DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE Carroll 343-5634

For Release September 26, 1971

DUCKS FOUND TO HAVE LOW LEVELS OF MERCURY

The Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service announced today that it sees no justification for closing any waterfowl hunting seasons because of mercury levels in ducks.

In tests the Service conducted during the past year, 30 of 307 ducks had breast muscle mercury content exceeding the Food and Drug Administration's permissible limit of .5 parts per million (ppm) for domestic meats moving in interstate commerce. Levels were as low as .004 ppm and as high as 3.9 ppm. Breast muscle is the favored part of the duck for consumption.

The report prepared by the Service's Division of Wildlife Research cautions, however, that livers, which sometimes are eaten, have averaged from 2 to 5 times as much mercury content per unit of weight as have breast muscles.

Samples were from ducks of 11 species shot during the 1970-71 hunting season at 21 locations widely distributed thoughout the United States.

In breast muscle tests, the highest readings were for 12 gadwalls from Mobile Bay, Ala., which averaged 1.03 ppm (the range was .08 to 3.9 ppm). These mercury burdens averaged much higher than those of seven lesser scaup from the same locality and were 19 times greater than four gadwalls taken from Alabama's Baldwin County

For 156 other dabbling ducks, the mean was .05. Most of this sample consisted of 142 mallards, of which only three exceeded .5 ppm. The mean mercury level in samples from 139 diving ducks (122 were lesser scaup) was .26 ppm -- only 15 exceeded .5 ppm. Dabbling ducks prefer mostly marshes and other shallow waters for feeding, whereas diving ducks feed predominantly in deeper open waters.

The report states that "based on the FDA maximum, there is little problem with dabblers except in certain localities." Mobile County, Ala., is one example. Levels in divers, particularly from the West, are of somewhat greater concern, but averaged well below the FDA maximum.

"Considering these facts, plus the likelihood that most hunters eat ducks only occasionally, a human health hazard seems remote," the report says. The report adds that "some trouble spots definitely deserve a closer look, and will be investigated in depth."

Primary analyses for the present data were conducted at the Service's Denver Wildlife Research Center. The results were corroborated using other methods on subsamples of the same material at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, Md., at Stoner Laboratories, San Jose, Calif., and at Gulf Radiation Technology, San Diego.

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TABLE Breast Muscle Mercury Residue Values in ppm (wet weight) for Selected Subsamples of Waterfowl by Area, Species and Types.

Sample	Mean	Range	No.
Mobile County, Ala., gadwall	1.030 ppm	0.08-3.90	12
Western lesser scaup	0.349	0.02-1.78	31
Texas lesser scaup	0.269	0.06-1.00	17
Texas mottled duck	0.259	0.07-0.43	17
North Central lesser scaup	0.258	0.04-0.70	43
Eastern scaup	0.216	0.03-0.70	31
Western mallard	0.113	0.01-1.45	50
North Central mallard	0.061	0.01-0.25	67
Eastern mallard	0.042	0.01-0.16	25
Western divers	0.320	0.02-1.78	35
North Central divers	0.271	0.04-0.70	41
Eastern divers	0.218	0.03-0.76	63
Western dabblers	0.111	0.01-1.45	55
North Central dabblers	0.061	0.01-0.25	68
Eastern dabblers*	0.054	0.004-0.23	33
U.S. divers	0.259	0.02-1.78	139
U.S. dabblers*	0.054	0.004-1.45	156

*Mobile County, Alabama, gadwall not included in distribution.

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