

SUBJECT: Report on the Wisconsin Waterfowl Strategic Plan with an update on the potential for a sea duck season on Lake Michigan

FOR: DECEMBER, 2011 BOARD MEETING
Tuesday

TO BE PRESENTED BY / TITLE: Kent Van Horn, Migratory Bird Specialist

SUMMARY:

Information is annually provided to board members updating them on the actions and barriers to implementation of the Wisconsin Waterfowl Strategic Plan approved in 2007. This year, the format is an informational update at the board meeting and it will include information regarding work on a potential "sea duck season" for Lake Michigan.

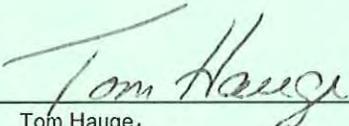
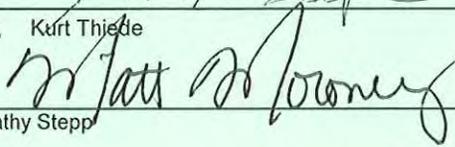
The US Fish and Wildlife Service allowed states, including Wisconsin, to slightly expand their duck hunting zone options. During 2011 public input to decide how to add a third duck hunting zone in addition to the existing north and south zones in Wisconsin, hunters expressed a desire for a new zone on the Mississippi River and Lake Michigan. However, federal rules would allow only one of these zones and in August the board approved a new Mississippi River zone. At that time, duck hunters and the board requested that Department staff explore the possibility of additional duck hunting days on Lake Michigan to take advantage of late migrating ducks on deep water. This has been referred to as a "sea duck season."

RECOMMENDATION: This item is informational and no action is needed.

LIST OF ATTACHED MATERIALS:

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| No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Fiscal Estimate Required | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | Attached |
| No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Environmental Assessment or Impact Statement Required | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | Attached |
| No <input type="checkbox"/> | Background Memo | Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Attached |

APPROVED:

 Bureau Director, Tom Hauge	<u>11/16/11</u> Date
 Administrator, Kurt Thiede	<u>11/17/11</u> Date
 Secretary, Cathy Stepp	<u>11/21/11</u> Date

cc: NRB Liaison DNR Rules Coordinator	Kent Van Horn WM/6 Tom Hauge WM/6	Scott Loomans WM/6
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DATE: November 11, 2011

TO: Natural Resources Board Members

FROM: Kent Van Horn, Migratory Game Bird Ecologist

SUBJECT: Annual summary of Waterfowl Strategic Plan accomplishments

In December, 2007 the Natural Resources Board approved a 10 year Wisconsin Waterfowl Strategic Plan following a 3 year public involvement and plan development process. The Board requested that they receive a report of annual accomplishments and barriers toward accomplishing the objectives set forth in this plan.

Waterfowl are migratory game birds so Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources staff are required to work cooperatively across the continent in the management of this resource. In calendar year 2011, Wisconsin staff continued to serve in key regional and national leadership roles in waterfowl management. The Mississippi Flyway Council is an organization of 14 states and 3 Canadian provinces which share the waterfowl resource in our migration flyway. Tom Hauge represents Wisconsin on the council and Kent Van Horn and Ron Gatti serve on the technical section of the council. Tom continued to serve as the Mississippi Flyway Council representative to the National Flyway Council and the US Fish and Wildlife Service – Service Regulations Committee. Bill Vander Zouwen served as chairman of the Upper Mississippi and Great Lakes Region Joint Venture on bird habitat. Kent Van Horn served as chair of the Mississippi Valley Population of Canada goose committee and worked on several key national issues such as duck hunting zones and sandhill crane management in the eastern part of North America. The North American Waterfowl Management Plan is currently under revision and Kent has represented Wisconsin through this 3 year revision process with the final workshop in 2011 and submission of comments on a draft plan. These regional and continental efforts are important aspects of successfully implementing state level management goals for migratory game birds including waterfowl.

Workload and budgetary limitations continue to slow progress toward new initiatives outlined in the Waterfowl Strategic Plan, however, basic management operations have been maintained and some new initiatives advanced in 2011. I have outlined below highlights for 2011 which are organized by the 6 Objectives identified in the strategic plan (pages 40-45, <http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/wildlife/hunt/waterfowl/plan2.pdf>)

Objective 1: Continue to provide and expand habitats and management necessary to meet the year round ecological needs of Wisconsin's diverse waterfowl community and other wetland species with recognition given to the state's role as a waterfowl production state and its waterfowl hunting heritage.

