



**Ducks Unlimited Canada**  
Conserving Canada's Wetlands

## **Late Spring Habitat Conditions in Canada**

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*Waterfowl nesting is now well underway in Canada despite a late arrival of spring in most of the country. Habitat conditions for breeding waterfowl are very good from Ontario east and are quite variable in western Canada at present, with dry conditions persisting in much of the southern prairies.*

Spring precipitation has been below normal in coastal **British Columbia** and temperatures have remained cool. The cold weather has delayed the beginning of spring snowmelt and allowed new snow to accumulate on the Coast Mountains, where the snow pack is still well above normal. Migrant Pacific Flyway waterfowl have been stopping at important estuary, wetland, and agriculture sites to rebuild nutrients for their flight northward. Large flocks of American wigeon, northern pintail and scoters have been seen along the Fraser River Delta recently.

In the central Interior mid and high elevation snowpacks are still above normal for this time of year due to relatively cool spring temperatures. Conditions are good on average, although the Chilcotin area is notably drier than normal. Despite the late spring, nest initiation is well underway at lower elevations and groups of bachelor males are appearing among mallard and other early breeders.

Mid and high elevation snowpacks are still above normal in the southern Interior for this time of year. Spring precipitation has been almost non-existent. Runoff has been below normal, particularly in grassland-dominated areas at lower elevations. The usual spring "wave" of American wigeon and northern shoveler passed through in early May, and breeding effort appears to be on schedule. Young Canada goose broods (class 1A) have been sighted.

Mid and high elevation snowpacks are still above normal in the southeast Interior for this time of year and runoff is expected to be normal.

Winter snowpack was above normal due to some late winter snowfalls in the Peace region. Spring precipitation has also been above normal. Runoff is still occurring and is normal in most areas. Nest initiation is underway and the breeding effort is expected to be good in the Peace region.

Spring habitat conditions in **Alberta** are average overall with the best conditions in the northeastern aspen parkland, boreal transition zone (BTZ) and north Peace Parkland. Spring precipitation has been average to above average for most of the province. The exceptions are the north Peace Parkland, south-central aspen parkland and central and western prairie, where precipitation has been below average. Temperatures have been seasonal or slightly below average, which has reduced evaporative losses.

The western aspen parkland and foothills regions received significant precipitation on May 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>. Over 30 cm of snow fell in western areas and 20-30 mm of rain in the eastern portion of the affected area. The southern prairie received lesser amounts of precipitation.

Wetland habitat conditions are rated as fair to poor in the prairie and south-central aspen parkland. Recent precipitation in these areas has had minimal impact due to low soil moisture levels.

In the west and northwest parkland (Red Deer- Camrose- Edmonton) there has been some improvement with field-water formation and recharge of more permanent basins. Wetland projects are approximately 20-30 cm below full supply level in these areas, which are rated as fair. Frost remains in many of the more permanent wetlands so some water loss can be expected in the next couple of weeks as temperatures warm.

In the eastern aspen parkland conditions are rated as good to very good from Lloydminster to Wainwright and good south to Provost. Basins are flooded into the willows. The northeast aspen parkland and eastern BTZ is also rated as good to very good and many wetland projects are spilling in this area.

The western BTZ and most of the Peace Parkland is rated as fair. Recent precipitation is serving to maintain water levels.

The first Canada goose broods have been observed in the prairie and aspen parkland during the past couple of weeks. The recent precipitation appears to have stimulated a breeding effort amongst early-nesting species such as mallard and northern pintail. Blue-winged teal recently returned and all waterfowl species are now back in the province.

Spring seeding is well underway in southern Alberta and just starting in areas further north. There was good carryover in many pastures from 2007 so early season nesting cover is in good condition.

Wetland habitat conditions across **Saskatchewan** are variable with dry conditions persisting in the prairies and good conditions in the parklands. The southern half of the province is suffering from drought-like conditions with the southeast and southwest regions being the driest. Habitat conditions are generally poor in the Missouri Coteau and are very dry near the U.S. Border improving only slightly as you move north. Wetlands in the parklands are in better shape compared to the prairies primarily due to carryover water from last fall. In the area from Biggar north to North Battleford west to the Alberta border wetland conditions have improved substantially since late April due to several snowfall events that brought 1-1.5 feet of wet snow. In the north central and northeastern parts of the province, wetlands remain in good shape due to carryover water from last fall and average to above average snowfall amounts this past winter.

