



The Future of Waterfowl & Waterfowl Hunting in Texas

ARTICLE BY TODD STEELE

I sat in awe on my marsh stool late in October 2011, as I had done countless seasons before, at the spectacle unfolding before me. But, this time, it was different. I knew I was witnessing the greatest duck hatch in over half a century, the greatest migration of ducks since man had started counting waterfowl in 1955, a nesting record of 45.6 million strong. Flight after flight of pintails, gadwalls, and teal rocketed down, defying aerial decompression, primary wings strongly cupped – almost touching, completing their migratory liftoff somewhere far to the north. Thirsty and exhausted flocks plopped one after another into one of our many ponds for a well-deserved drink and rest. A record number of ducks were counted that spring on the nesting grounds on the prairie potholes to the north; records were shattered for a number of species. The “good old days” did not belong to my forefathers, but they belonged to anyone who ventured into wetlands in 2011.

This year, the unfathomable happened again, another record for ducks on their spring nesting grounds, 48.6 million.



photo by Todd Steele

A hunter sending his young Lab on retrieve.

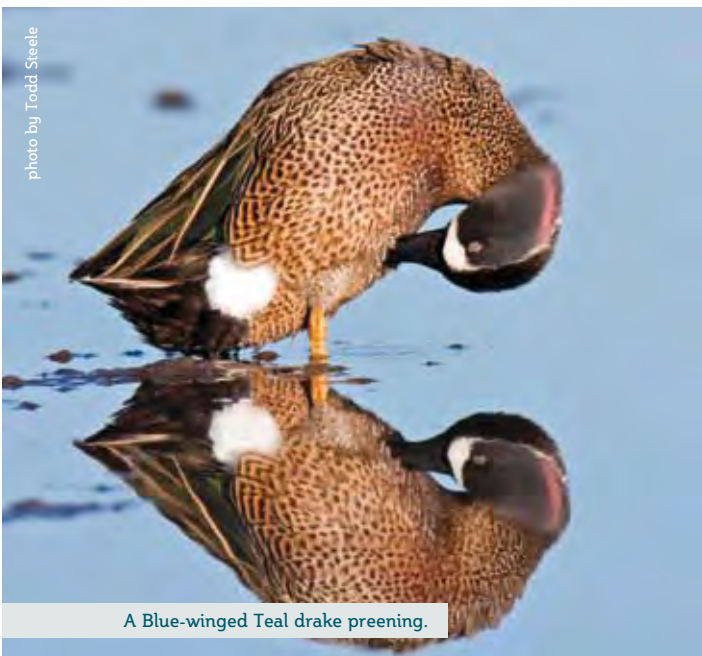


photo by Todd Steele

A Blue-winged Teal drake preening.





photo by Todd Steele

Snow Geese

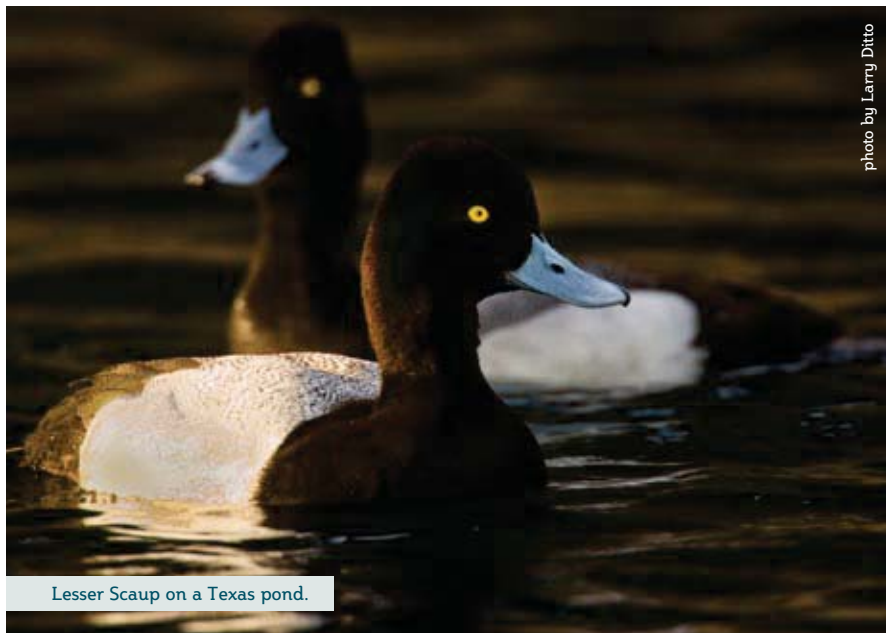


photo by Larry Ditto

Lesser Scaup on a Texas pond.

