

Habitat Report

July 2011



Ducks Unlimited Canada
Conserving Canada's Wetlands

Active by nature.

ducks.ca



Ducks Unlimited Canada
Conserving Canada's Wetlands

The following is a compilation of impressions, collected from Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) field staff, of environmental conditions relative to breeding waterfowl. These observations are not based on systematic surveys, and are not intended to describe hunting conditions. This report should only be redistributed as a full PDF document, with DUC permission.

Habitat Report Contributors

Editor:

Meagan Hainstock

Field Reporters:

British Columbia
Bruce Harrison

Western Boreal Forest
Brent Friedt

Alberta
Ian McFarlane

Saskatchewan
Michael Hill

Manitoba
Mark Francis

Ontario
Erling Armson

Québec
Patrick Harbour

Atlantic Canada
Adam Campbell

Habitat Reports Online

In English:

ducks.ca/habitatconditions

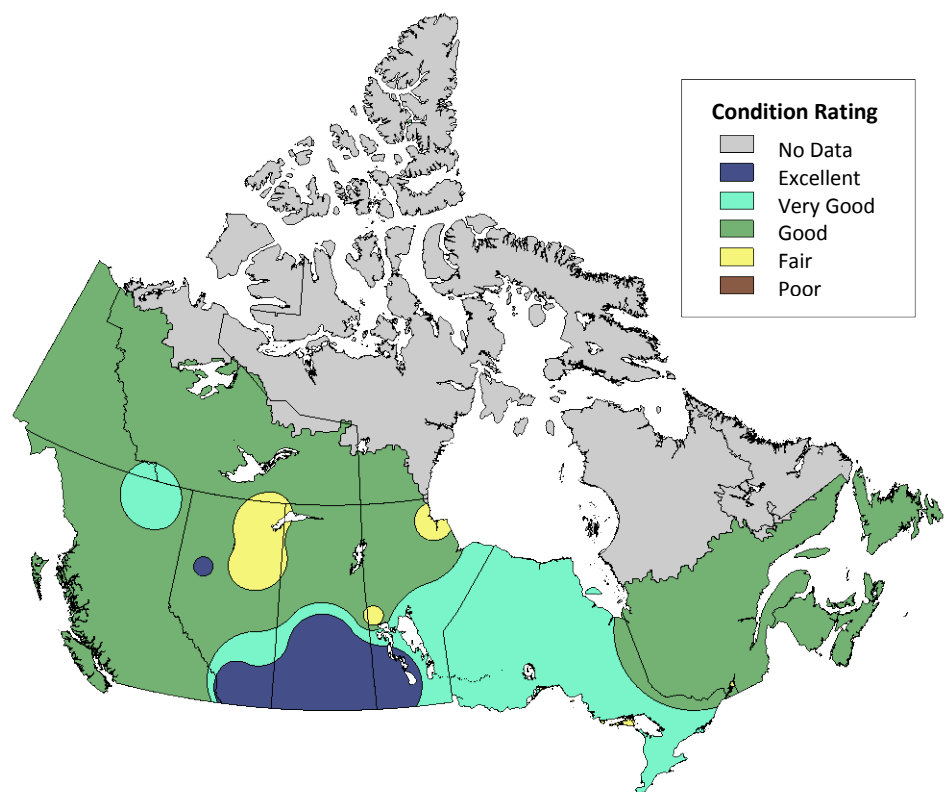
In French:

canards.ca/conditionsdhabitat

Early Summer Habitat Conditions in Canada

Summary

According to 2011 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Canadian Wildlife Service waterfowl surveys, total duck breeding population estimates have increased in most traditional survey areas in Canada. The only exceptions are in northern parts of the British Columbia/Western Boreal Forest Region, which could be a result of birds short-stopping to take advantage of the excellent habitat conditions in the Prairie Region. Prairie breeding populations have increased by 41-66 per cent since last year and by 2-43 per cent compared to the long-term average. Breeding habitat is favourable in most of the Eastern Region, and Ontario is expecting an above-average production year.



British Columbia / Western Boreal Forest

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Along the coast, the cooler and wetter conditions that have been associated with the La Nina weather pattern are starting to weaken. The current forecast is for warmer conditions in July. Given the delayed snow melt this year, the South Coast Mountains still have up to 50 per cent of the high-elevation snowpack. This should lead to a sustained freshet, as well as continued moisture in local wetlands and rivers. Farmers in the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island have now planted their fields, and these agricultural fields will support many waterfowl during fall migration and winter. Most resident waterfowl are currently tending to broods.



