

Horicon National Wildlife Refuge Fall 2020 Migration Report

12/2/2020

This is week eleven of waterbird surveys at the refuge for the fall migration. This will be the last fall migration survey update for 2020. The marsh was frozen on this week's survey with ice thickness between 2-3 inches. Despite having mild 40+ degree days, night temperatures in the 20's continues to build ice leaving very little open water on the marsh. Large groups of Canada geese and mallards are keeping several tiny areas of water open.

Canada goose numbers decreased from 2 weeks ago - about 10,000 were counted on the refuge this week.

Dabbling ducks numbers decreased from 2 weeks ago. Over 10,000 mallards were counted this week on the survey. Several hundred American black ducks were counted mixed in with the mallard flocks.

No diving duck were seen on this week's survey.

Other sightings to note:

- Sandhill cranes. Come out to the marsh at sunrise. Hundreds of sandhill cranes can be seen flying out to feed in farm fields – especially along the east side of the marsh. They will likely be here in numbers until we have snow preventing easy feeding in upland fields.
- Swans – Almost 100 tundra swans were nestled in with the Canada geese as they rested on the ice.
- Watch for American black ducks mixed in with the large mallard flocks.

The best waterfowl viewing was along Hwy 49 (south side) where large flocks of Canada geese, mallards and swans were loafing on the ice. Large flocks of mallards in the thousands were seen at the dead end of Ledge Road (the west section of road that enters the marsh). Look northeast from the parking area. This is where the Rock River enters the marsh. Birds congregate there because it usually has the last open water areas.

11/23/2020

No waterbird surveys were conducted this week.

11/17/2020

This is week nine of waterbird surveys at the refuge for the fall migration. Last weekend a strong front came through Wisconsin with 40+ mph winds and rain showers. This brought down more cranes and mallards. More than 80% of the marsh was frozen (1/2" ice) on this week's survey. Most birds were congregated in the middle of the marsh in open water. Anticipated warmer weather through the beginning of next week will bring back the open water.

Canada goose numbers decreased- about 20,000 were counted on the refuge this week. Fall harvest is nearly complete. Many geese and cranes were observed feeding in corn stubble surrounding the refuge.

Dabbling ducks numbers increased this week –almost 68,000. A big influx of mallards made up 90% of that total - ~61,000. The only other species seen in the thousands was green-wing teal. Northern shovelers, Northern pintails, American black ducks, and gadwall were seen in the hundreds.

Diving duck numbers total about 900. Three species were seen in the hundreds – buffleheads, ruddy ducks, and ring-neck ducks. A couple small groups of hooded mergansers were seen. The rest of the divers were absent, likely due to being frozen over.

Other sightings to note:

- Sandhill crane spectacle. Come out and see/listen to the thousands of sandhill cranes as they stage at the refuge for migration. Hundreds can be seen feeding in farm fields – especially along the east side of the marsh.
- Swans – both tundra and trumpeter were seen in the pockets of open water.
- Watch for American black ducks mixed in with the large mallard flocks.
- Snow geese are mixed in the Canada goose flocks.
- Notable decrease in numbers – canvasback, redhead, American coot, American wigeon, and scaup.

Waterfowl viewing is getting tougher as winter approaches. This week the last impoundment around the auto tour had the best viewing close to the road.

11/12/2020

This is week eight of waterbird surveys at the refuge for the fall migration. The upper Midwest had a “second summer” last week with 5 days in the 70’s. The mild weather kept birds in the area.

Canada goose numbers increased- about 52,000 were counted on the refuge this week. Corn harvest and fall tillage continue on the farms around the refuge. Geese, ducks, and cranes can be seen flying out of the refuge several times a day to feed in the harvested fields.

Dabbling ducks numbers are down several thousand this week. Mallards numbers were highest with around 28,000 seen this week on the survey. Species seen in the thousands included mallards, green-wing teal, Northern pintails, and Northern shovelers. Others seen in the hundreds included American wigeon, gadwall, and American black ducks.

