

# AMERICAN BLACK DUCK

## CHANGES IN HUNTING REGULATIONS 2017-18

After more than 30 years of 1-bird daily bag limits for black ducks, duck hunters in the U.S. will have an opportunity for a 2-black duck daily bag limit in 2017. Why the change after all these years? Three developments led to this shift.



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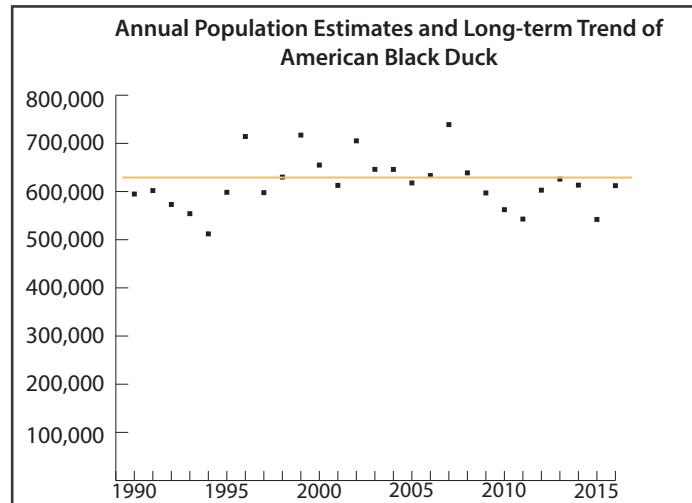
- 1** Both eastern Canada and eastern U.S. have seen the number of duck hunters decline since the 1980s, as well as the harvest of black ducks. Since the late 1990s, the combined black duck harvest in the two countries has dropped from more than 300,000 birds per year to less than 200,000. However, during the same time span the black duck population size has been stable.
- 2** Wildlife managers have much better biological information on black ducks than they had during the first 20 years of restrictive black duck bag limits. Surveys of the breeding black duck population have been conducted annually in eastern Canada and northeastern U.S. since the 1990s, long enough to provide reliable information on the population trend and year-to-year fluctuations. The most up-to-date survey results indicate that the population is currently stable. In addition, an ongoing black duck banding program, coupled with band reporting from hunters, has provided annual estimates of harvest and survival rates. This information has enabled managers to evaluate the effect of harvest on survival rates of black ducks and, more generally, examine how harvest affects their population.
- 3** The much-improved biological data now available due to these on-going monitoring programs has enabled U.S. and Canadian biologists to construct a black duck population model that is now the basis for an International Black Duck Harvest Strategy. The Harvest Strategy, adopted in 2012, prescribes annual black duck hunting regulations in the two countries. The three objectives of the Harvest Strategy are: (1) Maintain a sustainable black duck population; (2) Maintain a robust black duck hunting tradition; and (3) Maintain the historical and relatively equal proportion of the black duck harvest between Canada and the U.S.

These developments allowed U.S. and Canadian biologists to gain better insight into one of the most debated questions in waterfowl management over the past half century: "What effect does hunting have on the population?" If annual survival rates are lower in years when harvest rates are high, and increase when harvest rates decline, then this would suggest that harvest has a negative effect on annual survival and to some extent the population size. On the other hand, if there is no apparent relationship between harvest rates and survival rates, this suggests that harvest has a limited effect on population size. The most recent results from the black duck population model indicate that at the current levels of hunting, harvest is not affecting annual black duck survival at the population level. Accordingly, the Harvest Strategy allows for more liberal black duck hunting regulations in 2017. If liberalization of the hunting regulations causes black duck survival to decrease and the population to decline, those signals will be detected through the annual monitoring programs and the appropriate regulation changes can be made to ensure that black duck harvest is sustainable over the long term.

Kyle Wintersteen



Black ducks are among the most prized species for duck hunters in the east.



The yellow line shows the relatively stable population estimates of black ducks over a 26 year period.



## **CHANGES IN AMERICAN BLACK DUCK HUNTING REGULATIONS, 2017-18**

### ***FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS***

Black ducks are among the most prized species for duck hunters in the east. After more than 30 years of a 1-bird daily bag limit for black ducks, duck hunters in the U.S. will have an opportunity to take 2 black ducks per day in 2017.

#### **Why was the bag limit was increased after all these years?**

Since the late 1990s, the number of black ducks harvested in eastern Canada and the eastern U.S. combined has dropped from more than 300,000 birds per year to less than 200,000. However, during the same time span the black duck population size has been stable. Population models based on harvest and population data indicate that the predicted increase in harvest from the bag limit change should not significantly affect the population.

