Field Notes
Waterfowl Breeding Population
Habitat Survey Reports
June 12, 2018
By
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The common question asked pre-season to Thunderbird, "Do you think you guys will have a lot of birds this season?" My response is generally always the same, "If you built it (the habitat) he (the ducks) will come!" But the real question should be, "Will you have a lot of young birds to shoot this season?" Although you will never hear an old duck screaming "foul" as it veers off the decoys like a seasoned goose, old ducks will take the entire flock away silently when things don't look quite right with zero outcry. Young ducks and juvenile geese end up on straps, old birds pass on the genes. The importance of the waterfowl "hatch" is two-fold. First it gives us an overview of the health of the habitat and the prosperity of the birds. Second it foretells the future of how easy, or hard, to have cupped wings over the decoys that season. Read on with my predictions for the upcoming duck season.

My "flight" is combing through the U.S.F.W.S. flying biologist field notes and photographs of their annual Spring Waterfowl Population and Habitat Survey. First let me say this, the report is by no means conclusive as data from flight and ground crews covering 2 million square miles and 4,100 survey routes must be collected, modeled, and analyzed. The intent of this report is to give a snapshot of current conditions / impressions through the eyes of the biologists afield.

A few thoughts on the counting of waterfowl and looking at the landscape of breeding waterfowl, it is not easy and interlaced with many overlapping complex issues. Counting fowl and identifying the species while traveling 100 mph, 150-200 feet above the ground is both taxing and with risk. Bare in mind the observer is not only counting waterfowl non-stop all day long, but also has to id species composition along with ratios of drakes to hens among other tasks. It is a formidable undertaking to survey thousands of waterfowl and have a good proficiency rate on what just buzzed by your window.

In addition, the survey has to be cognizant of what they call the "wave." Ultimately the biologists are trying to count breeding pairs of waterfowl and not massive migrating groups stalled on freeze lines. If a pilot gets ahead of the "wave" it might count waterfowl just passing through and this same group of birds will be double-counted to the north by another crew leading to inflated numbers. Vice-versa if a pilot gets on the back of a "wave" then they will see far fewer breeding birds leading to an underinflated population estimate. Ideally pilots ride right on top of the "wave" of migratory breeding birds, slowing and speeding their flight to compensate for variants in the migration. Add to this that every species migrates and disperses differently during their travels to the nesting grounds.

Think it is easy to count waterfowl from the air, try testing your skill @ https://www.fws.gov/waterfowlsurveys/showImage.do?level=1&range=5&menu=counting.test. Select "Challenging" and "Any" to somewhat duplicate what an observer has to deal with in the air. Just a hint about the test, I guarantee that you will undercount more often than not. When you are consistently in the teens and low twenties give yourself a pat on the back, you are now ready to be a scout for Thunderbird!

WESTERN BREEDING GROUNDS

- **Alaska and Yukon Crew *****
  - Appears to be a "return to normal year" with phenology, water levels, and species composition, but some interior areas were dryer.
  - Improved habitat with perfectly timed thawing from Mother Nature. Combine this with the arrival of birds and favorable nesting should occur in Alaska this year.
  - More pintails were seen than in previous years, meaning possible over-flights due to poor nesting conditions in some areas of southern Canada, but data needs to be accessed.

The Yukon-Kuskokwin Delta Wildlife Refuge Area looking pretty good

- **Northern Alberta, Eastern B.C. and NW Territories Crew ****
  - Overall average habitat conditions in this region.
  - Fort McMurray area of northern Alberta that was devastated by wildfires last year is in great shape and "back in business." My two cents on fire, while mostly viewed in a negative context by the public, fires are generally good for wildlife, setting back succession and regenerating production, whether they are in the boreal forest, Yellowstone National Park, or the Gulf Coast areas.

Forest regeneration after 2016 fires in northern Alberta

Boreal forest of northern Alberta

- **Southern and Central Alberta Crew ******
    - A late winter and quick thaw has lead to outstanding conditions for nesting waterfowl with the exception being the heavily farmed agricultural areas. Duck numbers were up as well. Parklands habitat to the north was marginal with fewer ducks than in the past, but this could be attributed to short stopping in the excellent habitat to the south.

Excellent habitat near Lethbridge, Alberta

Wetlands west of Calgary in great shape

CENTRAL BREEDING GROUNDS

- **Northern Saskatchewan and Northern Manitoba Crew *****
    - Conditions and birds in this area are similar to last year and things are looking good, wetlands are adequately charged with breeding pairs setup across the landscape. Both ponds and birds are similar to last year at this time. Should be good waterfowl production from this area.

