

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE & FISHERIES
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Waterfowl Population Estimates
in Louisiana's Coastal Zone Below
U.S. Highway 90 and on Catahoula Lake

Date: Coastal Zone: Dec. 12-15, 2011
Catahoula Lake: Dec. 7, 2011
Scaup Survey: Dec. 9, 2011

December 16, 2011

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Estimates made from Aircraft

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	62,000	15,000	20,000	97,000
MOTTLED	26,000	38,000	0	64,000
GADWALL	372,000	418,000	12,000	802,000
WIGEON	16,000	18,000	**	34,000
GW TEAL	220,000	169,000	18,000	407,000
BW TEAL	30,000	70,000	**	100,000
SHOVELER	160,000	23,000	**	183,000
PINTAIL	108,000	43,000	82,000	233,000
TOTAL DABLERS	994,000	794,000	132,000	1,920,000
SCAUP	41,000	152,000	7,000	200,000
RINGNECKED	58,000	144,000	38,000	240,000
CANVASBACK	0	31,000	32,000	63,000
TOTAL DIVERS	99,000	327,000	77,000	503,000
TOTAL DUCKS	1,093,000	1,121,000	209,000	2,423,000
COOTS	833,000	994,000	18,000	1,845,000

**Estimate is less than 1,000

COMMENTS:

The estimated 2.42 million ducks on this survey is a 31% increase over the 1.84 estimated in November, is 11% higher than last December's estimate of 2.17 million, and is slightly higher than the most recent 5-year average of 2.25 million. However, it is still 13% below the long-term average of 2.78 million. The much cooler temperature associated with a number of cold fronts since the November survey, as well as freezing of some wetland habitats in the northern states of the Central and

Mississippi Flyway have created conditions favorable to migration of many species into Louisiana, and to push blue-winged teal out. Estimates for all species increased from the November survey except blue-winged teal, which declined from 451,000 to 100,000, and our resident mottled ducks, which stayed about the same. The estimate for coots remained extremely high, the highest level recorded for a December survey. The biggest increases from November were seen for diving ducks, green-winged teal, and mallards. Despite increases from December, 2010, all dabbling duck estimates except that for shovelers are below long-term averages, and diving duck estimates are above long-term averages.

About the same total number of ducks was estimated in both southeastern and southwestern Louisiana, which is a shift in relative distribution from November when nearly 2/3 was seen in southwest. That shift was primarily due to big increases in gadwalls, which declined markedly in southwest Louisiana, and an influx of large numbers of scaup and ring-necked ducks into southeast Louisiana marshes. In southeast Louisiana large concentrations were seen in the upper Terrebonne marshes and near the mouth of the Mississippi River. In southwest Louisiana, large numbers were counted on a sewage lagoon near Rayne, flooded agricultural fields north of Kaplan that are enrolled in the Waterfowl Rest Area Program, and in the marshes of southern Vermilion Parish. In general across the coastal areas, ducks were not as locally concentrated as in November with smaller numbers counted on almost all transects.

The duck population at Catahoula Lake was up substantially from the 131,000 counted in November. Although fewer birds were seen this year compared to December, 2010 (209,000 vs 282,000), the relative abundance of dabbling ducks was remarkably similar. Fewer canvasbacks (32,000 vs 67,000) and ring-necked ducks (38,000 vs 55,000) accounted for most of the difference between the December counts.

During December and January, LDWF conducts a scaup survey on Lakes Maurepas, Pontchartrain, and Borgne. An estimated 173,200 scaup were seen with about 157,000 tallied on Lake Pontchartrain. That is much lower than the 466,000 estimated in December 2010, and less than the most recent 10-year average of 254,800. However, scaup estimates on this survey have shown extreme variability including estimates ranging from only 1,000 in 2005 to nearly 1.2 million in 2006. Along with above-average scaup estimates from the coastal transects, numerous flocks of scaup ranging from a few hundred to over 5,000 were noted offshore in southwest Louisiana between transect lines from south of Pecan Island to Marsh Island.

We experienced many difficulties the past 2 weeks attempting to complete the intended aerial waterfowl surveys. Weather kept the survey team grounded for 2 days last week, then mechanical problems with the aircraft limited flight time for a new transect-based survey in northeast Louisiana and most of the Louisiana portion of the Mississippi Alluvial Valley. East-west transects from the Arkansas border to south of Monroe showed relatively few ducks but large concentrations of snow geese east of Bonita. No meaningful population estimates could be generated from the limited sampling in that area. Likewise, poor weather limited flight-time to afternoons this past week and did not allow us to even begin the NW Louisiana survey.

Overall, habitat conditions in Louisiana for migrating and wintering waterfowl are improved over November, but remain well below average in most regions. Far more managed water has been pumped up in the agricultural regions throughout the state, but overall acreage is still less than in the past. In southwest Louisiana drought conditions are still extreme and many marshes have the same or less water than in November providing below-average foraging habitat. Marsh conditions generally improved as we moved to the east, and conditions in southeast Louisiana are generally good. Water levels at Catahoula Lake have remained within management targets and habitat conditions are good.

Surrounding agricultural land has less than normal shallow flooding, and habitat conditions are below average. The same is true across much of northeast and northwest Louisiana where despite recent rains, there is little backwater flooding along most major river systems and less than normal shallow flooding in agricultural fields. The Mississippi River is rising, so some backwater flooding was noted in extreme northeastern Louisiana, and that may help improve habitat conditions in that region.