DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR
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Fish and Wildlife Service

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE DECLARES 1988 "DISMAL" FOR WATERFOWL; OTHER WILDLIFE SHOWING STRAIN FROM DROUGHT

"The long-continued and severe drought . . . has inflicted not only economic hardships by seriously curtailing crop and stock production, but also has resulted in an emergency condition as regards the present and future safety and abundance of the waterfowl of the continent. In large areas of the United States and Canada, through lack of the water on breeding grounds essential to rearing the young birds, the drought has entailed widespread destruction among the former hordes of the wild fowl that migrate to our several States."

This gloomy assessment about the condition of North America's ducks and geese was made by President Herbert Hoover in 1931, but he could have been talking about the state of wildlife in the summer of 1988.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists believe the 1988 drought is hurting production among already depressed continental duck populations. Fall flight estimates for this year will be completed later this month, but already some experts fear numbers could drop to levels rivaling 1985's record low fall flight of 62 million ducks.

Wildlife managers at many of the Fish and Wildlife Service's over 500 national wildlife refuges, research laboratories, and field offices also report that many other species of fish and wildlife are suffering from unusually dry habitat conditions through much of the upper Midwest, West, and South.

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"'Dismal' is about the best way to describe the outlook for fish and wildlife, especially waterfowl, in 1988," concludes Frank Dunkle, director of the Interior Department agency. "This drought is proving just as tough on wildlife as it is on people."

With the exception of waterfowl, few statistics are available yet to document the effects of the Great Drought of 1988. But the following are examples of drought-related wildlife problems already observed by Fish and Wildlife Service field offices and research stations:

WATERFOWL

This year's drought is a devastating blow for North America's ducks. Even before this spring, numbers of mallards and other major duck species were depressed as a result of dry weather trends that began in 1980 in the continent's most important duck nesting region--the prairies of the north-central United States and southern Canada. The dry weather also accelerated the permanent loss of prairie wetlands to agriculture, particularly in Canada, as bulldozers and plows were able to move into places normally too wet or muddy to be cultivated. Breeding duck populations hit the 30-year low in 1985, alarming wildlife officials in both the U.S. and Canada. In response to long-term declines in some species, and new evidence of rapid habitat alteration, the two nations developed a new international agreement, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, signed in May 1986 by Interior Secretary Don Hodel and Canada's Environment Minister, Thomas McMillan, and aimed at rebuilding waterfowl populations and restoring key habitats.

Against this already worrisome background, U.S. and Canadian teams once again went into the prairies this spring to survey duck breeding populations, and came back reporting the worst habitat conditions they had ever seen. This year's population of ducks in the prairie-parkland areas of Canada was the lowest recorded since 1955. Many ducks apparently did not even try to nest, while unprecedented numbers of some species shifted into northern Canada where habitats are less productive and nesting success is not expected to be good. The 1988 breeding population of pintails was the lowest ever recorded--2.6 million, a whopping 54 percent below that species' average population from 1955-1987.

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The wholesale shift of ducks has also been noticed in Alaska, where this summer's 400,000 mallards represent a 50-percent increase over the previous 10-year average. Although Alaska has plenty of wetlands to accommodate the newcomers, many recent arrivals are so tired that biologists predict few will produce young this year. "The big flocks don't appear to be nesting," reports one Fish and Wildlife Service biologist/pilot. "They're just sitting there . . . too exhausted to be parents, having used all of their fat reserves just to get here."

While the outlook for ducks is poor, geese nesting in Arctic Canada and Alaska have generally escaped the drought. Populations nesting in the drought-stricken portions of the United States and Canada are affected, but, in general, geese fare better than ducks during drought because they typically nest on more permanent wetlands and are better able to protect their nests and young against predators.

Overall, the Fish and Wildlife Service anticipates such poor duck production that the special September hunting seasons for blue-winged teal already have been proposed for suspension this year in 13 states. Decisions about regulations for regular duck seasons, which begin in October, will be made in August, but are likely to be restrictive in an effort to maintain breeding populations of severely stressed ducks. Now, biologists are beginning to worry that continued low water conditions in the areas waterfowl use for migration stopovers and wintering will concentrate the birds and make them more vulnerable to disease later this year.

Meanwhile, the drought has provided graphic proof of the importance of long-term habitat restoration and conservation efforts such as those begun under the North American Plan and the 1985 Farm Bill. Just as the 1930's "Dust Bowl" launched the Pittman-Robertson Federal aid program that returned many depleted game species to abundance, Federal officials expect the present drought to accelerate the need for the conservation provisions of the North American Plan and related agriculture legislation. State and Federal areas managed specifically for waterfowl have provided some of the only relief available this year to ducks and the many other species that depend on prairie wetlands, and some farmers have discovered that the acreage they set aside for conservation has become a welcome source of hay during the drought emergency.

The following are additional reports from Fish and Wildlife Service managers in several drought-affected areas:

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OTHER MIGRATORY AND UPLAND GAME BIRDS

--Because of demands for irrigation and other uses, the Platte River has been turned into a "river of sand," according to Fish and Wildlife Service biologists in Grand Island, Nebraska. Nesting piping plovers and interior least terns, both endangered or threatened species, have been exposed to the triple threats of predators, all-terrain vehicle users driving along the river bank and emerging sandbars, and die-offs of small fish and aquatic invertebrates used for food by these birds.

