

What Kind of Ducks Can You Shoot on a Full Moon Tuesday?

By Craig Mortimore

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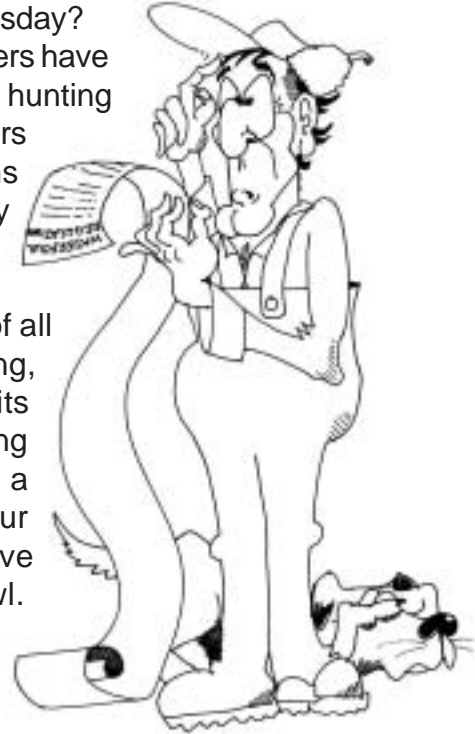
That has become sort of a catch phrase as waterfowlers have come to jokingly exaggerate the complexity of waterfowl hunting regulations during the last couple of decades. Some hunters find the amount and annual inconsistency of regulations maddening. They are rightly concerned since regulatory complexity can place hunters in jeopardy of noncompliance. Well, there is method behind the madness.

Waterfowl hunting is perhaps the most regulated of all sport hunting in the United States. Regulated sport hunting, and modern wildlife management for that matter, found its genesis within our government's attempt to staunch declining duck numbers due to uncontrolled market hunting – a practice that was prevalent during the development of our country. Modern fish and game laws and regulations have been an essential tool in the conservation of waterfowl. Wood ducks and canvasbacks have recovered because daily bag limit restrictions have reduced sport hunting take. However, there is a delicate balance between necessary regulations and their influence on hunting and hunters. Like many wildlife management agencies, NDOW is concerned that regulatory complexity is affecting hunter recruitment and retention. It is estimated that nearly 19,000 people hunted ducks in Nevada in 1982, while that number dropped to a low of 4,300 in 1993 and has averaged just under 4,100 for the past five years.

Today's sport hunting regulations are derived after a number of processes which can be fit into three basic categories: 1.) data collection, 2.) analysis of this data and 3.) consultation.

