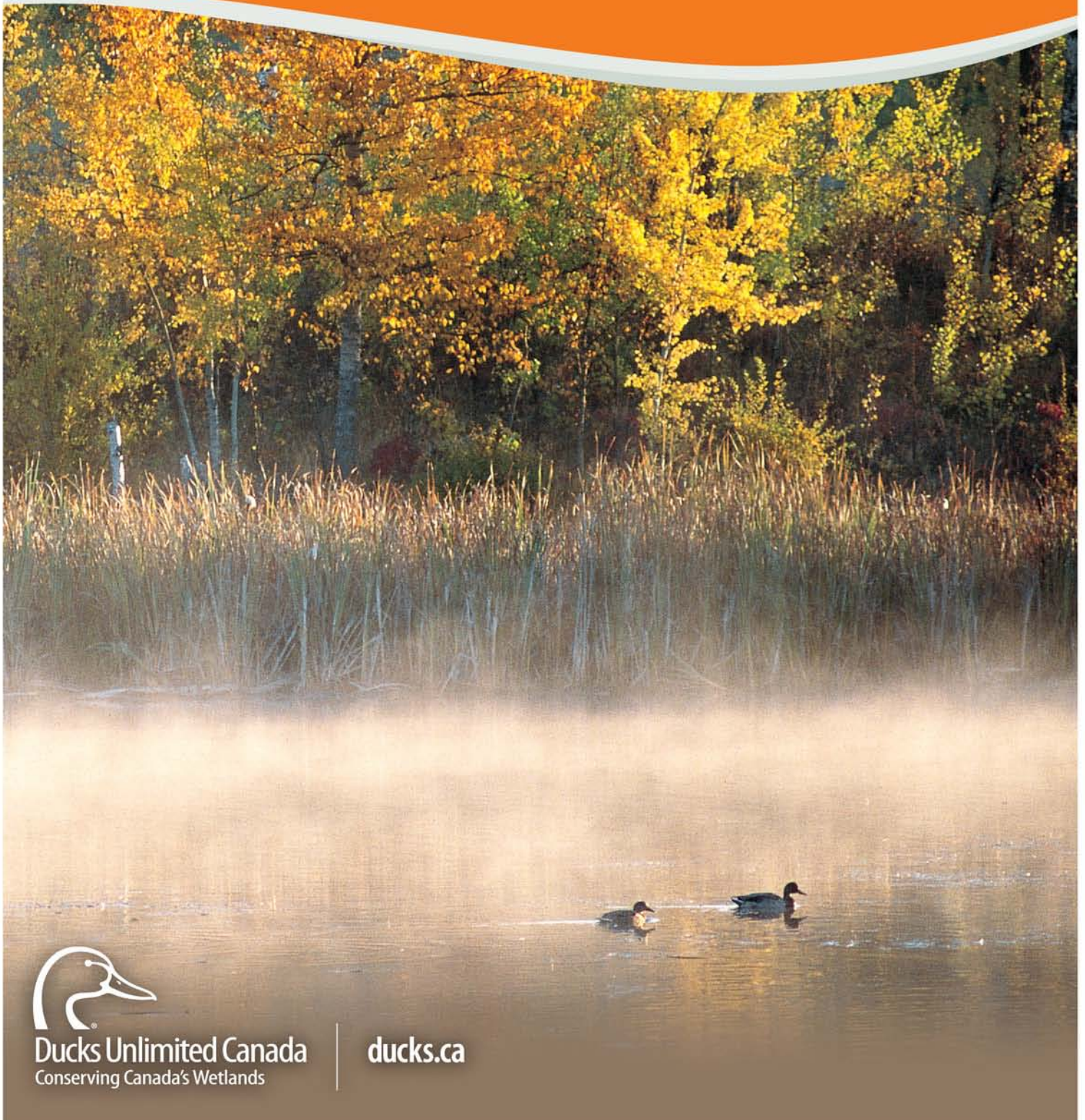


Habitat Report

Sept 2011



Ducks Unlimited Canada
Conserving Canada's Wetlands

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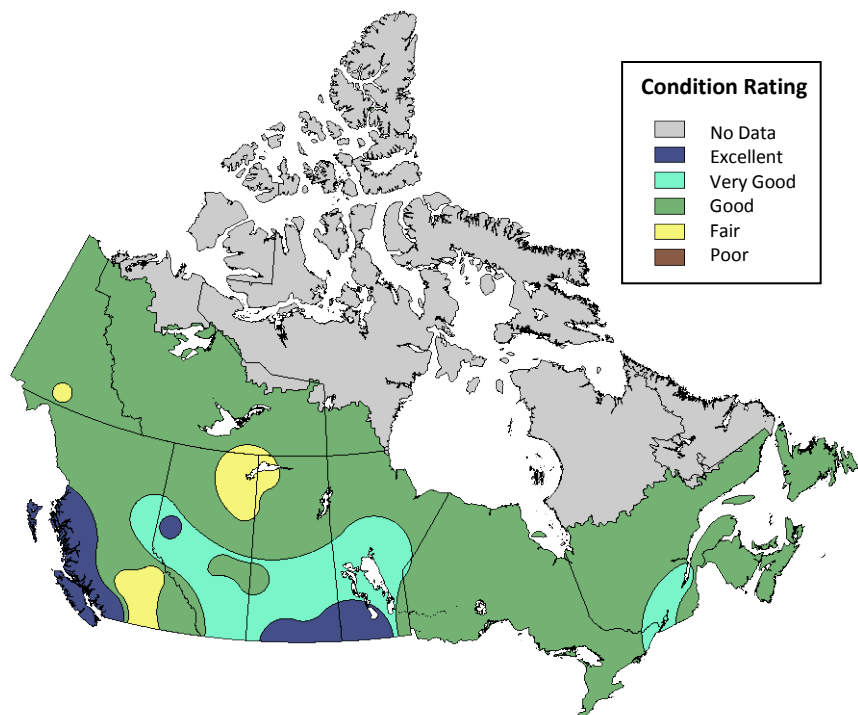
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The following is a compilation of impressions, collected from Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) field staff, of environmental conditions relative to breeding waterfowl. These observations are not based on systematic surveys, and are not intended to describe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

Early Fall Habitat Conditions in Canada

Summary

In the British Columbia / Western Boreal Forest Region, migration may have been stalled in some areas, but foraging conditions are great along the B.C. coast. Although it has been relatively warm and dry in the Prairie Region, conditions are still favourable thanks to exceptional spring conditions. Alberta is still experiencing its best conditions in years, and northern pintails appear to have had an excellent production year. Unprecedented conditions also continue in Saskatchewan, where the fall flight should be excellent. In Manitoba, waterfowl are flocking and feeding in fields, where they are finding an abundance of food. The outlook for the fall flight is also generally positive in the Eastern Region, although early-nesting birds faced some challenges in Atlantic Canada.



British Columbia / Western Boreal Forest

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Although warm and dry weather has dominated the coast for the last few weeks, summer is now coming to an end. These dry conditions have had little effect on river and wetland levels, which were above normal thanks to the wet, cool spring. Most wetlands are at normal levels, and are ready for migrating waterfowl that travel along the Pacific Flyway. Farmers in the Lower Mainland and on Vancouver Island are harvesting their crops and planting winter cover crops that will provide food for wintering waterfowl. Many sea ducks are completing their moult off the Fraser River Delta, and are settling into their local wintering sites.



In the central Interior, weather conditions became much dryer and warmer since early August, and precipitation levels were about half of normal. However, wetland water levels were mostly stable at August levels, and habitat conditions are average overall. Migrant ducks have been showing up for the last three weeks, and wetlands are busy with birds again. However, fall flight numbers are expected to be below average due to decreased production in local wetlands and northern areas.



