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Idaho Waterfowl Hunters Look Forward to Another Good Season

A light snow falls in the cracking cold of a November dawn; only the dogs seem unaffected by the cold.

An array of decoys bob silently in the Snake River.

Then a flurry of wings and a barrage of shotgun blasts. Two birds hit the water, followed by a pair of eager retrievers.

The three hunters have forgotten all about the cold. The mallards are barely gathered in before another flight appears.

More shots fired. Missed. The ducks retreat, and the hunters settle back in their blind to share another cup of coffee from the thermos and stories of past exploits.

Such is waterfowl hunting in Idaho – and perhaps in most places in the northern United States.

It may be hard to think of freezing in a duck blind when the weather is in the 90s, but this year is shaping up to be a banner year for waterfowl hunting in Idaho, with duck numbers on the breeding grounds taking wing.

Waterfowl nesting conditions on these breeding areas were good in 2011. The total pond estimate (prairie Canada and U.S. combined) increased 22 percent to 8.1 million, up from 6.7 million in 2010. The number of mallards in these areas increased 9 percent to 9.2 million, up from 8.4 million birds in 2010.

The Federal Harvest Information Program estimates that 16,800 hunters in Idaho spent about 102,700 days hunting and harvested 225,100 ducks annually during 2001 –

2010. Over that same time period, the harvest information program estimates Idaho hunters harvested 59,800 Canada geese annually. This is the third highest total in the Pacific

Flyway, behind Oregon and Washington, respectively.

Idaho initiated its first early light goose season during February and early March 2010. During the first two seasons, about 790 hunters spent about 3,100 days hunting to harvest 1,600 light geese each year. Most of the birds were harvested in the Southwest Region, while the Magic Valley and Southeast regions split the remaining harvest.

Twenty-one banded snow geese were reported as harvested during the spring hunts and yielded interesting information about the origins of the snow geese that pass through Idaho. All of the birds were banded on the breeding grounds – nine originated on the north slope of Alaska, four on Banks Island in Canada's Northwest Territories, three on Queen Maud Gulf in Canada's Nunavut (two of which were Ross's geese) and five on Wrangel Island, Russia.

"Wrangel Island snow geese undertake one of the longest migrations of any geese

wintering in North America," said Jeff Knetter, upland game and waterfowl staff biologist for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. "It is over 3,000 miles from Boise to Wrangel Island."



A successful north Idaho hunter surveys his harvest.

Photo by Jeff Knetter

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Idaho Waterfowl Seasons Setting a Cooperative Process

Most of the waterfowl harvested in Idaho are produced in Canada.

More than 60 percent of the ducks harvested in Idaho come from Alberta, Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories. And 2011 looks like a good year for ducks.

Idaho's waterfowl season is set within a framework determined by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and provided to Idaho Fish and Game in early August after meeting with all four Flyways.



Pintails line up for a landing in an Idaho wetland. *Photo by Clair Kofoed*

Since 1996, the Fish and Wildlife Service has used an adaptive harvest management process to determine the general duck season framework, to evaluate duck habitat and populations annually, and to select the optimal season framework for U.S. duck seasons. Special harvest strategies are used for some of the less common ducks, such as canvasbacks, pintails and scaup.

Goose seasons are determined by flyway management plans for each goose

population. Spring goose pair counts are the key parameter for selecting Canada goose seasons.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service coordinate assessments of the population status and productivity of 30 populations of Canada geese, brant, snow geese, Ross's geese, emperor geese, white-fronted geese, and tundra swans in North America.

Breeding duck population size and production are estimated annually during

and Habitat Survey is the most extensive and most important of North America's waterfowl population surveys. It was started experimentally in 1947, became operational in 1955, and has been conducted every year since then.

These surveys encompass principal breeding areas of North America, and cover more than 2 million square miles.

The traditional survey area comprises 52 sampling areas across Alaska, Canada, and the north-central U.S. and includes about 1.3 million square miles.

