

ALLEGAN MANAGED WATERFOWL AREA 2008-2009 ANNUAL REPORT

Introduction

This report includes information for the Allegan Managed Waterfowl Area (MWA), focusing on the four Managed Waterfowl Units (Fennville Farm Unit, Highbanks Unit, Bravo Unit, and Ottawa Marsh), and for the reporting period from February, 2008 to February, 2009. Tables appended to this report provide further quantification.

Area Goals and Management Emphasis

Area goals include providing habitat and safe harbor for migrating and over wintering waterfowl and for waterfowl production, with an emphasis on both Canada geese and dabbling ducks, primarily mallards and wood ducks; providing hunting opportunities for waterfowl and other species; and providing wildlife viewing opportunities and other non-hunting recreation as compatible with primary goals.

Management emphasis includes habitat creation and maintenance to mimic grassland and tundra on the Fennville Farm Unit and to compliment the needs of migrating and over-wintering waterfowl on all units.

Wildlife Production and Use Estimates

Waterfowl production is largely limited to wood ducks and hooded mergansers with a limited number of mallards and Canada geese also produced. A variety of furbearers have been noted in the Managed Waterfowl Area including river otters, beavers, mink, muskrat, and raccoon. Other resident wildlife common to the MWA includes deer, turkeys, pheasants, squirrels and rabbits. Coyote numbers have increased over the past decade in former red and gray fox habitats. The Farm Unit is well known for its grassland birds (bobolink, horned larks, grasshopper sparrows, and Henslow's sparrows) and wintering raptors (bald eagles, rough-legged hawks, northern harriers, short-eared owls) and other species of greatest conservation need. The Farm was also used by a whooping crane and many sandhill cranes during the summer and fall of 2008.

Significant Habitat Management

Habitat Management

The most intensively managed of the Units is the Farm Unit which includes over 4,100 acres, approximately 2,300 acres are maintained in agricultural cropping largely through contract arrangement with sharecrop farmers. Water level management on all Units, including draw downs and flooding of impounded Units, is used to enhance and maintain desirable plant communities. Forest management and forest opening maintenance are practiced throughout all 4 managed waterfowl units.

Approximately 13.5 acres of warm season grasses (WSG) and 5.2 acres of cool season grasses were planted in Zone 10 of the Farm Unit. These fields were converted by

DNR personnel from fields choked with woody vegetation and invasive herbaceous plants: especially spotted knapweed. WSG are part of a project to replace wooded wind breaks with herbaceous cover and convert marginal row crop acres to grassland acres. The chemical Transline was used as field treatments in several locations where spotted knapweed proved resistant to other treatment in newly established WSG areas.

Twenty-eight acres of corn (hunter concealment strips) and over 80 acres of rye were planted on the Farm Unit by DNR personnel. In addition, 23 acres of sunflowers and 7 acres of food plots consisting of buckwheat and corn were planted. This is in addition to the 1791 acres of annual crops and 308 acres of grass hay contracted to sharecroppers.

Similar to past years, the Farm Unit Impoundment was drawn down in late winter, 2008, to promote wetland plant growth. It was refilled in late summer/early fall through capture of surface water runoff, without need for supplemental pumping of water. The unusually high rainfall in September (approximately 13" of rain on the farm) ensured that the impoundment was at capacity for the entirety of the waterfowl seasons.

The lower Highbanks Unit impoundment pool was drawn down in the summer of 2008 to promote the growth of vegetation beneficial to waterfowl. Conversely, due to DEQ permit restrictions, the upper pool was not drawn down fully during 2008. However, water levels were reduced somewhat to protect dikes and infrastructure from damage. Water levels in both pools were returned to full pool for fall use by waterfowl.

Species Management

The Macatawa Bay Waterfowlers continued their project of banding adult female wood ducks and hooded mergansers taken from nest boxes in local area wetlands in the spring. A total of 54 birds (50 wood ducks and 4 hooded mergansers) were banded at 9 different banding locations. Fifty-three previously banded birds were recaptured and released (43 wood ducks and 10 hooded mergansers). In addition, this group also constructed and used walk-in traps to band 1 wood duck and 67 mallards during the summer at 4 different locations. A successful Canada goose banding effort was undertaken on June 21 near Holland and Grand Haven (202 geese banded and 25 geese recaptured that had been previously banded).

