DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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DUCK BREEDING POPULATION UP
EIGHT PERCENT IN POTHOLE COUNTRY

The number of ducks estimated to be breeding in the North-Central United States and western Canada during May appears to have increased about eight percent over last year, according to the first of two annual aerial and ground surveys of duck breeding grounds conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Canadian Wildlife Service, and Ducks Unlimited.

The outlook calls for a better than average year for the number of young ducks hatched if normal rainfall prevails on the breeding grounds, but no firm fall flight forecast can be made until August.

Another survey will be taken during July to estimate the number of young hatched by breeding pairs. During both of these surveys a critical factor monitored is the number of ponds dotting this glaciated landscape, which is referred to as North America's duck factory. A comparison of May and July pond counts give an indication of the stability of water conditions there. Central to the needs of most waterfowl is the aquatic environment.

While waterfowl breed throughout North America, the prairie regions of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta in Canada; and the prairies of Montana, the Dakotas, and western Minnesota in this country are where 50 to 75 percent of the total of the 10 most abundant duck species breed and raise their young each year. This semi-arid region is subject to recurring drought, and the land's ability to support breeding ducks varies markedly

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from year to year. In 1972, for example, there were over 3.4 million ponds counted on the Canadian prairies during May. By July this count was down to under 1.4 million.

Last fall and winter was generally dry and open in the North-Central United States and prairie Canada. Through the winter the outlook was for rather poor waterfowl habitat conditions in 1975, but late winter and early spring storms markedly improved the situation.

Pond numbers in 1975 in Manitoba and Alberta declined from the very high 1974 counts when extensive spring flooding occurred. Those in North Dakota, Montana, and Saskatchewan showed little change. Water areas this May in South Dakota were 40 percent above 1974, a dry year there. In all these areas pond counts were higher than the long-term average and Saskatchewan is the wettest it has been since the mid-1950's.

Water levels in most bush areas in 1975 were normal or above but not as high as the flooded conditions experienced in 1974. The spring was cool and wet and the season was late initially in prairie areas. In contrast in far north areas spring was earlier and warmer than usual.

The ubiquitous mallard, traditionally the most numerous species, seems to have increased in numbers by about 10 percent over last year's estimated population. Estimates on other species must await the July survey results.

Breeding ground surveys using both aerial and ground counts of waterfowl and wetlands were first conducted during the summer of 1974. The surveys were subsequently intensified and expanded over the years.

In 1974 approximately 33,000 linear miles of aerial transects were flown in Canada, Alaska, the Dakotas, and Montana by 30 biologists of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service. The surveys cover a segment of waterfowl breeding habitat encompassing about 2 million square miles.

The census crews fly prescribed routes at altitudes of about 100 feet and count birds for a distance of 220 yards on either side of the aircraft. In conjunction with the aerial surveys, ground crews in the prairie and parkland portions of the prairie provinces and the States of North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Montana count the number of birds on selected transects.

The difference between aerial observations and the number recorded by the ground crews provides a correction factor for birds not visible from the aircraft. An overall index of abundance is then obtained by expanding transect counts to the total area.

For abundant duck species within the prairies and parklands it is judged that annual estimates of breeding population size as well as long-term trends are obtained with reasonable accuracy. For less abundant species such as the canvasback, the data are useful for determining long-term trends but annual estimates of population size are less accurate because of a higher probability of sampling error.

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