- Wisconsin is one of the nation's leaders in Federal North American Wetlands Conservation Act grants. Since 1992, Wisconsin has been awarded approximately \$29 million in Federal funds through this source to use for land acquisition and habitat restoration. DNR and other partners have added over \$92 million in matching funds to improve 125,545 acres of wetlands and associated upland habitat for waterfowl. There was 1 new NAWCA Standard and 7 new Small grant applications submitted this year from Wisconsin with funding requests totaling over \$1.5 million. If approved, these grant funds will be available for habitat projects as early as summer

2012. As noted last year, we have over 100 Wildlife-owned dams. For about 70 of these dams we need to complete a required Dam Failure Analyses (DFA). To begin addressing this deficiency, Wildlife Management has allocated \$350,000 in the current biennium to start working on DFAs. Step one of using this money was the identification of three large, high-hazard Wildlife dams. Private engineering companies will be contracted to prepare DFAs for these dams. Step two is to prioritize the remaining dams and use any remaining money to contract with private engineering companies to get as many done as possible. More funding will be needed in future bienniums.

- Wisconsin Waterfowl Stamp funds totaling over \$529,000 were provided to thirty-four state projects. Twenty-one of these projects involve major maintenance of wetland infrastructure reflecting the struggle to address needed maintenance issues major wetlands with limited funds.
- The Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC) received federal funding that they in turn passed on to the DNR to help fund habitat projects. Eight habitat projects will receive money. In addition, GLIFWC is using a federal grant to undertake an initiative to develop a wild rice strategy for the entire ceded territory. GLIFWC is working with the DNR, tribes, USDA Wildlife Services, US Forest Service and other partners to develop this strategy.
- In June, the DNR cooperated with the USFWS and NRCS to provide a weeklong wetland restoration training event for 30 participants.
- Ducks Unlimited continued its major role in Wisconsin wetland issues. Among its many activities, DU is working with the DNR and Sheboygan County to develop a survey and feasibility study of Sheboygan Marsh, the largest wetland in either the Lake Michigan or Lake Superior watershed. The lack of effective water level control at this marsh has resulted in recurring and expensive cattail problems and inefficient management capabilities. Completion of this study will identify potential solutions and allow for the development of cost estimates to implement.
- The many activities of wetland management on state wildlife areas, advocating within the land acquisition program, master planning, farm bill program coordination and invasive plant work continued.

Objective 2 – Monitor and evaluate waterfowl populations in Wisconsin across seasons and locations.

- Department staff and our cooperators continued the existing surveys and efforts, including the spring breeding waterfowl survey, waterfowl banding, and mid-winter waterfowl survey.
- The 2011 Wisconsin Waterfowl Breeding Population Survey was conducted statewide in May. This an important survey for management of Wisconsin's breeding waterfowl and the data from this effort are also used nationally as part of the waterfowl hunting regulation process. Based on the spring survey, 514,000 breeding ducks and 176,000 Canada geese were estimated in the Wisconsin breeding population. Both estimates represent an increase over 2011. <http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/wildlife/hunt/waterfowl/WaterfowlSurv2.pdf>
- In 2011 wildlife staff and cooperators banded 4034 Canada geese, 4639 mallards, and 1246 wood ducks, according to quotas requested by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The harvest rate data obtained from hunter band returns is an important part of the federal and flyway level decisions regarding the annual setting of waterfowl hunting seasons.
- The new monitoring initiative outlined in the strategic plan was to design and begin fall waterfowl surveys as well as a system for communicating the results to our customers; however, such an effort would require new staff and funding. We do not anticipate that this initiative will be advanced in the near future because of fiscal constraints.

- Department staff and cooperators have been successful in securing other funding to begin to answer some questions about fall/winter waterfowl movements in Wisconsin. Wildlife staff from the Northeast District, secured Area of Concern (AOC) funding for waterfowl surveys of Green Bay but this effort stalled when the DNR twin engine aircraft was taken out of service this fall for engine replacement. Another effort by a group of ornithologists and DNR pilots used US Fish and Wildlife Service grant funds available to evaluate the impact of wind power development in Lake Michigan to conduct aerial surveys of waterbirds on Lake Michigan from October 2010 to May 2011. This has provided some preliminary information on fall/winter waterfowl use on Lake Michigan.
- Wisconsin continues to provide funding as part of the cooperative effort to conduct breeding surveys in Ontario for the Mississippi Valley Population of Canada geese. These survey data are critical to the approval of our Canada goose hunting seasons. Each year, Ontario request staff assistance from Wisconsin with the surveys but because of travel restrictions we were not able to send staff to help with this effort in 2011. However, one of our retired Wisconsin DNR biologists has been volunteering the last few years to assist Ontario with this important work.

