

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, November 7-9, 2005,
Catahoula Lake & NE Louisiana,
November 3, 2005
NW Louisiana, November 2, 2005

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November 15, 2005

Pilot: B. Dorsa, G. Rackle

Estimates made from Aircraft (*) Estimate less than 1,000

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	9,000	2,000	2,000	13,000
MOTTLED	34,000	15,000	*	49,000
GADWALL	212,000	339,000	10,000	561,000
WIGEON	6,000	23,000	2,000	31,000
GW TEAL	210,000	37,000	2,000	249,000
BW TEAL	27,000	36,000	4,000	67,000
SHOVELER	77,000	14,000	4,000	95,000
PINTAIL	78,000	37,000	69,000	184,000
TOTAL DABLERS	653,000	503,000	93,000	1,249,000
SCAUP	4,000			4,000
RINGNECKED	20,000	3,000	7,000	30,000
CANVASBACK			*	*
TOTAL DIVERS	24,000	3,000	7,000	34,000
TOTAL DUCKS	677,000	506,000	100,000	1,283,000
COOTS	30,000	110,000	10,000	150,000

COMMENTS:

The estimate of 1.28 million ducks recorded on this survey is 25% higher than last year's estimate (1.03 million) and is similar to the 2003 estimate (1.27 million). However, it is much lower than the long-term average of nearly 2.2 million. Estimates for all species except green-winged teal and northern shoveler are well below long-term averages. Total duck numbers in southwest Louisiana were down from the 797,000 estimated last year, so the larger total estimate resulted from big increases at Catahoula Lake (16,000 in 2004) and in southeast Louisiana (207,000 in 2004).

An additional 21,000 ducks and 50,000 (86% White-fronted) geese were counted in selected habitats of northeast Louisiana. Primarily due to very dry conditions, this was far fewer ducks than counted last year (69,000) on the same areas. We counted another 12,000 ducks on our northwest Louisiana survey, primarily on the locks, lakes, and oxbows along the Red River and upper Toledo Bend, which is much higher than the 4,000 counted last year.

Many factors are negatively influencing the number of ducks in the State. For the 3rd consecutive November, abnormally warm weather in Louisiana and the northern Mississippi Flyway are delaying migration. Record and near-record temperatures have persisted through October, with few very mild cold fronts. Our west-zone waterfowl season opened on November 12, following a week of temperatures a full 10 degrees above normal. In addition, severe drought conditions and low river stages persist nearly statewide. Across central and northeast Louisiana, precipitation is 10-15 inches below normal, and topsoil conditions show large moisture deficits. Consequently, backwater flooding is virtually non-existent and many areas traditionally flooded for waterfowl are still dry. The very high price for diesel fuel is undoubtedly delaying or reducing the acreage flooded.

The largest impacts to waterfowl habitat and potential waterfowl distribution and/or hunting opportunities were the impact of 2 major hurricanes: one over the deltaic marshes near the mouth of the Mississippi River and the other across the Chenier Plain of southwest Louisiana. High-energy storm surges pushed high-salinity water across the entire coastal zone, physically broke up marsh, scoured submerged aquatic vegetation, and deposited debris across the landscape. Resulting flooding and high-salinities have further stressed remaining vegetation leaving little desirable duck food in the impacted areas which run nearly the length of the coast inland to varying distances.

Despite broad areas of storm-damaged coastal marsh that were nearly devoid of ducks, locations of intact fresh marsh and flooded agricultural areas hosted relatively large concentrations. Indeed, ducks in the marshes of the upper Terrebonne basin, north of Lake Salvador, and a surprising number of pintails counted at Delta NWR and Pass-a-Loutre WMA at the mouth of the Mississippi River were responsible for the big increase in the Southeast estimate this year. Large groups of ducks in the agricultural regions of Cameron and Vermillion Parishes kept the Southwest estimate from being even lower.