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 camouflages.”

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 $150,000 profit. “It’s better than a bake sale,” Bell jokes.

Waiting lists can be long to join some private duck clubs, Collins says. “But we’re on a waiting list for a club that has just 20 or so members.”

Hunters enjoy Wildlife Farms almost as much as the ducks do. Waterfowl head to Wildlife Farms in quest of deer, turkey, pheasant, partridge, but most of all ducks. The farm is a business on the edge of town that is dedicated to serving waterfowl hunters. What started as a small stone 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 1995. “We went from being a state-wide company to being a national company when we began publishing the catalog,” says Deena Fischer, a spokeswoman. “There’s another million catalogs will be mailed out this year. 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 attracted to serving waterfowl hunters. What does well. Stuttgart is probably like just about any other small Southern town. We were hurt during the fall and winter, Collins says. “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 farmers want 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 of rice and oil products 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, Saud, Arabia and Europe also buy Riceland rice in bulk.

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

Waiting lists can be long to join some private duck clubs, Collins says. “We’re 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 away as the Philippines and Argentina to Wildlife Farms in quest of duck, turkey, pheasant, partridge, but most of all, duck. By mid-September, rooms at the lodge are full. They stay that way until mid-February.

Ducks and Rice Are Staples in Stuttgart

Ducks Mean Big Business

The Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism hopes that Stuttgart’s fowl reputation will 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.”

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