



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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PINTAILS HIT RECORD LOW BREEDING POPULATION IN 1988

Breeding populations for North America's 10 major duck species are 4 percent lower this year than in 1987 and remain 16 percent below their average for the past 33 years, according to the results of May surveys carried out by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Canadian Wildlife Service.

This year's breeding population of northern pintails dropped to a new record low of 2.6 million, more than a half million birds below last year's number and 54 percent below their long-term average population size from 1955-87.

The surveys also recorded the smallest number of ducks ever in drought-stricken prairie-parkland areas of southern Canada (southern Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba) since surveys began in 1955, and a major shift of ducks to northern Canada and Alaska.

"Overall, the situation this year is one of extremely poor habitat conditions and continued depressed breeding populations of 5 of the 10 major duck species," Fish and Wildlife Service Director Frank Dunkle said. "In some of our most important duck nesting areas, there is no water and very little cover. A record number of some species have been displaced to less productive northern habitats. We will know more when we have the results of the July brood counts, but given these conditions, we are not optimistic about the outlook for duck production this year."

Dunkle noted that the drought has provided graphic evidence of the importance of long-range habitat restoration and management programs such as those provided for under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and the 1985 Farm Bill. "In many areas, managed marshes provided some relief for ducks and the many other wetland species," he observed. "The drought is reminding us once again of the need for good soil and water conservation practices. Through the North American Plan and the Farm Bill, we can enhance quality habitat to help sustain wildlife and water and soil resources through this kind of drought emergency."

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May pond numbers in prairie Canada declined 19 percent from last year, and the southern Alberta survey recorded the lowest number of wetlands on record. Pond numbers in the north-central states fell 41 percent from 1987, with the largest decrease from last year reported in North Dakota. Throughout the region, this year's poor habitat conditions reflected the combined effect of a dry weather pattern that has persisted throughout the 1980's. Three of the five lowest pond counts on record for prairie Canada have occurred in the 1980's.

Total numbers of mallards and blue-winged teal this year remained about the same as in 1987, but are still well below their long-term average (-20 percent and -25 percent, respectively). The blue-winged teal population has been lower only in 2 previous years, 1983 and 1987.

Scaup declined 12 percent from 1987 and are 21 percent below average. Canvasbacks also declined, 9 percent from last year and 22 percent below average.

American wigeon and redhead populations showed the greatest improvements from 1987 (+16 percent and +10 percent, respectively). Green-winged teal numbers changed slightly from last year (+3 percent) and are 46 percent above the long-term average. Gadwall dropped 10 percent from 1987 and are 2 percent above average. Northern shoveler numbers are 3 percent lower than last year and 8 percent above average.

Duck distribution clearly showed the effects of the drought, as the total number of ducks fell 18 percent in the southern Canadian prairies and 19 percent in Montana and the Dakotas from 1987 levels, while there was a 9 percent increase in total ducks observed in Alaska and northern Canada. In prairie Canada, the 1988 blue-winged teal and mallard populations were the lowest recorded since 1955, and mallard numbers in southern Saskatchewan fell below 1 million for the first time. Record populations of mallards and blue-winged teal were recorded in northern survey units.

The fact that ducks have been displaced from their traditional prairie breeding habitats, which in good years produce more than half the ducks in the fall flight, does not bode well for duck production. Northern areas are inherently less productive and many displaced ducks may not nest at all. Those ducks that did attempt to nest in prairie habitats found little relief from the dry conditions that existed in May. The outlook for production of most ducks is very poor.

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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 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. All of the available information from the July production surveys will be reviewed on July 25 at the Waterfowl Status Meeting in Denver, Colorado. The states, through the flyway councils, will then work with the Service to develop waterfowl hunting regulations for the 1988-89 season. It appears likely at this time that seasons and bag limits will be reduced.

Table 2. Breeding population estimates for 10 species of ducks, 1955-88 (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	3,428	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	3,808	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	6,303	1,590	2,446	2,588	4,664	2,403	3,201	956	442	6,252
1987	6,691	1,705	2,734	3,041	3,618	2,229	3,137	767	478	6,261
1988	6,549	1,528	3,168	3,143	3,646	2,157	2,577	846	435	5,480
Goals**	8,700	1,600	3,300	2,300	5,300	2,100	6,300	760	580	7,600
1955-87 Ave.	8,204	1,501	3,134	2,160	4,849	1,999	5,566	725	560	6,918
Percent Change in 1988 From:										
1987	-2	-10	+16	+3	+1	-3	-18	+10	-9	-12
1955-87 Ave.	-20	+2	+1	+46	-25	+8	-54	+17	-22	-21

* All duck indexes adjusted for visibility bias.

** Breeding duck population goals, from North American Waterfowl Management Plan (FWS-CWS 1986).