

Texas waterfowl season hinges on rainfall

Plenty of birds, long hunting seasons and liberal bag limits — just add water and you've got the recipe for a waterfowler's delight. Without the water, though, this recipe won't work.

What was projected to be a prime hunting for ducks and geese in Texas this year might not live up to expectations, according to Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPW) officials, who are concerned about a lack of fall rainfall along the eastern half of the state.

On Oct. 30, Texas greets a 107-day season and 20-bird daily bag limit for light geese statewide and a 74-day season and six-bird daily bag for ducks across most of the state. It looks to be a dry welcome for the estimated record fall flight of 105 million birds heading our way, with little or no rainfall for several months in key wintering grounds along the upper Texas coast and up through the Pineywoods.

"It's starting to look pretty grim," lamented TPW waterfowl biologist Carl Frentress of Athens. "It was looking great with the fall flight forecasts, but now we're going to be in tough shape if we don't get some rain. We have a pretty fair mast crop, but no water in the bottoms to hold the ducks. There are a lot of birds coming and most notable large numbers of mallards, but I don't foresee them sticking around very long."

Regardless of the weather in Texas during the weeks ahead, record numbers of ducks and geese are riding cold fronts from the north to their wintering haunts here. The only questions left unanswered are where these birds will stop and how long they'll stay.

According to Frentress, unless East Texas sees some significant rainfall soon, most duck hunting will be relegated to the reservoirs. "The birds are already heading to the big water because lake levels are so low right now and there's plenty of new vegetation."

Duck hunting season for 1999-2000 in the North Zone are Oct. 30-31 and Nov. 13-Jan. 23.

In the South Zone, the season dates are Oct. 30-Nov. 28 and Dec. 11-Jan. 23.

The merganser and coot seasons will run concurrently with the duck seasons, with a bag limit of five mergansers (only one may be a hooded merganser) and 15 coots. Duck hunting seasons in the High Plains Mallard Management Unit are Oct. 23-26 and Oct. 30-Jan. 23.

The duck bag limit statewide is six ducks in the aggregate, which may include no more than five mallards (only two may be hens), three scaup, two wood ducks, two redheads, one mottled duck, one pintail and one canvasback. The restriction to the scaup bag limit represents the only change from last year and was implemented in order to help this bird recover. Despite a 27% increase from last year's record low, scaup still remain well below the long-term population average and the goal set under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

As with scaup, pintail numbers improved but remain below the long-term goal and consequently, the federally approved bag limit will remain at one per day. "Pintails prefer nesting in Alberta and western Saskatchewan, which were extremely dry when the birds arrived this spring. The birds moved farther north where breeding conditions aren't as favorable," explained Brian Sullivan, TPW's waterfowl program coordinator. "We saw a 21% increase in the pintail breeding population, but I don't expect much improvement in the fall flight due to their reduced reproductive potential."

While hunters along the coastal marshes will be forced to pass up pintails again, the good news is an increased daily bag for white-fronted geese (specklebellies) from one to two birds in the Eastern Zone and for Canada geese during the final week of the season from one to three birds. The

daily bag for Canada geese in the Western Zone has also been increased from four to five.

Hunting methods legalized during the special snow goose conservation action late last season - electronic calls and unplugged shotguns - are not an option pending further federal action. However, should changes occur at the federal level, TPW has procedures in place that would allow for rapid implementation.

The season dates for light geese statewide are Oct. 30-Feb. 13, with a bag limit of 20 birds and no possession limit. The Western Zone dark goose season will run concurrently, with a daily bag limit of five, no more than one specklebelly.

For dark geese in the Eastern Zone, the season dates for Canada geese are Oct. 30-Feb. 1 with a bag limit of one (increased to three birds during Jan. 24-Feb. 1) and Oct. 30-Jan. 23 for specklebellies,

with a two bird daily bag.

TPW estimates that nearly 500,000 specklebellies winter along the coastal prairie, along with about 1 million snow geese and tens of thousands of Canada geese.

Current range conditions are far from adequate to support those populations, according to David Lobpries, TPW coastal waterfowl biologist. "I'm definitely worried about the goose situation," he explained. "We didn't have a second rice crop this year or the water from a second crop and not much volunteer rice crop, so the prairies are not looking good."

As a result of poor range conditions, Lobpries said the geese would probably migrate to the coastal marsh country and into winter pastures quicker this year. "This could make the birds more predictable and easier to hunt on areas with water and decent habitat," he suggested. "It's not as big a concern with ducks because they

move around and can use the saline marshes and then fly quite a bit to find freshwater."

Fortunately, only the upper Texas coast is affected by the dry conditions, according to Lobpries. "From Corpus Christi to the south they got a good dose from hurricane Brett so they should see some overflights of birds that normally would hold to the north."

Last year, 101,000 Texas waterfowl hunters took more than 1.5 million ducks, an increase of 29% from 1997 and a new harvest record. The average hunter bagged more than 13 birds during that record season. "We're probably not going to return to the peak participation we saw in the late '70s and early '80s when there were 120,000 hunters," said Sullivan. "But we have rebounded from a low of about 65,000 hunters a decade ago and the recovery can be attributed to increasing waterfowl (See Rain, Page 11)

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