Caribou marsh

Late summer was relatively dry and warm in the southern and southeast Interior. Wetland conditions are slightly below the long-term average in southern areas, while southeast wetlands are in good shape.

In the Peace region, precipitation levels tailed off in the latter part of the summer, but conditions are still above average for this time of year thanks to heavy summer rains.

The agricultural harvest is late by about a month, but crop quantities are higher than they have been in several years. Brood production was lower this year than in 2010. This is likely due to a rapid rise in water levels after heavy rains, which occurred while many ducks, particularly divers, were in the late stages of nest incubation. Surveys also indicated fewer breeding pairs, and the fall flight is not expected to be large. Birds are beginning to stage. There have been no significant northerly weather systems driving migrants south to date, and they are still dispersed across the landscape.

WESTERN BOREAL FOREST

Conditions are generally good in the Whitehorse area of the Yukon. The summer was mild and wet, and all ponds and even large lakes appear full. Early September was windy and rainy, which may have slowed migration. However, one of the earliest-departing species (white-fronted goose) has been on the move, with a flock of almost 8,000 passing through Teslin.



Water levels are relatively good in the Northwest Territories, due to favourable rainfall amounts since the beginning of August. Ducks and geese are migrating, but the fall flight is not

at its peak yet. Good numbers of dabblers and divers have been observed. Hunting success on the north arm of Great Slave Lake has not been great, possibly due to low numbers of northern migrants come through. There appear to be fewer wigeons and pintails around than usual, although mallards and green-winged teal are common.

In northern Alberta, Edmonton received significantly less September rainfall than usual. However, conditions are still in relatively good shape given how wet July and August were. Similarly, although Grande Prairie and High Level have also had well-below-normal rainfall as of late September, levels are not dire thanks to favourable summer conditions.

