

TO: Larry D Voyles, Director

FROM: Mike Senn, Assistant Director
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PRESENTERS: Mike Rabe, Small Game Program Supervisor

TITLE: Consideration of Proposed Commission Order 21–Waterfowl and Commission Order 22–Snipe for the 2009–2010 Hunting Season.

DESCRIPTION: The Commission will consider and may vote to approve Commission Order 21 (Waterfowl) and Commission Order 22 (Snipe), establishing seasons and season dates, bag and possession limits, and open areas. A detailed description of all proposals is available for public review at all Department offices.

DATE: July 17, 2009

Summary:

Commission Order 21 – Waterfowl

Status – Arizona

A total of 6,043 Arizona duck stamps were sold to hunters in 2008–2009, a 15% decrease over the stamps sold in the previous season (7,071). The Arizona survey questionnaire estimated 4,058 waterfowl hunters for the 2008–2009 season, 12% fewer than were estimated in 2008–2009 (4,630). Those hunters spent 32,558 days hunting waterfowl in Arizona; in 2008 hunters spent 33,020 days hunting waterfowl. Duck harvest was lower than last year; 40,430 in 2008–2009 compared to 49,782 in 2007–2008. Goose harvest also decreased from 2,431 in 2007–2008 to 1,776 in 2008–2009.

The 2009 midwinter waterfowl survey counted 13,865 ducks, which is lower than the number counted in 2008 (18,360). The total goose count was 11,345, which was an increase of 40% from last year's count of 8,445. Variations in these counts are typical and not a cause for alarm since the midwinter survey is a one-week snapshot of waterfowl in select areas of the state.

The annual spring goose production surveys conducted in Units 1 and 27 suggests an increasing resident goose population. The June 2009 survey counted 287 adults and 167 goslings (454 geese total). This is a record high for this survey. The June 2008 survey counted 254 adults and 80 goslings (313 geese and 105 goslings were counted in 2007). Although Arizona is not a destination for many breeding geese, we do have these small populations and also have breeding geese in Units 22 and 23. Protecting these breeding populations is the reason for the delayed start for the goose seasons in these units.

Western Mallard Model

Last year, the Pacific Flyway and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to a fundamental change in the way duck seasons are set in the Pacific Flyway. Before last year, duck seasons were set according to a model based on the breeding population estimate of mallards in the mid-continent survey area and habitat conditions in the survey area. This area includes the northern plain states of the U.S., the central plains of Canada, and parts of Alaska and the Yukon Territory. The number of breeding mallards in this area is typically about 8 million ducks. These mid-continent mallards supply most of the mallards hunted in the Central and Mississippi Flyways. They typically contributed about 18% of the harvest in the Pacific Flyway. The majority of the mid-continent birds harvested in the Pacific Flyway come from the Alaska survey area.

Last year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, along with the Pacific Flyway, implemented a Western Mallard Model that split the Alaska birds from the mid-continent estimate. Along with the Alaska birds, breeding population estimates from California and Oregon are combined to form the western mallard breeding population estimate. There are plans to include Washington mallards in the near future. These western mallards are then used to determine the duck harvest packages in the Pacific Flyway. For the Pacific Flyway and the USFWS, this new model is a more equitable way to apportion harvest. In other words, most of the birds harvested in the Pacific Flyway are now estimated from birds that end up in the Pacific Flyway in the fall. Under the old system, most of the birds harvested in the Pacific Flyway were never counted. Pacific Flyway seasons were set with birds that never came here.

Once Washington is added, about 80% of the birds harvested in the Pacific Flyway will be included in the breeding population estimate used to set duck seasons each year. This is a much better way to manage ducks in the Pacific Flyway than the previous system. The advantage to Arizona duck hunters is that season selection will likely become less vulnerable to the boom and bust cycles of the prairies. Western mallards, because of their different breeding areas, maintain steadier breeding populations. This should result in more stable duck seasons.

