



Photo by Todd Steele

Banner duck season closes this weekend

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Texas waterfowlers anticipating heading afield for the final weekend of the 2016-17 duck season have a lot of feathered reasons to be more than a little optimistic about their odds for success.

After what anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests has been one of the best duck seasons, statewide, in the past several, the final days of the season ending at sunset Sunday sees wetlands from the Panhandle to the coast, Central Texas farm ponds to East Texas river bottoms and even South Texas stock tanks holding strong concentrations of birds.

"We're probably seeing our peak number of ducks in the state," Kevin Kraai, waterfowl program leader for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, said earlier this week. "We've got wintering birds that were pushed south by cold weather to our north; there aren't likely any more coming.

And the first waves of ducks - blue-winged teal, especially - moving up from the south (on their return migration) have been showing up.

"There are a lot of ducks in Texas, right now," he said "This last weekend looks absolutely fantastic, in my opinion."

That opinion is bolstered by preliminary data from the annual midwinter survey of duck populations across the state, a standardized, aerial survey conducted earlier this month. While the survey data hasn't been crunched, some of the raw numbers, results of recent hunts on private and public areas across the state and anecdotal observations from wildlife professionals and waterfowl hunters offer insights into what Texas waterfowlers might see over this final weekend.

Unlike most years, when only portions of the state hold good waterfowl habitat conditions and birds are concentrated in those relatively small areas, this autumn/winter has seen generally good - even great - habitat conditions across large areas of the state. That has spread wintering waterfowl across the landscape, offering more

And winter weather helped, too. Strong cold fronts in December and early January forced birds lingering in the Midwest to move to Texas. That helped waterfowlers across the state, but especially in the Panhandle, central Texas, the coast and portions of East Texas.

Pintails return

Texas' Panhandle has enjoyed one of its best waterfowl seasons in years, Kraai said. Timely rains filled the region's playa wetlands, and strong crops of native plants such as smartweed provided good forage. The recent midwinter survey indicated the Panhandle was holding a half-million mallards, as well as good numbers of other ducks, including pintails, green-winged teal and, surprisingly, a fair number of redheads, he said.

Pintails have been one of the pleasant surprises for many waterfowlers on the Texas coast this season. After consecutive years of seeing only fair numbers of the big ducks on coastal prairies and bays, pintails returned in good numbers in many areas this season.

Hunters on coastal bays, especially, have seen much-improved numbers of pintails this season. Those pintails were joined by strong numbers of scaup, teal and gadwall, plus the swarms of redheads that traditionally winter on coastal bays - as many as 70 percent or more of North America's redheads winter on the shallow coastal bays that arc from the mid-Texas coast to northeastern Mexico.

Improved habitat conditions on the coastal marshes and prairies also was reflected in the

apparent surge in mottled duck numbers. Population trends of mottled ducks, year-round residents of Texas' coastal prairies and marshes, are a useful gauge of habitat health. Preliminary results of this year's midwinter survey indicate mottled duck numbers were "way up," Kraai said - 50 percent over the previous years in some areas and perhaps as much as 100 percent in others.

The result of the improved habitat conditions, apparent increase in wintering duck population and the increased hunting opportunities that come with spreading those birds over a larger area has been one of the best seasons coastal waterfowlers have witnessed in the past several. Evidence of that can be seen in the record or near-record numbers of waterfowlers who hunted on many public hunting areas along the coast, Kraai said.

"Hunter numbers on some of our public hunting areas are going to break records, this year," he said.

And those hunters have had generally good success. Most years, waterfowlers on Texas public hunting area average around 1.5 birds per hunt. A two-bird-per-hunter average - one-third of the six-duck daily bag limit - over a season is considered very good for public areas that draw waterfowlers of varying skill levels. This year, some of TPWD's public hunting areas have seen three-bird averages or even higher.

'Covered up' with birds

This past weekend, hunters on one of TPWD's public hunting areas along the mid-coast averaged four ducks per hunter, Kraai said. The average on that same area a year ago was less than one bird per hunter.

Hunters headed to the coastal prairies and marshes this weekend should see plenty of birds.

"We're covered up with teal and pintails," said Buddy Nelson, a veteran waterfowler who hunts property near East Bernard in Wharton County. Recent heavy rains on the prairie left shallow "sheet water" on fields, the flooded flats creating perfect habitat for ducks, he said.

Nelson said swarms of teal - most of them greenwings but good numbers of bluewings - have been the most common birds working decoys on the prairie, with more than enough pintails for hunters to have opportunities to take their two-bird daily limit of the long-necked "sprigs."

That assessment was echoed by Todd Steele of Thunderbird Hunting Club in Wharton and Matagorda counties. Bluewing and greenwing teal have been club member's most commonly encountered ducks, with strong numbers of pintails and gadwall, Steele reported. Hunting success has been very good, with 66 hunters this past week averaging 4.5 ducks apiece.

'Sorry to see it end'

Many waterfowlers in East Texas also have enjoyed a very good year, and look to close out the season on a high note.

Timely rains helped put water in river bottom sloughs, managed impoundments and over shallow aquatic vegetation in larger lakes and reservoirs, creating magnets for mallards and other ducks pushed south by brief but frigid temperatures to the north.

Waterfowlers participating in public hunts on the Richland Creek WMA North Unit along the Trinity River in Freestone and Navarro have seen outstanding hunting success, said Corey Mason, TPWD regional wildlife director. Hunters have taken more than 8,000 ducks from the expansive wetland complex this season, he said.

Other waterfowlers in East Texas had similar success this season. Sabine River fishing guide Jane Gallenbach reported having the best duck season she's enjoyed in several years, hunting managed wetlands and flooded timber near Carthage in Panola County.

"It's been a great season - the best we've had in along time," Gallenbach said. "I'm going to be sorry to see it end."