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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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PRELIMINARY REPORT ON CONDITIONS ON WATERFOWL BREEDING GROUNDS

North American waterfowl still have hurdles to overcome on their road back from the serious population declines of the past two years, and preliminary reports have given no reason for real optimism that ducks are on the upward trend this year.

That was the interpretation given by the Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior to the June and early July reports from field men as the agency awaited the results of the late July aerial survey of duck production.

The Service's flying biologists conduct this survey across the principal waterfowl nesting grounds of the continent. This late July survey supplies data on the number of broods produced and gives a measure of the annual duck crop. It will determine whether or not the waterfowl population is on the road back. The report will be made public on August 9.

Last summer, the information collected by the Fish and Wildlife Service prompted its officials to forecast a serious decline in duck numbers and develop a pattern of restrictions on hunting to make certain the kill would not cut excessively into the basic breeding stock which must be sent back to the northern nesting grounds each year.

The experiences of hunters last season demonstrated the action was justified, Service officials say. The annual kill data collected in a postcard questionnaire of a large sample of American hunters showed that the kill of ducks decreased 42 percent from the year before. Adding the decreases in crippling losses and birds retrieved together, it is estimated that the reduction in the kill was approximately 6,000,000 ducks. A decline in hunter numbers contributed to this reduction.

The first 1960 aerial survey conducted by the Service in Canada in May revealed that, despite this major decrease in kill during the past season, the number of breeding birds on the nesting grounds was down about one-fifth from a year ago.

Changes in the numbers of breeders of the important species were as follows this year.

Mallard, down 24 percent; pintail, down nine percent; scaup, down 20 percent; baldpate (widgeon), down 22 percent; blue-winged teal, down 12 percent.

The shoveler was the only species recorded in large numbers during the breeding ground survey which showed an increase: 20 percent.

Canvasbacks and redheads, it was pointed out, are among the species whose numbers are so small relatively that they are subject to rather high sampling errors in the breeding ground surveys, and their population trend indices are less reliable than those for the numerous species. Data from both winter and breeding ground surveys, however, showed the 1960 breeding population of redheads was further reduced from the previous year.

In the case of canvasback, the winter survey showed the 1960 population reduced while the breeding ground index for these birds increased somewhat. Special significance was given to the fact that more than half of the canvasbacks recorded in the spring breeding ground survey this year were in forest and tundra habitat north and east of the prairies and parklands where they normally rest. In contrast, only 10 percent were recorded outside the prairies and parklands in 1957. Since forest and tundra habitats are not suitable for canvasback production, the present breeding ground distribution pattern is considered unfavorable for the species.

As a result of the drought last year, there was a major shift of the duck breeding population northward from the prairies, and the number of adults in the North during the nesting season increased markedly. This year, there is a correspondingly large decrease in the number of breeders in this northern area--northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories. Better water conditions in some parts of the Canadian prairies which stopped northward migration and the over-all decrease in the breeding population are responsible for this change.

Waterfowl breeding population levels compared to last year on the breeding ground, according to the surveys, are as follows: the same in southern Saskatchewan; decreased somewhat in southern Alberta, northern Saskatchewan, southern Manitoba, and Minnesota; small increases in Nebraska, Ontario, and northern Manitoba; and major increases in North and South Dakota. It is pointed out that a relatively small part of the duck production occurs south of the border in the United States.

Field personnel report water conditions in the midcontinent prairie and parkland nesting habitat considerably improved in many areas this year. Southeastern Saskatchewan and southwestern Manitoba had good water last fall and winter, and frequent rains during the current season. However, drought continued in southwestern Saskatchewan and southern Alberta. In these areas, many birds nested in the vicinity of ponds with shallow water which went dry. In addition, southern Alberta experienced a late April snowstorm which caused widespread losses of early

nests. Reduction of early nesting cover as a result of plowing and mowing in dry potholes last year and as a result of a large amount of burning also contributed to a low success of early nesting efforts.

However, there has been a lush growth of emergent vegetation during the season in the well-watered areas. Although much of this vegetation came on too late to provide nesting sites this year, it is certain that nesting habitat conditions will be much improved in these areas next year.

Against the background of this variety of conditions on the breeding grounds ranging from favorable to adverse, the survey flights are now measuring what kind of crop a somewhat smaller over-all breeding population has been able to produce.

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