

Habitat Report

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Ducks Unlimited Canada
Conserving Canada's Wetlands

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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:

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In French:

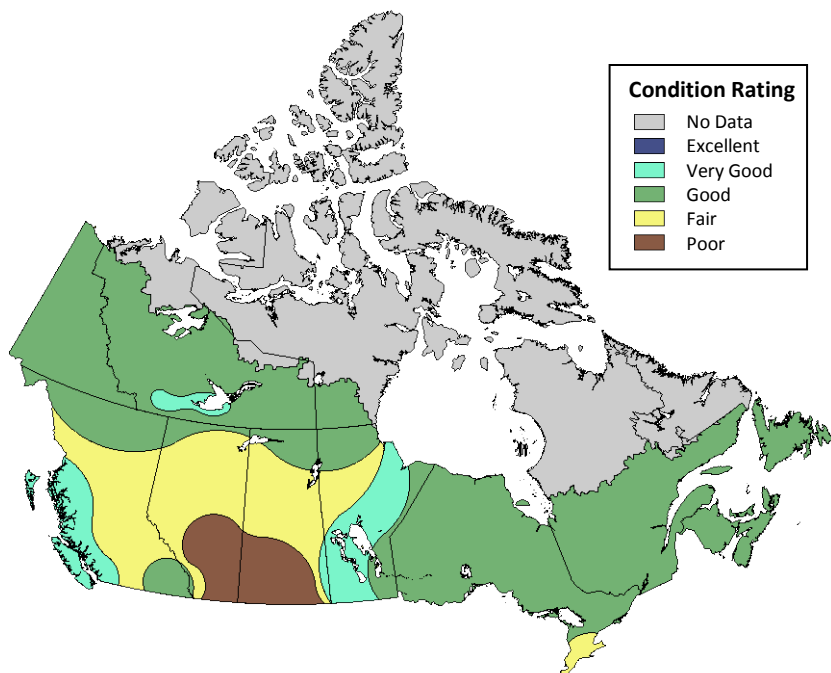
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The following is a compilation of impressions, collected from Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) field staff, of environmental conditions relative to breeding waterfowl. These observations are not based on systematic surveys, and are not intended to describe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

Winter Habitat Conditions in Canada

Summary

Conditions are variable in the British Columbia / Western Boreal Forest Region, where large flocks of wintering waterfowl can be found around the Fraser River Delta and along the east coast of Vancouver Island. Winter has been dry and warm in the Prairie Region. In Alberta, temperatures and snowpack accumulations have set record extremes in some areas. Although Saskatchewan is expecting little spring runoff, wetlands may still benefit from carry-over water from last summer. Carry-over water is also supporting wetlands in Manitoba, although some seasonal basins could be in jeopardy. It has also been a warm winter in the Eastern Region, where total precipitation has varied but Ontario and Atlantic Canada have received more rain than snow.



British Columbia / Western Boreal Forest

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Although the winter started off drier and warmer than usual along the coast, conditions have become wet and cool, which is typical for this region. Current predictions are calling for a weak-to-moderate La Niña pattern lasting into the spring. Snowpacks are currently below normal but more snowfall is expected over the next few months. Waterfowl are acquiring nutrients from estuary habitats as well as remnant crops and grass in local fields. Large flocks of wintering waterfowl can be found around the Fraser River Delta and along the east coast of Vancouver Island, including snow geese, American wigeons, trumpeter swans, mallards, northern pintails and many others.



In the central Interior, snow conditions are variable overall and below average at lower elevations. Temperatures have been mild, with several thawing events reducing snow even further. The prospects for the spring runoff are fair.

Snow conditions have recently improved in the southern Interior, but are still below average at low and moderate elevations. The prospects for the spring runoff are fair. Snow conditions are about average in the southeast Interior.

In the Peace region, although high-elevation snowpacks are normal, snow conditions are significantly below average at low elevations, where many areas are almost bare. Temperatures have been above normal for most of the winter.