Macatawa Bay also contributed to a continuing project to reduce mammal burrowing and dike erosion (muskrat removal) and increase duck production (predator removal) at the Highbanks Unit.

Mute swan removal, especially at the Highbanks Unit, is a continuing project with 13 swans removed during this period, complimenting similar efforts in past years. Historically, swan numbers in the Unit have exceeded 100 birds but were largely contained below 50 birds during this period.

The MWA has a continuing project to contain deer populations at levels that are compatible with other MWA goals. For the past 3 years there has been a managed

antlerless deer hunt on the Farm Unit with the purpose of reducing deer numbers inside the refuge. There were 265 deer harvested. There was no refuge antlerless hunt in 2008 due to low deer concentration on the Farm Unit.

The Managed Units accepted Canada geese translocated from other areas of Lower Michigan this summer where they were posing a nuisance. Over 900 geese were relocated into the Highbanks, Crooked Lake, the Ottawa Marsh, Trowbridge Dam, and a private pond adjacent to Farm Zone 10.

Land Acquisition Update

This year the State took full management control of the 100 acre parcel on the southwest corner of the Farm Unit that was purchased in 2001.

Area Maintenance

Many of the trails and drives on the Farm Unit were repaired by grading or resurfacing with gravel. The trails leading down the hill to the main Ottawa Marsh landing were repaired by Remington Excavating after significant rains in June created sizeable washouts. Woody vegetation on the Highbanks dikes was successfully controlled using herbicides. A new public announcement system (speakers, amplifier, and microphone) was installed to replace the old system that failed during the 2007-08 managed hunt.

Equipment

A new John Deere 2210 Level Lift Field Cultivator was purchased. This equipment will help to level fields during cultivation, as opposed to disking, which leaves the field uneven. Significant repairs were completed on several existing pieces of equipment.

Special Projects

Macatawa Bay and the Allegan Chapter of Ducks Unlimited volunteered on a continuing project to band nesting Giant Canada geese either north of the Farm Unit in Ottawa and Allegan County or south of the Farm Unit in Allegan and Van Buren County. A total of 234 geese were banded north of the Farm Unit.

Pheasants Forever contributed WSG blend seed with an equated value of about \$4,000.

Brush and tree clearing bids were gathered for 25 sites totaling 214 acres. The result is a 3-year contract with Remington Excavating and Quantum Construction totaling \$206,574 (\$965/acre). Approximately \$80,000 split between 2 WIP's will be spent during the 2009 fiscal year. Work on the sites began in January and is expected to continue through August.

Recreational and Educational Activities

Recreational pastimes for which the Units within the MWA are utilized include wildlife viewing, fishing, hiking, boating, wild food collecting, sightseeing, dog training, and field dog trials in addition to hunting and trapping.

The Kalamazoo Audubon Society hosted several guided visits to the Farm Unit to watch birds. In addition, numerous tour busses visited the Farm Unit to view the wildlife. Staff coordination with these ventures is minimal.

In January, department staff began to offer a short, bird-focused talk on Saturday mornings during the managed goose hunt with the intent of promoting the Farm Unit as unique and valuable to avian fauna. These presentations were intended for consumptive and non-consumptive users with the additional benefit of exposing the two groups to each other.

Adding another year in a continuing project, Macatawa Bay hosted a spring youth event that included removal of trash from hunting strips and education surrounding the function of the Farm Unit and its use by wildlife. This mentoring experience had a goal of increased practical awareness for the resource and the sport.

The WMA contributed opportunities for Youth hunting throughout the period. A federally sponsored Youth Hunt occurred September 20 and 21. Several hunting parties took advantage of waterfowl concentrations (largely wood ducks and mallards) in the Ottawa Marsh and Farm Unit. Successful hunts were reported for these dates. November 8, 2008 and January 10, 2008 State sponsored Youth Hunts through the Managed Waterfowl Hunt drawing were also held where only youths were allowed to hunt. Both opportunities were well attended and resulted in many positive comments. Respectively, 79 and 58 youths took part in the two hunts contributing to the units' overall youth hunter trips. This youth exposure appears successful as a hunting recruitment tool as youth hunters are a regular occurrence in the hunters served in our daily drawings.

