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1986 FALL FLIGHT OF DUCKS EXPECTED TO INCREASE OVER LAST YEAR; OUTLOOK FOR GEESE IS MIXED

This year's fall flight of ducks will be greater than last year's all-time low but remains the second lowest on record, according to the "1986 Status of Waterfowl and Fall Flight Forecast" released today by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service.

Duck populations will increase this year in all four waterfowl flyways after an extremely poor fall flight experienced in 1985. Last year's fall flight index was 62 million ducks, down from 80 million in 1984 and the lowest since such projections first were made in 1969. The projected index for the 1986 fall flight is 73 million, the second lowest since 1969. The index is a relative figure reflecting the trend in duck populations rather than the exact number of ducks.

Although the improvement in duck numbers is encouraging to wildlife officials, spokesmen for the two wildlife agencies cautioned that many areas of prime importance to ducks in North America have not yet recovered from recent drought conditions and the negative impacts of agricultural activities that have converted many former wetlands to cultivation and removed important natural vegetation near remaining wetlands. The projected fall flight of 73 million ducks is well below the duck population goal, which is a fall flight of 100 million ducks by the year 2000. The 100 million figure is based upon duck population levels during the 1970's.

In July, the two agencies reported that breeding populations for most key duck species increased this spring over last year. Overall, breeding duck numbers in all areas surveyed totalled 35 million, up 14 percent from last year's 31 million, but 12 percent below the average for 1955-85. Breeding populations of six of ten common duck species - mallard, pintail, blue-winged teal, wigeon, canvasback, and scaup - remain below population goals.

The record lows in 1985 followed several years of severe drought in prime duck nesting areas of Canada and the United States. Conditions improved in 1986, with more ponds observed during May and July surveys in many areas of the United States and Canada. Improvements were particularly noticeable in the north-central United States and in southern Manitoba. In Alaska, spring weather conditions were more favorable to nesting ducks than last year. Because of increased production and larger duck breeding populations than last year, duck flights will increase this year from many key areas, especially Alaska, southern Manitoba, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

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The outlook is mixed for fall flights of geese, with Canada geese faring better than some other species. Goose production can be affected by weather conditions during the winter and spring, and in 1985-86 some populations experienced poor nesting conditions resulting from extremely cold winter temperatures and a delayed spring thaw, particularly in western arctic Canada and north and east of Hudson Bay. Conditions were favorable for nesting Canada geese in most areas of prairie Canada and the north-central United States, except for portions of southern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan. Habitat conditions for Canada geese in the mid-west were favorable, and conditions in much of Alaska were improved over last year's poor conditions.

In the Atlantic Flyway, the fall flight of Canada geese is expected to be smaller than last year as a result of poor nesting conditions in some areas. Substantially smaller fall flights are anticipated for greater snow geese and brant, with a moderate reduction projected for eastern tundra swans.

In the Mississippi Flyway, fall flights of Canada geese will increase for the Tennessee Valley population (wintering mainly in Kentucky, Tennessee, and northern Alabama) and the Eastern Prairie Population (wintering near Swan Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Missouri). The Mississippi Valley population (southeastern Wisconsin, southern Illinois and Indiana, adjacent areas of Kentucky, Missouri, and western Tennessee, and along the Mississippi River in Arkansas and Mississippi) will have a fall flight equal to or slightly greater than last year. The fall flight of Giant Canada geese also will increase. Reduced fall flights are projected for lesser snow geese and white-fronted geese.

In the Central Flyway, reduced fall flights are predicted for Canada geese in the Tall Grass Prairie Population (wintering mainly in Oklahoma, Texas, and northeast Mexico) and the Short Grass Prairie Population (wintering in Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas). Fall flights of other Canada goose populations and Giant Canada geese will be equal to or larger than last year. The fall flight of lesser snow geese will be reduced. Greater white-fronted geese that winter mostly along the Texas coast will have a fall flight similar to last year.

In the Pacific Flyway, an increased fall flight is predicted for lesser Canada geese, and Pacific Canada geese will have a fall flight similar to last year. There will be a reduced fall flight of lesser snow geese. The Pacific white-fronted goose, one of four Pacific flyway species of concern, will have a reduced fall flight from last year. Of the other three species of concern, Pacific brant will have a reduced fall flight, while Dusky Canadas will have a fall flight similar to last year's poor flight and the fall flight of Cackling Canadas will be equal to or greater than last year's.

Western tundra swans will experience a slightly greater fall flight than last year.

The size of the duck migration is estimated annually by Canadian and U.S. biologists on the basis of May and July air and ground surveys of habitat conditions, breeding populations, and brood production, as well as harvest surveys and band recovery data. Numbers of geese, brant, and swans are projected on the basis of fall production surveys, winter surveys, spring staging area counts, local breeding surveys, and satellite imagery.