Regenerating Marsh in Okanagan, British Columbia

In the central and southern Interior, conditions are much improved compared to the last few years. High- and moderate-elevation snowpacks appear to be driving wetland conditions. Wetlands with a creek or river source (particularly a mountain source), are full and overflowing. Conversely, many wetlands that rely solely on early spring for recharge are still relatively dry. Waterfowl production may not be improved over last year due to a variety of factors, including slightly lower pair numbers, the cold spring, late flooding, and possible “short stopping” of ducks in wet areas elsewhere within the Pacific Flyway.

Interior, but temperatures are now returning to seasonal norms. The large winter snowpack and wet spring weather have resulted in a delayed, but very high, runoff. Consequently, wetlands within river valleys are in flooded condition much later than normal, and production is expected to suffer as a result.

Spring was wet and cool in the southeastern

The Peace region also experienced a wet and cool spring, and recent precipitation levels have been high. Projects are full (unlike in recent years) and many basins are still rising. Upland vegetation is very lush. Unfortunately, field reports indicate that pair counts were down by 16 per cent compared to last spring, possibly because ducks are short-stopping in the Prairies, where habitat conditions are excellent. This is consistent with results from the *2011 U.S. Fish and Wildlife and Canadian Wildlife Services' Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey* (USFWS/CWS survey) that was carried out this spring. The combination of lower-than-normal pair numbers, a cool and late spring, and recent late-season flooding (which will disadvantage riparian and over-water nesters) may result in lower waterfowl productivity overall. On the positive side, the wet summer conditions bode well for next year.



Creston Marsh in Kootenays, British Columbia

WESTERN BOREAL FOREST



Pelly River, Yukon

Conditions are good overall in the Yukon. Ponds were full this spring, and runoff was high in late May due to snow melt.

In the Northwest Territories (NWT), spring has generally been dry. Yellowknife received lower-than-normal precipitation in May and June, while amounts in Norman Wells were normal.

Forest fires forced people from towns in northern Alberta, but rains passed through in June, which brought some relief. Most fires are now under control, but the region remains relatively dry. However, because of the more permanent nature of boreal wetlands, there is still habitat available to breeding ducks. In fact, many broods have been reported throughout the area, so fair to average production is likely despite the dry conditions.

Unlike the southern half of the province, northern Saskatchewan has been relatively dry, although recent precipitation has helped. Ponds and creeks have been in good shape thanks to favourable conditions this winter and last year.

In northern Manitoba, local rain conditions have been favorable over the spring and early summer period. However, the Saskatchewan River Delta (SRD) area has only received roughly 70 per cent of its normal precipitation between March and June. Recent flooding on the Saskatchewan River is a result of the record wet period between April and October of 2010, as well as wet spring conditions across the watershed. Habitat conditions remain moderate overall in the SRD. Anecdotally, fewer broods have been observed than usual. However, this may be because they are dispersed over the additional habitat that was created by flooding.

Estimates from the USFWS/CWS survey vary across the region. In the survey stratum that includes the Yukon, total duck breeding populations have decreased by 32 per cent since the last survey, but are similar to the long-term average (1955-2010; hereafter LTA). Populations of common species are lower this year than last, but only northern pintails and canvasbacks are significantly below their respective LTAs.

In Boreal portions of Alberta, British Columbia, and the NWT, total duck populations are down by 19 per cent since 2010, with blue-winged teals, northern pintails, and northern shovelers declining by at least 48 per cent. This is likely because many birds taking advantage of the excellent conditions in the southern Prairie provinces and northern Great Plains states, and are settling in the Prairie Pothole Region rather than migrating further north.

In Boreal regions of northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba (and Western Ontario), 2011 total duck populations are 13 per cent above 2010 numbers, with scaup and wigeon both showing increases from last year.



Prairie Canada

ALBERTA

Although the late spring was wet in southern areas, and dry in central and northern areas, most of the province experienced average to well-above-average rainfall in June. Showers and heavy thunderstorms continue to occur, which is maintaining water levels. May temperatures were slightly cooler than normal to average across the Prairie and Aspen Parkland, where frost was still occurring into early June. The Boreal Transition Zone (BTZ) and Peace Parkland experienced slightly warmer-than-normal temperatures in May.



In the southern Prairie, precipitation totals since April 1 have been over 100-200 per cent of normal in the Calgary, Lethbridge, Milk River Ridge and Cypress Hills areas. Western areas received over 100 mm of rain in the last week of May, which led to some localized flooding. The remainder of the area has received average to slightly-above-average precipitation. Temperatures have remained moderate, which is reducing evaporative losses.