#### **Won't the U.S. harvest double by increasing the bag limit from one to two birds?**

No, on many hunts there is not an opportunity to take a second black duck. Harvest management experience from numerous waterfowl species, across large geographic scales, and through time, suggest a liberalization from one to two birds (or restricting from two birds down to one) results in about a one-third (33%) change in total harvest.

#### **What is the size and trend of the black duck population?**

Population surveys for breeding black ducks began in the early 1990s. About 90% of the population breeds in Canada while the majority of these birds winter in the U.S. The long-term average number of breeding black ducks is over 650,000 birds and the continental population has been stable through the past 25 years.

#### **In some areas, hunters and birdwatchers report seeing fewer black ducks than in years past. This seems to be a mismatch with overall population data.**

Local trends do not always reflect range-wide trends. On a local scale, factors such as weather, disturbance, and changes in habitat quality affect where wintering black ducks settle and what specific areas they use. At a larger scale, the distribution of wintering black ducks has shifted northward over the past several decades. More recently, fewer birds winter in southern states like North and South Carolina while a significant number of black ducks now winter in southern Canada.

## **How is the black duck harvest distributed between the U.S. and Canada?**

Both historically, and in more recent times, the harvest is about equally distributed between the two countries. With most other waterfowl species (e.g. mallards, green-winged teal), the vast majority of the harvest occurs in the U.S.

## **What are the objectives that guide black duck harvest management in North America?**

Black ducks are managed through an International Harvest Strategy. This strategy, adopted in 2012, prescribes annual black duck hunting regulations in the two countries. The three objectives of the Harvest Strategy are: (1) Maintain a sustainable black duck population; (2) Maintain a robust black duck hunting tradition; and (3) Maintain the historical and relatively equal proportion of the black duck harvest between Canada and the U.S.

## **I have seen banded black ducks or have a hunting companion who shot a banded black duck. What do these band recoveries tell us?**

Banding data are used to estimate harvest rates, or the proportion of the population that is taken through hunting, and survival rates. The most recent results from the black duck population model indicate that at the current levels of hunting, harvest is not affecting annual black duck survival at the population level. Accordingly, the Harvest Strategy allows for more liberal black duck hunting regulations in 2017. Hunters can continue to do their part by reporting banded ducks that they harvest.

## **What is the risk that we will go to two black ducks, overharvest them, and then close the black duck hunting season?**

The benefit and unique aspect of Adaptive Harvest Management is its ability to aid managers in learning about the effects of harvest on waterfowl populations. With each season, managers gain greater insight into how much harvest a population can sustain which allows them to make more informed decisions over time. The experience of a liberalized season in the U.S. in 2017 will further improve our understanding. If harvest rates are higher than expected or have a negative effect on the breeding population, future harvest policies will be more conservative, resulting in a higher probability of the U.S. returning to a 1-bird bag limit for black ducks. There is a much lower chance that that the policy will result in a closed season in the immediate future.

## **Is this bag limit increase being used to recruit new duck hunters?**

No. Although the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service implemented Youth Days nearly two decades ago and many states are using innovative programs to recruit and retain people in hunting, this liberalization was not developed to draw new hunters. Further, given that there are over 25

species of waterfowl, most of which are abundant, it seems unlikely that this bag limit change for one species will recruit a new crop of duck hunters or change hunter effort appreciably.

**Does this liberalization of hunting regulations mean there is less urgency to protect habitat for black ducks?**

No. Even with this regulation change, the black duck population is not expected to decline, so black ducks will still need abundant, high quality habitat. Further, many other species, including other waterfowl, shorebirds, and wading birds, require an adequate amount of healthy habitat to thrive. As such, this new harvest regulation does not change the need for habitat protection and enhancement efforts.

**Many states have a small population of nesting black ducks. Does this regulation change put these birds at risk?**

Several studies have suggested that hunting seasons that open earlier in the fall have can have an impact on local breeding ducks largely because fewer migrant ducks are present to buffer the harvest. In fact, some states have their earliest season dates closed to black duck hunting in an effort to protect their breeding black ducks. Since this regulation is a bag limit change and not a season length change, it seems unlikely that states would choose to open their seasons earlier than they do now. As such, it seems unlikely that this regulation change would have any significant additional impact on local breeding black ducks than what occurs now.

Prepared by:

American Black Duck Adaptive Harvest Management Working Group  
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