



NEWS RELEASE

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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**GOOD NEWS FROM THE PRAIRIE: BREEDING DUCK POPULATIONS
RISE FOR THIRD STRAIGHT YEAR**

Boosted by two consecutive years of good habitat conditions, duck breeding populations climbed 5 percent this spring to the highest level since 1979, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Acting Director John Rogers announced today.

The annual breeding duck survey recorded an estimated 37.5 million ducks, up from 35.9 million in 1995. The survey samples 1.3 million square miles across the north-central United States, western and northern Canada, and Alaska and estimates the approximate numbers of ducks in important breeding areas.

Populations of four species--gadwall, blue-winged teal, northern shoveler, and canvasback--reached record highs. In particular, blue-winged teal, up 25 percent to 6.4 million, and northern shoveler, up 15 percent to 3.4 million, showed substantial gains.

"There are two primary reasons for this good news," Rogers said. "First, we continue to be blessed by abundant precipitation and good habitat conditions on the breeding grounds. Second, hunters and other conservationists have spent the last decade restoring and conserving vital wetlands in key duck production areas.

"Although duck populations naturally fluctuate over time as habitat and water conditions change, we wouldn't have seen this kind of recovery from the drought in the mid-1980s and early 1990s if not for these habitat conservation efforts."

The overall number of ponds in the survey area rose 18 percent to 7.5 million, the second highest level ever recorded. The pond count in Canada rose 29 percent, with the biggest gains in southern Alberta and Saskatchewan. The U.S. pond count was similar to last year but still 84 percent above the long-term average.

The Fish and Wildlife Service administers or participates in a number of programs to conserve and restore waterfowl habitat. For example, since 1986, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, an international partnership effort, has protected, restored, or enhanced more than 2.5 million acres of wetland habitat.

In addition, other government programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program and the Wetland Reserve Program have conserved significant tracts of wildlife habitat in recent years. And

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sportsmen and conservation organizations have conserved and restored millions of acres of prime habitat. In addition, laws such as the Swampbuster provisions of the Farm Bill and the wetland protection provisions of the Clean Water Act also have helped conserve waterfowl habitat.

The breeding duck survey estimated mallard populations at 7.9 million this year compared to 8.3 million in 1995. Statistically, this change was not significant. The 8.3 million estimate in 1995 was an increase of 18 percent over the previous year and the highest in more than two decades.

American wigeon populations experienced a significant decline to 2.3 million from 2.6 million in 1995. Populations of pintail, green-winged teal, scaup, canvasback, redhead, and gadwall were at levels similar to 1995.

The overall increase in breeding duck populations occurred despite relatively liberal hunting regulations that, along with a large fall flight, resulted in a 46-percent increase in duck harvest nationwide in 1995.

The number of hunters and days in the field was similar to previous years suggesting the increase in harvest from 8.6 million ducks in the 1994-95 season to 12.6 million last season was due to better hunter success in the field.

The survey information is used by the Service and the four flyway councils in the cooperative process of setting fall duck hunting seasons. This will be the second year of a new system for setting these regulations called Adaptive Harvest Management.

Adaptive Harvest Management is a tool to increase objectivity and efficiency in the process of regulating waterfowl hunting. It improves upon the traditional approach by using clearly defined harvest management objectives, a limited number of regulatory options, and new data-assessment procedures.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats. The Service manages 508 national wildlife refuges encompassing 92 million acres, as well as 72 national fish hatcheries.

The agency also enforces Federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, administers the Endangered Species Act, and oversees the Federal Aid program that funnels Federal excise taxes on angling and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.