Aspen Parkland, Alberta

In the northern Prairie, precipitation totals are average to slightly below average. Wetland conditions remain very good in this region, as well as in the southern Aspen Parkland, where southwestern areas have received average to slightly-above-average precipitation. In the Pine Lake and Buffalo Lake landscapes, seasonal and semi-permanent wetlands remain full and are often flooded into the willows. Further north, precipitation totals were less than 50 per cent of normal through the end of May, but

significant June rainfall recharged wetlands. Wetland conditions are now good to very good across the northern Aspen Parkland, including the Cooking Lake, Mundare and Viking moraines.

Although conditions in the BTZ were deteriorating in late May, subsequent rains have now recharged wetlands. Crops seeded in low areas are showing signs of excess moisture stress. Precipitation was less than 40 to 60 per cent of average through to the end of May, but is now average to slightly above average. The Town of Slave Lake, portions of which were destroyed by a forest fire in May, received 60-80 mm of rain between June 23 and 26. Conditions are now rated as good across most of the BTZ.

The Peace Parkland is now rated as good to excellent, with the exception of some northern regions. Some areas received over 100 mm of rain in late May, and then 5-10 cm of snow in early June. The Grande Prairie area received 60-80 mm of rainfall during a June 23-26 storm event. While some larger basins remain slightly below full, recent recharge has vastly improved conditions.

Upland nesting habitat is in good to excellent condition across the agricultural zone. Wet conditions are delaying haying activity, which will enhance nesting success in hayfields. There have been increasing sightings of duck broods as the season progresses, and Canada goose goslings are almost fully feathered.

On the southern Alberta portion of the USFWS/CWS survey (includes the Prairie and Aspen Parkland), pond numbers are 60 per cent higher this year than they were in 2010, and are 47 per cent above the LTA. Duck numbers responded to this increase in wetland habitats, and total duck breeding population estimates increased by 66 per cent from 2010, and by 3 per cent compared to the LTA. Estimates indicate that most species of breeding populations have increased since last year.

The waterfowl production forecast for Alberta is above average in the Prairie, average in the Aspen Parkland and below average in the BTZ and Peace Parkland.

SASKATCHEWAN

Water levels in many rivers are breaking historical records. The Souris River in southeastern Saskatchewan recently broke the high water level mark that was set in 1881. Given the wet summer and fall in 2010, combined with over 300 mm of precipitation since April 2011, much of southern Saskatchewan has experienced unprecedented wet conditions. Habitat conditions are excellent in most of the province, including key waterfowl production landscapes like the Missouri Coteau and Allan Hills.



Missouri Coteau, Saskatchewan

range (1 to 3 weeks old), as well as a few older broods. Since wetland conditions have been so good, it is harder to detect broods because they are more widely dispersed and cover is plentiful. Waterfowl production should be good to excellent this year and, given the excellent water conditions, there should be a considerable re-nesting effort if initial nesting attempts failed.

According to the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture's Crop Report, 82 per cent of the province has been seeded, and haying operations are underway. Over 50 per cent of the crops are behind normal development for this time of year and are rated as fair to good. Thousands of acres of land have not been accessible this spring due to flooding and road closures.

According to the USFWS/CWS survey, total duck breeding population estimates were up 56 per cent compared to 2010, and populations of most species have increased over this period as well. Compared to 2010, mallard numbers were up by 23 per cent and northern pintails were up by 233 per cent. Although northern pintail numbers are still 5 per cent below the LTA, this is the highest population recorded in the traditional survey area since 1980. Scaup populations were up 41 per cent in 2011 compared to 2010, but were still 15 per cent below the LTA.

Across the province, DUC staff have been reporting broods in the 1A to 1C class

MANITOBA

Waterfowl production is expected to be very good this year. Record flooding levels have left wetlands inundated throughout southwest breeding areas, and an unprecedented 3 million acres of cropland remains unseeded. Frequent rains continue, and cooler summer temperatures have recently been replaced by more seasonal highs.



Waterfowl are responding well to the wet conditions. According to the USFWS/CWS survey, 41 per cent more breeding birds settling in the traditional Manitoba survey area this year compared to 2010. Populations of several species are above or near the LTA, including mallards, canvasbacks, blue-winged teals and gadwalls. This is not surprising given the increased number of ponds available.