Diving duck numbers total about 1000. Three species were seen in the hundreds – buffleheads, ruddy ducks, and ring-neck ducks. Other species spotted in small flocks included redheads, hooded mergansers, and a couple scaup. Look for these divers along Hwy 49 –both sides of the highway.

Other sightings to note:

- Sandhill crane numbers remain high as they stage at the refuge for migration – watch for flocks in the hundreds in farm fields – especially along the east side of the marsh.
- Buffleheads – small flocks seen in most impoundments.
- Watch for American black ducks mixed in with the large mallard flocks.
- Look close at the goose flocks – both snow geese and blue geese were seen mixed in with the Canada geese.
- Notably absent – blue-wing teal, wood ducks, egrets, canvasbacks.

Check out the north side of Ledge Road (the west section of road that enters the marsh) – this area continues to be one of the best spots for seeing a variety of waterfowl. Ten species of waterfowl were seen including hundreds of gadwall, Northern Shoveler, mallards, Northern pintails, ruddy ducks, and ring-neck ducks. The last impoundment around the auto tour had Northern shovelers and Northern pintails in full color right along the road. Bring your camera for some great photos of fall waterfowl.

11/3/2020

This is week seven of waterbird surveys at the refuge for the fall migration. The upper Midwest had a very windy weather front come through Halloween weekend shifting birds in migration. Many birds took advantage of the winds to continue their journey south. This front brought more mallards and Canada geese down from the north.

Canada goose numbers increased- about 32,000 were counted on the refuge. Corn harvest continues throughout the area. Geese, ducks, and cranes are flying out of the refuge several times a day to feed in the harvested fields.

Dabbling ducks were most numerous again this week. Impressive numbers of mallards (38,000) were seen this week on the survey. Top species seen in the thousands were mallards, green-wing teal, Northern pintails, gadwall, and Northern shovelers. Others seen in the hundreds included American wigeon and American black ducks.

Diving duck numbers decreased greatly. Two species were seen in the hundreds - ruddy ducks and buffleheads. Other species spotted in small flocks included redheads, ring-neck ducks, and hooded mergansers. Look for these divers along Hwy 49 –both sides of the highway.

Other sightings to note:

- Large rafts of American coot can still be seen – especially along Hwy 49.
- Sandhill crane numbers are increasing – watch for flocks in the hundreds in farm fields – especially along the east side of the marsh.
- Buffleheads – small flocks seen in most impoundments.
- Watch for American black ducks mixed in with the large mallard flocks.
- Notably absent – blue-wing teal, wood ducks, egrets, great blue herons, canvasbacks.

Check out the north side of Ledge Road (the west section of road that enters the marsh) – 12 species of ducks were seen along there including hundreds of gadwall, Northern Shoveler, American Wigeon and green-wing teal. The impoundments around the auto tour offer some close up views of ducks.

10/29/2020

This is week six of waterbird surveys at the refuge for the fall migration. Southern Wisconsin saw the first measurable snow last weekend. This front moved many birds out of the area. Large groups of tundra swans arrived with the front – staying only a couple days. Big increases were seen in mallards (18,000+) and green-wing teal (17,000+). Canada goose numbers remained the same- about 20,000 on the refuge. Corn harvest continues throughout the area. Geese, ducks, and cranes are flying out of the refuge several times a day to feed in the harvested fields.

Dabbling ducks were most numerous again this week. Impressive numbers of mallards and green-wing teal were seen this week on the survey. Top species seen in the thousands were mallards, American wigeon, gadwall, and Northern shovelers. Others seen in the hundreds included Northern pintails and American black ducks.

Diving duck numbers stayed about the same. Top species seen in the hundreds included ruddy ducks and buffleheads. Other species spotted in small flocks included redheads, ring-neck ducks, canvasbacks, hooded mergansers and scaup. Look for these divers along Hwy 49 –both sides of the highway.

Other sightings to note:

- Large rafts of American coot can still be seen – especially along Hwy 49.
- Sandhill crane numbers are increasing – watch for flocks in the hundreds in farm fields – especially along the east side of the marsh.
- Buffleheads and hooded mergansers arrived.
- Tundra swans arrived.

