



The first hour of teal hunting is the most productive.

## BLUE-WINGS

Article and photos by TODD STEELE

**F**or the dyed-in-the-wool waterfowler it is New Year's Day, a crescendo of pent-up summer energy released into clenched guns under hunched backs, wagging companion tails and tenacious eyes on flights of blue-patches banking over decoys. Call it the ideal waterfowl hunt, no elaborate blinds, spreads and foul-weather gear, just a short-sleeved camo shirt, a stool and a few dekes for easy decoying action: a perfect bird to introduce youth into waterfowl hunting. Blue-winged Teal season is no longer the warm-up for the regular duck season with six-bird bag limits and seasons spread over three consecutive weekends; it is the inauguration of the duck season, especially in Texas.

### BY THE NUMBERS

Newbies to waterfowl hunting over the past decade are accustomed to a liberal early teal season, but it was not always a six-bird limit and a 16-day season. The first experimental early teal season was held in 1965 in 20 states including Texas, and in 1968 the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) enacted a permanent early teal season.

The sustained drought of the late 1980s and early 1990s triggered a complete closure of early teal season. Then in 1998, the USFWS enacted laws governing the length of early teal season based on breeding population, and seasons fluctuated between nine and 16 days up until 2005.

Then the inconceivable happened: Blue-winged Teal populations mushroomed to record numbers—not for just a couple of years, but for more than a full decade—with an average of 7.51 million breeding teal per year and a peak number of birds of 9.24 million in 2012.

According to Kevin Kraai, waterfowl program coordinator with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), responding to record breaking numbers of Blue-wings in 2013, the USFWS—in conjunction with lobbying efforts by TPWD—enacted a six-bird limit on early teal through the Adaptive Harvest Management Strategy. The four-bird limit on early teal was set in the 1960s, when the regular season limit was four birds. Even though the regular season bag limits went up in



following seasons, the ‘four-bird’ early teal season stayed in place until 2013.

### THE PERFECT STORM

Blue-winged Teal have been the second most populous duck over the past number of seasons. A number of factors came together leading to burgeoning Blue-wing population into what Mike Szymanski, Game and Fish Migratory Game Bird Supervisor for North Dakota, calls the perfect storm.

First and foremost, wetlands filled and upland prairie grasslands flourished in the pothole region of southern Canada and the northern states. Second, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) protected thousands of acres of nesting habitat in the states, especially in the Dakotas where many Blue-wings are hatched. However, many acres of habitat were lost due to changes in the CRP during this time, yet the Blue-wings remained in abundance, producing strong broods and fall flights that perplexed biologists.

### PREDATOR SWITCH

The answer came in the form of a predator switch. In the late 1990s, a plague hit the red fox population in the northern states, and coyotes subsequently moved in to replace them as the top predator.

Nesting ducks benefited greatly in two ways from the predator change: First, coyotes do not prey as heavily on duck nests as do red foxes, and second, the now-dominant coyote population kept the red fox population in check. This gave a significant boost to Blue-wings in the area, especially in the heart of Blue-wing nesting territory of eastern North Dakota where 30 percent of all banded Blue-wings originate, according to Szymanski.

### ADAPTIVE DUCK

The Blue-winged Teal is also an adaptive duck, an opportunistic nester, according to Dr. Bart Ballard, professor and waterfowl research scientist for Texas A&M University-Kingsville. Blue-wings will take advantage of good nesting habitat wherever they can find it; they are not tied to where they were born.

In addition, Blue-wings exhibit what biologists term income breeding strategy, according to Ballard, allowing them to migrate to their nesting grounds without large fat reserves as opposed to having to store energy reserves on their wintering grounds. In other words, when wintering and migratory habitat are in poor condition, the impact on nesting is not as great on Blue-wings compared to Arctic nesting geese that are capital breeders and must store energy prior to their migration in order to have a successful nesting attempt.

### FIRST TO ARRIVE AND FIRST TO DEPART

Blue-wings are among one of the latest ducks to nest, taking advantage of more prolific native grasslands, according to Szymanski, who notes that bachelor groups of male Blue-wings are one of the first to vacate the northern prairies with the first cold front.

Dr. Todd Merendino, manager of conservation programs with Ducks Unlimited, mirrors those observations. A brief wisp of north wind is all that is needed to usher in a pulse of birds into the coastal areas of Texas. They are either here in large numbers or not at all. And, as of late, Blue-wings seem to be wintering in Texas a lot longer.



One of the easiest ducks to decoy and hunt.

Travis Peterson, co-owner of the Thunderbird Hunting Club said, “For the past two seasons, Blue-wings have been our number one duck bagged along the coast, and there was probably not one day that one of member did not bag a Blue-wing, often it was full straps of just Blue-wings.”