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storm is looming on the horizon. Coin it “the perfect storm,” if you like, but for those of us who love ducks, those of us that enjoy crawling out of a

warm bed to be pelleted by rain, stung by north winds, and covered in mud to watch cupped wings sail into our spreads, the “good old days” may be numbered for ducks.

Three factors are converging in the impending storm that stands to dramatically alter our heritage of watching and hunting ducks. First, dry weather has finally hit the primary breeding grounds of the north-central United States and southern provinces of Canada for the first time in close to a decade.

Second, commodity pricing for grain is at an all-time high and increasing every day. The United States accounts for over half the global export market for corn and nearly half of the soybean market. More than 60 percent of the continental United States, including prime farm and ranch territory of the Midwest, is suffering from moderate to exceptional drought, with the corn-growing belt taking a severe

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hit. Half of all U.S. counties – 1,584 in 32 states – have been designated primary disaster areas this growing season, the vast majority of them mired in a drought that's considered the worst in decades. This situation will likely lead to habitat alteration on the prairie potholes for the 2013 duck-nesting season.

And, if the drought and high commodity pricing were not enough, add in a third factor, the uncertainty of federal conservation programs and policies that benefit ducks and their habitats. Programs such as Swampbuster and the Conservation Reserve Program need immediate attention in Congress. Essential to both the agriculture and waterfowl communities, a new 2012 Farm Bill awaits action in Congress. This important legislation, which contains details of federal conservation programs for the next five years, will impact millions of acres of wetlands, grasslands and, ultimately, waterfowl, across the United States. The Texas Wildlife Association supports the passage of a new 2012 Farm Bill and not the continuation of the expiring 2008 Farm Bill and its authorizations.

Nesting and wintering grounds are in jeopardy in Texas.



Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher on a ranch pond in Texas.

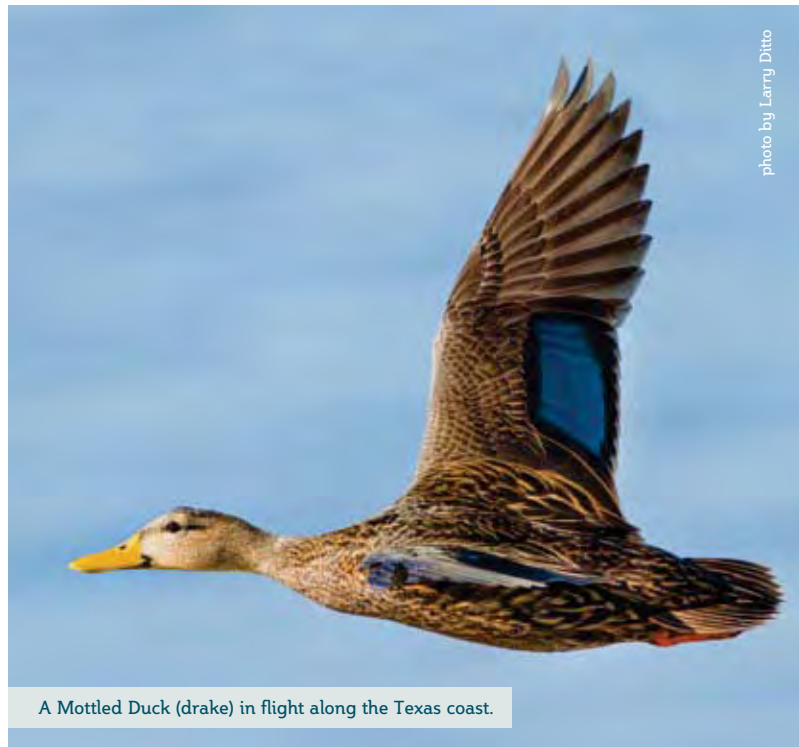
photo by Larry Ditto

According to Dr. Mike Brasher, team leader with the Gulf Coast Joint Venture, which both monitors and advances habitat conservation along the Gulf of Mexico, Texas has lost a significant portion of wetlands along the Gulf Coast. The middle coast, an important wintering area for millions of waterfowl and water birds, is 200,000 acres behind or at 50 percent of their long-term objective of wintering habitat. The ongoing drought in Texas caused the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) to withhold water this year on approximately 50,000 acres of rice, further amplifying the problem already at hand. The North American Waterfowl Management Plan (a conservation joint venture of various organizations and boundaries formed to help sustain waterfowl and wetlands) suggests that the flooding of rice fields is a critical component of sustaining continental waterfowl populations.



