



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Megan Durham 202-343-5634

1986 SPRING WATERFOWL SURVEYS FIND BREEDING DUCK NUMBERS IMPROVED OVER LAST YEAR

The number of breeding ducks increased this spring following improved habitat conditions and a 27 percent reduction in last fall's duck harvest, the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reported today.

Breeding populations of important species such as mallards and pintails, while improved over 1985, are still well below their average for the past 30 years. Mallard breeding populations in surveyed areas increased to 6,351,000, or 16 percent over last year's record low of 5.5 million, but still 24 percent below their average for 1955-1985. Pintails showed less improvement, increasing to 3,201,000, only 9 percent over last year and 44 percent below their 30-year average. Numbers of blue-winged teal increased 24 percent over last year, and gadwall, green-winged teal, northern shoveler, and redheads showed increases. Wigeon and scaup numbers are about the same as last year. Canvasbacks increased 8 percent over last year but remain 22 percent below their long-term average.

Service Director Frank Dunkle said that the improvement in this year's duck populations was welcome but should be interpreted with caution.

"This is only one year's data," Dunkle said. "It doesn't necessarily mean we are seeing the beginning of a trend toward increasing duck numbers, although we fervently hope that is the case. We can't credit all of the increase to last year's more restrictive hunting regulations. The increase is probably due to a combination of improved habitat conditions in some key nesting areas and last fall's reduced harvest."

Last year, after several years of severe drought in prime duck nesting areas of Canada and the United States, the number of breeding ducks counted was the lowest ever recorded in 31 years of surveys. As a result, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued restrictive duck hunting regulations for last fall's hunting season in an effort to reduce duck harvest in the United States by 25 percent.

Recently completed harvest survey figures for the 1985-86 hunting season show that the total duck harvest was 27 percent below 1984-85. Harvest reductions were greatest in the Central Flyway (35 percent), followed by the Mississippi Flyway (29 percent), Atlantic Flyway (26 percent), and Pacific Flyway (13 percent). The total U.S. goose harvest was also lower -- 9 percent below the previous year -- while the coot harvest increased slightly.

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The reduced harvest is attributed to a combination of factors including lowered hunter expectations, with fewer hunters going afield as evidenced by a 10 percent decrease in 1985-86 Duck Stamp sales; the more restrictive hunting regulations; and the reduced fall flight of ducks, making birds less available to hunters.

Wetland conditions improved in some areas this spring, but dry conditions were reported elsewhere. Pond numbers increased substantially in southern Manitoba, but portions of southern Saskatchewan suffered a significant loss of water. Following last year's improvement, dry conditions were observed again in prairie areas of southern Alberta during the survey. In Montana and the Dakotas, wetland numbers increased markedly over last year. -

Overall, breeding duck numbers in all areas surveyed increased to 35 million ducks, up 14 percent from last year's 31 million but remaining 12 percent below the average for 1955-85. Total duck numbers increased substantially in Alaska, southern Manitoba, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Wisconsin, while a smaller increase was reported in northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories. Numbers remained essentially unchanged from last year in southern Saskatchewan. Relatively large decreases were observed in southern Alberta and California, with the decline in southern Alberta bringing total duck numbers to the lowest level ever recorded there. In the combined prairie-parkland areas of southern Canada, total duck numbers increased 4 percent over 1985, while in Montana and the Dakotas, duck numbers increased 59 percent and include the largest number of breeding ducks ever observed in South Dakota.

The information on duck numbers and habitat conditions comes from surveys conducted by teams of U.S. and Canadian biologists. The North American waterfowl survey is the most extensive wildlife census in the world. Each May, the biologists fly 38,000 miles of transects at low altitudes in small aircraft over major portions of the nesting grounds. In addition, ground crews provide survey information to correct for the birds not seen from the air. The May surveys provide data on both the general conditions of nesting areas and the estimated numbers of ducks and geese in these areas. In July, additional flights are made over some of the same areas to determine the number of duck broods produced. This information is used to forecast changes from year to year in the anticipated fall populations of waterfowl.