Waterfowl Hunting Season

General Introduction

Conditions for the Hunt were variable, and hunter participation and harvest were similarly variable. Habitat conditions were affected by 3 major flooding events in June, September, and December 2008.

Weather and Habitat Conditions

Atypical fall and winter weather highlighted the hunt period. The significant rainfall event in September resulted in extensive flooding of the Farm Unit. High water in rye fields crucial to early-arriving geese were flooded out and were subsequently replanted. Despite this, the geese concentrated on the flooded rye fields, possibly holding them on the Farm for longer periods. During the November season temperatures hovered around freezing which resulted in snow/sleet mixtures for all 3 days of the hunt. December brought heavy snows earlier than normal. Snowfall on December 19 (the day before the opener) topped 12 inches. Snow continued to accumulate regularly until December 26-30 when above-freezing temperatures (nearly 60°F on 12/27) and rain melted the snowpack, causing another significant flood. Long-time Farm Unit hunters

commented that they had never seen so much water on the farm. Cold weather (below 25°F and reaching -20°F wind chill) and snow dominated in January.

Crop production was average on the Farm in 2008 and was hampered significant floods in June and September. The flood in June drowned nearly 40% of Department-planted crops and approximately 25% of sharecrops. Most fields were replanted but some were left fallow for the remainder of the year. The September flood hampered harvests in October and November by leaving most fields on the Farm saturated for extended periods. Some crops were not harvested due to inaccessibility to fields. Staff and sharecroppers were able to plant rye before the flooding which produced adequate green graze on the Farm.

Migration and Waterfowl Numbers

Canada goose numbers on the Farm Unit increased from 760 geese on September 23 to a peak of 25,000 on December 26. Estimates in October, November, and December averaged approximately 2400, and 5,000 in October and November, respectively. December started with around 7,400 geese on the Farm Unit and concluded with around 20,000 in the area.

Duck estimates on the WMA indicated that migration timing for non-mallard ducks was from mid-October to early November. Mallard numbers gradually increased from 46 on September 9 to 4,018 November 4. Thereafter, the Highbanks and open water areas in the WMA were frozen which forced the mallards into areas on the Farm where they are extremely difficult to estimate. Documented mallard numbers remained around 6,000 to 8,000 in December and January with highs above 10,000 ducks. (Table 1 provides estimates of waterfowl present on the WMA. Estimates of goose numbers are more reliable than estimates of duck numbers. Fall estimates are less variable than winter estimates. Cold and snowy conditions tend to concentrate waterfowl on the Farm Unit where birds are easier to locate, but obtaining an accurate count is difficult. Conversely, wet and warm weather prompts birds to disperse from the Farm Unit.)

Season Dates and Area Regulations

The Duck Season on the WMA ran concurrent with the rest of southern Michigan (South Zone: October 11 through December 7 and January 3-4) with the exception of the 7-day quiet period (no hunting) enacted for the Farm Unit for November 1-7. The WMA Goose Season included two hunt periods: November 8-10, 2008 and December 20, 2008 through January 30, 2009. This goose season was scheduled for 45 days. As in 2007-08, there was no quota assigned to the Allegan GMU.

Managed hunt changes for the 2008-09 season included consolidation of posts, reducing November hunt period from 9 to 3 days, and a first come-first serve hunt (no drawing) on Christmas Day, December 25. On non-holiday weekdays the posts in Zones 3 and 5 were paired (3A&B, C&D, E&F, etc.) and issued to one party, giving the party double the area to set decoys and hunt. This was done to attempt to provide higher quality hunting conditions by spreading hunters out further, thus reducing interference between parties and reducing pressure on the geese around the refuge.

The response by hunters who have tried this system has been favorable. The reduction of the November hunt period from 9 to 3 days resulted in reduced hunting pressure (about 60% fewer hunter trips this November vs. the 9 days in 2007-08) on the Farm Unit while preserving a youth hunt opportunity in November. It appears that fewer geese left the WMA following the November hunt than in prior years. On December 25 the hunting posts on the Farm Unit were distributed first-come, first-serve. Hunter turnout was estimated at 30 parties and the harvest was estimated to be 80-90 geese. Response to this technique was mixed.

