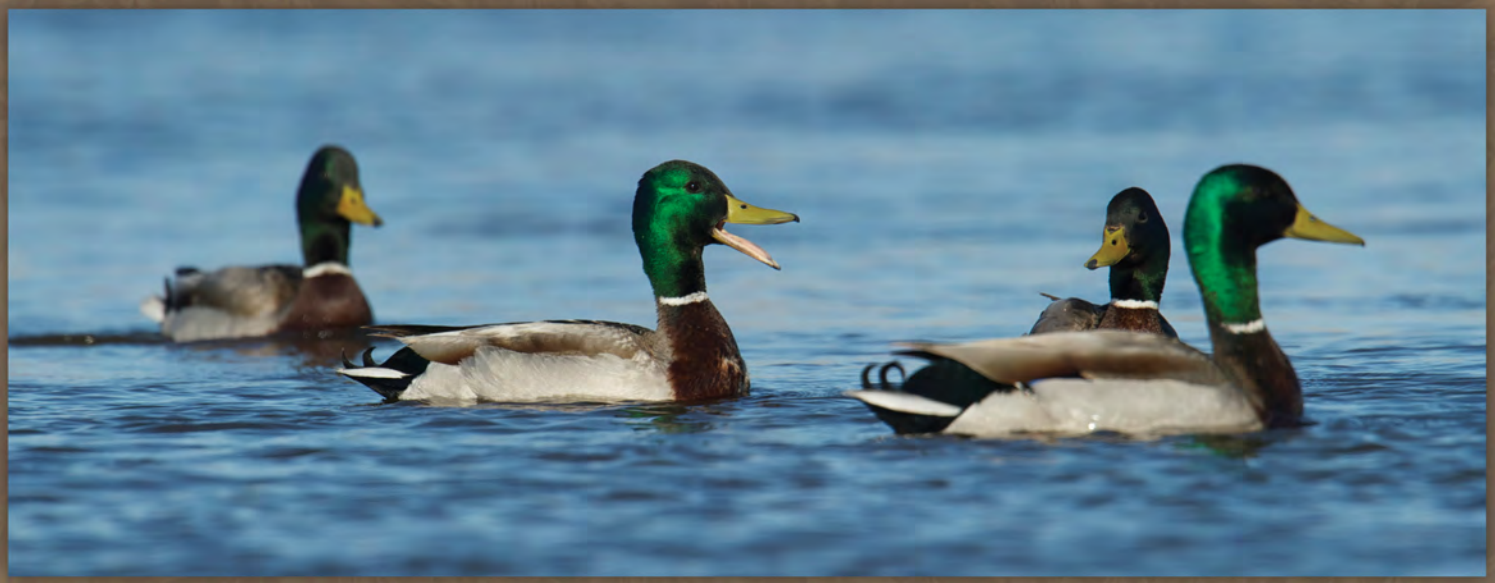
Status of Breeding Ducks

A Special Report from Delta Waterfowl



2012

From the Staff and Board of Delta Waterfowl

As a Delta Waterfowl supporter, we strive to always keep you apprised of major developments affecting waterfowl and waterfowl hunting. As such, our annual **Status of Breeding Ducks Report** provides you with an insider's view of topics ranging from habitat conditions, duck population status and prospects for the fall flight. We hope you appreciate the report!

Summary of Habitat Conditions Across the Breeding Grounds

After the excellent wetland conditions of last spring and summer, average water levels returned to the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) in 2012. Exceptionally mild winter temperatures coupled with well below normal snowfall resulted in a significant decrease in available wetland habitat. In all, results from the 2012 Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey, conducted annually by biologists with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS), show a 32% decrease in May ponds from 2011 levels. However, pond conditions this year remain 9% above the long term average.