Check out the north side of Ledge Road (the west section of road that enters the marsh) – 13 species of ducks were seen along there including hundreds of gadwall, Northern Shoveler, American Wigeon and green-wing teal. The north side of Hwy 49 had 10 different species of ducks. Check this area for diving ducks. Redhead, canvasback, ruddy ducks, buffleheads, scaup, and hooded mergansers were seen. Bring binoculars and a spotting scope.

10/20/2020

This is week five of waterbird surveys at the refuge for the fall migration. SE Wisconsin saw the first snowflakes last weekend but temperatures and conditions are following normal fall patterns for the area. Gadwall were the most notable increase –over 10,000.

Canada goose numbers dropped slightly to about 20,000 on the refuge. Corn harvest continues throughout the area. Geese, ducks, and cranes are flying out of the refuge several times a day to feed in the harvested fields.

Dabbling ducks were most numerous again this week. Impressive numbers of gadwall, mallards, and American wigeon were seen this week. Top species seen in the thousands were gadwall, mallards, American wigeon, Northern pintails, green-wing teal, and Northern shovelers. Others seen in the hundreds included wood ducks, American black ducks, and blue-wing teal.

Diving duck numbers stayed about the same. Top species seen in the hundreds included ruddy ducks, redheads, and ring-neck ducks. Other species spotted in small flocks included canvasbacks, hooded mergansers, scaup, and buffleheads. Look for these divers along Hwy 49 –both sides of the highway.

Other sightings to note:

- Large rafts of American coot can still be seen – especially along Hwy 49.
- Sandhill crane numbers are increasing – watch for flocks in the hundreds in farm fields – especially along the east side of the marsh.
- American white pelican –less than 15 hardy birds remain at the refuge.
- Trumpeter swan families can be seen along Hwy 49.

Check out the north side of Ledge Road (the west section of road that enters the marsh) – the biggest variety of ducks (13 species) was seen along there including more 1000 gadwall and green-wing teal. Another great spot for viewing waterfowl is along the auto tour route – check the last impoundment before you exit. This week there were nearly 5000 gadwall and 4000 American wigeon. Bring binoculars and a spotting scope.

10/15/2020

This is week four of waterbird surveys at the refuge for the fall migration. Despite weather fronts and lots of wind this week, goose numbers did not increase. Mallards were the most notable increase –nearly 9000.

Canada goose numbers stayed the same at about 25,000 on the refuge. Fall crop harvest continues. Soybean harvest is nearly complete. Combining corn started in full force this week. Many local fields are being used daily by geese, ducks, and cranes.

Dabbling ducks were most numerous again this week. Impressive numbers of American wigeon and Northern pintails, and mallards were seen this week. Top species seen in the thousands were American wigeon, mallards, Northern pintails, green-wing teal, gadwall, and Northern shovelers. Others seen in the hundreds included American black duck, and blue-wing teal.

Diving duck numbers are increasing with most species being seen here right now. Ruddy ducks are still the most numerous nearly 800. Other species spotted in small flocks included redheads, ring-neck ducks, canvasbacks, and scaup. Look for these divers along Hwy 49 –both sides of the highway.

Other sightings to note:

- Large rafts of American coot can still be seen – especially along Hwy 49.
- Sandhill crane numbers stayed about the same in the area – watch for flocks in the hundreds in farm fields – especially along the east side of the marsh.
- American white pelican –only about 50 remain at the refuge.
- Trumpeter swan families can be seen along Hwy 49.

Check out the north side of Ledge Road (the west section of road that enters the marsh) – the biggest variety of ducks (14 species) was seen along there including 2000 American wigeon. Bring a spotting scope. Large flocks of Northern pintails were seen along the auto tour route – check the last impoundment before you exit.

10/7/2020

This is week three of waterbird surveys at the refuge for the fall migration.

Canada goose numbers doubled to about 25,000 on the refuge. Fall crop harvest continues with soybean harvest underway. More geese are off the refuge feeding in the harvested farm fields.