Wet field in Southwest Manitoba

Anecdotal brood observations indicate that waterfowl are doing quite well despite two setbacks that occurred early in the season: the snow event of April 30 and the flooding of nests, which had serious and widespread impacts on early-nesting species. Both of these events occurred early in the nesting season, and birds quickly renested. The mixed ages of Canada goose broods provide evidence of this renesting effort.

Nesting birds have also benefited from the lack of nest disturbance this year. With approximately 20 per cent of the land not cultivated this year, birds that nest in these croplands will likely have improved nest success compared to other years. This will bode especially well for species that tend to nest in sparse cover, such as the northern pintail. In addition, wet conditions have significantly delayed haying operations this year, and very little hay is being cut at this time. This will have a tremendous positive impact on upland nesting species that will be able to exit these habitats prior to haying operations.

With the abundance of water everywhere in southern Manitoba, brood survival is expected to be high this year and should offset any setbacks that occurred earlier in the season.

Eastern Region

ONTARIO

Very good spring waterfowl pairing habitat conditions have continued, and brood-rearing habitats are very good throughout the province.

Warm temperatures arrived in the latter part of June, accelerating the growth of plants and invertebrates, which bodes well for developing broods. Semi-permanent and permanent wetlands are still at or near flooding capacity, with beaver populations and road floodings at an all time high in many areas.

USFWS and CWS assessments indicate that breeding waterfowl habitats are in much better condition this year than they were in 2010.

According to the Canadian Hydrographic Service of Environment Canada, water levels throughout the Lower Great Lakes are about average for this time of year. Lakes Erie and Ontario are slightly above the long-term average, while lakes Superior and Michigan are somewhat below the long-term average.



Typical brood-rearing wetland in southeast Ontario

Southern James Bay and Mississippi populations of Canada geese appear to have had a good hatch this year.

Results from the USFWS/CWS survey stratum that includes western Ontario indicate that there has been a 13 per cent increase in duck breeding populations over last year. Scaup (lesser and greater), a species of concern, increased by 76 per cent.

Waterfowl breeding surveys of Eastern Canada report that mallard populations are 13 per cent higher this year than in 2011, with no significant changes reported for other species.

Field reports indicate that a good initial breeding effort was made by many waterfowl species, with some typical renesting due to

predation and nest flooding. Wetlands and water levels are relatively high and extensive throughout Ontario, so broods are widely distributed across the wetland base. Later this summer, results from banding exercises should provide more insight into actual production outcomes. Overall, 2011 waterfowl production is expected to be above average this year.

QUÉBEC

May and June temperatures were close to the norm across the province, except in the south, where average temperatures were about 2 C higher than normal.



The Abitibi region received about one-third of its normal rainfall in May, making it the third-driest May since 1951. With total monthly precipitation close to or above normal elsewhere in Quebec, Eastern townships saw the rainiest May since 1962 and Montreal regions had their third-rainiest May since 1941. Six low pressure systems moved through Quebec over a 14-day period, which contributed greatly to several flood events, particularly in the south and in the Eastern Townships. In general, June precipitation was close to or below normal for all regions except in the Quebec area.

The mean St. Lawrence level at Sorel station was about 90 cm higher than usual. All major courses and wetlands have a good water supply across the province.

Spring habitat conditions were excellent in Quebec, and breeding population estimates for the six most abundant species revealed an increase for mallards. Estimates for black ducks and mergansers were 13 and 8 per cent below their respective LTAs.

Production should be good this year. Habitat conditions remain generally good across the province.

ATLANTIC CANADA

The wet and cold spring has resulted in high water and prolonged freshet levels. Rarely have two consecutive days gone by when it has not rained.

Breeding populations of most waterfowl species remain stable. Numbers of green-winged teals, mergansers, ring-necked ducks and goldeneyes are hovering around the LTA, while mallards continue to increase. Some noticeable declines in black duck populations have been noted over the past few years.

Geese and early-breeding waterfowl were challenged by cold and rainy conditions early in the season. The first brood was observed nearly three weeks later than last year. Several nest box stewards reported delayed nesting attempts by goldeneyes on the Saint John River, even though they paired on time. If the weather warms up, this may improve reproductive success for ducks that initiated clutches late.

It has not been uncommon to see broods composed of only two young. In fact, the average brood size is likely three in parts of New Brunswick. This may be due to relentless rain and cold temperatures that were dipping below 0 C at nights until recently.

Waterfowl habitat is favourable, thanks to the rainfall and reduced evaporation. Though this may not be a great recruitment year for early nesters, it could be better for late nesters. Overall, habitat conditions are good in Atlantic Canada.