Parklands of northern Saskatchewan with great conditions

- **Southern Manitoba and SE Saskatchewan Crew ***
    - Ground crew whom had been participating in the survey for over twenty years confirmed it is the driest they've seen in a long time due to below average precipitation through the winter and spring.
    - Little sheet water, so important to early nesting pintails. It was a late spring with a quick warm up.

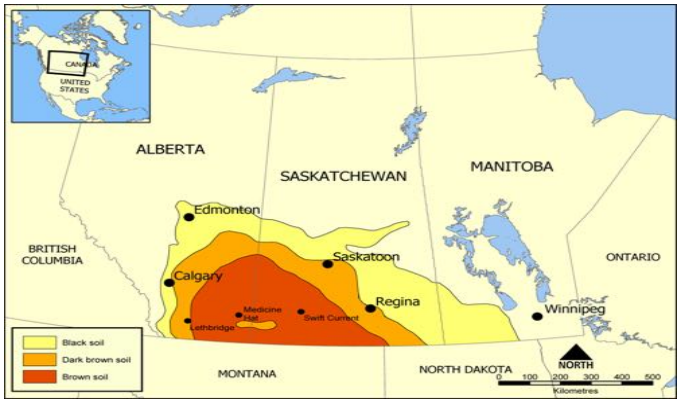
Dry conditions for most of southern Manitoba

- **Southern Saskatchewan Crew * / ****
  - In late April the habitat and duck timing were still on the early side. The survey is dynamic and so are the wildfowl moving through.
  - Southern Saskatchewan has dried out since last year, but conditions vary widely. Below normal precipitation last summer and throughout the fall and winter have the wetlands dry.
  - Ice delaying birds attempts to nest.
  - Little or no sheet water.

Very dry conditions in SE Saskatchewan

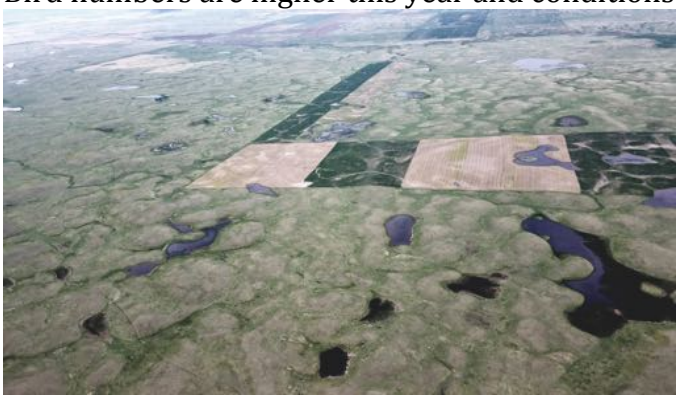
  - On a positive note the Missouri Coteau (6-million acres in SW Saskatchewan) was in very good shape.

Missouri Coteau of SW Saskatchewan



Map of Missouri Coteau region of Canada

- **Western Dakotas and Eastern Montana Crew ******
  - Habitat conditions of most of eastern Montana are much improved over last spring, precipitation in wetlands have increased dramatically both in quality and quantity. Quote, "Expect excellent production from Montana."
  - Double the wetlands in South Dakota from last year.
  - Wetlands in western North Dakota have increased 30%.
  - Bird numbers are higher this year and conditions are very promising.



Very good conditions in eastern Montana

- **Eastern Dakotas Crew **** / ***
  - Late season rain last year with above normal snow pack had parts of South Dakota looking better than it has in the past several years. Waterfowl numbers for all species appear to be up as well. But as one heads towards North Dakota habitat begins to dry out. A mixed bag in the eastern part of the Dakotas.

Eastern South Dakota - wet

Eastern North Dakota – mostly dry

EASTERN BREEDING GROUNDS

- **Western Ontario and Northern Quebec Crew ** / ***
  - Our very own Jared Laing with TP&WD was selected to cover this survey, what an honor and an adventure to boot! They are reporting a late spring with flight delays to the north due to ice and snow. Overall the habitat conditions are spotty with most being average and some below average with very little snow pack leading to weak runoff.