The drying conditions were most evident in the U.S. PPR where May pond counts dropped 49% below last year's estimates. May ponds in Canada were down less than in the U.S. Declines were noted in all regions and total Canadian May ponds decreased by 21%. In direct contrast to 2011 where excellent wetland conditions existed across most of the Dakotas, Montana and prairie Canada, the only area categorized in 2012 as excellent by pilot biologists conducting the survey was extreme southeastern Saskatchewan.

Figure 1. May Pond Counts from 2012 Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey.

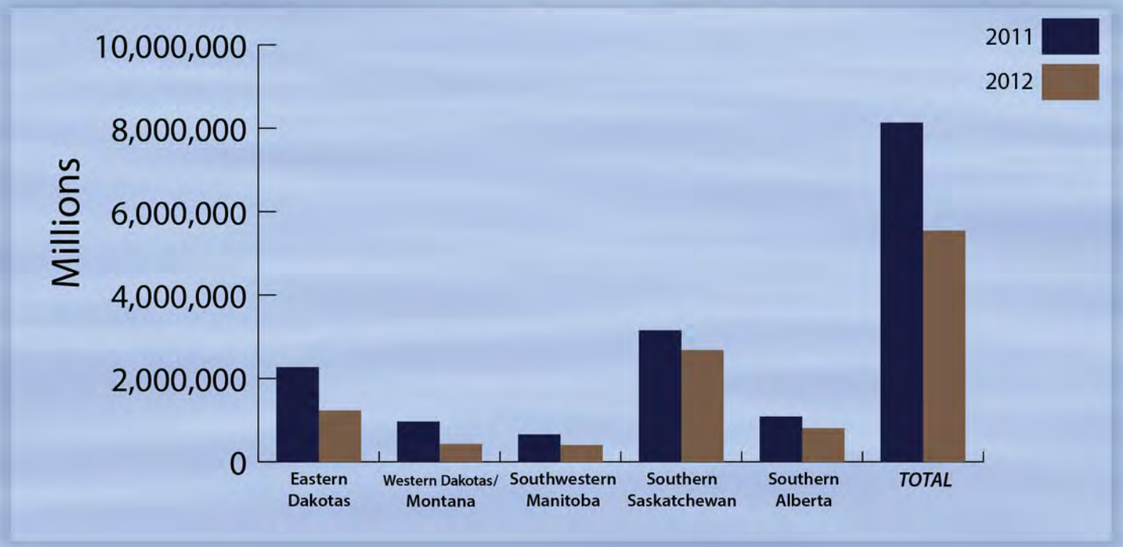


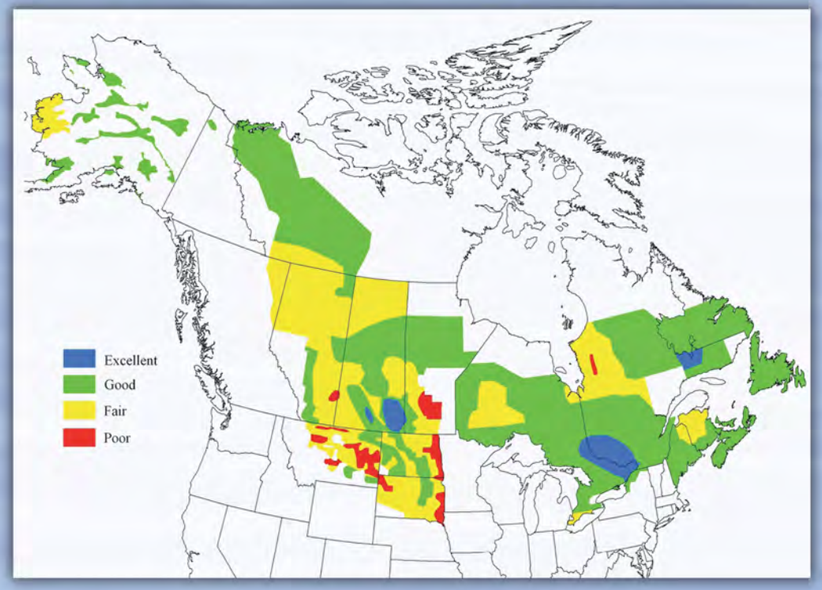
Table 1. 2012 May Pond Counts - Change from Long Term Average

