



Photo by Todd Steele

## Waterfowlers will benefit from wet, cold weather

By [Shannon Tompkins](#)

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Call it an early Christmas for Texas waterfowlers.

An unusually powerful winter storm sweeping swarms of ducks and geese south from a snowy, freeze-bound Midwest combined with abundant, fowl-friendly wintering habitat generated by rains that recharged coastal wetlands set the stage for what should be an outstanding, if chilly, start to the second segment of duck season in Texas' South Zone.

And that comes after a first season segment that saw many waterfowlers enjoy good hunting success.

"It looks like we're set up to have a good opener in this area," [David Butler](#), central-coast waterfowl biologist for [Texas Parks and Wildlife Department](#), said of the Saturday reopening of duck season in the state's South Duck Zone. "Habitat conditions improved, thanks to the rain we got over the past week.

"We had a push of birds in the past week, and this cold front has the potential to bring another

big wave in the next few days. Things look really encouraging.”

That positive assessment is echoed across the state, but especially on Texas coastal prairies and marshes, the traditional wintering grounds for millions of waterfowl travelling the Central Flyway and heart of the state's waterfowling activity, and in eastern Texas, where rains have improved waterfowl habitat available for the surge of ducks expected.

"Things were already looking pretty good, but they improved over the past week or so," said **Todd Steele** of **Thunderbird Hunting Club**, a private, waterfowl-centric hunting club with properties in Wharton and Matagorda counties.

### **Wetlands recharged**

About 4 inches of rain flushed and recharged natural and managed wetlands in the region, he said. That benefits waterfowl and waterfowlers.

"It was just the right amount," Steele said. "It didn't flood the whole landscape, so the birds aren't scattered everywhere."

Some areas along the upper Texas coast received significantly more rain, and that could distribute birds over a larger area for the second-season opener, Butler said. Portions of the waterfowl-rich marshes and prairies in Jefferson and Chambers counties were swamped with as much as 10 inches of rain. That could prove a temporary problem for some hunters this weekend, but it will prove a season-long benefit by providing abundant wintering habitat that will hold birds in the area.

"In the long run, it's beneficial to hunters and the birds," Butler said.

Even without the expected surge in waterfowl expected with this week's cold front, waterfowl numbers ahead of the Dec. 10 South Zone opener are strong. Over the past week, large numbers of redheads and a sizable number of pintails have found their way to the shallow bays along Texas middle and lower coasts. And other species also have poured into the state.

"We've had a big push of gadwall and wigeon in the past week," Steele said. "The wigeon, especially, have been kind of a surprise."

Another surprise, he said, is the number of snow geese that have arrived on portions of the coastal prairies in the past week or so.

"I haven't seen snow geese like this in a long time," Steele said. "It almost looks like the old days in some spots."

Texas traditionally wintered the majority of snow geese using the Central Flyway. But the number of snow geese wintering on the Texas coast has withered by as much as 80 percent over the past two decades as the birds have shifted their wintering grounds farther north - to places such as Arkansas and Kansas.

This year, a combination of weather and marginal habitat conditions up the flyway appear to have resulted in an increase in the number of snows making it back to their traditional wintering grounds on the Texas coast - at least anecdotally. TPWD's annual midwinter goose survey, an aerial count scheduled to begin Dec. 19, promises to shed a more empirical light on the issue.

### **Front pushing through**

The pending cold front should send a significant amount of "new" birds into Texas. Blizzard conditions in the upper Midwest and multiple days of freezing temperatures as far south as Oklahoma have birds on the move. Waterfowlers in East Texas could be a major beneficiary of the bird-moving blast.

Significant rain over the past week put water in many bottomland sloughs, flooding stands of smartweed and other seed-producing, moist-soil plants waterfowl love. The same applies on

some East Texas reservoirs, where water levels have jumped several inches, inundating flats and giving ducks access to smartweed, millet and other waterfowl-attracting forage.

Duck hunters in East Texas in the state's North Duck Zone, where the second session of the two-part duck season opened Dec. 3, reported stronger duck numbers and better hunting success than during the first season.

If that proves to be the case in the South Zone, it will be impressive; the first segment of duck season in the South Zone saw generally higher-than-average numbers of birds and some good hunting success.

During the first segment of the two-part duck season, hunters on the 12,000-acre Justin Hurst Wildlife Management Area in Brazoria County averaged 3.08 ducks per hunter, Butler said.

That's good for public hunting areas.

### **Bluewings popular**

Blue-winged teal accounted for almost 40 percent of the birds taken in the Hurst WMA, Butler said. And that high percentage of bluewings, and a surprising number of green-winged teal dominated bags in many areas during the first session.

Bluewings were the top duck taken by hunters during the first season segment on the Big Hill Unit of the **J. D. Murphree WMA** in Jefferson County. Greenwings and gadwall were second most common birds on duck straps of Big Hill Unit hunters, where hunters averaged 2.5 birds apiece.

The Salt Bayou Unit of the Murphree WMA saw even better hunting, with waterfowlers averaging an impressive 4.05 ducks per hunter under the current six-duck daily bag limit.

Gadwall were the most common bird taken by Salt Bayou Unit hunters, followed by green-winged teal and shovelers.

"The first part of duck season was really pretty good for a lot of hunters; better than a lot of recent years when we were hurt by extended drought," Butler said.

But things have changed in the almost two weeks since the Nov. 27 close of that first segment of the South Zone duck season. They've gotten better. Tens of thousands of Texas waterfowlers will find out how much better when they head afield this weekend.

Dress warm.