DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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DUCK BREEDING POPULATION DOWN SLIGHTLY FROM LAST YEAR

This spring's total duck breeding population was down about 4 percent from 1976, the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today.

Weather on the waterfowl breeding grounds last fall and winter was mild, with record high temperatures and below average precipitation recorded at most stations. The drought continued until mid-May, when extensive rain fell over prairie areas in Canada and the United States. Unfortunately, the rains may have come too late in the nesting season to help nesting waterfowl.

Dry conditions in the important Canadian and U.S. prairie-pothole region resulted in a major decrease in numbers of breeding ducks there as birds overflew the dry areas. Spring waterfowl populations increased sharply in Alaska and northern Canada because of the overflight.

The breeding population of mallards, traditionally the most numerous species, decreased 5 percent from 1976 and 7 percent from the 1956-1976 average. Breeding population estimates for other species reflect the following changes from 1976: gadwall +5 percent; widgeon -1 percent; green-winged teal +6 percent; blue-winged teal -8 percent; northern shoveler -11 percent; pintail -18 percent; redhead -27 percent; canvasback +2 percent; and scaup +7 percent. The total breeding population of these 10 species was down 4 percent.

Waterfowl nest throughout North America. However, the prairie-pothole regions of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, the Dakotas, Montana, and Minnesota normally produce 50 to 75 percent of the continent's annual duck crop. This area receives highly variable amounts of precipitation, with periodic droughts fairly common. Consequently, the capability of this area to support breeding ducks also varies markedly. This glaciated landscape, pocked with lakes and potholes, is the key area for waterfowl production in North America. Experience has shown that ducks produce less successfully when they are forced from their traditional prairie-pothole regions to more northerly breeding areas.

During July, duck broods are counted to monitor production success from the breeders surveyed in May. A comparison of May and July pond counts is made to determine an index of water stability. These waterfowl production counts and habitat assessments are in progress now. The impact of this year's weather and habitat condtions on actual duck production are not yet known.

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