Eastern Dakotas	Western Dakotas/ Montana	Southwestern Manitoba	Southern Saskatchewan	Southern Alberta	TOTAL
+13%	-24%	-40%	+32%	+8%	+9%

Despite the significant declines, wetland conditions remain slightly better than the long term average in southern Saskatchewan, southern Alberta and the eastern Dakotas, while conditions in southwestern Manitoba and the western Dakota's and Montana are drier.

Conditions across the boreal forest were classified as "fair to good," while conditions in Alaska were rated as "good." In the eastern breeding grounds, where wetland conditions do not experience wide fluctuations, pilot biologists surveying the region noted habitat quality declined overall from 2011, but conditions were still rated as "good."

Figure 2. Assessment of Habitat Conditions as Determined by USFWS/CWS Pilot Biologists.



Duck Populations in the Traditional Survey Area

Despite the significant decrease in available wetland habitat, total duck populations increased 7% to 48,575,000, which represents the highest total duck estimate since the survey began in 1955. The population estimates for blue-winged teal, green-winged teal and northern shovelers are at all time highs. Mallard populations increased significantly from 2011 and now stand at 10,602,000, which represents the highest population levels since 1999.

Scaup increased for the seventh consecutive year, which is the highest estimate since 1991. Wigeon, which have shown marked declines, increased for the first time in four years yet remain well below the 1955 - 2012 average. Pintail populations declined by 22% from 2011 levels, sinking below their LTA to 3,473,000.

As a direct result of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), remaining native prairie, intact wetland basins and the continued near absence of red fox due to mange and coyotes , the eastern Dakotas continue to attract a significant portion of all prairie-nesting duck populations. Wetland conditions in the eastern Dakotas were only slightly above average, yet the Dakotas as a whole continued to attract ducks at exceptionally high levels. Total duck estimates were 162% above the LTA in the eastern Dakotas. Mallards (161% above LTA) and pintails (97% above LTA) still settled in the region despite a significant reduction in available wetland habitat.

Total duck numbers in Saskatchewan and Alberta improved in 2012, likely due to a combination of reduced wetland conditions in the Dakotas and the presence of excellent conditions in southeastern Saskatchewan. Mallard numbers improved significantly in Alberta (+34%) and Saskatchewan (+20%), while pintail numbers declined significantly in both provinces.

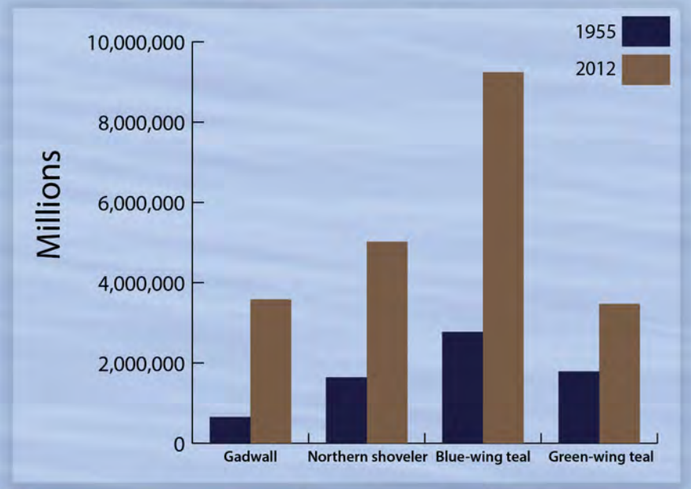
Table 2. Estimates of Duck Populations in the Traditional Survey Area