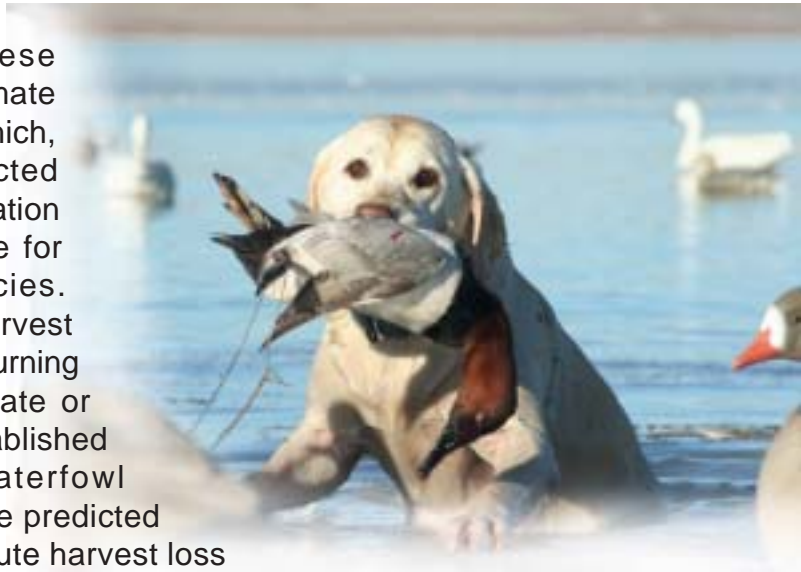
Data Collection

Biologists for state, provincial and federal wildlife management agencies collaborate to collect harvest, population and habitat data in an overall effort to understand the status and trend of continental waterfowl populations. Hunters play a direct role in gathering some of this data. Reported harvest and parts collection data allows managers to calculate harvest estimates for most waterfowl species. Biologists conduct a number of waterfowl population surveys each year. These investigations are designed around specific, consistently-applied survey protocols, thus the findings are comparable within a long-established database. In this way, biologists are able to detect the trend of waterfowl in general, and certain species in particular. Surveys to appraise the quality and abundance of habitat used for nesting and brood-rearing are conducted in order to factor in the potential for waterfowl to increase their numbers through annual production and recruitment.



Data Analysis

Biologists analyze these combined biological data to estimate the breeding population (BPOP) which, along with the summer's predicted productivity, factor into the computation of a fall flight population estimate for mallards and many other species. Managers attempt to maintain harvest rates that will allow next spring's returning breeding population to approximate or exceed species-specific goals established within the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP). The predicted harvest rates are applied to compute harvest loss within annual survival models. Initially after NAWMP, managers had attempted to tightly scale annual harvest levels based upon the premise that harvest was the preeminent factor affecting change in population levels.



From the mid-1980s to 1995, season length and bag limits fluctuated almost annually as they were modified to reflect population changes. In Nevada, the season length had been 93 days long from 1970 to 1984, then seasons varied from a low of 30 days in 1992 to 79 days in 1985-1987. Likewise, general daily bag limits varied and species-specific bag limits became fashionable. See the appendix in NDOW's 2007 small game status report for more detail.

Since 1995, managers have used a system called Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM) that strives to make regulations more consistent. This process attempts to avoid reactive, short-term regulatory changes that generally reflect annual changes in BPOPs. AHM acknowledges that many factors affect waterfowl numbers and most of these cannot be adequately predicted or manipulated. AHM has been implemented in different ways within the Flyways as managers developed long-term understanding of flyway-specific waterfowl population distribution and migration patterns along with geographically specific harvest pressure.

Consultation

Once the data is in and the models have been accomplished, state and federal agencies convene to discuss waterfowl status and determine the frameworks for the forthcoming waterfowl seasons and bag limits. Frameworks are guided by an interpretation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and describe the maximum number of days for a season and the earliest opening date and latest closing date allowed, along with maximum daily bag limits. States provide comment

and other input through the Flyway Council process, wherein representatives are given their opportunity to lend a perspective that might be salient to a state, region or entire flyway. Flyway Council meetings are open to the public to allow all other pertinent comments and input. Afterward, the United States Fish & Wildlife Service holds a meeting of its Regulations Committee to prepare a final recommendation to the Secretary of Interior who makes the final rule for waterfowl hunting frameworks



in the United States. Then state wildlife commissions (or similar regulatory organs) establish hunting seasons for their states within the guidelines established in the frameworks.

What does this mean for waterfowl hunters in Nevada?

NDOW is actively involved in the Pacific Flyway Council and consistently participates in waterfowl surveys in the west. In recent years, NDOW has made recommendations to the Nevada Board of Wildlife Commissioners that are designed to be consistent across the state – an easy consideration given that under AHM, the liberal season framework (107 days) has been in effect for the past 11 years. Bag limit recommendations will always be the highest allowed under the framework.

This article has focused principally upon season and bag regulations. There are biological and management rationale for other waterfowl regulations as well. These include the use of non-toxic shot, three shot-shell maximum capacity (need for a plug), shooting hours, species ID retention, specific swan regulations, waterfowl stamps and more.

To sum it up, short of a complete return to the habitat conditions that existed in the 1970s, waterfowl biologists and managers will have to rely upon season length and bag limit restrictions as their most traditional tool to influence certain duck stocks. For this reason, hunters will have to annually scrutinize their regulations pamphlets before heading to the marsh, with the knowledge that wildlife managers are doing their best to support waterfowl populations for the long-term.