Ducks

For this year, the same harvest packages that were used when the Pacific Flyway was under the mid-continent model will be used. Although the breeding population numbers are in, the model runs were not complete at the time this memo was written, in all likelihood, a liberal package will be subscribed. Whatever the results may be, the season packages available are as follows:

1. Liberal, 107 day season, 7 bird bag limit;
2. Moderate, 86 day season, 7 bird bag limit;
3. Restrictive, 86 day season, 4 bird bag limit.

Both the Liberal and Moderate 2008 Federal framework packages for the Pacific Flyway allowed for a 7-bird bag limit, with species bag restrictions of no more than two female mallards, two redheads, one pintail, and two scaup. Canvasback season was closed because of low survey numbers. Survey numbers for canvasback are up this year, and a closure is unlikely. The long-term average for pintail and scaup remain below the goals outlined in the management plans for

both species in 2009. Because the population indices are below population goals, a continuation of the restrictive bag-limit of one bird per day will probably be in place for pintail and canvasback for this season. It is possible that we could have shorter seasons for both pintail and canvasback. Should partial, 60 day seasons be necessary for any species, the Department will recommend the full 60 days. Scaup numbers remain below the long-term average by about 18%. In 2008, the Pacific Flyway frameworks reduced the daily bag on scaup from four to two. A further reduction in bag limit is unlikely for scaup this year.

Geese

In 2002, the Pacific Flyway Council requested that the Service include geese in the duck framework extension as well. This was approved, allowing duck and goose seasons to run the same number of days. To assure that Canada goose reproduction in Northern Arizona is not disrupted, goose seasons within Units 1, 22, 23, and 27 start later than goose seasons in the rest of the state.

The Rocky Mountain Population (RMP) of Canada geese are the most important geese in the bags of hunters in the interior states. In July of 2001, the Pacific Flyway Council adopted the management plan for this population of Canada geese, which established a breeding population index of 117,000 birds. Although Arizona typically supports approximately 20 to 40 breeding pairs, the majority of RMP geese wintering in Arizona migrate from northern interior states and southern Alberta, which are already above their respective breeding population objective. In 1999, the Pacific Flyway Council approved a recommendation to increase the daily bag limit on Canada geese from two to three birds. Arizona adopted the framework in the 1999–2000 Commission Order and has continued that recommendation. Results from the January 2009 waterfowl harvest survey revealed that of the 1,776 geese harvested in Arizona and the majority (about 1,000), were harvested along the Colorado River.

Department Recommendation:

The Department's recommendations hinge on which regulation package is called for based on the results of the Western Mallard Model. Based on this year's survey results, a liberal package is the most likely season structure. That package is illustrated below.

The waterfowl season has different season opening and closing dates for the mountain and desert zones. It is most advantageous to hunters to open the season earlier in the mountain zone because birds arrive in mountain waters earlier than they do in the desert, and winter storms often drive those birds to the desert part of the state late in the season. In the desert zone, the season should be open as late as possible because birds typically remain in that zone through February. Federal frameworks do not allow the general waterfowl season to extend beyond January 31. However, junior hunts may occur into February.

Liberal Package

	<u>Mountain Zone</u>	<u>Desert Zone</u>
Juniors-Only	Oct 3 – Oct 4, 2009	Feb 6 – Feb 7, 2010
Falconry-Only	Oct 3 – Oct. 7, 2009	Feb. 1 – Feb. 5, 2010
General Duck	Oct. 9, 2009 – Jan. 17, 2010	Oct. 23, 2009 – Jan. 31, 2010
General Goose	Oct. 9, 2009 – Jan. 17, 2010	Oct. 23, 2009 – Jan. 31, 2010

Restricted Goose Hunts Nov 15, 2009 – Jan. 17, 2010 (Units 1 and 27)
Nov. 15, 2009 – Jan. 31, 2010 (Units 22 and 23)

The Mountain and Desert Zones in Arizona are defined by unit within the Federal Register as follows: Desert (South) Zone: Those portions of Units 6 and 8 in Yavapai County, and Units 10 and 12B–45. Mountain (North) Zone: Units 1–5, those portions of Units 6 and 8 within Coconino County, and Units 7, 9, and 12A. Essentially, the North Zone is in the mountainous, high elevation areas of Arizona; the South Zone is in the lowland, desert areas.

