
Minnesota Experimental September Teal Season

2021-23

Background

Blue-winged teal are one of the most abundant and widely distributed ducks in North America. Blue-winged teal migrate early in the fall, thus avoiding much of the shooting pressure exerted during the “regular” duck season. Blue-winged teal are the 2nd most abundant breeding duck in Minnesota in addition to large numbers of migrants that move through the state beginning in late August.

In February 2013, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and its state partners released a report that assessed the harvest potential of teal. The analyses indicated that optimal harvest rates for blue-winged teal were 2 to 9 times higher than harvest rates that resulted during most hunting seasons conducted from 1965-2009 (both September teal and regular duck hunting seasons combined). Although the report indicated that green-winged teal also could withstand some additional harvest pressure, the difference in the optimal harvest rates from those occurring during most of the 1965-2009 hunting seasons (1.3 to 3 times higher) was less than for blue-winged teal. Therefore, the Service stated that it was willing to entertain proposals for additional opportunities to harvest teal, but that such opportunities should target primarily blue-winged teal because their earlier migration chronology makes them easier to isolate both temporally and spatially. In response, the Mississippi Flyway Council proposed initiation of an experimental September teal season in Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The proposal was endorsed by the Service in June 2014. Minnesota did not participate until 2021 but the other 3 states held teal seasons each year.

Potential impacts of September teal seasons on non-target waterfowl species have been a concern since the first experimental seasons in the Central and Mississippi Flyways during the mid-1960s. The non-target species take documented during the initial experimentation with these seasons was one reason that prompted the Service to discontinue their use in production states of Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin and Michigan. Therefore, states that want to implement September teal seasons must demonstrate that the special season does not have a significant impact on non-target bird species. To address concern of non-target take, Minnesota entered into a Memorandum of Agreement with the Service outlining a three-year plan to assess hunter

performance using observation blinds during a 3-year experimental period. Results of this work will help to determine whether the September teal-only season should be permitted in Minnesota.

Methods

Prior to opening the experimental teal season, Minnesota DNR did extensive outreach to gauge support from hunters, conservation groups, and the public. This began in late fall 2020 when we contacted conservation groups, tribal nations and avid hunters to gauge support for a suite of potential waterfowl regulation changes for 2021, including an experimental teal season. In January 2021, we collected online public input from ~4,000 individuals to evaluate support for teal season. In February 2021, we conducted a mail-out hunter attitude survey that included ~7,000 waterfowl stamp purchasers. In late March, we released a proposed package of changes that included a 5-day teal season. In April, we held a Town Hall meeting and took additional public comment before we selected a 5-day experimental teal season for 2021. In general, there was support for an experimental teal season across all modes of input. In the mail-out hunter survey, 46% supported teal season, 36% were opposed, and 18% were neutral. In the online public input survey, ~1,700 comments were in support of a teal season and ~1,400 were opposed.

We then identified staff across the state from both Wildlife and Law Enforcement divisions with waterfowl ID skills to conduct hunter observations (spy blinds). We held 2 online training sessions each year to cover the protocols, requirements, sample size, and reporting methods. In most cases, observers found locations to observe parties from shore or a hillside and/or posed as hunters in the marsh to get in locations to observe hunting parties with binoculars.

Observers evaluated the total number of non-target opportunities (any waterfowl or flock of waterfowl) judged to be in range of hunters, total number of non-target attempts (a shot or shots fired at a non-target), and total number of non-target harvested compared to teal harvest. In addition, we conducted some bag checks as well as other information on the hunting parties (using dogs, spinning-wing decoys, etc.).

Results

From Saturday September 2 through Wednesday September 6, 2023 16 hunting parties were observed. Most observations occurred opening day (Sat: 6; Sun: 4; Mon: 3; Tue: 2; Wed: 1). Observations occurred in 11 different counties, all on public lands, mainly on state WMAs.

The average length of the observations lasted 100 minutes and all observations occurred in the morning. Hunting party size ranged from 1-5 and averaged two hunters. About 27% of the parties observed used spinning-wing decoys and 27% of the parties used dogs.

