

REPORT SUMMARY: THE 2013 WATERFOWL HUNTER SURVEY

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Introduction and purpose:

The timing of waterfowl migration through Ohio depends upon the biology of more than 20 species of waterfowl, the climate, weather, day length, habitat, and geography. In addition to ecology and biology, the opinions of more than 20,000 waterfowl hunters should be considered when setting season dates. Hunting season dates are controversial among waterfowl hunters and opinions vary greatly based on species hunted, geographic location of the hunter, and individual experiences.

Past surveys of Ohio waterfowl hunters indicated hunters prefer a split duck season. The structure of recent duck seasons has therefore been designed to open the first split of the season to take advantage of early-migrating ducks (green-winged teal, widgeon, and pintails) and locally hatched ducks (mallards, wood ducks). The later segment is designed to take advantage of late-migrating waterfowl. All duck-hunting seasons must be closed by Jan. 27 due to federal regulations.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Mississippi Flyway Council liberalized Canada goose hunting season packages in 2012 allowing states to choose either a 92-day season with a two-bird bag limit or a 78-day season with a three-bird bag limit. In 2012 survey respondents indicated marginal preference for a 78 day goose season with a 3 bird bag limit.

To gather information for potential consideration in the regulation-setting process for 2013 the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife conducted an Internet-based survey of waterfowl hunters in January and February 2013. Email invitations were sent to 2012 Ohio Wetland Habitat Stamp buyers who provided an email address (9,597 emails), and 1,818 valid responses were received.

Survey methods:

Respondents to the online survey entered their unique customer ID number. Duplicate customer ID numbers and customers that did not buy an Ohio Wetland Habitat Stamp were removed from the results. Respondents were asked which zone (Lake Erie Marsh, North, South) they primarily hunted during the 2012-2013 waterfowl season, and results were stratified by zone. Ohio Wetland Habitat Stamp sales were compared between 2011 and 2012 to help determine retention, recruitment, and churn (people who do not hunt every year).

Survey results and discussion:

Where most hunt: A majority of respondents indicated they hunted primarily in the North Zone (59%), 19% in the South Zone, and 17.5% in the Lake Erie Marsh Zone (LEMZ).

What waterfowlers hunt: 98% of respondents hunted waterfowl in 2012 and the majority of all hunters hunted both geese and ducks (87%), while only 11% hunted ducks or geese exclusively.

Season dates: When asked about duck season dates in the 2012 season more respondents indicated they were slightly dissatisfied (26%), than satisfied (25%). Hunters in the LEMZ and North Zone were

slightly dissatisfied while hunters in the South Zone were generally satisfied. Most goose hunters were satisfied with 2012-2013 season dates overall and in each zone independently. Although dissatisfied with the duck season dates, 89% of respondents indicated they would hunt during the upcoming season.

Duck season dates: A majority of respondents preferred a split duck hunting season (all three zones were 70% or higher). Most hunters preferred the season to close in early or mid-November. LEMZ and South Zone hunters preferred mid-November to late-December to hunt ducks. The North Zone had no apparent preference for duck season dates.

Goose season dates: A small majority of respondents (53%) preferred goose season be open without regard to duck season. A majority (75%) preferred December and January geese seasons. A small majority of goose hunters preferred the 92-day goose season with a two-bird bag limit contrasting the 2012 survey where respondent preferred a 78-day season with a three-bird bag limit.

Waterfowl hunting methods: Most hunted over decoys in water (39%) while 28% hunt over decoys in a dry field. These two responses combined (67%) outweighed jump shooting, floating in a river/stream, pass shooting, layout boat, and sneak boat. Compared to an identical question asked in a 1983 survey of waterfowl hunters, nearly 20% more respondents indicated *hunting in dry fields over decoys* in 2012.

Hunter retention: A majority (89%) said they would hunt waterfowl during the 2013-2014 season before seeing the upcoming regulations. The number of customers who purchased an Ohio Wetlands Habitat Stamp in both 2011 and 2012 was 54% indicating low hunter retention (i.e. nearly half of waterfowl hunters did not hunt in two consecutive years). Of those who indicated they would not (or might not) hunt during the upcoming season, 49.5% of respondents said they did not see enough waterfowl to justify a return trip.

Where waterfowlers hunt: Overall, 71% of respondents hunted ducks on public land, 70% on private land, and 47% on both public and private lands. For geese, 61% hunted public lands, 77% hunted private lands, and 45% used both. A majority of hunters (60%) used a special waterfowl hunting opportunity (online and walk-in lotteries).

Management implications

- More people hunt over decoys in a dry field than past seasons.
- More hunters pursue Canada geese on private land than past seasons.
- Intent to hunt is high; hunter retention is low.
- Few hunters pay for the right to hunt waterfowl on private land in Ohio.
- Respondents utilize online controlled waterfowl hunts more than walk-in hunts nearly 3:1.
- Controlled hunts are more popular in the LEMZ and North zone; the South Zone offers no such hunts.