The Department is recommending adoption of the federal bag limit of seven ducks (including mergansers) per day, with no more than two female mallards, two redheads, one pintail, two scaup, and one canvasback taken in any one day. Recommended possession limits for ducks are 14 after opening day, with no more than four redheads, two pintails, four scaup, and two canvasbacks. Bag and possession on canvasback, pintail and scaup may change due to final analysis of the harvest strategy for those species. Recommended goose bag limits are no more than six white geese (snow, including blue and Ross' geese) and three dark geese (Canada and white-fronted). Recommended goose possession limits are no more than 12 white geese and six dark geese. The Department recommends that the Commission adopt the species bag limits as prescribed by the Service for the 2009–2010 waterfowl season. Should the Service again require season within a season structure for either canvasback, pintail, or scaup, the Department will recommend selecting the maximum allowable days for those seasons.

Justification:

The Department recommends continuation of the allowable framework extension for Liberal package. The use of mountain and desert zones is intended to offer mountain hunters the opportunity to hunt ducks and geese when the birds are in those areas. Likewise, the later opening and closing dates for the desert zone allows hunters to hunt as late as possible. Birds arrive earlier in the mountain areas of the state and leave as the waters freeze. In desert areas, many birds arrive later than in the northern areas and stay throughout the winter. Both zones receive the maximum allowance hunt days under both the Liberal and Moderate packages.

Under the Liberal package, there are 107 total hunt days allowed. In the Liberal recommendation above, 101 days are devoted to general waterfowl, five days are a Falconry-Only season and there is a weekend Juniors-Only season in each zone. Federal frameworks require that the youth hunt be on weekend days within 14 days of the General season, but may be outside the General season frameworks. The bag limits for the Juniors-Only hunts will be the same as during the General season.

Arizona and California are required to coordinate seasons along the lower Colorado River region. California is required to match their season along the Colorado to the Arizona season dates.

Coots and Common Moorhens

Commission Order 21 includes bag limit and season structure for coots and common moorhens within the general duck season frameworks. The Department will continue to recommend the full Federal framework and bag limit on coots and moorhens which is 25 per day, either singly or in the aggregate. Possession for coots and moorhens is 25 in possession, either singly or in the aggregate. Although an Arizona State Waterfowl Stamp is not required for harvest of these species, hunters taking coots or moorhens must have in their possession an Arizona Migratory Bird Stamp that registers them for the Harvest Information Program. Harvest of these species is typically incidental to waterfowl hunting. A total of 1,167 coots were harvested in the 2008–2009 season. In 2007–2008, 984 coots tragically lost their lives by colliding in time and space with cold steel.

Commission Order 22 – Snipe

During the 2008–2009 season, hunters harvested 69 snipe. In the 2007–2008 season, hunters harvested 130 snipe. Snipe hunter participation and harvest are derived from the waterfowl questionnaire. Even though a waterfowl stamp is not required to hunt snipe, most snipe are taken opportunistically by waterfowl hunters.

The Department recommends that the Commission approve a general snipe season consistent with the total allowable season days and bag and possession limits allowed by the Service for Pacific Flyway states. In Arizona, the allowable bag is 8 snipe per day with a possession limit of 16 after opening day. Seasons for snipe are recommended to run concurrent with the general waterfowl seasons in each of the state's zones.

Recommendation:

The Department recommends that the Commission **VOTE TO APPROVE, SUBJECT TO FINAL FEDERAL FRAMEWORKS, COMMISSION ORDER 21 – WATERFOWL AND COMMISSION ORDER 22 – SNIPE, AS PRESENTED.**

MJS:MJR:mjr

Attachments