The prospects for spring runoff are not promising, as fall soil conditions were relatively dry, making for a poor frost seal. Conditions could improve with some heavy, wet snowfalls. Fortunately, most DUC wetland projects went into fall in good condition thanks to heavy mid-summer precipitation. Vegetation conditions were also good in the fall, which should provide good residual cover for early nesters next spring.



Swans and other wintering waterfowl along the coast

WESTERN BOREAL FOREST

Snowpack in the Yukon appears to be average overall. There's roughly 1 ft. of snow on the ground in the Whitehorse area, but 3-4 ft. in the mountains. Temperatures have fluxuated, with some very warm days and a few more-typically cold ones.



Temperatures have also varied in the Northwest Territories, where the snowpack is average to slightly above average. Southern areas experienced above-freezing temperatures in late December and early January, and Trout Lake was 3 C in mid January.

Across northern portions of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, snowpack conditions are average to slightly above average. Only the northernmost edge of Alberta has had good snow coverage.

In northern Alberta, the ground in and around Edmonton is brown. Very little snow has fallen, which is cause for concern. Further north, conditions are much better in terms of snow depth.

Temperatures have varied greatly in northern Saskatchewan, where temperatures were above 0 C in December and early January before dropping to -40 C and lower recently. Snow depth in Prince Albert is 11 cm while it is in the mid 40s in La Ronge.

In northern Manitoba, there is approximately 37 cm snow on the ground in The Pas, which is 5 cm above the average for this time of year. Since October, The Pas has received roughly 18 per cent more precipitation than usual, while experiencing above-normal average temperatures. Some snow was consolidated with a rainfall event on January 9.

Prairie Canada

ALBERTA

According to Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, “Most of Alberta has been experiencing unusually warm and dry winter weather, with temperatures and snowpack accumulations for some areas at record extremes over the entire period of observation (1961-2011).” Conditions prior to winter were also dry, resulting in average or well-below-average soil moisture in much of the province at freeze-up. Most areas had a poor to fair frost seal.



Snow cover in the Aspen Parkland

Precipitation totals for the winter (November 1, 2011 to present) have generally been below normal across the agricultural zone of the province. Precipitation totals varied from <40 to 60 per cent of normal in the Prairie region, and a similar precipitation pattern continues into the Aspen Parkland and Boreal Transition Zone (BTZ). Snow accumulations are slightly higher in the Peace Parkland, where precipitation totals have been 60-85 per cent higher than normal.

There is currently minimal snow cover in the Prairie region, from north of Hanna to the United States border. Alberta Environment reports average to slightly-above-average snowpack in the southern mountains, which supply southern irrigation districts. In the Aspen Parkland, there is approximately 3-8 cm of snow on the ground, with accumulations decreasing from west to

east. Similar accumulations have occurred in the BTZ. The southern Peace Parkland has 5-10 cm of snow on the ground, while the northern portion of the Peace has 20-30 cm.

Temperatures have been average to well above average from September 2011 to present. In December, average monthly temperatures were 5 C above normal. Temperatures have remained warm into January, with daytime highs reaching above freezing in much of the province. Warm, dry conditions are forecast to continue into early February.

The usual wintering waterfowl are present on open water areas associated with power plants, rivers and reservoirs.

SASKATCHEWAN

Winter snowfall has been well below normal in most areas of the province, while temperatures have been well above normal. Snowfall amounts vary. Most areas have 1-5 cm of snow on the ground, including key waterfowl areas such as the Missouri Coteau and Thickwood Hills, while the Allan/Dana Hills and Touchwood Hills have 15-30 cm.

Record highs have been set in places like Maple Creek (southwest), where temperatures reached 12 C in late January. In February, temperatures are expected to be above normal, with average daytime temperatures being -5 to 5 C.



Snow conditions near Wadena, Saskatchewan



Despite the dry fall and winter, wetlands conditions could improve. Carry-over water from last summer will help, and although current predictions are calling for little runoff in most areas, this can change quickly on the Prairies.

