



NEWS

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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SERVICE PROPOSES FEW CHANGES TO FALL WATERFOWL HUNTING SEASONS

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed today to retain most of the waterfowl season lengths and bag limits of last year for the upcoming 1998-99 season. The Service also proposed to continue the popular Youth Waterfowl Hunting Day for a third year to encourage parents and other adults to take young people hunting.

The hunting season proposals were developed after consultation with the four flyway councils and following extensive review of information collected throughout North America. Breeding population and habitat surveys conducted in May 1998 indicated that the condition of many important North American breeding habitats had deteriorated from the excellent conditions that existed during the mid-1990s. The estimated number of ponds in surveyed areas declined 38 percent from 1997 levels but were still only 6 percent below the long-term average. The duck breeding population declined about 8 percent from 1997 but remained 20 percent above the 1955-97 average. The mallard breeding population in 1998 declined slightly (-3 percent) from the 1997 level but remained 19 percent above the North American Waterfowl Management Plan goal.

The Service estimated a fall flight of 11.7 million mallards for 1998, which is 18 percent below last year's estimate. The total fall flight index of ducks is predicted to be 84 million, about 7 percent lower than in 1997.

"The total harvest in the United States was 15.8 million ducks, only 50,000 below the record high harvest of the 1970 season. In addition, the number of Canada geese harvested in the United States reached a record high last year," Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark observed. "Even though we counted record numbers of breeding ducks last year, many factors influence hunting success, including weather and the amount of available habitat. We can't control the weather but we can continue to protect, restore and even rebuild waterfowl habitat.

"During the mid-1990s, we enjoyed favorable weather and habitat conditions in the continent's northern duck factory that, combined with the millions of acres of wetlands restored in the past decade, have boosted duck populations. This year's habitat surveys remind us that dry cycles can return and reinforces the need for continued habitat conservation."

"Not all species have flourished equally over the past few years of good weather and breeding conditions," Clark added. "Pintails

are still well below their target populations. As a consequence, the Service has proposed a bag limit of one pintail in all flyways. The Service is particularly concerned about the continued lack of improvement in scaup numbers, which are 36 percent below the long-term average. As part of this year's regulatory process, the flyway councils have agreed to assist in the development of a scaup harvest strategy that can be implemented beginning with next year's hunting season."

The population level of mid-continent snow geese remains dangerously high and continues to threaten the arctic ecosystems on which snow geese and so many other species rely. Hunters in areas frequented by these snow geese and other growing goose populations will enjoy additional hunting opportunity this fall.

Highlights of the proposed late-season frameworks follow:

Atlantic Flyway--(Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia)

Ducks--A hunting season of not more than 60 days between October 1, 1998, and January 20, 1999. The proposed daily bag limit is six and may include no more than four scaup, four mallards (two hens), two wood ducks, two redheads, one black duck, one pintail, one mottled duck, one fulvous whistling duck, one canvasback, and four scoters. The proposed daily bag limit of mergansers is five, only one of which may be a hooded merganser. The season on harlequin ducks is closed.

Geese--For light geese, states may select a 107-day season between October 1 and March 10, with a daily bag limit of 15 geese and no possession limit. For Atlantic Population Canada geese, the season is suspended. In Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Long Island, New York, a season on North Atlantic Population Canada geese is proposed between October 1 and December 15, with a two-bird daily bag limit. Special or experimental seasons and regular seasons to harvest resident and other populations of migratory Canada geese are authorized in Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. For Atlantic brant, the season length may be 50 days with a daily bag limit of two.

Mississippi Flyway--(Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee, and Wisconsin)

Ducks--Hunting seasons of not more than 60 days between October 3, 1998, and January 17, 1999. The proposed daily bag

limit is six and may include no more than four mallards (two hens), three mottled ducks, two wood ducks, two redheads, one black duck, one pintail, and one canvasback. The proposed daily bag limit of mergansers is five, only one of which may be a hooded merganser.

Geese--Generally, states may select 70-day seasons for dark geese between October 3, 1998, and January 31, 1999, and 107-day seasons for light geese between October 3, 1998, and March 10, 1999. The daily bag limit is 20 light geese, 2 Canada geese, 2 white-fronted geese, and 2 brant. There will be no possession limit for light geese. There are, however, numerous area-specific exceptions to these frameworks.

Central Flyway--(Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and portions of Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, and Wyoming.)

Ducks--In the High Plains Mallard Management Unit (roughly west of the 100th Meridian), a 97-day season is proposed between October 3, 1998, and January 17, 1999. The last 23 days may start no earlier than December 12, 1998. A 74-day season is proposed for the remainder of the Central Flyway. The proposed daily bag limit is six and may include no more than five mallards (two hens), two redheads, two wood ducks, one mottled duck, one pintail, and one canvasback.

Geese--Seasons for Canada geese are proposed from October 3, 1998, to February 14, 1999, with a bag limit of four. Season lengths are 93 days in the Eastern Tier and 107 days in the Western Tier. For light geese, the proposed 107-day seasons may extend from October 3, 1998, to March 10, 1999, except for selected areas of Nebraska where the closing date is February 1, 1999. There will be no possession limit for light geese. White-fronted goose seasons may be 72 days with a bag limit of 2 or 86 days with a bag limit of 1. Goose bag limits vary by state and management unit.

Pacific Flyway--(Arizona, California, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and portions of Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, and Wyoming)

Ducks--A 107-day season between October 3, 1998, and January 17, 1999. The proposed daily bag limit is seven ducks, including no more than two mallard hens, two redheads, one pintail, and one canvasback.

Geese--A 100-day season is proposed in most parts of the flyway between October 3, 1998, and January 17, 1999. Bag limits are generally three light geese and four dark geese. Other restrictions vary by state and zone. For brant, the

season lengths are 16 days in Oregon and Washington and 30 days in California, with a two-bird limit.

The Youth Waterfowl Hunting Day, proposed in July, would be available to all states. This year, youth hunters will be allowed to hunt geese as well as ducks, subject to regular season species and bag restrictions. This day would provide young people an extra hunting day before or after the regular waterfowl season. The day would have to be held outside of any regular duck season on either a weekend or holiday when youths would have the maximum opportunity to participate. The day could be held up to 14 days before or after any regular duck season framework or within any split of a regular duck season. Each state wildlife agency will select its day for this special hunt.

Participants would have to be 15 years of age or younger and be accompanied by an adult at least 18 years old. The adult would not be allowed to hunt ducks but could participate in other open seasons. Under the proposal, the daily bag limit and species restrictions would be consistent with the regular duck season in the flyway.

Details about the Youth Waterfowl Hunting Day and other early-season issues were published in the July 17 Federal Register and public comments were accepted through July 31.

Additional details about the proposed late-season hunting regulations will be published in the Federal Register soon. The public comment period on late-season regulations will close on or about September 7, 1998. Comments should be addressed to Chief, Office of Migratory Bird Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, 1849 C Street, NW., Mail Stop 634 ARLSQ, Washington, DC 20240.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprising more than 500 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.