In northern Saskatchewan, conditions have been quite good. Although the early fall has been dry, with a few intermittent rains, water levels are good in most basins of all sizes. Temperatures dipped in early September, with some frost that may have prompted bird movement, but temperatures have since rebounded. Forecasts are calling for well-above-normal temperatures, which may stall migration as birds in the lower Western Boreal Forest stay around to feast on the harvest spoils. Dabblers, divers and geese have all been observed in good numbers, and hunters are reporting good success.

Overall, it has been a warm and wet summer in The Pas region of northern Manitoba. Waterfowl production appeared to be good this year, with the exception of some late or second nests being flooded by the Saskatchewan

River in mid July. The fall flight appears to be above average so far. Many field hunters are reporting good numbers of mallards, and large flocks of Canada and snow geese (and some ross' geese) are either in the area or passing through. Temperatures have generally been well above average in August and September, which may be delaying the onset of peak migration through the Saskatchewan River Delta. Much the same conditions exist further north in the Cranberry Portage area, where basins are full and geese have been moving through in good numbers. Thompson had snow in mid September.



South Reader Lake, The Pas area

Prairie Canada

ALBERTA

Late summer and early fall have been generally warm and dry across the agricultural area of Alberta. In September, precipitation has been well below normal, while daytime temperatures were well above normal. Despite the weather, habitat conditions throughout the province remain the best in years.

In the Prairie, wetland water levels remain above average. Although water levels have declined as a result of the hot, dry weather of late summer, conditions remain very good. A number of wetland projects spilled water throughout the summer. Some field staff say they have witnessed the best breeding conditions in 30 years, noting that there wasn't one area where wetland conditions weren't favourable for production.



In the Aspen Parkland, conditions are very good in the southwest landscapes of Buffalo Lake and Pine Lake, while they are good in the east and north landscapes of Sullivan Lake, Viking Moraine and Cooking Lake. Semi-permanent wetlands remain full, and many seasonal wetlands also continue to hold water. In the Camrose-Viking area, some larger basins such as Beaverhill Lake and Wavy Lake remain well below full.



Class IV wetland in the Aspen Parkland

Similar conditions prevail into the Boreal Transition Zone and Peace Parkland. Parts of the Peace Parkland are rated as excellent. Semi-permanent and permanent basins remain at or near full supply level, and some traditional class three basins still contain water. Crops that were poor as a result of drought last year are now suffering from flooding.

Harvest has been somewhat delayed by late spring seeding and wet summer conditions. The recent warm, dry weather has advanced crop development, and harvest is now underway across the province. Hay harvest is still occurring in a few areas as a

result of wet summer conditions. There has been good re-growth on hay fields cut earlier in the season, and pastures remain in good condition going into winter. Upland cover will be in very good condition for next spring.

Early-season hunting reports indicate good numbers of birds in all areas. There should be excellent field and over-water hunting opportunities this year. Evidence of the excellent production year in the Prairie is provided by anecdotal results from northern pintail banding, where over 90 per cent of the birds banded were juveniles. An above-average fall flight is anticipated from Alberta.

Ducks are showing some flocking behaviour, but due to warm temperatures and delayed harvests, many birds are still taking advantage of the abundant wetlands. At this time, there appear to be small groups of ducks on every pond. Canada geese, mallards and northern pintails are beginning to flock as field feeding opportunities open up.

SASKATCHEWAN

Wetland habitat conditions remain good to excellent across the entire province, and wetland water levels have only begun to go down in the last few weeks. Most permanent and semi-permanent wetlands remain full, while seasonal and temporary wetlands are beginning to dry. The Missouri Coteau and southeast Saskatchewan remain very wet, with the Coteau experiencing some of its best wetland conditions in recent memory. Many of the seasonal and temporary wetlands in the Coteau still have water and most of the larger wetlands are at full capacity. Wetlands in the Touchwood Hills, Thickwood Hills and Allan Hills are also excellent. In addition, it is very wet in the northern portion of the agricultural zone of the province, where DUC staff are still operating projects in the Meadow Lake area, which is unusual for this time of year.



The wet conditions that were present this spring and summer have led to good to excellent waterfowl production across the province. Production extended into late summer because of the excellent wetland conditions, and some late broods are still being observed. Migration appears to be well underway, with Arctic geese and sandhill cranes common across northern and central parts of the province. Ducks are beginning to form large flocks, and are

feeding in harvested fields. Hunters are reporting good success in most areas of the province. Given the excellent wetland conditions in spring and summer, the fall southward flight should be excellent.

Since the beginning of September, temperatures have been above normal and there has been very little rain. Due to the warm temperatures, harvest is going extremely well and provincial reports suggest that 60 per cent of the crops have been harvested to date. Harvest is ahead of schedule compared to the long-term average for this time of year. In general, crop yields have been average to above average, depending on the area of the province. Most areas experienced freezing temperatures on September 13, which may have had some impact on those who planted winter wheat.



