

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE & FISHERIES
POST OFFICE BOX 98000
BATON ROUGE, LA 70898-9000

Waterfowl Population Estimates
in Louisiana's Coastal Zone Below
U.S. Highway 90 and on Catahoula Lake

Date: Coastal Zone: Nov. 8-11, 2010
Catahoula Lake: Nov. 5, 2010
Northwest LA: Nov. 4, 2010
Northeast LA: Nov. 5, 2010

November 12, 2010

Reported By: L. Reynolds, J. Olszak, C. Winslow,
J. Butcher, J. Hughes, S. Smith, and
D. Breithaupt.

Pilot: B. Dorsa

Estimates made from Aircraft

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	18,000	6,000	25,000	49,000
MOTTLED	31,000	34,000		65,000
GADWALL	469,000	107,000	34,000	610,000
WIGEON	8,000		2,000	10,000
GW TEAL	55,000	82,000	12,000	149,000
BW TEAL	292,000	170,000	4,000	466,000
SHOVELER	22,000	9,000	26,000	57,000
PINTAIL	14,000	49,000	106,000	169,000
TOTAL DABLERS	909,000	457,000	209,000	1,575,000
SCAUP	5,000	23,000		28,000
RINGNECKED	1,000	11,000	**	12,000
CANVASBACK			**	**
TOTAL DIVERS	6,00	34,000	**	40,000
TOTAL DUCKS	915,000	491,000	209,000	1,624,000
COOTS	382,000	445,000		827,000

**Less than 1,000

COMMENTS:

The estimated 1.62 million ducks on this survey is 20% higher than last November's estimate of 1.34 million, is slightly higher than the most recent 5-year average of 1.5 million, but is still 20%

below the long-term average of 2.0 million. Compared to November 2009, there were more than 3 times the number of mallards and pintails, mostly due to the large numbers at Catahoula Lake, and substantially more gadwalls (610,000 vs 356,000). The estimate for diving ducks was exactly the same as last November, but we saw fewer canvasbacks and ring-necked ducks, and more scaup (28,000 vs 2,000). The estimate for blue-winged teal was substantially lower than in 2009 (466,000 vs 598,000), but last November's estimate was a record-high, and this year's estimate remains over 3 times higher than the long-term average of 140,000 bluewings. Other duck species were approximately the same as November 2009, but coots were much higher (827,000 vs 360,000). The November coot estimate is the highest in at least 10 years, but long-term averages are not available. Despite increases from last year, all species except bluewings were below long-term November averages.

Although the distribution of ducks in coastal Louisiana is skewed toward the southwest portion of the state, the biggest changes from last year were seen in southeast Louisiana and at Catahoula Lake. The 491,000 ducks estimated in southeast Louisiana is much higher than the past 3 years (160,000, 200,000, and 170,000) and is similar to November estimates in 2005 and 2006. Habitat conditions are generally excellent in southeast Louisiana with good water conditions and greatly increased submerged aquatic vegetation over recent years. Large concentrations of ducks were noted in the Caernarvon and Delacroix areas where large numbers of both blue-winged and green-winged teal were seen, and at the mouth of River at both Delta NWR and Pass-a-Loutre WMA, where pintails and gadwalls dominated the counts. In contrast, the 915,000 ducks estimated in southwest Louisiana was lower than the 1.17 million in 2009 and 17% lower than the most recent 5-year average of 1.10 million. Although much-needed rainfall was received last week, from 3 to 7 inches across areas of southwest Louisiana, water levels in the marshes are still well below normal and some areas where large numbers of duck are traditionally counted are mostly dry. Large concentrations of gadwalls were noted in the far southwest corner of the state south of Sabine Lake and on Rockefeller Refuge, and large groups of mostly bluewings were counted northwest of White Lake. Although not counted on this survey, white-fronted geese were noticeably more abundant this November compared to last, and distribution of ducks in flooded agricultural fields was highly clumped.

The 209,000 ducks counted at Catahoula Lake is the highest since 1999 when 370,000 were seen. The last 2 years, Catahoula Lake has flooded much deeper than management target level because of extensive rainfall in September and October and provided relatively poor habitat for dabbling ducks. Last November, only 7,000 diving ducks were counted. Water levels have remained low this fall, and combined with dry conditions elsewhere in central and northeastern Louisiana, Catahoula Lake is holding far more ducks.

An additional 119,000 ducks and 56,000 geese (55% white-fronts and 45% snow) were counted in selected habitats of northeast Louisiana. That is about the same number of ducks and slightly more geese than November 2009, when the fewest number of geese were counted in the last 5 years. Habitat is generally dry across the surveyed region, with very low water levels in the major river systems, very little water in backwater swamps and other forested wetlands, and only managed flooding in the agricultural landscape. Pintails were the most abundant species followed by gadwalls, mallards, and shovelers. The largest concentrations were seen in flooded agricultural areas in the Bonita/Mer Rouge area, east of Bayou Lafourche in Richland Parish, in Concordia Parish southwest of Vidalia, and in the flooded fields between Grand Cote and Bunkie.

We counted another 10,200 ducks on the northwest Louisiana survey, primarily on the locks, lakes, oxbows, and fields along the Red River and upper Toledo Bend reservoir. Last November's survey was incomplete, and counted just 5,250 ducks, but this year's count is lower than the 11,000

counted in 2007 and 14,000 counted in 2008. As in other parts of the state, the severe drought has reduced waterfowl habitat in this area. Mallards and gadwalls were about equally abundant and made up 70% of the total count followed by bluewings, greenwings, and shovelers. Last year, with the over-abundant surface water from record October rainfall, ring-necked ducks were by far the most abundant species, accounting for over half the total count, but were completely absent from this year's survey. The largest concentration of ducks was seen on managed moist-soil impoundments near Loggy Bayou.

Although we have an average number of ducks in the state relative to the last 5 years, large numbers of blue-winged teal with low numbers of diving ducks and mallards suggest we are still very early in migration. Cold weather and blizzard conditions in the Dakotas during the last week in October and the associated cold weather in Louisiana the first week of November certainly moved birds into the state, but those conditions have moderated and daytime temperatures have been well above normal the past week across the Dakotas and Minnesota. Hunters in those areas are still waiting for a good freeze in Canada. Biologists in Missouri and Arkansas are reporting lower than average numbers of ducks and similarly dry habitat conditions.

As previously reported, habitat conditions in the coastal marsh appear excellent in southeast Louisiana but drier than normal in southwest. There is good growth of seed-producing annuals in most locations in southwest Louisiana that will provide excellent foraging habitat if flooded, and more submerged aquatic vegetation was noted compared to the last few years. Growth of submerged aquatics is outstanding across southeast Louisiana in fresh to brackish marshes and may be the primary reason for the increased number of ducks using that habitat compared to the past 3 years. Food production at Catahoula Lake was very good and the lake should provide outstanding habitat if water levels can be maintained at target levels. Active pumping to flood additional fields was noted across central and northeast Louisiana so improvement in habitat conditions across those regions is expected.