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Rain the Missing Element for Memorable Waterfowl Hunting

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JEFFERSON CITY—Recent rains have improved conditions at wetland areas, but 2012 could be a dry year for Missouri duck hunters in more ways than one unless the state gets more rainfall.

With North American duck numbers at record high levels, you might think waterfowl hunters' prospects had never been brighter. But memorable seasons require a confluence of duck populations, food, cover, and water. Doreen Mengel, a resource scientist with the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC), says the 2012 duck season still is a long way from realizing its potential.

Habitat surveys conducted early in October showed significant improvements in natural food and cover at almost half of Missouri's public wetland areas. In early August, only seven conservation areas (CAs) reported good growth of seed-producing native plants, such as smartweed. By early October, the condition of these "moist-soil" plants was rated as good on 11 CAs, and Ten-Mile Pond CA, in Mississippi County, reported excellent moist-soil vegetation.

"I have been amazed at how well moist-soil vegetation has responded to recent rains, given the drought conditions through late summer," says Mengel. "That is the good news right now, but floodable crops are still only fair to poor on most areas."

A bigger concern to Mengel is the supply of water available to flood MDC-managed wetlands.

“There are still concerns about our ability to pump water at some areas,”

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said Mengel. “Low stream flows could limit the availability of public areas. I haven’t spoken with many people with private wetlands, but my guess is if they do not have a reliable water source, their sites are probably on the dry side, too. Bottom line, we will still need rains, hopefully linked with migration events.”

Of all the state-managed wetland areas, Ted Shanks CA in Pike County has fared best this year. In spite of the drought, new levee construction, and some pump issues, the area has good moist-soil habitat and good floodable crops. Water levels were normal in early October, and changes to the area’s refuge and hunted pools should add 10 to 12 hunting spots this year.

Following is a summary of conditions on other MDC-managed wetland areas.

- **Coon Island CA** – Good moist-soil vegetation and fair crops. Call 573-624-5821 for water-levels.
- **Duck Creek CA** – Fair moist-soil vegetation and poor crops. Major construction will limit access and flooding capability.
- **Otter Slough CA** – Good moist-soil vegetation and fair crops. Normal water conditions.
- **Ten-Mile Pond CA** – Excellent moist-soil vegetation and fair crops. Normal water conditions.

Mengel says conditions could change significantly at any or all these areas with significant rainfall.

“Things look much better today than they did two months ago, and they could be even better in another month or two,” she says. “Missouri’s duck season opens Oct. 27 in the North Zone and runs through Jan. 20 in the South Zone, so there is plenty of time for everything to come together for hunters.”

Mengel said other conservation areas, large reservoirs and rivers provide additional walk-

in hunting opportunities.

“At certain times, duck and goose hunting can be very good on Truman Reservoir or the Missouri River. Hunters should not overlook these great resources and include them in their pre-season scouting activities,” says Mengel.

Details of Missouri’s waterfowl hunting seasons are available in the Waterfowl Hunting Digest 2012-2013. The print version is available wherever hunting permits are sold. The same information is available at mdc.mo.gov/node/3616.

This year’s North American Duck Breeding Population Survey estimated total duck numbers at 48.6 million continent-wide. That is a 7-percent increase from last year and 43 percent more than the long-term average (LTA).

The North American population of mallards, the mainstay species for Missouri waterfowl hunters, is estimated at 10.6 million this year. That is up 15 percent from 2011 and 40 percent above the LTA.

Blue-winged teal numbers this year are estimated at 9.2 million. That is similar to last year’s population. It also is 94 percent above the LTA.

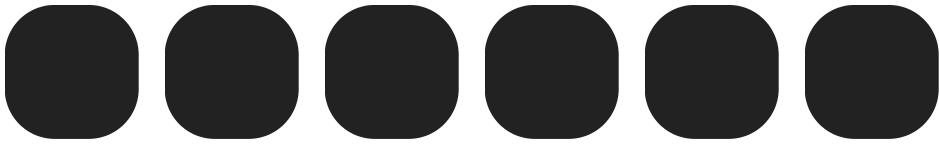
Other duck species breeding populations recorded in the 2012 survey include:

- Scaup, 5.2 million, up 21 percent from last year and similar to LTA
- Shoveler, 5 million, similar to 2011 and 111 percent above LTA
- Gadwall, 3.6 million, similar to last year and 96 percent above LTA
- Pintail, 3.5 million, 22 percent below 2011 and 14 percent below LTA
- Green-winged teal, 3.5 million, up 20 percent from 2011 and 74 percent above LTA
- Wigeon, 2.1 million, similar to 2011 and 17 percent below LTA
- Redhead, 1.3 million, similar to 2011 and 89 percent above LTA
- Canvasback, 800,000, similar to 2011 and 33 percent above LTA

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