Hunting regulations for this fall's waterfowl season have not yet been proposed. A public hearing is scheduled at 9 a.m. August 1 in the Interior Department auditorium in Washington, D.C., to discuss proposals for the 1986-87 waterfowl hunting season. Once the regulations are proposed, public comments will be accepted. After the public comment period, the Service will publish regulatory "frameworks" within which the States will select their hunting seasons and regulations. After the States have notified the Service of their selections, the Service will publish final waterfowl hunting regulations in mid-September.

Table 2.--Breeding population estimates for 10 species of ducks, 1955-86 (in thousands)*

Year	Mallard	Gadwall	American wigeon	Green-winged teal	Blue-winged teal	Northern shoveler	Northern Pintail	Redhead	Canvasback	Scaup
1955	10,345	1,106	3,333	2,076	6,436	1,965	9,251	733	595	7,100
1956	11,711	1,202	3,712	1,898	6,267	2,084	10,124	928	692	6,595
1957	10,946	1,102	3,208	1,293	5,449	1,744	6,856	684	600	6,535
1958	12,904	687	3,372	1,618	5,799	1,515	6,889	524	713	6,040
1959	10,292	683	3,779	3,153	5,300	1,649	7,228	641	481	8,220
1960	8,206	873	3,165	1,630	4,303	1,859	5,769	542	575	5,566
1961	8,290	1,422	3,219	2,216	4,833	1,625	4,860	437	396	6,764
1962	6,144	1,610	2,721	1,119	3,890	1,633	4,299	664	385	6,398
1963	7,360	1,578	2,209	1,754	4,587	1,435	4,361	396	523	6,564
1964	6,974	1,223	2,630	2,051	4,943	1,685	4,111	560	658	6,326
1965	5,948	1,692	2,695	1,526	4,628	1,607	4,301	568	505	5,383
1966	7,401	1,976	2,901	2,219	5,616	2,272	5,777	747	683	5,421
1967	8,205	1,638	2,637	1,944	4,715	2,244	5,870	846	556	5,877
1968	7,586	2,098	2,783	1,805	3,697	1,811	4,225	502	557	5,971
1969	8,065	1,837	3,192	1,991	4,514	2,150	6,390	759	530	6,338
1970	10,379	1,698	3,752	2,259	5,633	2,269	7,004	834	601	6,930
1971	9,843	1,733	3,425	2,352	5,426	2,052	6,291	693	441	6,149
1972	9,867	1,776	3,478	2,407	5,673	2,505	7,875	489	429	9,527
1973	8,781	1,198	3,665	2,444	4,866	1,657	5,114	754	696	7,535
1974	7,392	1,562	3,003	2,221	5,437	2,060	7,165	613	493	7,045
1975	8,109	1,672	2,862	2,038	6,441	1,994	6,387	974	706	7,846
1976	8,637	1,478	2,699	1,844	5,023	1,818	6,045	946	686	6,973
1977	8,226	1,546	2,678	1,952	4,626	1,616	4,971	688	702	7,490
1978	7,695	1,593	3,809	2,978	4,497	2,162	5,664	833	423	7,125
1979	8,444	1,889	3,388	2,920	5,278	2,555	6,070	774	606	9,135
1980	8,003	1,459	3,857	2,925	4,903	2,050	5,420	1,146	688	7,690
1981	6,757	1,479	3,555	2,515	4,076	2,403	4,227	825	594	7,253
1982	6,684	1,690	3,159	2,247	3,879	2,540	4,112	674	543	6,549
1983	7,107	1,536	2,923	2,574	3,381	2,237	4,086	866	528	8,788
1984	5,974	1,799	3,979	1,804	3,870	2,222	3,664	849	569	8,402
1985	5,475	1,410	2,506	1,873	3,756	1,925	2,935	701	411	6,235
1986	6,351	1,590	2,452	2,588	4,664	2,403	3,201	956	442	6,252
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1955-85 Ave.	8,315	1,492	3,169	2,118	4,895	1,979	5,721	716	567	6,960
Percent Change in 1986 from:										
1985	+16	+13	- 2	+38	+24	+25	+ 9	+36	+ 8	NC
1955-85 Ave.	-24	+ 7	-23	+22	- 5	+21	-44	+34	-22	-10

*All duck indexes adjusted for visibility bias.