



NEWS

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

For release July 9, 1998

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Ducks Down in a Drier Northern "Duck Factory"

Marking a downward turn from three years of record-high numbers, the population of breeding ducks dropped 8 percent to 39.1 million, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's annual breeding duck survey of key nesting areas.

Breeding populations of mallards dropped only slightly to 9.6 million. Blue-winged teal numbers, at 6.4 million, were also close to the 1997 figures. Other species fared far less well, with northern pintails down 29 percent, northern shovelers down 23 percent, green-winged teal down 17 percent, and scaup down 16 percent. The Service is particularly concerned about the continued lack of improvement in scaup numbers, which are 36 percent below the long-term average.

The estimated number of May ponds in the traditional survey area was down 38 percent from last year, but basically matched the average number of ponds from the period of 1974-1997. Availability of these wetland habitats is crucial to the reproductive success of waterfowl.

"For the last three years, we have enjoyed favorable weather and habitat conditions in the continent's northern duck factory' that, combined with the millions of acres of wetlands restored in the past decade, have boosted duck populations," Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark said. "This year's breeding duck survey reminds us that dry cycles can return. Dry years, and the low duck numbers that go with them, remind us forcefully of the need for continued habitat conservation."

"Last year we counted record numbers of ducks, but changes in local weather patterns resulted in mediocre hunting seasons for many parts of the country," Clark observed. "We can't automatically assume that changes in duck populations will lead to more or less success in the field for hunters. A lot of other factors influence hunting success, including weather and the amount of available habitat. We can't control the weather, but we can continue to protect, restore and even rebuild waterfowl habitat. We must continue to do all we can on that front."

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The traditional breeding duck survey samples 1.3 million square miles across the north-central United States, western and northern Canada, and Alaska and estimates the approximate numbers of ducks in important breeding areas.

Among other duck species, the breeding population of gadwalls decreased 4 percent to 3.7 million and American wigeon decreased 8 percent to 2.9 million. Canvasback numbers were unchanged at 686,000. On the positive side, blue-winged teal populations were up 4 percent to nearly 6.4 million and redhead populations were up 9 percent to 1 million.

Results in the eastern survey area, which was generally wetter than last year, showed more positive trends, including increases in buffleheads, mallards, the American black duck and gadwalls. Notable exceptions included the ring-necked duck, scaup and blue-winged teal. This recently-developed survey includes the eastern provinces and northeastern states and is a part of the Service's efforts to expand the surveys outside the traditional area.

Annual survey results help guide the Service in managing its waterfowl conservation programs under the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The Service works in partnership with state representatives from the four flyways the Atlantic, Mississippi, Central and Pacific that waterfowl and other birds use during their migrations, to establish regulatory frameworks on waterfowl hunting season lengths, dates and bag limits.

The Service also administers or participates in a number of programs to conserve and restore waterfowl habitat. For example, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, an international partnership effort, has protected, restored, or enhanced more than 2.5 million acres of wetland habitat since 1986.

Provisions of the Farm Bill, such as the Conservation Reserve Program and the Wetland Reserve Program, have provided significant acreage of wildlife habitat in the United States in recent years. The Swampbuster provision of the Farm Bill and the wetland protection provisions of the Clean Water Act also have helped conserve waterfowl habitat. And sportsmen and conservation organizations such as Ducks Unlimited have conserved and restored millions of acres of prime habitat.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprising more than 500 national wildlife

refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.

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