### UPCOMING SEASON (AS OF JUNE REPORTS)

According to Dr. Frank Rohwer, president of Delta Waterfowl, Western Saskatchewan, conditions overall are very good for breeding ducks this season in Canada, and a strong fall flight into the parklands of Alberta is expected. He said that it is as wet as people can remember in years. However, the wetlands in the northern U.S. are struggling to hang on, even though they had a good snowpack, there were no significant spring rains to recharge ponds this year.

“We have lost a lot of nesting habitat on the landscape due to cuts in the CRP program,” Szymanski said. “Combine the dry conditions with that, and it makes it pretty hard to produce ducks. But there is a silver lining in the drought currently hitting the Dakotas: Rich nutrients are introduced back into the ponds leading to a more productive wetlands ecosystem for the ducklings. In addition, Blue-wings will overfly the Dakotas to nest in southern Canada, where conditions are much better.”





The opening of early teal season in the middle of September begins the waterfowl season in Texas.

**SEPTEMBER BLUE-WINGS**

Only Louisiana tops Texas in early teal bagged each season and banding studies show that the vast majority of the Blue-wings shot by hunters in Texas are males. For the 2015-16 season, a total of 141,744 Blue-wings were harvested in Texas, representing 27 percent of the total bag across America.

Best place to hunt September teal are on the upper and middle Texas coasts, especially in areas with second-cropped rice. State-run wildlife management areas such as J.D. Murphree, Justin Hurst, Mad Island and Guadalupe Delta provide excellent public hunting when habitat conditions are right. National wildlife refuges such as McFaddin, Anahuac and Brazoria provide additional public hunting for early teal. Check refuge regulations before venturing out to hunt on any public hunting area.

And be sure not to miss the opening bell as Blue-wings are notorious early risers, with flights slowing shortly after sunrise. A common mistake for novices is to flock shoot at large incoming flocks often missing the entire wad of birds, better to pick out a single bird for a full strap.

Decoy spreads do not have to be complicated or large, but motion is critical to attracting passing flocks. A couple of robo-ducks will often out-compete your entire decoy spread. And watch for the creepy-crawlers: Venomous snakes and spiders are in abundance, and alligators, when present, can be downright deadly for your retriever.

This season, 26 states will partake in the early teal season—a conservation success story made possible by the great habitat conditions to the north over the past decade. 🐾

**\*EARLY TEAL TIMELINE**

**1955** - Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey becomes operational. Beginning of long-term averages of waterfowl species, Blue-winged Teal population at 5.30M.

**1962** - Second-lowest Blue-winged Teal population on record at 3.01M.

**1965** - First experimental early teal season was conducted for 20 states including Texas; Blue-winged Teal population at 4.02M.

**1965** - Only teal season held ever in Minnesota; Blue-winged Teal population at 4.02M.

**1968** - Permanent early teal season enacted; Blue-winged Teal population at 3.46M.

**1988-91** - Drought in breeding grounds triggers closure of the early season; Blue-winged Teal populations for those four years at 4.01M, 3.12M, 2.76M, and 3.76M.

**1989** - Third-lowest Blue-winged Teal population on record at 3.12M.

**1990** - Lowest Blue-winged Teal population on record at 2.77M.

**1995-97** - Blue-winged Teal population consecutively exceeds 4.7M at 5.14M, 6.41M, and 6.12M.

**1995** - Adaptive Harvest Management adopted by USFWS.

**1998** - USFWS enact early teal season length to spring breeding population, 4.7M or more triggers 16-day season and 4.7M or less triggers nine-day season. Blue-winged Teal population at 3.46M.

**2002-05** - Blue-winged Teal population drops below 4.7M, triggering nine-day seasons.

**2006-16** - Blue-winged Teal population exceeds 4.7M with average of 7.51M, triggering 16-day seasons.

**2011** - Second-highest Blue-winged Teal population on record at 8.94M.

**2012** - Highest Blue-winged Teal population on record at 9.24M.

**2013** - USFWS, in conjunction with lobbying efforts by TPWD, increases the bag limit to six birds for early teal season; Blue-winged Teal population at 7.73M.

**2015** - Third-highest Blue-winged Teal population on record at 8.54M.

**2014-17** - Experimental early teal season for Wisconsin, Iowa and Michigan; Minnesota declines to have teal season. Blue-winged Teal respective population at 8.54M, 8.54M, and 6.68M.

**2014-17** - Optional two bonus Blue-winged Teal added to regular daily six-bird bag limit for first 16 days of season in North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana and Wyoming.

**2017** - Total of 26 states will have an early teal season.

*\*Blue-winged Teal numbers per breeding numbers from aerial surveys, numbers in millions*

