



Photo by Todd Steele

## Weather is the key to waterfowl season

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October 29, 2016

When the 2016-17 duck and goose hunting seasons open across Texas over the next two weeks, 100,000 or so waterfowlers and the millions of ducks and geese in and on their way (waterfowlers hope) to wintering ground in the state will face conditions quite different than they saw a few weeks ago.

They certainly are different than what faced Texas waterfowlers at the start of the 2015-16 season - which, according to federal waterfowl harvest surveys, saw Texas hunters take 40 percent fewer ducks and more than 70 percent fewer geese than the previous season despite booming populations of both birds.

This year, instead of being awash in water and an abundance of waterfowl habitat it created - a situation that benefited arriving waterfowl but made for tough hunting as it scattered birds over a wide area - much of Texas' premier waterfowl wintering areas are increasingly dry, a result of an unseasonably warm and extremely dry October.

This could prove a benefit - perhaps short-lived - for hunters and a mixed bag for the birds. How it plays out hangs, as it almost always does for both waterfowl and waterfowlers, on the weather.

"A lot of how this season goes is likely to depend on what kind of weather we see here and up the flyway," said **Kevin Kraai**, waterfowl program leader for **Texas Parks and Wildlife Department**. "Right now, we could use some wet cold fronts."

### **Cold and wet welcome**

The cold is needed to push ducks and geese south from up the Central Flyway. The wet is needed to recharge waterfowl habitat.

"Back in August and September, when we were so wet across almost all of the state, it looked like things were shaping up to be a lot like they were when the season started last year," Kraai said. "Then the rains came to a screeching halt, and it got hot and dry. A lot of that water just disappeared."

The result, Kraai and other waterfowl managers said, has been a reduction in waterfowl habitat on some prime wintering areas such as Texas' coastal prairie and the Panhandle's playa wetlands, concentrating early-arriving ducks on the available habitat.

**Todd Steele** is seeing this on the Wharton and Matagorda county wetlands he manages for the private **Thunderbird Hunting Club**.

"It's just been a year of extremes," Steele said. "Too much water all through spring and summer, then the rain just shut off."

### **Bird push has begun**

Many of the "natural" wetlands on the coastal prairie have shriveled over the last month. But land managers who have worked to maintain and pump water into their managed wetlands are seeing the benefits their hunters will begin reaping when duck season in Texas' South Duck Zone opens Nov. 5.

"The good news is, we had a good push of ducks - pintail, gadwall, wigeon and green-winged teal - with that little front we had a couple of weeks ago. And the bluewing teal are still here; we don't seem to have lost any to that front," Steele said. "There's just a ton of birds on some of the ponds."

And there is food to attract and hold those birds. The extremely wet spring and most of summer put freshwater on the landscape, triggering a flush of submerged aquatic vegetation and other wetland/moist-soil plants such as wigeongrass, najas, duck potato, sago pondweed, smartweed, barnyard grass and other seed- or tuber-producing plants ducks relish.

Some of Texas' coastal marshes especially benefited from the earlier wet conditions.

"All the freshwater earlier this year was generally very beneficial for the marshes," said **Mike Rezsutek**, manager of TPWD's wetland programs based out of the agency's sprawling J.D. Murphree WMA near Port Arthur. "It kept high salinity out of the marshes. We had really high water in some areas almost all summer, and that hurt aquatics in those areas. But in others, there's good crops of aquatics. The marshes are in good shape.

"We've had some birds show up - gadwall, teal,. I think we're looking at a good season."

Waterfowlers on those coastal marshes for the season opener might benefit from the recent lack of rain.

"With the dry conditions on the prairies, the coastal marshes could see a really good opener," Kraai said.

But hunting success could quickly decline if weather doesn't lend a hand by producing a series

of significant cold fronts, ending what has been a very mild October on the northern plains and pushing new waves of ducks and geese down the Central Flyway and into Texas.

"The weather has just not been there to push birds south," Kraai said. "They're seeing Indian Summer conditions in Canada. There's plenty of food and water up there for them. They haven't had a reason to leave."

But the ducks that have made it to Texas and are concentrated in relatively limited habitat on the coastal prairies and marshes soon have a reason to leave.

Those ducks can be very sensitive to hunting pressure, Kraai said. If hunted hard, the birds will look for areas with less pressure and keep flying until they find it. They don't have to fly far in years when habitat is abundant and the birds can scatter over a wide area. But when habitat is relatively limited, heavy pressure can push the birds completely out of an area.

A series of November cold fronts could help solve that problem, especially if they bring recharging rains along with fresh waves of migrating ducks and geese.

### **Prospects promising**

And there are a lot of birds up the flyway.

North America's duck and goose populations continue to ride a high. This year's spring breeding population index of the 10 most common ducks was 48.4 million, 38 percent above the 1955-2015 average. Several duck species important to Texas waterfowlers - green-winged teal, mallard, blue-winged teal, wigeon and redheads - are at or near record populations.

Goose numbers also are strong and, after a summer in which average to above-average nesting success put lots of young geese into the population, goose hunters, who await the opening of the Eastern Goose Zone season Nov. 5, should see improved success, Kraai said.

Despite the recent dry conditions and the lack of any serious bird-moving cold fronts forecast for at least a couple of weeks, overall prospects for Texas waterfowlers heading afield for the Nov. 5 South Duck Zone opener are good, and the whole season could be productive if the weather lends a hand.

Duck hunters in the state's North Zone have to wait until Nov. 12 for their opener - a move state waterfowl managers made to maximize hunting opportunities later in the season, when more mallards tend to move into that region of the state. And when - if - weather cooperates and shoves mallards and other cold-tolerant ducks into East Texas, they should find plenty of suitable wintering habitat.

"Things look pretty good for ducks in East Texas," said **Corey Mason**, Tyler-based regional director for TPWD's wildlife division. "There's certainly plenty of water on the landscape."

Record-setting rains in winter and spring-filled oxbows and sloughs in East Texas, and the late-summer dry stretch allowed some areas to dry out a bit and produce good crops of duck-attracting aquatic vegetation such as smartweed, according to Mason.

Also, the region saw good production from resident wood ducks, he added.

"The table is set. We just have to wait to see if the birds show up," Mason said. "If we can get some freezing temperatures up the flyway and good cold fronts to push the birds down, it should be a good season. Weather's the key."

It always is with waterfowl.