The annual survey guides the Fish and Wildlife Service's waterfowl conservation programs under authority of the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Fish and Wildlife works with state biologists from the four flyways — the Atlantic, Mississippi, Central and Pacific — to establish regulatory frameworks for waterfowl hunting season lengths, dates and bag limits.

The entire Trends in Duck Breeding Populations, 1955-2011 report is available at <http://www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/>.

(Source: flyways.us)

Season Setting Process

The annual process for setting hunting regulations in the United States begins in January and ends in September. The process involves:

- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state biologists gather, analyze and interpret survey data and provide the information to Flyway councils.
- The Pacific Flyway officials review the reports and develop recommendations appropriate for hunting seasons and bag limits to the Fish and Wildlife Service.
- Fish and Wildlife develops migratory bird hunting frameworks based on recommendations from each flyway.
- Season frameworks must be approved by the Interior Secretary.
- The Idaho Fish and Game Commission sets the state waterfowl hunting season dates and bag limits. Fish and Game may be more conservative than the federal frameworks, but never more liberal.

the Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey, conducted in May, and the Waterfowl Production and Habitat Survey, conducted in July.

The Waterfowl Breeding Population

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 implemented the 1916 treaty between the United States and Great Britain, for Canada, for the protection of birds migrating between the U.S. and Canada. The treaty includes a prohibition of hunting migratory birds except as permitted by regulations adopted by the U.S. Department of the Interior. Similar conventions between the United States and Mexico in 1936 and amended in 1997, Japan in 1972, and Russia in 1976 further expanded the scope of international protection of migratory birds.

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Waterfowl Hunters Need:

All hunters 16 years of age or older must purchase a Federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp – commonly referred to as a Duck Stamp – each year to hunt migratory waterfowl. In addition to a Duck Stamp, waterfowl hunters in Idaho need to purchase a migratory game bird harvest information program validation from Idaho Fish and Game.

For more information about waterfowl hunting and license requirements in Idaho visit: <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/public/hunt/rules/?getPage=66>.

Lead Shot

The use of lead shot for hunting waterfowl was banned nationwide in 1991.

Nontoxic shot regulations apply only to ducks, geese – including brant – swans and coots. Any shot type that does not cause sickness and death when ingested by migratory birds is considered nontoxic.

Shot types approved as nontoxic for waterfowl hunting in the U.S. are:

- Bismuth-tin
- Iron (steel)
- Iron-tungsten
- Iron-tungsten-nickel
- Tungsten-bronze
- Tungsten-iron-copper-nickel
- Tungsten-matrix
- Tungsten-polymer
- Tungsten-tin-iron
- Tungsten-tin-bismuth
- Tungsten-tin-iron-nickel
- Tungsten-iron-polymer

*Coatings of copper, nickel, tin, zinc, zinc chloride and zinc chrome on approved nontoxic shot types also are approved.

Idaho Fish and Game Policy

Idaho wildlife management policy is set by seven volunteer commissioners. The Idaho Fish and Game Commission's policy decisions are based on research and recommendations by the professional staff of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and with input from the governor's office, the state Legislature, hunters, anglers and the public.

Survey Results Show Higher Duck Populations

Improved conditions in much of the waterfowl breeding habitat in Canada and the prairies of the north-central United States have contributed to higher populations of many species of ducks, according to breeding population estimates by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The preliminary estimate of the total duck population from the traditional survey area (north-central United States, south-central and northern Canada and Alaska) was 45.6 million birds. This estimate represents an 11 percent increase over last year's estimate of 40.9 million

birds and is 35 percent above the long-term average (the total duck estimate excludes scoters, eiders, long-tailed ducks, mergansers, and wood ducks).

The surveys are summarized in the 2011 Report on Trends in Duck Breeding Populations, which contains information about the status of duck populations and wetland habitats found during spring 2011.

Other highlights from the traditional survey area include:

- Estimated mallard abundance was 9.2 million birds, a nine percent increase from the 2010 estimate of 8.4 million birds and 22 percent above the long-term average.
- Gadwall estimated abundance was 3.3 million, similar to 2010 but 80 percent above the

long-term average.

