so much business that Winchester Ammunition of East Alton, Ill., has named it the No. 1 steel shot dealer in the world for seven straight years.

Fueling the boom was the addition of a mail-order catalog business in 1993.

“We went from being a state-wide company to being a national company when we began publishing the catalog,” says Deena Fischer, a spokeswoman. This year, 1.8 million catalogs will be mailed out.

Stuttgart’s economy doesn’t depend solely on the great outdoors. Lennox Industries, for example, employs 910 in making commercial heating and air-conditioning units. Lennox is big enough that suppliers are opening up shop nearby. In late July, Assembly Component Systems Inc. opened a new plant in Stuttgart and hired 11 workers. The Kansas-based supplier makes fasteners for Lennox air conditioners. Two other suppliers also have opened up shop near Lennox: Scott Manufacturing Inc. and Industrial Crate and Supply Co.

Tim Walker, a Lennox executive, says he hopes Lennox can attract more suppliers to Stuttgart.

“Agricultural communities like this are full of talented, skilled workers who fit in well with heavy manufacturing jobs,” Walker says. “Plus, when suppliers move close to us, we save money on travel costs and it frees up space for us. We don’t need to keep as much inventory.”

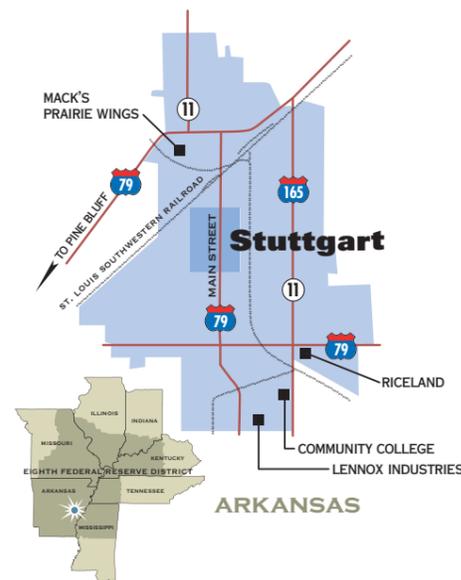
Downtown Stuttgart is a mix of mom-and-pop shops. Brenda Dickson, a third-generation florist, owns Fern and Feather. Business goes up and down, she says.

“This is a farming community,” Dickson says. “If the economy does well, our store does well. Stuttgart is probably like just about every other small Southern town. We were hurt by Wal-Mart and other discount stores.”

The Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism hopes that Stuttgart’s fowl reputation can sprout some new wings. State officials want the city to promote itself also as a bird-watching hub.

“It’d be kind of odd, though,” Bell says. “People come in to kill ducks, but now we’d be asking them to come and watch them.”

*Glen Sparks is an editor at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.*



## Stuttgart, Ark.

### BY THE NUMBERS

Population .....Stuttgart 9,377 (2004)  
Arkansas County 20,130 (2004)

Labor Force .....Arkansas County 11,584 (May 2005)

Unemployment Rate .....Arkansas County 6.3 (May 2005)

Per Capita Personal Income .....Arkansas County \$26,489 (2003)

Top Five Employers  
Riceland Foods Inc. ....1,025  
Lennox Industries.....910  
Producers Rice Mill Inc. ....425  
Kinder-Harris Inc. ....102  
Rice Capital Inc. ....97

## Rice Industry Stands Tall in Stuttgart

In a town where some cars sport “Have a Rice Day” bumper stickers and grain silos dominate the skyline, it’s not surprising to hear Bill Reed say that rice “is why Stuttgart is here.”

Reed is a spokesman for Riceland Foods Inc., which is not only the biggest employer in town but also the biggest rice miller in the world. It employs 1,025 in Stuttgart. Two other millers employ another 500 or so.

“It’d be hard to come to Stuttgart and find a family that does not include at least one person who works in the rice industry,” says Reed.

W.E. Hope was the first farmer to grow rice in Stuttgart, on a 9-foot by 27-foot plot of land in 1901. Hope apparently had noticed the dense layer of clay that rests beneath the prairie topsoil. The hard clay was ideal for holding water. Rice grows best in flooded fields.

Arkansas harvests 41 percent of the nation’s rice, almost twice as much as No. 2 California (21 percent). Riceland alone is responsible for almost one-third of the U.S. crop.

