



Ducks Unlimited Canada
Conserving Canada's Wetlands

Early Fall Habitat Conditions in Canada

September 23, 2008

The prospects for the fall flight are generally good across Canada this fall. Wetland conditions have improved or remained stable in many areas with recent rains, and are providing adequate habitat for migrating waterfowl.

Conditions on the **British Columbia** Coast have been relatively warm and dry, and wetlands are at normal seasonal lows. The cool spring resulted in a late harvest of many agricultural crops, and this could translate to poor growth of winter cover crops that provide important food to wintering waterfowl. However, the fall flight is expected to be good, as usual. Some early migrating mallards and northern pintails have arrived in local wetlands. Sea ducks such as surf scoters and harlequin ducks are finishing their moult around the Fraser River Delta and Boundary Bay.

Conditions have been variable in the central Interior, with high rainfall (throughout the breeding season) in the north, and dry conditions in the southwest; overall, conditions are average. The fall flight is expected to be slightly below average in the region due to late brooding.

There was little precipitation this summer in the southern Interior and conditions are below average in the Thompson drainage; the Okanagan is somewhat wetter. Again, the fall flight is expected to be slightly below average due to late brooding.

Conditions are still split between the West Kootenays (relatively dry) and the East Kootenays (good) in the southeast Interior. The fall flight is expected to be average, as most birds use valleys in the East Kootenays.

Precipitation has continued to be below average in the past two months in the Peace region. Crops are showing anywhere from less than 50% to 80% of normal yields. The area will require significant snowfall this winter combined with an optimal snowmelt to bring conditions back to normal next spring. Fall weather has been mild so far, and birds are staging locally, but only the earliest migrants have left the area. The fall flight is expected to be below average due to late brooding and anticipated high mortality rates.

Precipitation totals for the **Alberta** growing season (April 1 to August 31) are average to above average for the southern aspen parkland and prairie and below average for the northern aspen parkland, Peace Parkland and boreal transition zone (BTZ). This trend has largely continued during the past month. Temperatures were average to slightly above average through August. In late August most areas experienced a light overnight frost. Recently daytime temperatures have been 5° to 10°C above normal, but overnight temperatures have been seasonal.

In the prairie, as is typical, most natural wetlands have dried, but irrigation habitat is in good condition. Further north, periodic showers and locally heavy rains have

maintained more permanent wetland habitats in much of the southern aspen parkland. The Buffalo, Pine and Sullivan Lake areas are in good condition. Similar conditions prevail in the east Viking and to Lloydminster area.

An area from Hanna north through the central aspen parkland and into the BTZ is rated as fair to poor. The northern aspen parkland and BTZ have recently been dry resulting in a deterioration of wetland condition. Mudflats are prevalent around many semi-permanent wetlands. Wetlands in the Camrose-Edmonton-west Viking area are rated fair to poor.

The Peace Parkland has also been dry. No significant rain fell in the Grande Prairie area from June until early September. Many larger wetlands and lakes are in drawdown condition. Overall, conditions are rated as fair in the north and poor in the south. Recent rains may herald a turn-around for the Peace area.

The fall harvest is well underway throughout the province. Most canola is swathed and grains and peas are being combined. The current hot, dry weather should allow for a timely harvest.

Waterfowl production and brood survival was average this year in Alberta and an average fall flight and hunting season is anticipated. Ducks Unlimited Canada staff report good early season hunting on local Canada geese and ducks. Flocks of gadwall, American wigeon and blue-winged teal are also being observed.

Fall is fast approaching in **Saskatchewan** as the leaves are starting to change colour, and overnight temperatures are getting cooler. To date there have not been any nights with frost, but the cooler temperatures and shorter days are beginning to bring arctic geese and sandhill cranes into the province.

Wetland habitat conditions remain poor to fair in the prairies, however recent rains have helped improve conditions. The Missouri Coteau has been dry all summer, but in the past month has received some significant rainfall in localized areas. In the parklands, wetlands are beginning to dry, but overall are still in fair to good condition. Most of the large marshes are holding water and providing good habitat for young birds that are just beginning to fly. Very few flocks of birds have been observed field-feeding, which is partly due to the harvest being delayed. Small flocks of lesser snow geese and white-fronted geese have slowly been moving into the province.