- The northern pintail estimate of 4.4 million - the highest count since 1980 - was 26 percent above the 2010 estimate of 3.5 million, and similar to the long-term average.
- Estimated abundance of American wigeon was 14 percent below the 2010 estimate and 20 percent below the long-term average.
- The combined (lesser and greater) scaup estimate of 4.3 million was similar to that of 2010 and 15 percent below the long-term average of 5.1 million.



More mallards may be gathering in Idaho this year. Photo by Clair Kofoed

- The canvasback estimate of 700,000 was similar to the 2010 estimate and 21 percent above the long-term average.

In the traditional survey area habitat conditions were generally good to excellent, with the exception of a region of boreal forest in the west-central portion. Habitat conditions across the Prairies generally improved relative to 2010, especially in Canada.

The total pond estimate (Prairie Canada and the north-central U.S. combined) was 8.1 million, 22 percent higher than the 2010 estimate of 6.7 million ponds, and 62 percent above the long-term average.

(Source: *flyways.us*)

Bird Banding Data Key to Waterfowl Migration Corridors

One of the first things waterfowl managers learned from early waterfowl banding efforts was that waterfowl follow distinct, traditional migration corridors or flyways in their annual travels between breeding and wintering areas.

Migratory birds use four major migratory routes – Pacific, Central, Mississippi and Atlantic flyways – in North America. Since 1948, waterfowl have been managed by four administrative flyways that are based on those migration paths.

Each flyway has its own council and technical committee, which have roles in setting migratory bird policy and regulations within the United States and migratory bird research and management throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Idaho is a member of the Pacific Flyway Council along with Alaska, Arizona, California,

Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and those portions of Colorado,

Montana, New Mexico and Wyoming west of the Continental Divide. The federal governments of the United States, Canada, and Mexico, and Alaska subsistence harvest management bodies may also provide nonvoting representatives to the council.

The Pacific Flyway Council meets twice a year.

- March – Migratory shore and upland game birds, which have hunting seasons that open before October 1. These include doves, pigeons, snipe, rails and cranes. The council also considers special September waterfowl and extended falconry seasons, and all of Alaska's seasons.

- July – Waterfowl, which have hunting seasons that open on or after October 1, including ducks, geese and swans.



Pacific waterfowl flyway appears in red.

Courtesy flyways.us

(Source: flyways.us)

Banding Birds Has a Long History in North America

In 1902, Paul Bartsch of the Smithsonian Institution became first to band birds in North America when he banded 23 black-crowned night herons near Washington, D.C.

Bartsch published his finding in 1904, and many others soon followed. Banding and recovery records have been kept since 1914.

Bird banding is a universal technique for studying the movement, survival and behavior of birds. Records are coordinated through the North American Bird Banding Program, which is administered by the U.S. Geological Survey's Bird Banding Laboratory and the Canadian Wildlife Service's Bird Banding Office.

These agencies don't band birds, but they issue banding permits, provide bands, maintain band and recovery data, and coordinate banding projects in North America. The program supports studies by federal and state wildlife agencies,

the academic community, professional and amateur ornithologists and nongovernmental organizations.

Banders capture wild birds and mark them with a uniquely numbered leg band. They record the band number, date and location, the bird's age and gender, and send that information to the Bird Banding Laboratory.

When bands are found and reported to the laboratory, they provide information about the movement, lifespan, survival and other parameters of individuals and populations.

Some research projects involve marking migratory game birds with color leg bands, neck collars, radios or other markers. Such marking, also coordinated by the North American Bird Banding Program, provides more detailed data on individual birds through their annual travels.

To view banding data for your area or nationwide, go to: <http://www.flyways.us/surveys-and-monitoring/banding-and-marking-programs/bands-across-america>.

To submit band recovery information:

- Call the Bird Banding Lab toll free at 800-327-BAND (2263).
- Complete an electronic reporting form on the Bird Banding Lab website at: <http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/>.

(Source: flyways.us)



IDFG photo