The lack of snow cover has some producers concerned about winter kill of winter wheat. However, most models show that temperatures have not been cold enough for an extended enough period of time to produce widespread winter kill.

MANITOBA

The lack of precipitation from the summer and fall has continued. Winter precipitation has been well below normal across southern Manitoba, including in primary breeding areas. Snowpack is minimal and is largely limited to wooded areas and ditches, although it does improve slightly in the northern reaches of the Minnedosa/Shoal Lake pothole region.



Despite the dry conditions, some permanent basins remain in favourable condition due to last spring's flood events. Temporary wetlands, however, are more vulnerable to seasonal fluctuations and are showing the negative effects of the prolonged dry spell. Increased snowpack and spring precipitation will be required for these ponds to function as spring pair ponds.

Temperatures were unseasonably warm in December and January. December saw average temperatures of >5 C above normal, and January temperatures were similar.

Warmer temperatures are proving positive for winter wheat growers. However, if cold temperatures return and dry conditions persist, their crops may be at risk of freezing due to the lack of an insulating snowpack.



Dry conditions near Glenora

Eastern Region

ONTARIO

December temperatures exceeded normal, in some cases by as much as 5.5 C, which hasn't occurred since 2006. Precipitation was normal to above normal in southern Ontario, while northern Ontario was drier than usual. Along with the warm temperatures, a large percentage of December precipitation fell in the form of rain. Snowfall amounts ranged from below normal to normal levels.



Ice free Lake Erie

In January, most of southern Ontario experienced no snowpack to very little. Most areas in the southwest did not have a good frost seal and many tile drains continue to run freely with every rainfall event. Warmer-than-normal temperatures and average-but-erratic precipitation events resulted in abundant frozen sheet water across fields in the agricultural zone of the province. Northern Ontario has experienced milder-than-normal temperatures as well, with extreme highs and lows. Snowpack conditions

throughout northern Ontario remain above normal for this time of year. Marshes, ponds and lakes iced over slightly later than usual.

Wetlands throughout Ontario, with the exception of the extreme southwest, are full of water and at their maximum holding capacity. If decent spring rains occur, spring waterfowl pairing habitat should be good. If not, below-average habitat conditions can be anticipated.

Of particular note is the lack of ice formation on the Lower Great Lakes. With the exception of a few days in January, most of these lakes have been completely ice free, including the shoreline zones. As a result, an above-average number of waterfowl remain staging on the near-shore areas of the Lower Great Lakes.

QUEBEC



Étang Dollard, in Lower St. Lawrence region

normal throughout the province. At the Sorel Station, the St. Lawrence water level is approximately 20 cm higher than normal.

Habitat conditions remain good throughout the province. Cold temperatures and more snowfall will help maintain good conditions for the spring season.

ATLANTIC CANADA

The winter has been particularly warm. There has been little precipitation, with more rain falling than snow.

Temperatures reached above freezing in January, with one day reaching a balmy 10 C. These mild days were often followed by a plunge in temperature, which has resulted in a layer of ice covering the ground. Many areas have had no snow cover.



Throughout most of the province, December and January were warmer than usual.

December precipitation was below normal in most areas, including the Ottawa River Valley, which received 44 per cent less snow than usual. Total precipitation was close to normal in January, and Montreal and north shore regions had 30 per cent more rain than usual. Overall, snowpack is below



The Saint John River it is likely to swell less than normal this spring. Early shallow-water feeding opportunities may be in short supply for migrants and early breeders. Lower water level may decrease food availability for staging birds.

Given the lack of snow to act as insulation, coupled with several freeze-thaw cycles, there is thick ice in many areas - as thick as 16" in New Brunswick. The long-range forecast is calling for mixed precipitation and temperatures around the freezing mark. Wetlands are expected to remain frozen for a while yet. Depending on spring weather, it may be a later thaw than normal in spite of the warmer winter temperatures.



Germantown, southeast Nova Scotia

Though the freshet volume will likely be lower than normal this year, most impoundments will continue to operate at normal spring water levels. Overall, habitat conditions are good in Atlantic Canada.