In most cases, observers were only able to watch partial hunts (80%) compared to the entire hunt (20%). In 94% of the hunts, hunting parties were not aware they were being observed. In 94% of hunts, hunting ended by 9 AM.

Bag checks were conducted for 75 hunters who averaged 3.1 teal//hunter/day, with 82% blue-winged teal and 18% green-winged teal.

A total of 185 waterfowl flocks were observed over the 16 hunts, with 47% identified as teal (blue-winged, green-winged, or unknown teal) and 48% non-target ducks and 5% unknown. Wood ducks comprised 42% of the non-targets followed by mallards (30%), ring-necked ducks (10%), and hooded mergansers (7%). Five other species of non-targets were observed but all in relatively low numbers.

The attempt rate at teal was 63% and non-targets was $7\pm 4\%$ (95% CI) (Table 1).

During observations, 41 teal were observed harvested and 1 non-target duck (hooded merganser) which is 4.0% non-target kill rate (Table 2).

Overall teal harvest during the September season has been about 50,000 teal each of the first 2 seasons (Table 2; FWS harvest estimates); Minnesota ranks #3 in the US for teal harvest during September teal season behind Texas and Louisiana, which both allow 16 days of teal hunting.

Table 1. Number of hunting parties, teal flocks and non-target duck flocks in range encountered during legal shooting hours during experimental teal season evaluation in Minnesota in 2021-23 and Iowa, Michigan and Wisconsin in 2014-16.

State	Year	Parties	Teal flocks in range	Teal flocks shot at	% Teal shot at	Non-targets in range	Non-targets shot at	% Non-targets shot at	Upper 95% CI (% shot at)
Minnesota	2021-23 avg.	31	135	108	80%	116	9	8%	10%
Minnesota	2023	16	87	55	63%	92	6	7%	11%
Minnesota	2022	26	93	77	83%	77	4	5%	9%
Minnesota	2021	51	225	191	85%	178	18	10%	14%
Iowa	2014-16 avg.	60	285	219	77%	220	13	6%	7%
Michigan	2014-16 avg.	43	59	41	69%	210	10	5%	6%
Wisconsin	2014-16 avg.	38	60	37	61%	102	7	7%	8%

Table 2. Number of teal and other ducks killed during legal shooting hours during experimental teal season evaluation in Minnesota in 2021-23 and Iowa, Michigan and Wisconsin in 2014-16.

State	Year	Teal killed	Non-target killed	% non-target kill	Teal harvest	% Blue-winged teal
Minnesota	2021-23 avg.	99	5	5.0%		
Minnesota	2023	41	1	2.4%	n/a	
Minnesota	2022	99	4	4.0%	49,000	95%
Minnesota	2021	157	9	5.4%	48,000	87%
Iowa	2014-16 avg.	231	4	1.7%	41,000	94%
Michigan	2014-16 avg.	40	6	13.1%	7,000	52%
Wisconsin	2014-16 avg.	32	3	8.6%	15,000	86%

Table 3. Number of waterfowl law enforcement violations that were recorded statewide during the 5 day teal season, 2021-23, which included teal season but also early goose season.

	2021	2022	2023
No license	7	33	10
License not in possession	2	21	2
No federal duck stamp	7	39	5
Unsigned federal duck stamp	1	8	n/a
Closed season	19	21	11
Closed hours	2	9	19
Illegal weapon/manner	1	0	1
Overlimit	1	0	1
Wanton waste	2	2	1
Unplugged shotgun	16	24	16
Toxic shot	5	12	4
Loaded firearm	6	6	5

Discussion

Overall, the 5-day experimental teal season in 2023 was again successful. The attempt rates and take of non-teal remained well below the thresholds needed for an operational teal season (<25% attempt rate at non-teal; <10% kill rate of non-teal). Waterfowl stamp sales through teal season this year were 2% lower than last year so hunter participation was likely similar to last year. Law enforcement violations were higher than last year for shooting hour violations but most of the other violations are not specific to teal season (no license, no stamps, lead shot, etc.). We again had 2 tribal nations in northern Minnesota close their wild rice lakes to teal hunting due to potential safety concerns with wild rice harvesters and teal hunters on the same lakes.

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