The harvest is generally behind schedule due to the cool temperatures we had in spring and recent rains that have kept producers out of the fields. The northwestern part of the province is probably furthest behind in harvest, as only about 10% of the crop has been cut. Seeding of fall crop is underway with the availability of stubble being the biggest factor delaying seeding.

In southwestern **Manitoba** the area south of Brandon received some frequent rain events during the beginning of September but this has done little to replenish the highly stressed wetland conditions around Baldur, Killarney, Boissevain and Deloraine. Class III (seasonal) and some smaller Class IV (semi-permanent) wetlands are dry in this area and larger Class IV (semi-permanent) basins are showing mudflats. It will take a lot of precipitation to get these areas back in shape for the spring and some local residents have noted that certain wetlands have not been this dry since the 1980s. In contrast, the area

north of Brandon is in very good shape and wetlands are inundated. Further north in the Interlake severe flooding has occurred.

Harvest has been delayed by a late-maturing crop and some recent rain events, and fewer winter cereal crops have been planted thus far. Food is currently plentiful for waterfowl; this is in sharp contrast with last year when harvest was so successful that it likely prevented many birds from staying in southwestern Manitoba in the fall. Hunting has been good for local resident Canada geese and ducks although there have been many reports of seeing more geese than ducks. A few snow geese have just now entered this portion of the flyway, and the first wave of cackling Canada geese moved through from September 18 – 22.

The majority of the **Western Boreal Forest** (WBF) experienced average precipitation over the past year. Rainfall was plentiful this summer in the Yukon (115-150% of average) and many basins have been recharged with water. In the Northwest Territories, precipitation was near average at sites along the Mackenzie River, but better in Yellowknife and in the southwest near Nahanni. Inuvik also received above average precipitation over the past three months, which was needed after a dry winter. Northeastern British Columbia received 115-150% of average precipitation in the past year, and habitat conditions should have improved, although the fire risk in northeast BC remains high to very high. Northern and parkland Alberta has received below average rain in the past year (60-85%) and conditions are especially dry in the region from Fort St. John to Edmonton, including Peace River; the northeast part of the province; and the Peace-Athabasca Delta. Northern Saskatchewan and northern Manitoba have good conditions after receiving average amounts of precipitation over the last year.

Spring breeding populations of all duck species were up 1% from last year and 7% above the long-term average in the areas of the WBF that were surveyed (Alaska, Yukon, central and northern Alberta, northeast B.C., north Saskatchewan, north Manitoba, and western Ontario). Migration is well underway in the Yukon and Northwest Territories, and birds are building in the southern extents of the WBF. Geese (mainly Canada) and cranes have been observed in large flocks in many locations. There also seems to be many young and potentially flightless ducks for the time of year.

While July saw a continuation of wet weather across **Ontario**, August brought a very different story with many locations reporting less than half their monthly rainfall totals. Despite this short-lived dry spell, heavy rains from Hurricane Ike have more than compensated for any water losses during August and have ensured that wetlands throughout the southern parts of the province are at full supply, as the fall flight gets underway. The same can be said of northern Ontario, where habitats also remain in great shape for migrating waterfowl in spite of the recent dry weather. Water levels in all of the Great Lakes except Lake Ontario remain below their long-term monthly average for this time of year; however, levels are all higher than they were this time last year, which is good news for big water hunting.