A pair of Snow Geese.

photo by Todd Steele



A Mottled Duck (drake) in flight along the Texas coast.

photo by Larry Ditto



There are still good pockets of habitat across the Texas coast that are supporting good goose hunting, as witnessed last year, but those opportunities are certainly not what they used to be.

“The loss of 50,000 acres of rice,” said Dr. Todd Merendino, Ducks Unlimited Gulf Coast Manager of Conservation Programs, “will impact the nutritional demands of approximately 600,000 wintering waterfowl.” Dr. Merendino also stated that the net loss of these valuable rice lands was equivalent to losing the 60,000 acres of wetlands restored in the Texas Prairie Wetlands Program over the past 17 years. Flooded rice fields are especially important to early migrating blue-winged teal that feed intensely on the second-cropped rice to fuel their migration to Mexico and South American countries. It remains to be seen how the teal will react to this loss of rice and whether the marshes and moist soil wetlands will suffice.

Less rice on their wintering grounds could also impact pintails, another important wintering duck, with the mid-coast accounting for 95 percent of their wintering habitat. Snow geese numbers wintering along the Gulf Coast of Texas have dropped off dramatically over the past decade, from a wintering high of 1.6 million birds in the late 1990s to a low of 250,000 birds counted last season during the coastal mid-winter aerial goose survey. A lot of factors are influencing our wintering geese, but rice is a big factor. This season, eastern Arkansas will produce over 1.2 million acres of rice, compared to the estimated 2012 Texas production of only 110,000 acres of rice. Last season, during the mid-winter goose survey, Arkansas was wintering close to 1.5 million birds. With lower rice production and recent winter droughts in Texas, many of “our” geese appear to have found greener pastures elsewhere, especially in Arkansas. The Harvest Information



Northern Shoveler males in a South Texas marsh.

photo by Larry Ditto



American Widgeon

photo by Todd Steele



A Northern Pintail flock feeding in a marsh in early winter.

photo by Larry Ditto





photo by Larry Ditto

Feeding flock of Northern Pintail feed in pond shallows.

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Program (HIP), which randomly surveys hunter's harvests across the state, also confirms the loss of our geese. In 2000, the average number of geese bagged for the season was 9.5 per hunter. In 2009, the average number of geese bagged for the season was 5.4 per hunter. Although Texas leads the Central Flyway with the amount of geese harvested per season with an average of 401,151 birds (1999-2009), it has also recorded a decline in harvested geese from 1999 to 2009, with a high in the 2000-2001 season of 639,100 geese and a low of 196,499 in the 2009-2010 season.

As of early August this year, preliminary data began to arrive for the goose hatch far to the north in the subarctic and arctic regions of Canada. Because of the remoteness and lack of infrastructure in this huge area, it is hard to produce data similar to that which we have for our ducks. The Mid-Continent Population (MCP) of snow geese had a below-average hatch. There was widespread flooding over much of the nesting grounds. Overall, a low number of young birds is estimated in the MCP flock this year. The Western Central Population (WCFP) of snow geese is expecting to have an above-average hatch. Ross Geese, a separate goose species looking like a miniature version of the snow goose, also had an above normal hatch. In general, the snow goose hatch appears to be average.

Will the geese come back to the coast? They can, but as observed by Bill Stransky, who builds waterfowl habitat projects across the

