

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: January 3, 5 and 8, 2007
Catahoula Lake: January 9, 2007
Scaup Survey: January 3, 2007

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

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	326,000	4,000	1,000	331,000
MOTTLED	61,000	22,000		83,000
GADWALL	632,000	373,000		1,005,000
WIGEON	70,000	22,000		92,000
GW TEAL	1,150,000	64,000		1,214,000
BW TEAL	422,000	2,000		424,000
SHOVELER	280,000	8,000		288,000
PINTAIL	541,000	100,000	*	641,000
TOTAL DABLERS	3,482,000	595,000	1,000	4,077,000
SCAUP	14,000	8,000	1,000	23,000
RINGNECKED	31,000	73,000	18,000	122,000
CANVASBACK	2,000	9,000	52,000	63,000
TOTAL DIVERS	47,000	90,000	71,000	208,000
TOTAL DUCKS	3,529,000	685,000	72,000	4,286,000
COOTS	377,000	476,000		853,000

COMMENTS:

The estimate of 4.3 million ducks on this survey is a 52% increase over the December estimate of 2.9 million, 13% higher than the most recent 5-year average of 3.9 million, and is 40% higher than the long-term January average of 3.13 million. It is the highest estimate since 4.8 and 5.0 million ducks were estimated in January of 2000 and 2001 respectively. Estimates for all species except scaup and ring-necked ducks increased since the December survey, and all except mallards, wigeon, scaup, and

ring-necked ducks are at or above long-term January averages. The estimate for green-winged teal is twice the long-term average and is the highest ever recorded on this survey. The estimate for blue-winged teal is over twice the highest ever recorded and is nearly 5 times the long-term average for January. Large increases in the numbers of green-wings, pintails, and mallards accounted for most of the difference between the December and January estimates, but mallards remain 23% below the long-term average. Notably, ring-necked ducks declined sharply from December's estimate of 448,000 and were below the long-term average of 148,000.

Another 168,000 ducks and 175,000 geese were counted in selected habitat in northeast Louisiana. This is much lower than the 316,000 and 214,000 respectively counted in November (the December survey was not completed this year because of bad weather), but it does not include habitats south of the Red River, which LDWF counts in November and December but are counted by the USFWS in January as part of the coordinated Mid-Winter Waterfowl Survey. Furthermore, there is abundant shallow-flooded habitat in many surveyed areas and waterfowl were widely dispersed. Still, it is well above any of the northeast surveys completed in 2005/06 and is indicative of the relatively good habitat conditions and higher waterfowl numbers in that part of the state compared to last year. Pintails (40,000), mallards (34,000), green-winged teal (34,000), and gadwalls (30,000) were the most abundant duck species while snow geese (146,000) made up 83% of the geese counted.

A total of 13,000 ducks were counted in northwest Louisiana, primarily on the locks, lakes, oxbows, and fields along the Red River and upper Toledo Bend reservoir. That is far less than the 21,000 counted in November (the December survey was not completed due to bad weather), but is comparable to the highest count made in 2005-06 (12,000).

A total of 407,000 scaup was estimated on the survey conducted on Lakes Pontchartrain and Borgne. This is far lower than the 1.2 million estimated on the December survey but is still much higher than last year and is the 3rd highest estimate recorded since this survey began in 1978. Large flocks of scaup were noted (but not counted) just off the transect lines in Lake Pontchartrain and offshore between the 2 westernmost coastal transect lines in southwest Louisiana.

January survey estimates are very strongly biased toward southwest Louisiana; nearly 82% of the ducks in the coastal zone were seen in the southwest. That is much higher than the 62% seen in December and markedly different than the 5-year average of only 52% of the total coastal-zone ducks estimated in January being in southwest Louisiana. Large numbers of ducks, especially teal and pintail, were counted on survey lines from east of Calcasieu Lake to east of White Lake in both the marshes and flooded agricultural fields and pastures. We found notable concentrations of ducks in habitats that had not held many ducks in November and December, such as the marshes south of Sabine Lake and around Johnson's Bayou, which are showing more signs of recovery from last year's hurricane impacts and the marsh south of White Lake which had excellent growth of moist-soil vegetation but hosted few ducks earlier in the season.

A similar shift in proportion toward the southwest was seen last year between the December and January surveys. However, unlike this year, southeast Louisiana was holding 62% of the total estimated coastal-zone ducks in December 2005.

Although temperatures between the December survey and this one have been unseasonably warm (8 to 9 degrees above normal), it appears that large numbers of ducks have moved into the coastal areas of Louisiana, especially the southwestern portion. However, less than half the ducks were counted at Catahoula Lake than in December, which was expected because waterfowl hunting season was open, and fewer ducks were counted in both northeast and northwest Louisiana than in November.

Rainfall during the same period has also been above average. From December 20th through the first week of January, heavy rainfall fell across most of the state. Because the landscape was already fairly wet from the rains earlier in the fall, many agricultural fields and pastures were flooded, leading to very abundant shallow-flooded habitat for dabbling ducks. Large numbers of green-winged teal and pintails were seen on flooded pasture as well as numerous agricultural fields in SW Louisiana. Although those rains also created higher than desired water levels in the marshes, those habitats continue to hold ducks. The same seemed to be true in northeast and northwest Louisiana, where there was more shallow-flooded habitat than in November. The water level at Catahoula Lake is about 8 feet higher than the management target, and similar to December, the lake is holding almost exclusively diving ducks.