Species	2012	2011	% change from 2011	% change from LTA
Mallard	10.602	9.183	+15	+40
Gadwall	3.586	3.257	+10	+96
Wigeon	2.145	2.084	+3	-17
Green-winged	3.471	2.900	+20	+74
Blue-winged	9.242	8.948	+3	+94
Pintail	3.473	4.429	-22	-14
Shoveler	5.018	4.641	+8	+111
Redhead	1.270	1.356	-6	+89
Canvasback	0.760	0.692	+10	+33
Scaup	5.239	4.319	+21	+4
Total Ducks	48.575	45.554	+7	+43

Numerous species demonstrated increases in Alaska and the boreal forest survey areas, which is a pattern consistent with drying conditions in the prairie breeding grounds. Pintail numbers in Alaska were up 58% and 27% above the LTA, providing additional evidence of an over-flight of the prairies.

It is important to note that the composition of the breeding population has changed significantly over time. In 1955, gadwall, northern shoveler and teal (blue-winged and green-winged) made up a modest percentage (17.3%) of the total breeding duck estimate. In 2012, those four species comprise a significant percentage (43.9%) of the total duck population. Gadwall and green-winged teal are an important contribution to hunter bag limits. However, because of their early migration date, blue-winged teal are relatively lightly harvested. Northern shoveler are typically not a highly sought after species.

Figure 3. Changes in Species Composition 1955-2012.

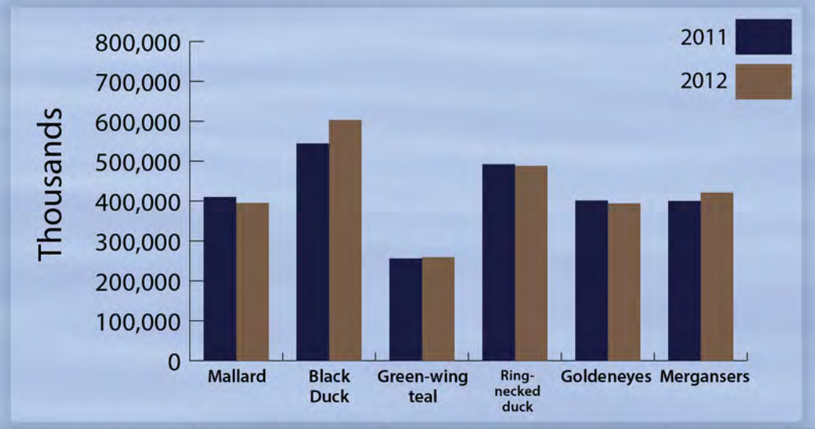


	1955	2012
Total 4 species	6,860,200	21,317,700
Total duck estimate	39,603,600	48,575,300
4 species as a % of total ducks	17.3%	43.9%

Duck Populations in the Eastern Survey Area

As noted above, habitat quality decreased in the eastern survey area, but not to the degree witnessed in the prairies. As a result, population estimates for the primary species in the eastern breeding grounds were largely unchanged from 2011. Notably, black duck estimates were up 11% from 2011 but still slightly below their LTA. Eastern mallards showed modest declines from 2011 levels, while remaining slightly above average.

Figure 4. Duck Populations in the Eastern Survey Area-Change from Long Term Average



Mallard	Black Duck	Green-wing teal	Ring-necked duck	Goldeneyes	Mergansers
+3%	-3%	+1%	-2%	-6%	-4%

Other Duck Surveys

A number of additional duck surveys are conducted annually by state agencies. Recently, estimates from a number of these surveys have been incorporated into harvest management plans for mallards. As such, these survey results have implications for establishing season length and bag limits.

In Minnesota, mallard numbers declined to 225,000, largely driven by a drier than normal winter. The total duck breeding population also illustrated declines with indexes showing 469,000 total ducks in 2012 compared to 687,000 in 2011.