--National Wildlife Refuge System managers in Minnesota report an infusion of ducks and shorebirds searching for water from the Dakotas and points farther north. On Agassiz National Wildlife Refuge, for example, water-starved canvasback ducks have concentrated around the remaining pools on that refuge, though the narrow strips on which they have built their nests have left them exposed to predators.

--Experts at the Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center advise many migratory birds are equipped to deal with a single year of drought. However, the recent series of droughts could stress many migratory birds or may alter well-established migration patterns and times; this year's effects will become apparent later in the fall. Nesting conditions in far northern Canada and the Arctic have been more favorable than those facing ducks in the Great Plains, so continental migrants like sandpipers and terns may experience little effect from the drought. Where water is absent in the Midwest, some birds may bypass or overfly the area altogether this fall.

--Biologists are monitoring critical Midwestern wetlands, however, as the first fall migrants begin departing the far North this month. Critical "stopover" points like Quivira National Wildlife Refuge in Kansas and that state's Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Management Area host an estimated 45 percent of all migrating North American shorebirds. Biologists report lower than normal water levels at both areas, but hope late summer rains will come and forestall any problems as birds pass through.

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--On upland game birds (pheasant, quail, grouse), look for problems not this summer, but next winter and spring, wildlife biologists advise. The effects of drought may take as much as a year to show up in these species; drought depresses the growth of vegetation, reducing the amount of cover and food that these birds rely on during harsh winters and the spring nesting season. Ground-nesting game birds are doing well in Kansas and Nebraska this season since they are under the cover of plants that emerged this past spring before the drought. Poor production of pheasant, prairie grouse, and Hungarian partridge is anticipated in the Dakotas this year, however, and wildlife managers fear the worst won't be realized until this winter.

FISHERIES

--Federal fish hatcheries in South Carolina and Georgia that draw their water from area streams report problems from declining flows and rising water temperatures in raceways that have increased the mortality of young trout. Managers will move this year's production out of hatcheries earlier than usual to avoid the higher risk of disease and mortality; many Southern trout streams are in poor condition to accept this year's stock because of low water flows, however. High water temperatures in the Dakotas have eliminated or sharply reduced production of walleye, Northern pike, and large- and smallmouth bass at Federal hatcheries. Nevada's Truckee River reservoirs are so low that spawning grounds for the endangered Lahontan cutthroat trout and the cui-ui were non-existent again this summer. Fish and Wildlife Service fisheries experts say 1988 will be a "missed year" for natural reproduction of some fish species in the Upper Mississippi and Missouri Rivers because low water made preferred spawning areas inaccessible.

--Low water in tributaries of the Great Lakes has hindered Fish and Wildlife Service biologists in their efforts to control the sea lamprey, a pest and predator on prized species like the lake trout. Flows are down so sharply that lamprey control chemicals can no longer be applied safely in certain streams without endangering more desirable fish.

--Harbors and river mouths in the Great Lakes will require accelerated dredging to maintain shipping channels, and experts at the Fish and Wildlife Service's Great Lakes Fishery Research Laboratory in Ann Arbor, Michigan, warn there will be greater long-term threats to fish and wildlife from the increase in disposal of dredged spoil. Of the 40 "areas of concern" identified by the International Joint Commission in the Great Lakes as heavily polluted sites, 39 have seriously contaminated bottom sediment.

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--Endangered freshwater mussels in the Tennessee River system are facing low water levels in an area plagued by drought for the past 3 years. The reduced dilution of pollutants in these low-water streams may threaten mussel beds, biologists warn.

--The Chesapeake Bay will get an added shot of salt water this year because of reduced flow of fresh water from the Potomac and Susquehanna Rivers. That should promote the growth of submerged aquatic vegetation and make more food available to waterfowl, but increased salinity could boost the number of sea nettles and oyster drills (parasites that prey on shellfish) in the Bay, according to Fish and Wildlife Service fisheries experts.

PLANTS AND GENERAL HABITAT CONDITIONS

--Fish and Wildlife Service fire experts at the Federal Government's Boise Interagency Fire Center report the potential for a severe fire season through this fall on national wildlife refuges is "very high," as it is on other Federal properties around the Nation. Already this summer, fires caused primarily by lightning have broken out on and around Seney National Wildlife Refuge on Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and by mid-July, Federal firefighters were contending with eight major fires on Yukon Flats and Selawik National Wildlife Refuges in Alaska and on two Native Corporation properties next to Federal refuges in Alaska. Collectively, the fires had consumed more than 420,000 acres in that state, and local weather conditions--high winds, smoke, drought--were hampering firefighters' ability to combat the blazes.

--Oaks in the Midwest and South are suffering, botanists report, and their plight spells problems ahead for acorn-eaters like deer, wild turkey, and squirrels. Southern wildlife managers expect a near total failure of the acorn crop if significant rains don't arrive in July; already the drought has caused some trees to begin dropping their "mast" crop prematurely, and the nourishment they provide to wildlife through the winter may decrease significantly.

--Fish and Wildlife Service botanists in the Southeast report nearly all of the 750 endangered green pitcher plant seedlings planted this spring in Alabama have been killed by the drought. The plant lives in boggy marshland, and the Service and the University of Georgia have been attempting to create a new colony within the species' normal range. If the weather improves this fall, botanists will try again with 300 more greenhouse seedlings.

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--One bright spot in the midst of the drought has been noticed in California, however. Dry weather during much of last winter and spring depressed the growth of fungus and molds that kill the eggs and larvae of the West Coast's endangered butterflies. The endangered Bay checkerspot butterfly has expanded its range to Contra Costa County, where it hasn't been found in at least 5 years.

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