DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR
news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release July 23, 1985 — Megan Durham (202) 343-5634

1985 WATERFOWL BREEDING SURVEYS FIND DUCK NUMBERS THE LOWEST IN 30 YEARS

The total breeding number of ducks this year is the lowest recorded during 31 years of surveys, and includes declines in all but one of the 10 duck species most important to waterfowl hunters, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reported today.

Mallard breeding populations reached an all-time low of 5.5 million in 1985, while the continental northern pintail population fell below 3 million for the first time in 31 years. Populations of other important species such as shoveler, gadwall, scaup, canvasback, redhead, and wigeon also showed marked declines from last year. Only green-winged teal increased slightly over last year. Reports from key breeding areas in the U.S. and Canada indicate that the overall duck breeding population totalled just under 31 million this year, compared with 38 million last year.

The low duck nesting populations come at a time when many wetland basins, previously dry or at reduced levels as a result of several years of drought in the prairie pothole region of southern Canada, have benefited by spring run-off. Overall pond numbers during May in the southern portions of the prairie provinces of Canada increased significantly from last year, but extremely dry conditions still persist in some areas. In the U.S. prairie breeding areas, wetland numbers declined in the Dakotas over last year's improved conditions, while habitat in much of Montana remains poor. Breeding areas in northern Canada are generally good, with some exceptions in northwestern Alberta and northeastern British Columbia. Spring arrived very late in Alaska, where persistent snow and ice may significantly impact nesting waterfowl.

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The information on duck numbers and habitat conditions comes from surveys conducted by teams of U.S. and Canadian biologists. The North American waterfowl survey is the most extensive wildlife census in the world. Each May, the biologists fly 38,000 miles of transects at low levels in small aircraft over major portions of the breeding grounds. In addition, other crews on the ground provide survey information to correct for the birds not seen from the air. The May surveys provide data on both the general conditions of nesting areas and the numbers of ducks and geese in these areas. In July, additional flights are made over some of the same areas to determine the number of duck broods produced. This information is used to forecast the anticipated fall population of ducks. The "fall flight forecast" is used by U.S. and Canadian federal, State, and provincial wildlife agencies in establishing annual hunting regulations.

Although water conditions improved somewhat this year, the Fish and Wildlife Service is concerned about the impact of agricultural practices on the ducks' ability to rebound from the recent drought. When wetlands are dry because of drought, farmers are more likely to convert them to cultivation. Intensive farming, including draining, burning, clearing, grazing, cultivating, and filling, have had a significant impact on wetlands in key duck breeding areas of the Canadian prairies. Studies since 1980 by the Canadian Wildlife Service indicate that wetlands are being altered at an accelerating rate. Wetland loss, combined with the loss of nesting cover near wetlands, have reduced the quantity and quality of habitat ducks need to produce young. Similar problems face ducks nesting in key northern U.S. breeding areas. Duck populations are affected not only by habitat conditions but also by mortality factors such as predation, disease, and hunting. Results of a 5-year study of stabilized duck hunting regulations, conducted jointly with Canada, are expected to be available next year.

The impact of this year's decline in duck numbers on U.S. waterfowl hunting regulations remains to be determined. Earlier this year, the Fish and Wildlife Service announced it was considering the need to reduce the mallard and pintail harvest by 25 percent if breeding numbers of those two species fell below 6.5 million and 4 million, respectively. The Service will not make a decision on whether to propose such reductions until after information from brood count surveys is available in late July. A public hearing is scheduled at 9 a.m. August 1 in the Interior Department auditorium in Washington, D.C., to discuss proposals for the 1985 waterfowl hunting season.

Once the regulations are proposed, public comment will be accepted until August 19. After the public comment period, the Service will publish regulatory "frameworks," within which States will select their hunting seasons and regulations. After the States have notified the Service of their selections, the Service will publish the final waterfowl hunting regulations in mid-September.

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Table 2.--Breeding population estimates for 10 species of ducks, 1955-85 (in thousands)*

Year	Mallard	Gadwall	American wigeon	Green-winged teal	Blue-winged teal	Northern shoveler	Pintail	Redhead	Canvasback	Scaup
1955	10,345	1,106	3.333	2,076	6,436	1,965	9,251	733	595	7,100
1956	11,711	1,202	3,712	1,898	6,267	2,084	10,124	928	692	6,595
1957	10,946	1,102	3,208	1,293	5,449	1,744	6,856	684	600	6,535
1958	12,904	687	3,372	1,618	5,799	1,515	6,889	524	713	6,040
1959	10,292	683	3,779	3,153	5,300	1,649	7,228	641	481	8,220
1960	8,206	873	3,165	1,630	4,303	1,859	5,769	542	575	5,566
1961	8,290	1,422	3,219	2,216	4,833	1,625	4,860	437	396	6,764
1962	6,144	1,610	2,721	1,119	3,890	1,633	4,299	664	385	6,398
1963	7,360	1,578	2,209	1,754	4,587	1,435	4,361	396	523	6,564
1964	6,974	1,223	2,630	2,051	4,943	1,685	4,111	560	658	6,326
1965	5,948	1,692	2,695	1,526	4,628	1,607	4,301	568	505	5,383
1966	7,401	1,976	2,901	2,219	5,616	2,272	5,777	747	683	5,421
1967	8,205	1,638	2,637	1,944	4,715	2,244	5,870	846	556	5,877
1968	7,586	2,098	2,783	1,805	3,697	1,811	4,225	502	557	5,971
1969	8,065	1,837	3,192	1,991	4,514	2,150	6,390	759	530	6,338
1970	10,379	1,698	3,752	2,259	5,633	2,269	7,004	834	601	6,930
1971	9,843	1,733	3,425	2,352	5,426	2,052	6,291	693	441	6,149
1972	9,867	1,776	3,428	2,407	5,673	2,505	7,875	489	429	9,527
1973	8,781	1,198	3,665	2,444	4,866	1,657	5,114	754	696	7,535
1974	7,392	1,562	3,003	2,221	5,437	2,060	7,165	613	493	7,045
1975	8,109	1,672	2,862	2,038	6,441	1,994	6,387	974	706	7,846
1976	8,637	1,478	2,699	1,844	5,023	1,818	6,045	946	686	6,973
1977	8,226	1,546	2,678	1,952	4,626	1,616	4,971	688	702	7,490
1978	7,695	1,593	3,808	2,978	4,497	2,162	5,664	833	423	7,125
1979	8,444	1,889	3,388	2,920	5,278	2,555	6,070	774	606	9,135
1980	8,003	1,459	3,857	2,925	4,903	2,050	5,420	1,146	688	7,690
1981	6,757	1,479	3,555	2,515	4,076	2,403	4,227	825	594	7,253
1982	6,684	1,690	3,159	2,247	3,879	2,540	4,112	674	543	6,549
1983	7,107	1,536	2,923	2,574	3,381	2,237	4,086	866	528	8,788
1984	5,974	1,799	3,979	1,804	3,870	2,222	3,664	849	569	8,402
1985	5,475	1,410	2,506	1,873	3,756	1,925	2,935	701	411	6,235
1955-84 Ave.	8,409	1,494	3,191	2,126	4,933	1,981	5,814	716	572	6,984
Percent Change in 1985 from:										
1984	-8	-22	-37	+4	-3	-13	-20	-17	-28	-26
1955-84 Ave.	-35	-6	-21	-12	-24	-3	-50	-2	-28	-11

*All duck indexes adjusted for visibility bias.