Hunting Season Results

This season was characterized by periods of very high hunter participation and harvest rates and periods of very low hunter participation and harvest rates (Table 3). Daily participation appeared to track hunter success and goose behavior in the MWA. Revenues amounting to \$7,810.00 were collected through the sale of 1326 Daily Hunter Fee Permits, 180 Annual Hunter Fee Permits and various other license sales.

Harvest and Hunter Use

During the November 8-10 period 438 hunter trips resulted in 182 harvested geese (0.42 geese/hunter trip). In the late December/January period, 3,751 hunter trips resulted in 1,354 additional harvested geese (0.36 geese/hunter trip). No geese were taken from either the Bravo or Highbanks Units during either period as recorded through hunter registrations. The total number of geese taken during the managed hunt was 1532 (0.37 geese/hunter trip) (Table 2 & 3).

A total of 78 ducks were taken from the Farm this year as tallied from Party Registration cards. Duck hunters are not required to report numbers of ducks harvested when hunting outside the timeframe of the Managed Goose Hunt, thus the total number of ducks taken on the Farm is considerably higher than that reported above. Duck hunters reported that success on the Farm Unit and Ottawa Marsh Unit was average to above average during the 2008-09 season. Five days of duck hunting opportunity were available during the GMU Goose Season. A waterfowl opening day bag check at the Ottawa Marsh revealed an estimated 75 hunters taking an estimated 30 wood ducks, 3 mallards, and 1 green-winged teal. Very few geese are reported taken from this Unit. The opening day car count on the Farm Unit yielded 14 cars with an estimated 30 hunters. Most cars were parked at the Zone 7 lot. This compares with 25 cars present on the Farm Unit on October 20 for the opening of pheasant season.

Biological data were collected from a total of 420 geese checked on 13 days throughout the Allegan GMU season. These included 38.8% juveniles; 61.2 % adults. Most appear to be interiors (migrants) and giants with some cackling geese harvested.

Permits and Harvest

The Farm Unit was the primary destination for those hunting geese inside the WMA. Historically, the Highbanks Unit figured centrally in the MWA harvest but declined dramatically in the early 1990s. Thereafter, the Bravo Unit figured more centrally in the combined harvest, but has shown dramatic declines since 2004. Both units have

reduced importance during the open hunting season (due to shifting the GMU season later in the year), but are still valuable protected resting areas for waterfowl earlier in the year.

Species Harvest

Canada geese are the predominant waterfowl species harvested as detailed in Harvest and Hunter Use table (Table 2). The number of harvested geese this year was 1532, higher than last year's total of 1297. Reported waterfowl harvests this year included Canada geese, mallards, wood ducks, black ducks, green-winged teal, pintails, gadwall, and a northern shoveler. The harvest is largely supported by migrant birds from the early-migrating wood ducks concentrating in the Ottawa Marsh to the late migrating and wintering mallards concentrating on the Farm Unit and using local water roosts overnight.

Resident birds appear to contribute less to the harvest on the Allegan WMA than elsewhere in southern Michigan. Based on formulas published by Moser and Rolley (1990), it was approximated that 65.1% and 16.4% of adult female and male checked geese, respectively, were Giant Canada geese. The remaining were interior (migrant) Canada geese and cackling geese, with the later representing less than 1% of checked geese. The checked geese consisted of 46.8% males and 53.2% females with 38.8% juveniles and 61.2 % adults.

Cropping and Water Level Management

The refuge impoundment in front of Zone 7 was filled to capacity before duck season this year due to the flooding event in September. Boards were placed in the agri-drain water-control structures beforehand in September. Additionally, surface water was retained on multiple areas of the farm and used of these areas by waterfowl was heavy.

Recommendations

Maintain the Allegan County Goose Management Unit (GMU) boundary in its current configuration.

Continue the conversion of old fields and some cropland acres to permanent grasslands in the eastern portion of the farm Unit.

Explore the production sources of giant Canada geese utilizing the Farm Unit.