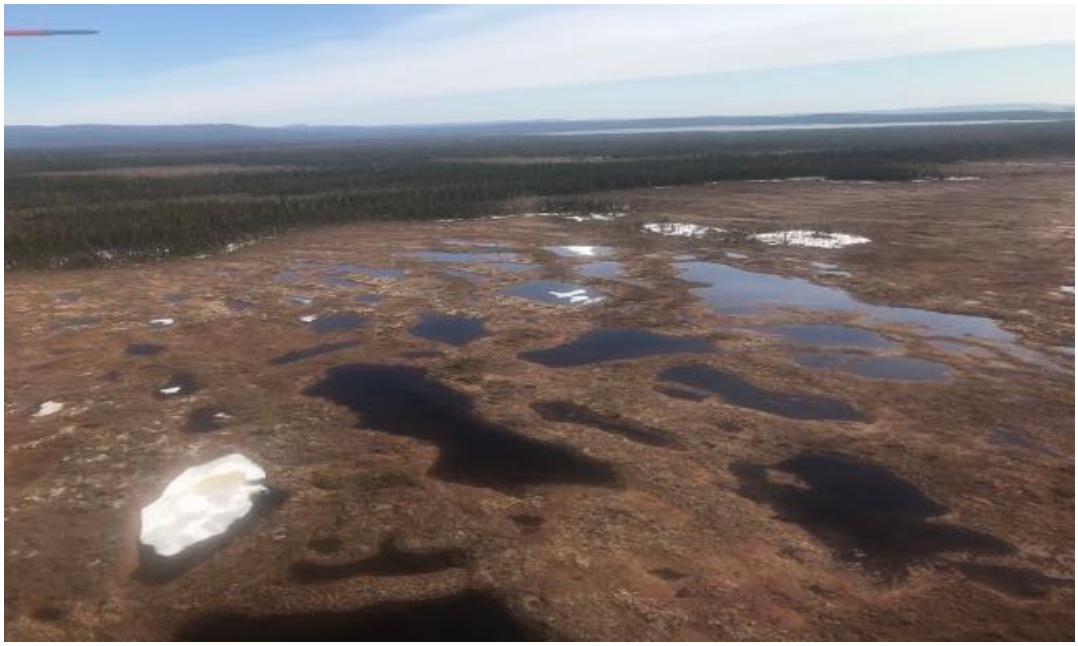
A late spring and frozen conditions to kick off their survey

- **Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec Crew *****
  - Habitat in this region is mostly good, with some areas fair to excellent. Drier than recent years, yet plenty of water on the landscape.
  - Late thaw in this area SE of James Bay could mean a possible poor snow goose hatch to the north in the tundra.

Late thaw could impact some species of nesting waterfowl

- **Maine and Atlantic Canada Crew *****
    - Conditions are generally good, but many areas in the eastern portion and higher elevations were locked in late snow and ice. Newfoundland and Labrador are expereincing cold temperatures with persisting snow.
    - While most of Canada was experiencing record highs parts of Newfoundland were still frozen and yet other areas had record snowfall. Overall this area so far looks very good and waterfowl production should follow suite.
    - Record flooding occurred in the St. John River of New Brunswick and parts of Maine due to rapid ice and snow melt due to high temperatures. In general these areas are good, but western Maine dry.

Late spring with frozen conditions



Wabush area of western Labrador seeing good numbers of waterfowl

All Important Prairie Pothole Region of North America


Boreal Forest of North America

Summary of the Flight Biologist Field Notes

Surprisingly overall the conditions are looking better for the Central Flyway than I had previously thought. Late season snows helped improve conditions tremendously in the northern states of the U.S. However it is still a long ways off before biologists assemble all the data for the final big picture.

One very important breeding area, the pothole prairies, encompassing Southern Manitoba and SE Saskatchewan went very dry, but plenty of other areas for the birds to nest in. Eastern North Dakota still remains somewhat dry, but pond counts are up in the western portion of the state. Alberta is in great shape, as is Montana and most of the rest of the Dakotas. The boreal forest including the parklands to the north appear to also have good conditions, but the boreal region is not as ideal nesting habitat as the pothole region to the south for puddle ducks. As many of us know ducks have an uncanny sense of where to find water and favorable conditions, let's hope for the best.

Sheet water was scarce in many areas with one report noting a number of pintails in Alaska. That could mean the hens have over-flighted some areas due to lack of sheet water and will not nest. But Alberta is in good shape, important nesting grounds for pintails. With all that said it would not surprise me if next season we drop back to one pintail. The feds must reconsider the population index of the pintail, it will never rebound to its glory days due to changing farming practices in the spring that are detrimental to their nests, along with hens not putting on fat reserves on their wintering grounds. My thoughts, the new norm will vary between 2-5 million birds, a new standard should be set for this species. We can shot two canvasbacks and their population last year was only 733,000, a fourth of the pintail population. Ultimately cutting the bag limit on pintails hurts the bird, as it impacts hunter participation, especially in the west and Gulf Coast area of Texas.

Delayed spring thaw could adversely impact nesting snow geese.

Nature is never ever static and a long ways to go before the "fat lady sings," conditions can get better or worse, but right now the habitat up north, while not excellent is looking good in a number of regions.

Now we wait and see if my anecdotic accounting of the survey flights becomes a truism.

Special thanks to those that courageously get into planes and abandon their families every spring, without them there would be no waterfowl season!