Waterfowl nesting is well underway with most birds still in the laying stage as the recent cool temperatures may have slowed some nest activities. Some groups of bachelor males have been observed indicating that breeding activities are complete in some localized areas. A number of three-bird flights have also been observed in the parkland areas. There are still flocks of snow geese and sandhill cranes remaining, with large numbers still present in the boreal fringe area, suggesting a slow start to the Arctic breeding season.

Overall, seeding across the province is well underway with approximately 25% of the 2008 crop in the ground. The southeast is furthest ahead with about 46% of the crop in the ground and in some locations crops are already beginning to emerge. Cool temperatures across the province have slowed crop germination and hay and pasture growth.

Spring rainfall remains extremely low across southwestern **Manitoba** and the prolonged dry period that began last summer has had a toll on wetlands throughout the region. The hardest hit area is the extreme south near Killarney and Deloraine, which has received very little precipitation since July 2007. The Minnedosa/Shoal Lake region is now showing signs of stress as well, although it continues to receive periodic relief from rainfall and remains in somewhat better condition the further north you travel.

The first Canada goose broods are expected any day and nesting of early mallards was very close to being on time despite a cold spell in an early April. Lone drake mallards are common and lone drakes of later-arriving species are becoming increasingly common as well. Good numbers of scaup are now moving through the area. There was little in the way of snow geese that stopped over in Manitoba although good migratory flights were observed from April 6 – 10<sup>th</sup>. Over flights of birds are expected this year with the dry conditions, particularly within the Killarney landscape, which will result in a lower settling rate. It is almost too late for precipitation to have an effect of the settling of early-arriving waterfowl species, but it will be needed to recharge brood waters for those birds that breed in this region.

Many landowners got an early start on seeding this year due to low soil moisture and lack of snowpack, and seeding is expected to be done early this year.

Many ducks have returned to the **Western Boreal Forest's** Yukon Territory and are using the open shorelines of lakes and smaller water bodies. Lakes are opening rapidly and should be clear of ice very soon. Mallards, green-winged teal, wigeon, scaup, ring-necked ducks, geese (both snow and Canada) have arrived and breeding and nest building is underway.

Spring has been late in arriving to the Northwest Territories and a prolonged run-off may result in below average water conditions. Canada geese, sandhill cranes, mallards, and bufflehead have been arriving in the past two weeks.

Spring also seems a little hesitant in arriving to northern BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Much of this region received a late heavy snowfall since the last report, but runoff appeared minimal. Regardless, many lakes and wetlands are recharged and high in the north, especially in Saskatchewan and northwestern Manitoba. Wetlands are open along the boreal transition zone (BTZ), but larger lakes remain partially frozen further north and in the higher elevations in BC and Alberta. Water and ducks are abundant along the BTZ through Saskatchewan. Conditions in Melfort are very good, with wetlands full, and many shovelers, mallards, blue-winged teal, and coots have been observed. Field staff working in the Duck Mountains of Manitoba report that it is dry in the area, with low water levels in many basins. Mallard, bufflehead, ring-necked ducks, and blue-winged teal are abundant in the area. A large number of flocked Canada and snow geese are reported throughout the southern extent of the boreal in the Prairie Provinces.

In Alberta, many duck species including wigeon, blue-winged teal, bufflehead, goldeneye, and mallards were observed as breeding pairs on a recent waterfowl survey along the eastern ridge of the Rockies (Dawson Creek southeast to Rocky Mountain House).

Above average temperatures are expected for the Western Boreal Forest in the upcoming months, with the exception being the Mackenzie River Delta, where average to below average temperatures are forecast. The forecast for precipitation is mixed, with above average amounts forecast in the Yukon, below average amounts forecast for the Northwest Territories, and average to above average amounts forecast south of 60.

An unseasonably warm April and some timely rains have maintained favourable habitat conditions across southern **Ontario**. Despite the rapid transition from winter to spring-like weather, the melt was relatively discreet and severe flooding was limited. Much of the runoff soaked into the ground because of drier than normal soil conditions and as such, the seasonal wetland base was relatively short-lived. The above normal temperatures have greatly accelerated plant phenology and insect hatches, which should bode well for emerging waterfowl broods. Spring habitat conditions continue to grade from fair in the extreme southwest where precipitation has been sparse to good-very good throughout central and southeastern Ontario where most permanent wetlands remain at or near full supply. Water levels in Lake Erie and Lake Ontario are both above their respective long term averages. Lake St. Clair and Lake Huron are both below normal, although Lake St. Clair is above last year's levels. Wetlands throughout northern Ontario remain in very good shape due in part to recent wet weather, while water levels in Lake Superior are much improved from a year ago.

