UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR
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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife Most - 343-5634

For Release July 12, 1965

DUCK NESTING CONDITIONS GREATLY IMPROVED, BUT NESTING POPULATIONS ARE LOW, INTERIOR DEPARTMENT REPORTS

Following six years of severe drought that reduced the continent's duck population to a critically low level, nesting conditions in North America's "duck factory," the northern prairie pothole country, are once again in good to excellent condition, the Department of the Interior said today.

Breeding population surveys, just completed by flyway biologists and game management agents of the Department's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, show greatly improved waterfowl habitat conditions, but a low population of nesting birds to take advantange of the improved situation.

The breeding population of mallards, the most popular duck with United States hunters, was the lowest ever recorded during the spring surveys. The mallard nesting population was down throughout its range. Canvasback and redhead ducks "held their own," with pintails also remaining at about the same population level as last year, the Department reported. Blue-winged teal and scaup were down from last year.

Snow cover during the winter over most of the nesting area was generally good. A fast thaw carried this moisture into the potholes and heavy spring and early summer rains raised the water levels even more.

Spring came late to the northern prairies with cold and wet conditions prevailing. This helped create good duck nesting habitat, but it was detrimental to successful early nesting. Many duck nests were lost through flooding.

The survey teams found some evidence of a strong renesting effort among the early nesting mallards and pintails. Such an effort has a good chance for success because of the excellent cover conditions. Surveys are underway to determine such waterfowl nesting success.

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