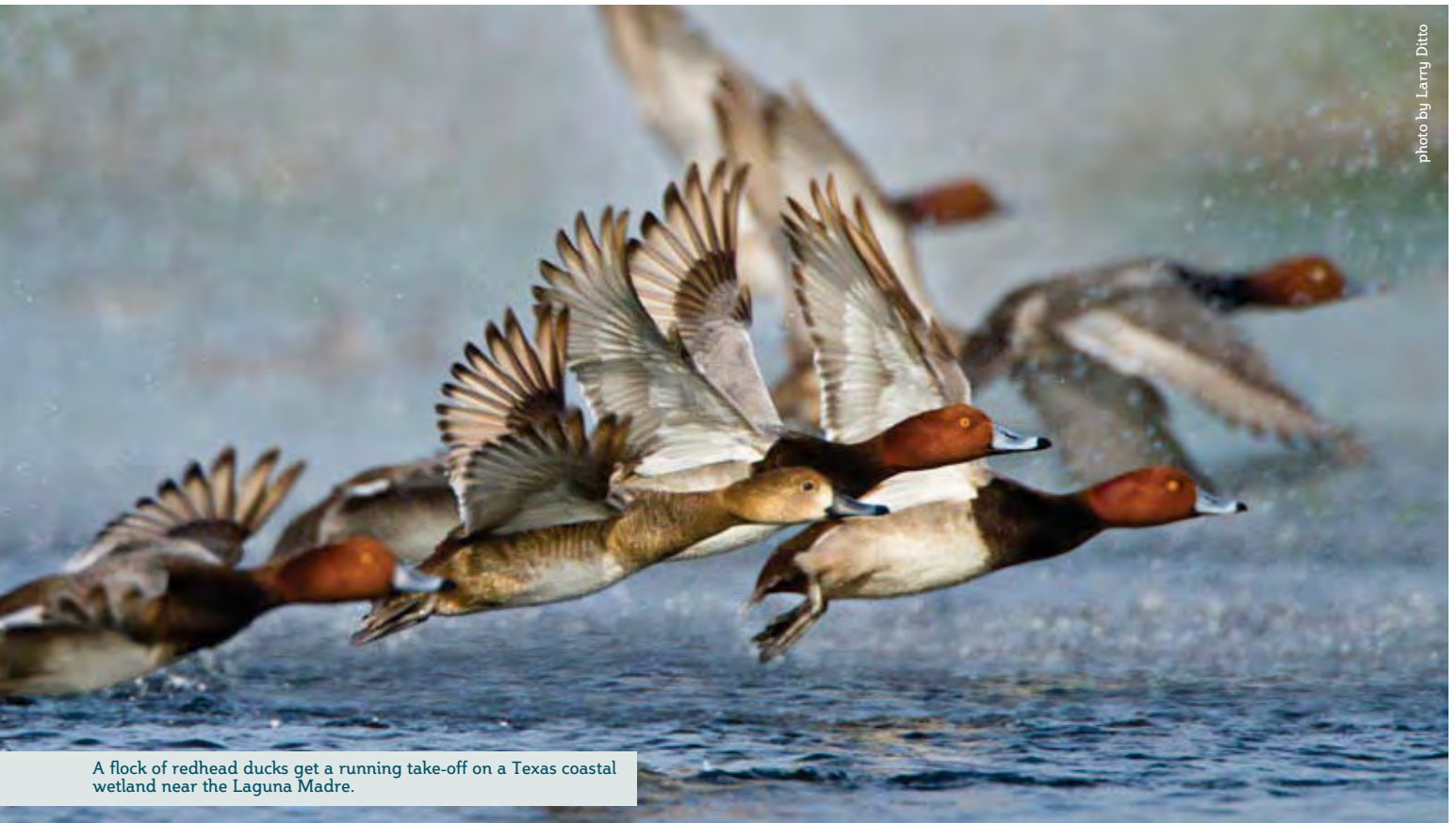


photo by Larry Ditto

A flock of redhead ducks get a running take-off on a Texas coastal wetland near the Laguna Madre.





Canada Goose



state: “The snow goose is a very adaptable and smart bird, as anyone who has hunted it knows, and it has shown a great ability to adapt over the years, both to its wintering and nesting grounds. This season, it remains to be seen what the snow geese will do with all the failed crops in the middle portion of the nation. When things change in the future, and they will, the birds might come back, but we will need to see our landscape change along the coast, and we will need some major winter storms to drive them to us.”

There are still good pockets of habitat across the Texas coast that are supporting good goose hunting, as witnessed last year, but

The duck season will mirror last season’s regulations, with the exception of scaup, which have increased from two to six in the daily bag limit.

those opportunities are certainly not what they used to be, with major losses of geese on the east side of Houston and, just recently, the loss of significant habitat in the Katy prairies due to development and changes in farming practices. The northern sections of the state are now enjoying increased success with Canada geese; and, in some areas, the birds are actually

becoming nuisance birds on parks and golf courses, instituting a recent “Early Canada Goose Season” for the Eastern Goose Zone of the state that coincides with early teal season.

