

# Smith: As habitat dwindles, duck numbers deserve a close watch

[Paul A. Smith](#)

Unbeknownst to most state residents, a pilot flew a Cessna on east-west transects over Wisconsin earlier this year.

The aircraft followed prescribed routes at no more than 200 feet above ground and at about 80 miles per hour.

The low altitude and moderate speed is necessary for the two observers on board to do their jobs – count and identify waterfowl. It's science in plain sight, part of the latest chapter in a 45-year history of Wisconsin spring [breeding waterfowl](#) surveys.

The flights largely go unnoticed and the report of their data rarely makes headlines.

But as Wisconsin grasslands have dwindled and a recently passed state law will allow 1 million acres of wetlands to be filled, keeping close tabs on waterfowl numbers is more important than ever.



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**A drake and hen mallard swim on a Wisconsin waterbody. (Photo: Paul A. Smith)**

The ongoing project is supported by funding generated through the sale of hunting licenses and stamps.

This year's [Wisconsin survey](#) showed a total breeding duck population estimate of 439,397, down 8% from 2017 and right at the long-term mean (45 years).

The results were a mixed bag for the three most abundant nesting ducks in Wisconsin.

The 2018 total mallard population estimate of 216,652 is up 20% from last year and 19% above the long-term mean.

The estimate of 100,055 wood ducks is similar to 2017 and 24% above the

long-term mean.

And at 45,130 birds, blue-winged teal were down 47% from 2017 and 58% below the long-term mean.

The remaining duck species are lumped together and were estimated at 77,560, down 30% from 2017 and 19% above the long-term mean. The "other duck" group included common goldeneye, hooded and common merganser, green-winged teal, pintail, hooded merganser, common merganser, northern shoveler and ring-necked ducks. Black ducks were absent from the survey.

The survey estimated 157,950 Canada geese in the state, similar to the 2017 estimate and above the most recent 10-year average of 145,737 and 61% above the long-term mean.

Mother Nature always plays a hand in waterfowl breeding conditions, and a relatively mild winter in 2017-'18 in most parts of the state, combined with average precipitation in April and May, led to average conditions throughout Wisconsin, according to Taylor Finger, migratory game bird ecologist with the Department of Natural Resources.



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**Ducks fly over Horicon Marsh. (Photo: Paul A. Smith)**

The 2018 Wisconsin breeding waterfowl survey was completed between April 30 and May 18. It included 10 days of flights and nine of ground surveys. The work was performed by DNR and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees.

The information is used as part of the overall survey of breeding waterfowl in North America as well as in making state-level waterfowl management decisions.

The data on Wisconsin waterfowl breeding populations are best interpreted as trends viewed over several years rather than as year-to-year changes, Finger said.

But the last decade or so of surveys have allowed one conclusion to be made regarding Wisconsin's most abundant duck.

"It's clear we are now in a new, lower phase of breeding mallards in the state," Finger said.

From 1995-2005, the average spring mallard breeding population estimate in Wisconsin was 272,417 while from 2009-'18 it has fallen to 186,229.

During the period leading up to the mid-1990's there was an increasing trend in mallard numbers in Wisconsin while there has been a decrease since the early 2000's.

Finger said the change appears to be a real decline and not related to the survey method or errors.

As for potential reasons, the state survey report noted a decline in grassland habitat (key for nesting for many duck species) in Wisconsin over the last 51 years due to land use changes and increases in forested lands.

And although the Conservation Reserve Program helped sustain grasslands for a period, peaking at more than 700,000 acres in 1994 and with 600,000 acres remaining through 2007, the land enrolled has steadily declined in recent years to less than 250,000 acres of CRP grassland habitat in 2017.

As habitat quality declines, mortality typically increases to hens and broods as nests are destroyed by predators or agricultural activity.

Fall mortality from hunting can also be a factor, although when habitat conditions are good this impact is relatively minor, according to the DNR.

Although there has been a long-standing debate about Wisconsin's tradition of limiting hunters to one hen mallard in the daily bag limit, the recent survey data supports this conservative measure.

It remains to be seen, too, how much Wisconsin duck production will be

affected in the coming years by a 2018 state law that allows filling of 1 million acres of non-federal wetlands.

The only way to know will be by continuing the best available science. And by keeping trained eyes in the field and in the sky.

In an era of declining grassland and wetland habitat, this work has become more critical than ever.

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