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Fish and Wildlife Service

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1989 DUCK BREEDING POPULATIONS CONTINUE NEAR RECORD LOWS; DECLINES REPORTED FOR 1988 HARVESTS AND DUCK STAMP SALES

Breeding duck populations in prime nesting areas of the United States and Canada continued near record low numbers this spring, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reported today.

Breeding populations for ducks in all surveyed areas totaled just under 31 million. This figure is 8 percent lower than the 1988 breeding population and 24 percent below the long-term average from 1955-88. Numbers of 9 of the 10 key species declined, with canvasbacks showing the only increase. The total duck breeding population in surveyed areas of Canada, Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota reached a record low of 28.8 million; duck populations in Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska, Minnesota, California, and Wisconsin brought the total breeding duck population to 30.9 million, just above the low recorded in 1985.

"What these numbers tell us is that, as we expected, duck production was very poor last year because of the severe drought," said Rollin Sparrowe, acting deputy assistant director for refuges and wildlife. "Duck numbers were already depressed after a series of drought years during the 1980's, and then last year very few young birds were produced to enter into this spring's breeding population."

Numbers of northern pintails declined slightly from last year's 2.57 million to a record low of 2.47 million, 55 percent below their long-term average. Blue-winged teal also hit a record low of 3.2 million, down 12 percent from last year; and scaup are at a record low 5.3 million, just 3 percent below last year.

Numbers of other important species continued at low levels. Mallard numbers declined 7 percent from last year to 6.1 million, 25 percent below their long-term average. Significant declines were posted by wigeon (-19 percent), northern shoveler (-24 percent), and redheads (-26 percent). Other key species in the survey included gadwall, down 7 percent from last year; green-winged teal, down 14 percent from last year but the only species currently above its long-term average; and canvasbacks, up 12 percent from last year.

Analysis of duck wings submitted by hunters confirmed that there was an unusually low proportion of young in last fall's population, providing additional evidence of poor production for most species.

Because of drought and the anticipated drop in duck production last year, the Fish and Wildlife Service established restrictive hunting regulations aimed at substantially reducing the 1988-89 duck harvest beyond cutbacks already achieved by restrictions imposed from 1985-87. In fact U.S. waterfowlers harvested 4.6 million ducks last fall, a 50 percent reduction from the previous year's 9.2 million. Hunters also bagged 8 percent fewer geese and 67 percent fewer coots than in 1987.

"Species that needed relief from harvest pressure on their low breeding populations got it," Sparrowe said. The mallard harvest declined 42 percent, blue-winged teal 78 percent, and pintails 66 percent.

U.S. waterfowl hunters spent 31 percent fewer days hunting in 1988, and sales of Federal Duck Stamps--required for all waterfowl hunters age 16 or older--totaled 1,247,600, a decline of 19 percent from 1987.

"I think a combination of factors reduced hunter opportunity, including fewer ducks and flocks composed mostly of wary adult birds, as well as more restrictive hunting regulations," Sparrowe said. "Some hunters apparently chose either not to hunt or to reduce their hunting activity out of concern for the resource; and some did not go afield because of a diminished expectation of success. In some places, the drought was so bad that traditional hunting areas just weren't worth hunting."

There are some hopeful signs that things may begin to improve for ducks soon, including wetter weather and the initiation of long-term habitat restoration efforts under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. Rainfall has been good since late spring in significant areas of prairie Canada, beginning a gradual recovery of soil moisture which has been critically low because of the prolonged drought. Although the improved precipitation is good news, biologists believe several years of favorable weather, combined with changes in farming practices, will be needed to restore the wetlands and cover vegetation that ducks and other wildlife need.

Following is a table of breeding populations for 10 species of ducks in surveyed areas of Canada and the United States.

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Table 3. Breeding population estimates for 10 species of ducks, 1955-89 (in thousands)*.

Year	Mallard	Gadwall	American wigeon	Green-winged teal	Blue-winged teal	Northern shoveler	Northern 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
1986	6,303	1,590	2,446	2,588	4,664	2,403	3,201	956	442	6,252
1987	6,691	1,705	2,734	3,041	3,618	2,229	3,137	767	478	6,261
1988	6,550	1,528	3,168	3,143	3,652	2,157	2,577	846	435	5,480
1989	6,119	1,423	2,577	2,697	3,199	1,636	2,471	628	488	5,299
Goals**	8,700	1,600	3,300	2,300	5,300	2,100	6,300	760	580	7,600
1955-88 Avg.	8,156	1,502	3,135	2,189	4,814	2,004	5,478	728	556	6,875
Percent Change in 1989 From:										
1988	-7	-7	-19	-14	-12	-24	-4	-26	+12	-3
1955-88 Avg.	-25	-5	-18	+23	-34	-18	-55	-14	-12	-23

* All duck indexes adjusted for visibility bias.

** Breeding duck population goals, from North American Waterfowl Management Plan (FWS-CWS 1986).