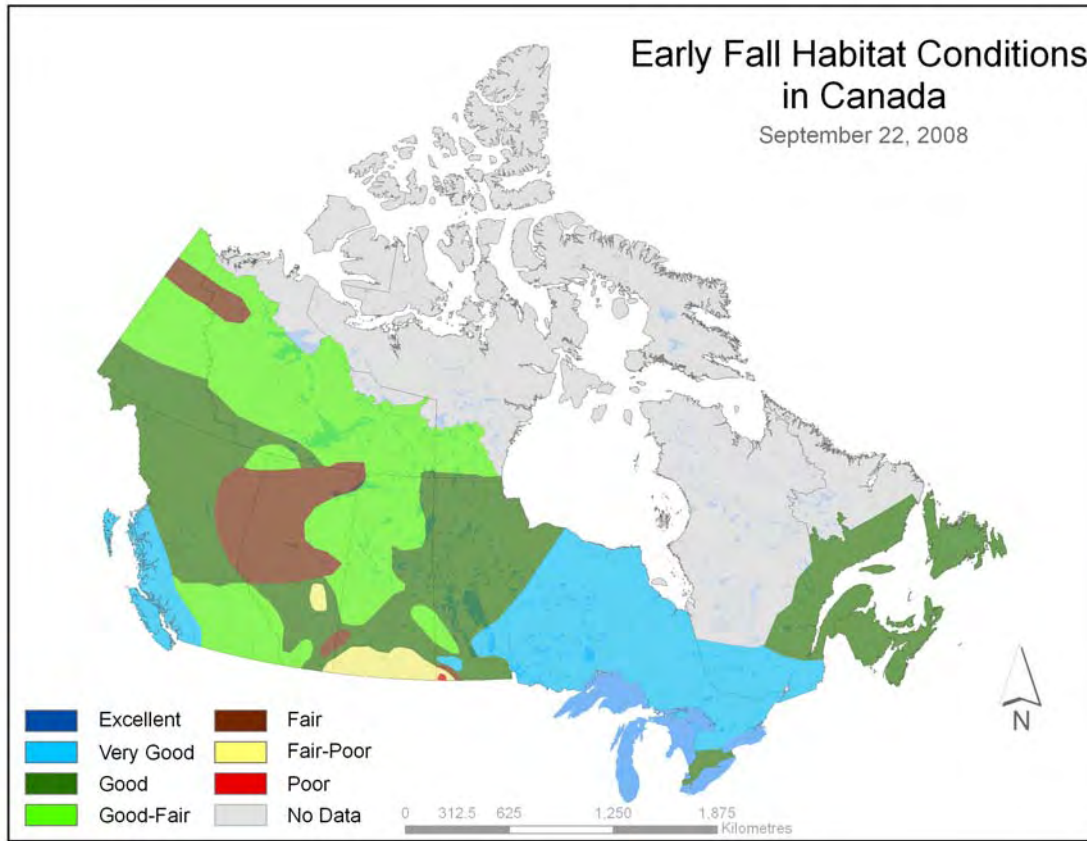
Early season waterfowl use of lower Great Lakes coastal marshes is very encouraging with above average numbers of birds, especially mallards, being reported. Banding results suggest 2008 was a pretty good waterfowl production year, as evidenced

by the ratio of immature birds to mature birds, and prospects for the Ontario fall flight and hunting season are considered good.

Generally, mean temperatures in July and August were near or slightly above average in all regions of **Quebec** except in Chaudiere-Appalaches. Total precipitation in July was above average for almost all regions, with precipitation levels closer to, or below normal, in most regions in August. Rainfall was particularly heavy from July 31st to August 3rd, with certain areas in the Eastern Townships, Montreal, southeastern and Lower St. Lawrence regions receiving 100-150 mm of rain within a few days. Several houses and roads were flooded or destroyed in certain cities by landslides. The water level of the St. Lawrence River remained high, and was 40 cm above average in July and 75 cm above average in August. Habitat conditions were very good in July and August and offered good brood-rearing habitat.

Waterfowl production remains good throughout the province and a promising fall flight is expected. We are expecting a good hunting season and the high water levels should provide hunters with easier access to the larger area on St. Pierre Lake. Resident Canada geese have been abundant since the beginning of summer and ducks have also been plentiful along the St. Lawrence River between Quebec and Montreal. At Bylot Island, the greater snow goose breeding season has been excellent with an average clutch size of 3.98 eggs, which is slightly above average. The banding season revealed a juvenile:adult ratio of 1.11, which is greater than the long-term average of 1.04. The percentage of successful goslings this fall should be around 26%, which is a very good result.

Canada geese have recently returned to **Atlantic Canada**, signalling the beginning of fall flight in the region. Waterfowl have been plentiful over the past two weeks, and numbers are expected to continue to rise as the weather gets colder. Atlantic Canada was hit with record rain amounts from the remnants of a hurricane that pased through in early September. Over 100 millimetres of rain were recorded in some areas over a 24-hour period, which has delayed the harvest of fall crops. This may affect the feeding patterns for waterfowl in the region, as the availability of vast food sources may be delayed somewhat. Even with this wet weather the hunting season looks favourable over the region, with DUC managed wetlands operating slightly above normal water levels.



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