DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

For Release July 16, 1976

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DUCK BREEDING POPULATION DOWN 9 PERCENT

The total duck breeding population is down approximately 9 percent from 1975, the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today.

The mallard breeding population, traditionally the most numerous species, has increased 7 percent from 1975 but remains 2 percent below the 1955-1975 average. Breeding population estimates for other species this year reflect the following changes from the long-term average: gadwall, -1 percent; wigeon, -24 percent; green-winged teal, -7 percent; blue-winged teal, -8 percent; shoveler, -6 percent; pintail, -5 percent; redhead, +36 percent; canvasback, +21 percent; and scaup, +1 percent.

Waterfowl nest throughout North America. However, the prairie and parkland regions of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, the Dakotas, Montana, and Minnesota produce 50 to 75 percent of the continent's annual duck "crop." This area receives highly variable amounts of precipitation, and periodic droughts are not uncommon. Consequently, the capability of this glaciated landscape, pocked with lakes and potholes, to support breeding duck populations also varies markedly.

Each year, aerial and ground surveys are conducted in this region during May to determine the size of the waterfowl breeding population. Then, during July, duck broods are counted in these same areas to monitor production from the breeders surveyed in May. A comparison of May and July pond counts also is made to determine an index to water stability.

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In 1976, over 33,000 linear miles of aerial transects were flown in conjunction with the May survey. Transects are established in the most important breeding areas, thus yielding a representative sample of the 2 million square miles of waterfowl breeding habitat. Census crews fly prescribed routes at altitudes of approximately 100 feet and count waterfowl for a distance of 1/8 mile on each side of the aircraft.

In conjunction with aerial crews, ground crews in the prairie and parkland regions of the breeding ground also count waterfowl on a sample of the transects that are surveyed from the air. A comparison of the aerial and ground counts provides a correction factor for birds not seen by the aircrew. An overall population estimate is then obtained by expanding transect counts according to the size of the sampled area. These surveys are conducted annually through the cooperative efforts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Canadian Wildlife Service, various State and Provincial agencies, and Ducks Unlimited, a private organization.

Weather on the prairies last fall and winter was mild with low precipitation at most locations. Generally, dry and warm weather continued through the May survey period, with concurrent reduction in water levels. Growth of vegetation was about 2 weeks ahead of schedule in most areas, as was the chronology of the waterfowl breeding and nesting activities. Overall, numbers of ponds in May were 18 percent below 1975 and 9 percent above the long-term average. Areas reporting better than average water conditions were southern Manitoba, southern Saskatchewan, and northwestern North Dakota. All other areas surveyed had below average water conditions.

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