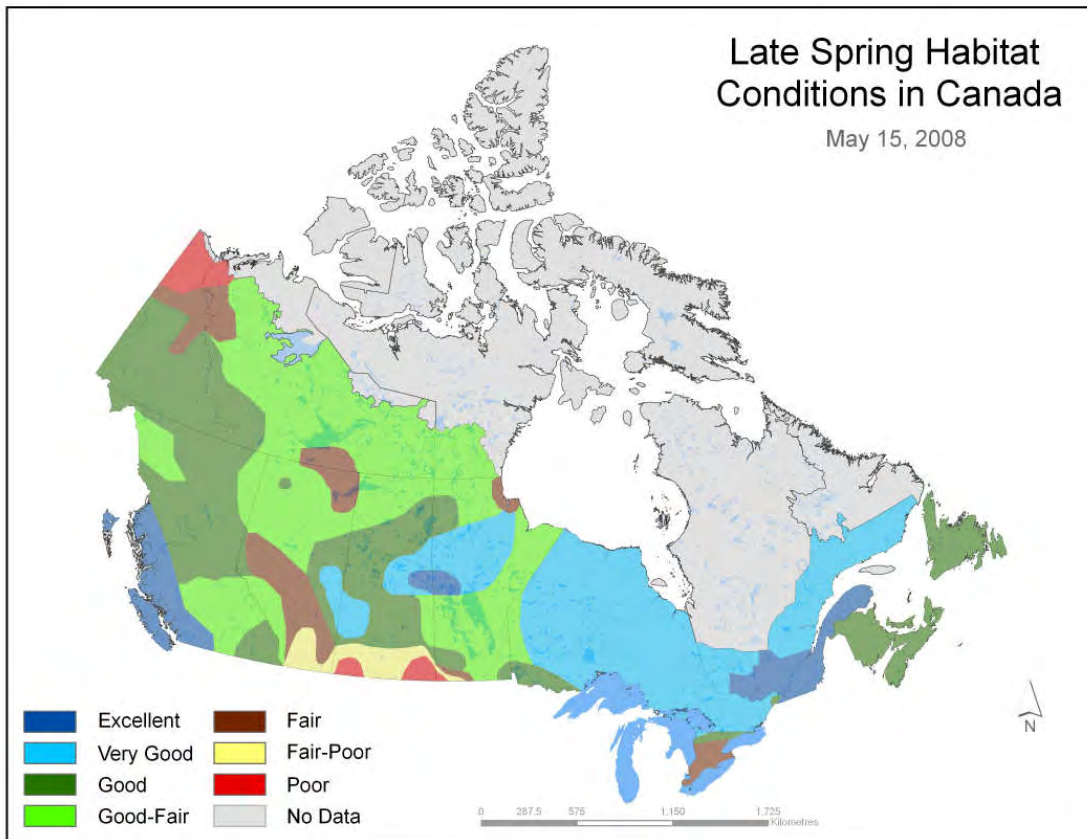
Preliminary pair survey results suggest that breeding chronology was unaffected by the lingering winter-like weather of early spring and that mallard numbers are near normal. Unfortunately, wood duck, blue-winged teal and black duck pair sightings are less encouraging and appear to be down across southern Ontario.

**Quebec's** record-breaking winter snowpack melted in most regions by the end of April due to above average temperatures. The thaw was gradual and without any significant precipitation, producing very good to excellent spring habitat conditions throughout the province for early-nesting waterfowl. Many rivers overflowed during the month, which enhanced wetlands habitats for waterfowl. The mean level of the St. Lawrence River at Sorel Station was 2.44m, which greatly exceeding the historic April average of 1.84m.

Most waterfowl species have been observed on the St. Lawrence River. Snow goose migration peaked slightly later than normal on May 3<sup>rd</sup> with 42,000 geese in Cap Tourmente. Local breeding Canada geese began nesting in Varennes archipelago at the beginning of May. Last week, DUC staging habitats on St. Peter Lake were full of geese and ducks including pintails and mallards. Solitary pairs of mallards are present in most wetlands.

Spring weather conditions across **Atlantic Canada** are favourable for nesting waterfowl with the exception of the severely flooded Saint John River in New Brunswick. Heavy rain accompanied by large snow accumulations over the winter

months have combined to produce severe flooding covering vast areas of the flood plain and inland. The high water has begun to subside and levels should return to normal over the next weeks. The rest of the region has been experiencing normal temperatures and spring-like weather providing excellent conditions for pairing and nesting waterfowl. Early spring rains have maintained normal water levels in managed wetlands providing good nesting habitat. Abundant residual forage crops are providing excellent food sources and should have a positive effect towards the breeding effort over the region.



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