Dabbling ducks were most numerous on this week's survey. Impressive numbers of American wigeon and Northern pintails were seen this week. Top species seen in the thousands were mallards, American wigeon, green-wing teal, Northern shovelers, and Northern pintails. Others seen in the hundreds included gadwall, blue-wing teal, wood ducks, and black ducks.

Diving duck numbers are increasing with most species seen here right now. Ruddy ducks are still the most numerous nearly 800. Other species spotted in small flocks included redheads, ring-neck ducks, and canvasbacks.

Other sightings to note:

- Large rafts of American coot can still be seen – especially along Hwy 49.
- Sandhill crane numbers are increasing in the area – watch for flocks in the hundreds in farm fields – especially along the east side of the marsh.
- American white pelican numbers continue to decrease as they end their stay at the refuge.
- Trumpeter swan families can be seen along Hwy 49.
- Small flocks of shorebirds can still be spotted along Hwy 49. You may see lesser and greater yellowlegs, long and short billed dowitchers, and a few species of sandpipers.

Check out the north side of Ledge Road (the west section of road that enters the marsh) – the biggest variety of ducks (12 species) was seen along there including 4,000 American wigeon. Bring a spotting scope. Large flocks of Northern pintails were seen on the auto tour route.

9/29/2020

This is week two of waterbird surveys at the refuge for the fall migration. Weather/rain patterns were very typical for this time of year. We saw the first freeze/frost for this fall.

Canada goose numbers to nearly 12,000 on the refuge. Fall crops are starting to be taken with corn and soybean harvest underway. More geese are off the refuge feeding in the harvested farm fields.

Dabbling ducks were most numerous on this week's survey. Top species seen in the thousands were mallards, American wigeon, blue-wing teal, green-wing teal, and Northern pintails. Others seen in the hundreds included gadwall, Northern shovelers, wood ducks, and black ducks.

Diving duck numbers are increasing with most species seen here right now. Ruddy ducks are still the most numerous. Other species spotted in small flocks included redheads, ring-neck ducks, lesser scaup, and canvasbacks.

Other sightings to note:

- Large rafts of American coot can still be seen – especially along Hwy 49.
- Sandhill crane numbers are increasing in the area – watch for flocks in the hundreds in farm fields – especially along the east side of the marsh.
- Shorebirds are still moving through the area and flocks of mixed species that include dunlin, both short and long-billed dowitchers, greater and lesser yellow legs, least sandpiper, spotted sandpiper, and semi-palmated plovers. The best shorebird habitat on the refuge is in the interior of the marsh on exposed mudflats.

The public best viewing of waterfowl this week is along State Hwy 49. Binoculars and spotting scopes are helpful.

9/22/2020

This week is the first week of waterbird surveys at the refuge for the fall migration. The refuge manages 18 separate impoundments with different water levels in each to create the necessary habitat and feeding conditions for migrating waterbirds. Current water levels and weather conditions are very typical for late September.

Canada goose numbers were low with around 6,000 on the refuge. Fall crops are starting to be taken with corn and soybean harvest underway. More geese are off the refuge feeding in the harvested farm fields.

Dabbling ducks were most numerous on this week's survey. The top 3 species seen in the thousands were mallards, green-wing teal, and blue-wing teal. Others seen in the hundreds included gadwall, American wigeon, Northern shovelers, Northern pintail, and wood ducks.

Diving duck numbers are very low right now – less than 1,000. Most of them were in groups of ruddy ducks in open water areas.

Other sightings to note:

- Large rafts of American coot – in the thousands – are grouping up for migration.
- Unusual high numbers of Pied-billed grebes – 175 -were seen all over the refuge.
- Ring-billed gulls are migrating through the area in large numbers.
- American white pelicans and double-crested cormorants began migration several weeks ago. We are down to several hundred of each.
- Trumpeter swans have had good nesting success here this year. At least 5 families still have young here.

The public best viewing of waterfowl this week is along State Hwy 49. Binoculars and spotting scopes are helpful.