

NDG&F September 23rd Newsletter

Wetland Conditions Favor Duck Hunters

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual fall wetland survey indicates approximately 43 percent more wetlands available for duck hunting than last year.

Mike Szymanski, migratory game bird biologist, said wetland conditions are looking good statewide. "Hunters will need to scout because the birds may be spread out with all the water and potential places to hunt," Szymanski said.

Wetland conditions have rebounded extremely well from the dry conditions of 2008, when much of the state had virtually no wetlands with water. Szymanski said the drying cycle was important to reset food webs within wetlands, and many wetlands in the state now have abundant food resources for waterfowl.

"Back-to-back winters with significant snowfall refilled wetlands, and considerable rainfall this past summer has maintained water levels in more temporary-type wetlands," Szymanski said.

Soft ground conditions might greet hunters in many areas of the state, so Szymanski urges caution when driving in or across fields this fall. "As always, the quality of the waterfowl hunting season in North Dakota is predicated on weather conditions," he added. "But strong reproduction for both ducks and geese, and excellent wetland conditions point toward a good fall."

The wetland survey is conducted in mid-September just prior to the waterfowl hunting season, to provide an assessment of conditions duck hunters can expect.

Opening day for North Dakota residents is Sept. 25 for ducks, coots, mergansers and geese. Nonresidents may begin hunting waterfowl in North Dakota Oct. 2.

Public Asked to Report Whooping Crane Sightings

Whooping cranes are in the midst of their fall migration and sightings will increase as they make their way through North Dakota over the next several weeks. Anyone seeing these birds as they move through the state is asked to report sightings so the birds can be tracked.

Whoopers stand about five feet tall and have a wingspan of about seven feet from tip to tip. They are bright white with black wing tips, which are visible only when the wings are outspread. In flight they extend their long necks straight forward, while their long, slender legs extend out behind the tail. Young-of-the-year whoopers are white with scattered brown feathers. Whooping cranes typically migrate singly, or in groups of 2-3 birds, and may be associated with sandhill cranes.

Other white birds such as snow geese, swans and egrets are often mistaken for whooping cranes. The most common mistake is pelicans because their wingspan is similar and they tuck their pouch in flight, leaving a silhouette similar to a crane when viewed from below.

Anyone sighting whoopers should not disturb them, but record the date, time, location, and the birds' activity. Observers should also look closely for and report colored bands which may occur on one or both legs. Young whooping cranes were marked during 1975-1988 with colored leg bands to help determine their identity.

Whooping crane sightings should be reported to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office at (701) 387-4397, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's main office in Bismarck at (701) 328-6300, or to local game wardens around the state. Reports help biologists locate important whooping crane habitat areas, monitor marked birds, determine survival and population numbers, and identify times and migration routes.