The survey in Wisconsin shows total ducks near their LTA at 521,100, with mallards up modestly from 2011 levels to 197,000. The California breeding duck survey indicated 524,500 total ducks, slightly below the LTA, yet mallards are up slightly from 2011 to 381,900 and near their LTA.

The Coming Duck Season

Due to high populations across the survey areas, a liberal duck season will be in place for all four flyways. In addition, the USFWS uses species specific population models to make harvest management decisions based on population size. The outcome of those models for the 2012 hunting season and general season frameworks are below:

Atlantic Flyway Season Framework
(60 days 6 duck bag limit)

- 2 pintail
- 4 scaup
- 1 canvasback

Central Flyway
(74 days, 6 duck bag limit)

- 2 pintail
- 6 scaup
- 1 canvasback

Mississippi Flyway
(60 days, 6 duck bag limit)

- 2 pintail
- 4 scaup
- 1 canvasback

Pacific Flyway
(107 days, 7 duck bag limit)

- 2 pintail
- 7 scaup
- 1 canvasback

Individual states have the option to be more conservative, but not more liberal, than the harvest packages offered by the USFWS. For more information regarding individual state waterfowl hunting regulations visit **www.deltawaterfowl.org/duckbiologists** for the contact information for the waterfowl biologists in your state.

Prospects for the Fall Flight

While breeding duck numbers are high in the traditional survey area, drier conditions prevail across large portions of the PPR. Since the surveys were completed in May, drought-like conditions have persisted in the U.S. prairies, while rains in prairie Canada may have helped the breeding effort in some areas.

Average to dry wetland conditions impact duck production. Fewer temporary and seasonal wetlands decreases the intensity of the entire breeding effort. With documented low nest success across large areas of the breeding grounds, re-nesting efforts are needed to provide a large crop of young ducks. Nesting hens need the food resources in these small wetlands to fuel the re-nesting effort. In years like this where those wetlands are scarce, the intensity of re-nesting is drastically reduced. In addition, research has illustrated that duckling survival is closely linked with the abundance of wetlands, with survival positively related to the amount of temporary and seasonal wetland habitat.

As a result, with a reduced breeding effort and lower anticipated duckling survival, the number of young ducks produced on the prairies will likely be down from 2011. Furthermore, research has confirmed high duck densities within limited habitat yields poorer production.

A Look Ahead

Beyond this year's fall flight, this moment provides a unique backdrop to speculate what the future holds for North American ducks. As this report is written, the U.S. House of Representatives is debating the Farm Bill, which is the enabling legislation for the CRP and other conservation programming responsible for significant increases in duck production out of the U.S. PPR. Early indications point to a drastically reduced CRP in future years, with enrollment caps set at 25 million acres, which is significantly below the peak of 39.2 million acres in the mid-2000s. In North Dakota alone, CRP enrollment has waned from a peak of 3,387,164 acres to an estimated 1,222,764 acres in 2013, representing a reduction of 3,382 square-miles of nesting cover.

Beyond CRP, native grass losses continue and wetlands are at greater risk with farmers pursuing record high commodity prices. In Canada, wetland loss rates continue to steadily erode the duck production capacity of "The Great Duck Factory." Hatching rates in many areas of prairie Canada continue to be well below levels necessary to sustain populations.

While we should be enthusiastic about strong breeding population estimates and the prospects for another above average fall flight, the underpinnings of continental duck production are tenuous. Delta Waterfowl recognizes the future will demand that our programs have an even greater impact. Our work to increase duck production will escalate in importance with declining habitat. We continue to test and refine predator management to significantly bolster hatch rates, are working towards expanding the scope of our Hen House program and our research program continues to address the key information needs of our flocks. Delta Waterfowl continues to advance Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS) as a means to address Canada's breeding ground habitat woes. In the United States, Delta Waterfowl is working on your behalf to achieve the best possible outcomes for duck habitat through public policy forums.

As always, it is your generous support that helps us to expand the impact of our programming.
We sincerely appreciate your generous support and look forward to working with you in the future.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