Continue to monitor dikes and dams to achieve early detection of maintenance needs and comply with monitoring requirements as set down in DEQ Dam Safety Inspection Reports.

Increase monitoring and banding of locally bred ducks.

Continue to reduce mute swan populations on the ASGA.

Maintain a GMU season that initiates when the GMU goose numbers build to an acceptable minimum threshold (5000 geese?) and includes the peak of the GMU goose migrant/wintering population.

Continue to provide hunting opportunities that promote youth participation and other forms of new hunter recruitment.

Continue to provide hunting opportunities that are ADA accessible where feasible.

Continue to diversify the habitat offerings on the ASGA managed hunt units, to provide for a more diverse species assemblage with sensitivity to species of greatest conservation need as outlined in the MWAP.

Continue to provide recreational opportunities that are compatible with ASGA primary goals.

Investigate the possibility of offering afternoon hunting opportunities through the managed hunt.

Remove 7-day quiet period as staff and majority of hunters feel that the negative effects of hunting before the GMU goose opener does not warrant the loss of 7 days of hunting (usually during the duck season).

Remove the Highbanks unit posts from the drawing but still require party registration card to hunt there (same rules as Bravo). No Daily Permit required for Bravo and Highbanks.

Table 1. Weekly waterfowl estimates from the Allegan GMU from September 2008 through January 2009.

Species	Sept. 9	Sept. 15	Sept. 23	Oct. 2	Oct. 8	Oct. 16	Oct. 23	Oct. 28	Nov. 7	Nov. 13	Nov. 20	Nov. 24
Mallard	46	154	222	479	764	1465	1143	2056	1587	482	3722	4018
Black Duck			8	56	52	110	65	252	60	4	12	14
Wood Duck	68	39	40	79	76	72	15	4	11		4	
American Wigeon				12	28	30	3		1			
Gadwall					33	75	102	205	182	13		
Northern Shoveler												
Northern Pintail						1	1					
Blue-winged Teal		15		40	36	15	0					
Green-winged Teal			16	100	134	257	52	63	64	7		8
Total Dabblers	114	208	286	766	1123	2025	1381	2580	1905	506	3738	4040
Ruddy Duck									1			
Redhead		1			3		1					
Ring-necked duck		4			4	671	1515	2040	860	559	3	10
Scaup											2	2
Bufflehead								6		10	26	28
Goldeneye												
Total Ducks	114	213	286	766	1130	2696	2897	4626	2766	1075	3769	4080
Canada geese	85	621	760	1316	1070	2964	3393	3533	4254	4811	4086	7072
Snow geese		1				3	2	4		4	9	2
Total Geese	85	622	760	1316	1070	2967	3395	3537	4254	4815	4095	7074
Mute swan	5	5	4	10	4	29	26	44	35	24	16	15
Trumpeter swan								5				
Total Swans	5	5	4	10	4	29	26	49	35	24	16	15

Species	Dec. 3	Dec. 11	Dec. 18	Dec. 26	Dec. 30	Jan. 6	Jan. 13	Jan. 21	Jan. 27
Mallard	3965	4930	4500	8100	7400	8000	6210	7000	8100
Black Duck	153	24	5	40	20	15	10	10	
Wood Duck		1							
American Wigeon									
Gadwall	2								
Northern Shoveler									
Northern Pintail						1		4	
Blue-winged Teal									
Green-winged Teal						2			
Total Dabblers	4120	4955	4505	8140	7420	8018	6210	7014	8100
Ruddy Duck									
Redhead									
Ring-necked duck									
Scaup									
Bufflehead	33								
Goldeneye	1				26	15			3
Hooded Merganser		4							
Total Ducks	4154	4959	4505	8140	7446	8033	6210	7014	8103
Canada geese	7411	21920	21530	25000	19130	19500	20500	18800	19100
Snow geese	1	1	1	1		8	8		
Total Geese	7412	21921	21531	25001	19130	19508	20508	18800	19100
Mute swan	38					2			6
Trumpeter swan									
Total Swans	38	0	0	0	0	2			6

Table 2. Allegan Managed Waterfowl Area hunter and harvest summary.

