

2014 Late Season MDWFP Waterfowl and Wetland Habitat Report

The 2014 Late January aerial waterfowl survey was canceled as a result of a bird collision which occurred during the Early January Survey. The survey plane was not repaired in time to conduct the survey during the scheduled survey dates. Although a late-season comprehensive aerial survey has not been conducted, biologists have observed wetland conditions and waterfowl numbers and have compiled field reports from public and private land managers.

The 2013-14 winter was relatively dry compared to recent years. As a result managed, permanent, and semi-permanent wetlands remained very important throughout the hunting season. Waterfowl abundance was the highest on record for both December and early January since the MDWFP's implementation of transect surveys in 2002. Waterfowl numbers remained relatively high through late January, and hunters reported great success during the later portion of the waterfowl hunting season.

Mallards and other dabbling ducks appeared to be most abundant on managed moist-soil habitats, followed by flooded agriculture during late January. High use of forested wetlands by mallards and gadwall was also reported. Duck abundance appeared to increase from north to south, which is similar to observations made during the previous aerial surveys. Several private and public land managers across the Delta reported some of the highest numbers of ducks they had observed in years on their properties, particularly mallards. Northern pintails, gadwall, and wigeon were much more abundant than in recent years. These reports are likely attributed to the harsh winter weather experienced over the past few months, which elicited several large migration events.

In summary, the 2013-14 winter was very cold and relatively dry. Conditions such as these typically make for a successful duck season, due to large numbers of birds concentrated on a reduced amount of wetland habitat. During December, we observed high concentrations of ducks on large complexes of flooded habitat. This social behavior continued until January, at which point ducks began to spread out across the landscape. This was likely due to changes in weather and the onset of many biological processes (i.e., pair formation and bonding). Ducks also likely sought out other habitats to avoid hunting pressure. This "spreading out" behavior increased success for many hunters in mid-late January.

Landowners and managers are encouraged to continue holding water where feasible to provide important habitat for waterfowl as they prepare for spring migration. Also, hunters are reminded that the light goose conservation order is ongoing through March 31. Light geese remain abundant across much of the Delta region of the state, particularly using winter wheat fields and previously flooded waterfowl impoundments which have been drained.

Visit the Waterfowl Program website for more waterfowl related information. Spring is quickly approaching and it will soon be time to start many habitat management practices. Information on habitat management as well as contact information for our biologists who provide free technical guidance can be found at www.mdwfp.com/waterfowl.