



Photo by Todd Steele

Storm has big impact on teal season

By Shannon Tompkins

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This week's full moon coincides with an unusual cool front that swept down the middle of the continent over the past two days, dropping temperatures into the 40s as far south as the Texas Panhandle and triggering swarms of blue-winged teal to leave their natal grounds on northern prairies to ride the north wind south, heading for Texas.

The combination of a bright moon and north wind bringing waterfowl south make for conditions Texas waterfowlers dream of seeing just ahead of the opening of the state's teal-only hunting season - a season that opens Sept. 9 for a 16-day run.

They got those dream conditions, this year.

But, they come on the heels of a nightmare.

Blue-winged teal arriving in Texas - a significant number of the early-migrating little ducks are already here, with more winging this way - find the state's coastal marshes and prairies awash with water, the result of the unprecedented rains and flooding created by Hurricane Harvey.

This may be good or bad or some combination, depending on the water's effects on the landscape on which those birds depend upon.

'Life-changing events'

There is no question of its effects on the as many as 13 million Texans - almost half the state's population - directly impacted by the storm/rain/flood that swamped the swath of coast from Corpus Christi to Calcasieu and inland more than 100 miles.

The storm's devastating effects on Texas' human population will affect participation in this year's teal season. Going afield and greeting the dawn in a coastal marsh or prairie wetland for a morning of teal hunting is almost inconceivable when facing the equally inconceivable truth that your home or the home of family, friends or neighbors has been flooded or, as is the case for those directly in the path of Harvey's hurricane winds, blown apart.

"I expect participation to be down, for obvious and understandable reasons," Kevin Kraai, waterfowl program leader for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, said of the pending teal season. "This storm has affected so many people in such devastating ways. They're focusing on dealing with those life-changing events. Going hunting isn't a priority. Taking care of their families is."

In a typical Texas teal season, perhaps as many as 40,000 hunters participate. This season, look for half of that, at best.

As Kraai notes, the majority of Texas waterfowlers who participate in the September teal-only season live in the Houston metropolitan area and the arc along the coast from Port Arthur to Corpus Christi. Those Texans are the closest to the coastal marshes, prairie wetlands and rice fields - the largest and best swath of teal habitat in the state.

Those are the areas slammed hardest by Harvey.

Harvey's probable impact on the number of waterfowlers participating in the Sept. 9-24 teal season can be guessed at from looking at the number of Texans so far enrolled in the Harvest Information Program. State and federal rules require anyone hunting migratory game birds - doves, waterfowl, snipe, woodcock, etc. - to have HIP "certification" on their hunting license. The program, which serves as a database of hunters, is used by waterfowl managers to solicit participants in migratory game bird harvest surveys.

Texas' 2017-18 hunting license "year" began Sept. 1, the same day dove season opens in much of Texas, and just ahead of the teal season opener.

By the middle of the first week of September a year ago, 400,900 hunters had been HIP certified in Texas. This year, that number was just 257,000 - barely over half the number from the previous year.

Wide-spread closures

Harvey, which washed away the dove opener for millions of Texans as it washed away homes and changed the lives of hundreds of thousands, is almost certainly the cause of the decline. Wingshooters who otherwise would have bought new hunting licenses and became HIP certified so they could participate in the opening of dove season, and the soon-to-open teal season, had, and have, much more pressing matters to attend to.

Many waterfowlers blessed to avoid the storm's devastation and planning to head afield for this Saturday's teal opener will find Harvey has taken that option from them. Flooding and damage to infrastructure forced closure of almost all of the public hunting areas along the coast.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department announced public waterfowl hunting areas on the agency's J.D. Murphree Wildlife Management Area near Port Arthur, Sea Rim State Park near Sabine Pass and the mission lake Unit of the Guadalupe Delta WMA near Tivoli will be closed for the entire teal season.

TPWD's Justin Hurst WMA near Freeport and Mad Island WMA in Matagorda County will be closed at least until Sept. 16.

As of late Wednesday, U.S Fish and Wildlife Service reports Big Boggy, San Bernard, Brazoria, Anahauc, McFaddin and Texas Point national wildlife refuges, which hold substantial and popular public teal hunting areas, are closed. No date for opening the areas has been announced.

Those public hunting areas are almost all coastal marsh, where flooding continues to be an issue. While Harvey's storm surge did not put a substantial, vegetation-killing surge of high-salinity saltwater into the marshes, it did swamp the marshes with several feet of freshwater. That deep water puts aquatic vegetation out of reach of teal, making the marshes less attractive to the little ducks.

Long-term effects

That high water also poises a potential longer term problem for the marshes if it triggers outbreaks of "black water," a condition in which deteriorating vegetation beneath floodwaters triggers chemical and biological processes that rob the water of dissolved oxygen. The result is a die-off of all plant and aquatic life in affected areas.

"We're just going to have to wait and see how this affects those areas," Kraai said. "This is an unprecedented event, so it's foolish to guess what the effects will be."

Things look better on the coastal prairies where Harvey's rains created lots of shallow, temporary wetlands and put water in cut rice fields, habitat often favored by teal. It was a mixed blessing for shallow, leveed "moist-soil" impoundments, most created by waterfowl hunting clubs or waterfowl outfitters.

Todd Steele, manager and chief waterfowl habitat guru of Thunderbird Hunting Club, said the dozens of moist-soil impoundments the club has scattered over Matagorda and Wharton counties were in excellent condition, growing great crops of waterfowl-attracting aquatic vegetation ahead of Harvey's arrival.

"Our habitat is in the best shape ever in the 31 years I've been building and managing wetlands," Steele said earlier this week while working frantically to repair breaks and other breaches in levees caused when wetlands were swamped by Harvey's record-setting rains.

Those breaches have the potential to drain the water from the shallow impoundments, voiding months of work by wetlands managers and leaving them facing the incredible irony of having to pay to pump water into wetlands whose levees were overwhelmed by Harvey.

But, that's down the road.

Right now, small swarms of bluewings are scattered across the coastal prairie wetlands. As of Wednesday, Steele reported several of Thunderbird's impoundments were holding good numbers of bluewings, with a few ponds hosting concentrations of 1,000 or more birds.

More were arriving with Wednesday's north wind. And there are a lot of bluewings still coming. This year's estimated spring breeding population of bluewings was 7.9 million birds, 18 percent more than 2016 and 57 percent above the 1955-2016 average.

A couple of weeks ago, this was setting up to be a teal season Texas waterfowlers would long remember.

It still will be that. Just not for the reasons most hoped.

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