

**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: Jan. 3-5
Catahoula Lake: Jan , 3
NE LA: Jan. 11-12, 15-16
NW LA: Jan. 19, Scaup: Jan 12

January 24, 2012

Reported By: L. Reynolds, J. Olszak, P. Link,
J. Butcher, L. Savage & J. Emfinger
 Pilot: B. Dorsa & M. Chauff

Estimates made from Aircraft

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	83,000	21,000	**	104,000
MOTTLED	28,000	38,000		66,000
GADWALL	389,000	469,000	**	858,000
WIGEON	6,000	15,000	**	21,000
GW TEAL	271,000	224,000	**	495,000
BW TEAL	16,000	72,000		88,000
SHOVELER	309,000	20,000	**	329,000
PINTAIL	50,000	54,000	**	104,000
TOTAL DABLERS	1,152,000	913,000	1,000	2,066,000
SCAUP	16,000	171,000	1,000	188,000
RINGNECKED	17,000	370,000	11,000	398,000
CANVASBACK		58,000	82,000	140,000
TOTAL DIVERS	33,000	599,000	94,000	726,000
TOTAL DUCKS	1,185,000	1,512,000	95,000	2,792,000
COOTS	181,000	2,642,136	3,000	2,826,136

**Estimate is less than 1,000

COMMENTS:

The 2.79 million ducks estimated from this survey is 15% higher than the December estimate but 15% lower than last January's estimate of 3.28 million. It is similar to the most recent 5-year average of 2.74 million but is 10% below the long-term average of 3.1 million. Estimates for most species were similar or higher than those in December with increases in shovelers in southwest Louisiana (183,000 to

329,000) and increases in ring-necked ducks in southeast (144,000 to 370,000) accounting for much of the difference between the totals in December and January. All diving duck species were above long-term January averages, and the estimate of 140,000 canvasbacks is the second highest on record. Conversely, all dabbling ducks except gadwalls and shovelers were below long-term averages, and the estimate of 104,000 mallards is the second lowest on record. The estimate for coots remains extremely high as it has been since November, and the estimate for mottled ducks has been remarkably consistent November through January.

Nearly 30% more ducks were counted in southeast Louisiana than in southwest continuing a shift in relative distribution that started between November, when 2/3 of the total were seen in southwest Louisiana, and December, when nearly equal numbers were counted in the 2 regions. The estimate of 1.5 million ducks in southeast Louisiana is nearly 75% higher than the most recent 5-year January average of 872,000 and is very similar to the January 2011 estimate of 1.41 million. Similar to December, the largest concentrations of ducks in southeast Louisiana were seen in the upper Terrebonne Parish marshes and at the mouth of the Mississippi River while in southwest Louisiana large numbers were again counted on a sewage lagoon near Rayne, flooded agricultural fields north of Kaplan, and in the marshes of southern Vermilion Parish.

Water level at Catahoula Lake was up substantially from the management target during this survey, and dabbling ducks declined from 132,000 in December to only 1,000 in January. In January 2011, when the water was at the targeted level, 54,000 dabblers were counted at Catahoula Lake. Divers increased from 77,000 to 94,000 between December and January surveys with far fewer ring-necked ducks and far more canvasbacks relative to the December survey. The 95,000 total ducks on Catahoula Lake is slightly higher than the most recent 5-year January average of 91,400.

Another 16,500 ducks were counted in northwest Louisiana, primarily on the locks, lakes, oxbows, and fields along the Red River and Upper Toledo Bend reservoir. This is nearly 3 times the 5,600 ducks counted on the same survey in November. This region was not surveyed in December due to poor weather and mechanical problems with the aircraft. Although the total is lower than the 22,600 counted last January, it is higher than the most recent 5-year average of 14,200. Gadwalls, shovelers, and ring-necked ducks made up 60% of the total, with canvasbacks, mallards, and green-winged teal commonly seen. Large numbers were counted on Toledo Bend reservoir and managed impoundments near Loggy Bayou.

In January, LDWF conducts a scaup survey on Lakes Maurepas, Pontchartrain, and Borgne. An estimated 314,300 scaup were seen with 300,000 tallied on Lake Pontchartrain. That is an 80% increase from December, similar to the 304,000 estimated in January 2011, and about twice the most recent 10-year average of 155,000. However, scaup estimates from this survey have shown extreme variability ranging from less than 1,000 in 2005 to 407,000 in 2007. Along with above average number of scaup estimated from the coastal transects, numerous flocks of scaup ranging from a few hundred to over 5,000 were noted offshore in southwest Louisiana from Johnsons Bayou east to Lower Mud Lake. In addition, large flocks of scaup were seen east of the transect line in Breton Sound in southeast Louisiana.

We are working to convert the traditional “cruise” survey for waterfowl in northeast Louisiana to a sample-based transect survey that encompasses the entire range of habitats in that region of the state rather than just selected locations. Bad weather, mechanical problems with aircraft, computer hardware and software issues, and personnel changes kept us from completing the survey in November or December. In January, we flew 36 east-west transects across the traditional mid-winter survey area in

northeast Louisiana for an approximate 9% sample. From those transects, 89,000 ducks and 245,000 (239,000 snow and only 6,000 white-fronted) geese were estimated. Mallards (42,000) were the most abundant species followed by gadwall (17,000), pintail (10,000) and ring-necked ducks (6,000). Largest numbers of ducks were seen in flooded agricultural fields east of Catahoula Lake, but observers noted extensive flooded agricultural habitats with unexpectedly low duck numbers over much of the surveyed area. Concentrations of geese were noted on transects between Marksville and Catahoula Lake. These estimates are not comparable to past counts because of different survey methodology. For perspective, during January 2011 in selected habitats in northeast Louisiana, 91,000 ducks and 77,000 geese (85% snow and 15% white-fronted) were counted, but that was less than half the ducks and geese counted on that same survey in January 2010.

Habitat conditions are much improved in northeast and northwest Louisiana from recent rainfall, but still remain below average. Habitat conditions for dabbling ducks deteriorated at Catahoula Lake with higher water levels from that rainfall, but water level is currently falling to near target levels. In southwest Louisiana, despite some improvement, habitat conditions remain below average, especially in the western portion of that region, because of low water levels. Conditions improved as we moved to the east, and habitat conditions in southeast Louisiana remain good.