Even with habitat loss across the state, our ducks seem to be holding their own and are actually increasing in numbers in some areas, according to the mid-winter survey conducted by biologists across Texas. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Waterfowl



photo by Todd Steele

Black Labrador retrieves a Green-winged Teal.



photo by Todd Steele

Pintails, Mallards and Widgeon rise from a marsh.



Program Leader Kevin Kraai said, “Surprisingly, the central and north central portions of the state are holding just as many ducks as the coast, where all the press is. They may not be the impressive build-up of duck concentrations we see on the coast, but when you add up all the small bodies of water, coupled with the large reservoirs, you come up with an impressive amount of birds.”

Participation in waterfowl hunting in Texas seems to be relatively stable, and 130,000 Federal Duck Stamps are sold each year, but the median age of a waterfowler seems to be getting older.

Gadwalls, widgeon, shovelers, and green-winged teal numbers have been increasing over the past few years in Central Texas, while the coast is holding its duck population even. The “Gray Duck” or gadwall is now our most populous duck across Texas with 745,037 birds, representing 21 percent of the total mid-winter survey of 3,551,924 ducks. Over an 11-year period (1999-2009), the gadwall was the most common duck bagged in Texas, with an

average of 229,416 birds harvested every season, accounting for 23 percent of the ducks bagged. The statewide average for ducks harvested by Texas hunters was over a million ducks per season, with the numbers remaining relatively consistent from year to year over the survey period (1999-2009).

Last season, if you had water and good habitat, you had ducks and probably enjoyed one of the best seasons ever. This season,

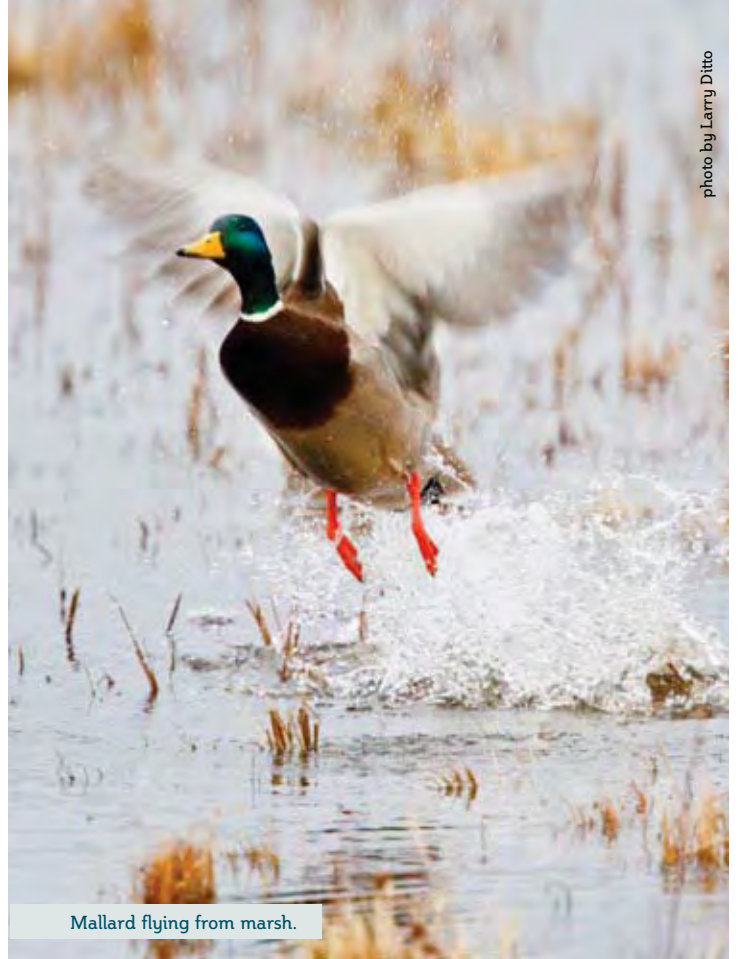


photo by Larry Ditto

Mallard flying from marsh.



photo by Todd Steele

A hunter takes aim at geese coming off a roost pond.



photo by Todd Steele



Two waterfowl hunters and a Black Labrador in duck blind with lanyards of ducks.



photo by Todd Steele

Canada Geese feed in a cornfield.

according to Kraai, the habitat across the state is in much better shape (in general) than it has been in quite some time. East, Central, and the coast of Texas are in good to excellent shape with the help of summer rains that fell and softened one of the worst droughts in the history of Texas. The reservoirs of the East are filling; once dry flats are now flooded with good plant growth; the coastal refuges have freshwater in them, and widgeon grass is abundant; and the stock tanks across the central part of the state have been recharged with water. The only areas with overall poor habitat conditions are the Panhandle and South Texas regions.