Local farmers founded the Riceland cooperative in 1921 to get better prices. Today, 9,000 farmers belong. Forty of them sit on the board of directors.

The average Riceland farm is about 750 to 1,000 acres, Reed says. About one-third to one-half is devoted to rice, with the rest going to soybeans, one of the other crops Riceland processes. The number of rice farmers in the area is dwindling, Reed says, but the typical farm is getting bigger as technology improves and the agricultural industry looks for ways to cut costs.

“Labor is part of the issue,” Reed says. “There isn’t much available. Therefore, farm equipment is getting bigger and faster to make up the difference.”

After farmers thresh their rice with combines, they deliver the crop to Riceland, which dries it, stores it, transports it, processes it, markets it and pays the farmers.

Riceland sells about \$1 billion worth of product every year from Stuttgart, with the rice and oil products going out across the nation and to 75 cities abroad. The rice

itself is packaged in bags ranging from four ounces to 2,000 pounds.

A few years ago, after the Bush administration lifted certain trade restrictions, Riceland began shipping rice to Cuba. Iraq is emerging again as a major market. Mexico, Haiti, Saudi Arabia and Europe also buy Riceland rice in bulk.

“About 95 percent of the rice that is grown in the world stays in that area,” Reed says. “China and India, for instance, are big rice producers. For us, though, the export market is very important.”



Stuttgart lies in the richest rice-growing area in the United States. Riceland is the city’s largest employer and the biggest rice miller in the world.

## Ducks Mean Big Business

Hunters enjoy Wildlife Farms almost as much as the ducks do. Waterfowl head to Wildlife Farms every fall and hang out near the White River or on one of the many Wildlife lakes. Hunters pay \$550 a day to bag a duck or goose. That price includes the guided hunt, a heated blind for duck hunting, plus lodging and meals.

Wildlife Farms is one of about 70 private and commercial duck clubs within an hour’s drive of Stuttgart. The duck clubs help prop up the economy in a part of the country that is struggling to gain new industry, says Jeff Collins, director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Arkansas. Club owners usually lease land from farmers during the fall and winter, Collins says.

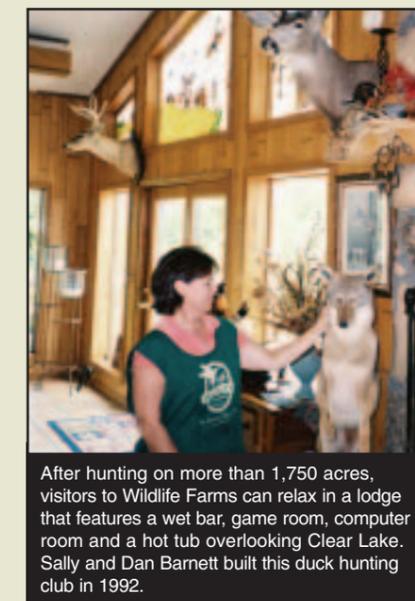
“Duck hunting is a part of the social network in this part of the country,” Collins says. “Duck hunting is booming. It’s natural to think that duck clubs also are booming.”

Waiting lists can be long to join some private duck clubs, Collins says. He is 30th on a waiting list for a club that has just 20 or so members.

Sally and Dan Barnett established Wildlife Farms in 1992 just a few miles east of Stuttgart. The couple built a 12,000-square-foot lodge that overlooks Clear Lake. Sally Barnett runs the business day to day, while her husband continues to work as a stockbroker in Little Rock.

Wildlife Farms stays busy all year. Guests fish for bass, catfish and crappie in the summer. Spring is a popular time for company retreats and business meetings. Wildlife Farms added a 3,000-square-foot conference center in 2000 that can handle up to 120 people for day meetings and 66 people for overnight visits. The lodge also is a popular place for weddings, receptions and family gatherings.

Business booms in the fall and winter. Hunters come from as far



After hunting on more than 1,750 acres, visitors to Wildlife Farms can relax in a lodge that features a wet bar, game room, computer room and a hot tub overlooking Clear Lake. Sally and Dan Barnett built this duck hunting club in 1992.

away as the Philippines and Argentina to Wildlife Farms in quest of deer, turkey, pheasant, partridge, but most of all, duck. By mid-September, rooms at the lodge are full. They stay that way until mid-February.