Sandhill Cranes in the Allan Hills

MANITOBA

Since late summer, a prolonged dry period and above-normal temperatures have reduced the effects of the extreme spring flooding. Despite this trend, wetland conditions are still favourable and water levels are more typical for this time of year. Although rainfall has been below average over the past two months, class four wetlands remain flooded well into the vegetation and most class three wetlands also remain wet. Although surface soil conditions are very dry and sun-baked, moisture levels remain favourable beyond the immediate surface.



Field staff have observed the initial stages of migration, with waterfowl flocking and feeding in fields. Following a great waterfowl production year, sportsmen have found ample hunting opportunities in Manitoba this year. Early-season hunters witnessed a large number of blue-winged teals in southwest Manitoba, and the abundance of all species has resulted in mixed bags by the less discretionary hunter. The ever-increasing resident Canada goose population has also provided more than ample opportunity for early-season field hunters.



Wetland in southwest Manitoba

A cold front that swept through the area around September 13 saw a major exodus of blue-winged teal from the province. This same front coincided with the arrival of large numbers of the cackling Canada geese, as well as small groups of snow geese.

Crop harvest continues to be significantly delayed due to late-maturing crops. This will result in an abundance of food for migrating waterfowl, despite the large number of unseeded acres this spring. A good number of these acres have been sown to winter wheat, which will bode well for nesting birds next spring.

Eastern Region

ONTARIO

Ontario has continued the trend set in July, with somewhat warmer- and dryer-than-average conditions in August and early September. Fortunately, due to the surplus of water earlier in the breeding season, water levels are still in relatively good condition. The lower Great Lakes are still at average water levels according to the Canadian Hydrographic Service of Environment Canada.



Due to the summer-like weather, many waterfowl are not demonstrating pre-migratory behaviours. Banding results indicate a healthy juvenile-to-adult ratio, confirming an above-average waterfowl production effort throughout the province.

Local Canada goose production exploded across southern Ontario, while numbers from Southern James Bay and Mississippi Valley populations are expected to be average. Early-season goose hunters have generally been very successful this year.

Overall, 2011 waterfowl production has been good, and this fall should provide average to above-average numbers of birds during the fall migration period.

QUÉBEC

August temperatures were normal or warmer than usual, especially in Montreal, the Eastern Townships and the Ottawa River valley. Since the beginning of September, mean temperatures have been close to normal.

In August, total monthly precipitation was generally abundant for all areas, except the Abitibi region, which experienced its second driest August in the past 60 years. Saguenay and Montreal regions received, respectively, 3 and 2.5 times more precipitation than normal. At the end of the month, post-tropical storm Irene brought 100-150 mm of rain in 24 hours.



At the Sorel Stations, the average St. Lawrence water level remained roughly 40cm higher than normal in August, and climbed quickly after Irene. Both the Ottawa River and St. Lawrence have now returned to normal levels.



St. Lawrence River, Quebec City

Given temperatures and water levels close to normal, the fall flight should be promising. Waterfowl are starting to arrive, and wetlands are in good shape. A good hunting season is anticipated, and the high water level should give hunters easier access. Habitat conditions remain good throughout the province, and are very good in the Ottawa River valley and along the St. Lawrence River plain.

At Bylot Island, temperatures were favourable for a good banding season, with

3,800 greater snow geese banded. This year, the juvenile-to-adult ratio was 1.19, which is similar to last year (1.18) and greater than the long-term average (1.03). The percentage of goslings in the fall flight should be roughly 29 per cent, which is very good compared to the average of 22 per cent.

ATLANTIC CANADA

This summer was one of the wettest and coolest in recorded history. The entire region experienced its second rainiest July ever, while many areas also had their rainiest August. Temperatures were below long-term averages for



St. John Floodplain, New Brunswick

most of the summer as well. Floodplains are at or near spring levels, having never lowered to typical summer levels, and water remains in many low-lying areas.

Earlier in the season, banding results confirmed that early-breeding birds were challenged by cold, wet conditions during their incubation periods. Broods were generally smaller than normal, and they appeared at least three weeks later than they did last year. Relentless rains are probably to blame, along with temperatures that dipped below 0 C at nights until mid July. Most banding stations are now reporting below average numbers, but this could be because late broods were less likely to be attracted to bait sites.

More recently, observations of healthier, larger broods suggest that late-nesting and re-nesting birds enjoyed better reproductive success. There continue to be several observations of flightless young. Early northern reports suggest an average reproductive success, and migrants are starting to arrive.

Waterfowl habitat is in good shape thanks to rainfall and reduced evaporation. Though it may not be a great recruitment year for early nesters, this could be balanced by later nesters' success. Overall, habitat conditions are good, though wet and cold.