With good habitat conditions over most of the state, waterfowlers this season should enjoy a more equal distribution of the record duck hatch this season. Resounding in my mind is the statement that Dave Morrison, Small Game Director for Texas





photo by Todd Steele

Goose hunters lying in goose spread in a rice field at sunrise.

Parks and Wildlife, made to me regarding ducks: “With all the adversity and loss of habitat that ducks have faced over the years, you must recognize the resiliency of these ducks. They have adapted like geese to reach record numbers, through a collaborative help of many individuals and organizations.”

Highlights of the record hatch include:

- Gadwalls – 10 percent higher than last year and 96 percent above their long term average (1955-2011);
- Mallards – 15 percent higher than last year and 39 percent above their long term average;
- Green-winged Teal – 20 percent higher than last year and 74 percent above their long term average;
- Blue-winged Teal – 3 percent higher and 94 percent above their long term average;
- Northern Shoveler – 8 percent higher than last year and 111 percent above their long term average, and
- Scaup (Bluebills) – 21 percent higher than last year and 4 percent above their long term average.

The duck season will mirror last season’s regulations, with the exception of scaup, which have increased from two to six in the daily bag limit. A harvest management strategy plan was in place

for scaup, triggering the increase in bag limit. Unfortunately for coastal gunners, there currently is no accepted harvest management strategy plan for redheads, which have the second highest numbers on record at 1,270,000 and 89 percent above their long-term average. In future seasons, we may see increased limits on redheads (if a plan is approved and populations remain high), increased bag limits during early teal season, and a change in the “possession limit.”

Participation in waterfowl hunting in Texas seems to be relatively stable, and 130,000 Federal Duck Stamps are sold each year, but the median age of a waterfowler seems to be getting older. To help promote waterfowling in Texas, the Texas Brigades, an outdoor youth education and leadership program whose supporters and partners include the Texas Wildlife Association, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, started a new Waterfowl Brigade this summer.

Helen Holdsworth, Director of Conservation Legacy Programs for the Texas Wildlife Association and Executive Director of the Texas Brigades, said, “The mission is to educate and empower youths with both knowledge of the resource and leadership skills that they will carry on into their adult lives. Whether the path leads to a direct career in conservation or not, the cadets will carry with them an understanding of our natural resources well into their adulthood. The youth of today will be our leaders of



Collectively, though, we can preserve our heritage of waterfowl for generations to come, and they can be in awe as they watch backlit birds drop out of the sky on a cold morning in early fall somewhere knee-deep in a wetland.

conservation in the future.”

With two record-breaking duck hatches and the unpredicted numbers of geese across North America, it is no time for us to let our guard down. It is critical that each and every person who loves to see a fall flight of migrating Vs or loves to watch the early gray morning light come alive with wings needs to get involved to help protect our heritage of waterfowl for future generations.

Over the course of the next few years, a lot rides on the decisions of our government, landowners and individuals. We all need to stay active in promoting the importance of conservation of our wetlands, supporting Texas Wildlife Association and other conservation organizations and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and recognizing landowners, farmers, and ranchers that are good stewards of their wetlands.

As Ducks Unlimited CEO Dale Hall said, “Habitat and the legislative process are key; ducks need both a round trip ticket from their breeding and wintering grounds, and they also need a seat at the table to be heard.” We are their voice. Waterfowl are indeed resilient, but they cannot make it on their own. Without everyone’s help, we would not have the record flight coming at us this fall. We need to keep waterfowl important and of value in our lives; for once they lose their importance to us, they will most surely suffer.


Collectively, though, we can preserve our heritage of waterfowl for generations to come, and they can be in awe as they watch backlit birds drop out of the sky on a cold morning in early fall somewhere knee-deep in a wetland. 



photo by Larry Ditto

A Canada Goose and a Mallard Duck on a Central Texas pond in autumn.