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
<u>Hunter trips</u>							
Farm	4,610	7,027	3,936*	4,129*	6,811*	4,613	4,189
Highbanks	66	32				13	5
Total hunter trips	4,676	7,059	3,936	4,129	6,811	4,628	4,194
<u>Goose harvest</u>							
Farm	1,178	1,717	637	1,106	1,812	1,274	1,532
Highbanks	8	0	3	0	6	0	0
Bravo	39	53	22	0	9	0	0
Total goose	1,225	1,770	662	1,106	1,827	1,274	1,532
<u>Duck harvest</u>							
Farm	71	59	28	132	31	56	80
Highbanks	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Total duck	71	60	28	132	31	56	80
Goose season length	25	45	25	25	50	45	45
Duck season length	60	60	60	60	60	60	60
Goose quota	1,400	3,000	1,500	1,500	3,000	None	None
Hunter trips/day	184	156	157	165	136	103	93.1
Geese/hunter trip	0.26	0.24	0.16	0.27	0.27	0.28	0.37

Table 3. Daily Farm Unit hunter numbers, goose harvest, duck harvest, and license sales from 2008-09 Allegan GMU Managed Goose Hunt.

Date	Farm Hunters	Geese Harvested	Geese/Hunter Trip	Ducks	Dailies	Annals	Waterfowl	HIP+Mig. Bird	Sr. Sm. Game	Res. Mtl. Sm Gm	Sm. Game	Turkey App.	Antlerless	Firearm Deer	Daily Total	
Nov. 8	79	43	0.54	12	60	7		4						1	1	\$ 356.00
9	242	73	0.30	11	122	23	1	80					1			\$ 802.00
10	117	66	0.56	6	32	11	2	26								\$ 281.00
Dec. 20	311	47	0.15		148	52	2	4								\$1,278.00
21	155	23	0.15		39	19	1	1								\$ 408.00
22	40	28	0.70		5	3										\$ 59.00
23	103	17	0.17	Closed	27	3										\$ 147.00
24	116	124	1.07		28	7		1	1							\$ 209.00
25																\$ -
26	205	131	0.64		58	12										\$ 388.00
27	215	145	0.67		69	12										\$ 432.00
28	209	126	0.60		69	4										\$ 328.00
29	155	35	0.23		46	8										\$ 288.00
30	162	43	0.27		48	5										\$ 257.00
31	151	79	0.52		40	8										\$ 264.00
Jan. 1	144	17	0.12		29			1		1						\$ 117.00
2	53	41	0.77		62											\$ 248.00
3	229	11	0.05	5	83											\$ 332.00
4	162	51	0.31	46	48	4	1	3								\$ 249.00
5	45	1	0.02		13	2										\$ 78.00
6	56	4	0.07		11											\$ 44.00
7	80	54	0.68		18											\$ 72.00
8	69	22	0.32		17											\$ 68.00
9	72	2	0.03		24	1										\$ 109.00
10am	96	0	0.00		30	3										\$ 159.00
10 pm	58	9	0.16		36											\$ 144.00
11	74	2	0.03		20											\$ 80.00
12	29	3	0.10		6											\$ 24.00
13	13	4	0.31		2											\$ 8.00
14	15	0	0.00	Closed	7											\$ 28.00
15	7	0	0.00		1											\$ 4.00
16	12	2	0.17		2											\$ 8.00
17	53	5	0.09		11											\$ 44.00
18	49	27	0.55		9											\$ 36.00
19	23	6	0.26		3											\$ 12.00
20	13	3	0.23		0											\$ -
21	44	38	0.86		3											\$ 12.00
22	68	54	0.79		6	1										\$ 37.00
23	102	87	0.85		20											\$ 80.00
24	86	21	0.24		18			1		1						\$ 73.00
25	52	6	0.12		12							2				\$ 56.00
26	16	2	0.13		3											\$ 12.00
27	25	15	0.60		2											\$ 8.00
28	47	3	0.06		10											\$ 40.00
29	64	46	0.72		13											\$ 52.00
30	73	16	0.22		16						1					\$ 79.00
	4189	1532	0.37	80	1326	180	7	120	1	1	0		2	1		\$7,810.00

