

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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DROUGHT AFFECTS NORTH AMERICA'S DUCK FACTORY

A recent survey of the major U.S. and Canadian waterfowl nesting areas indicates that this spring's drought may have hurt the 1980 duck crop.

The survey of most of the Prairie Pothole region, a 300,000 square-mile area that extends across Alberta and Saskatchewan down into the Dakotas and western Minnesota, shows that the area was hard hit. In normal years, the entire area sparkles with millions of ponds and small lakes. Called the "Land of Many Waters" by the Indians, the area is also known as North America's Duck Factory because it usually furnishes 60-70% of the Continent's duck production. This year, however, hot, dry weather and a light spring water runoff combined with a lack of carryover water from last year brought about very poor waterfowl nesting habitat throughout the area. Many of the ponds did not fill to capacity and many remained completely dry.

"Conditions on the waterfowl breeding grounds are about what we expected," said Morton Smith, head of the survey branch of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Migratory Bird Management Office. Smith recently returned from Canada after completing the annual spring Duck Breeding Pair Survey. "With a few exceptions," he added, "the prairie parklands breeding habitat is in poor condition for waterfowl."

The Duck Breeding Pair Survey consists of 38,000 miles of aerial transects completed by a team of U.S. and Canadian biologists over certain portions of breeding grounds. Each May, a survey is made of both the general condition of nesting areas and the numbers of pairs of ducks in these areas. A second flight over some of these same areas is made in July to determine the hatching success, and thus duck production in the huge international breeding grounds can be estimated.

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In normal years, around 50 million ducks return to the breeding grounds in the spring, and 100 million or more return to the wintering grounds in the fall. More than half of the 50 million ducks die between fall and spring from disease, lead poisoning, predation, and other natural causes. About 18 million are shot by hunters in the United States and Canadian waterfowl hunters shoot another 5 million.

The size of the fall flight of waterfowl is an important element in the development of the annual waterfowl hunting regulations, set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in consultation with the States.

This spring many of the ducks flew beyond the Canadian prairies seeking suitable nesting grounds farther North. Streams and lakes were also low in parts of the Canadian bush country. Fires have ravaged several portions of the tinder-dry north woods. Fortunately, the survey revealed some exceptions to this gloomy picture. Most notable was Alaska where nesting conditions are good and breeding populations are up. Numbers of ducks were up in Minnesota also.

"These areas, however, probably won't compensate for the losses in the drought areas," Smith summarized. "So far our studies indicate there will be reduced production this year. But we won't have an accurate estimate of how much less until the brood surveys are completed."

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