Objective 3 – Improve the waterfowl hunting experience and the measures of waterfowl hunter satisfaction at the state level.

- We have conducted waterfowl hunter surveys in 2005, 2007 and 2009 to learn about hunter experiences, desires and satisfaction with their waterfowl hunting experience. These surveys were mailed to several hundred randomly selected waterfowl hunters following the hunting season. These results have provided important information to guide the regulatory analysis and decision making process as well a number of property level management decisions. The repetition of the survey allows us to track changes in hunter satisfaction and attitudes on important management issues. In the winter of 2010-11 a survey using similar methods was used to obtain input on the proposed new duck hunting zones. The results of this survey provided important information leading to the final decision on duck hunting zones in 2011.
- We continue a strong annual public involvement process for establishing waterfowl hunting regulations as well as continued interactions with stakeholders. During the last year we conducted 4 public hearings, 2 public meetings, 3 advisory committee meetings, participated in 2 Wisconsin Conservation Congress (WCC) committee meetings, and spoke to several groups/events around the state. Press releases, interviews, and web communications were all used to inform waterfowl hunters and solicit input.
- In 2011, we implemented an historic change in Wisconsin duck hunting zones. The USFWS regulates the number of duck hunting zones and splits (temporary season closures) that a state can establish. These restrictions have prevented Wisconsin from recognizing the diversity of weather and waterfowl migrations in Wisconsin when planning waterfowl hunting season dates. After 20 years of discussion, the USFWS announced in August of 2010 that a small expansion of the duck hunting zone options would be offered. Wisconsin DNR staff then implemented a public involvement process that spanned 10 months and included an ad hoc committee of duck hunters and staff, a duck hunter mail survey, several meetings with waterfowl hunting groups, regional duck harvest analysis, advisory committee meetings, spring hearing question, as well as information sharing through the DNR website and press releases. We received 100's of emails, letters and phone calls on this topic. After several months, 2 new duck zone options emerged as most popular among duck hunters; creating a 3 zone system with splits to include a north, south and a Lake Michigan zone or a 3 zone system with splits to include a north, south and a Mississippi River zone. Under USFWS only one additional zone with season splits was allowed

so there had to be a decision between the Lake Michigan or Mississippi River zone. The NRB approved a new Mississippi River zone in August 2011. While not all duck hunters received their desires, most thought the process was inclusive and their voices were heard.

- As a result of duck hunting zone discussion there was renewed interest in the possibility of a late “sea duck season” on Lake Michigan. The NRB requested that staff begin working on the possibility of requesting such an additional “sea duck season” from the USFWS. In response to this request staff have begun the following: review existing precedent for sea duck seasons, assess current harvest levels, review available population and status information and initiate discussions with other states surrounding the Great Lakes about the potential for a special late duck season on the Great Lakes. A special sea duck season on the Atlantic coast has been offered since 1938. The current sea duck season is 107 days with a daily bag limit of 7 eiders, long-tailed ducks (oldsquaw) and scoters in aggregate. However, concern over this season in the last 20 years resulted in a reduced limit of only 4 scoters and a review of the impact of the season on sea duck populations. Data on sea duck populations that breed in boreal and arctic regions is poor compared to prairie breeding ducks. Within the states that border the Great Lakes, there is no opportunity for eider harvest and some opportunity for long-tailed duck and scoter harvest. For comparison, in the last 5 years about 20,000 long tails have been harvested annually on the Atlantic coast through all seasons compared to 7,000 in the Great Lakes during the regular 60 day season. For scoters, about 2,600 are harvested annually on the Great Lakes compared to 40,000 on the Atlantic Coast. Among the Great Lakes states in the Mississippi Flyway, Wisconsin and Michigan are the only 2 states that have had significant harvest levels of these 2 species. It may be possible to explore a different grouping of ducks for a special season on the Great Lakes. Discussions with the other state wildlife agencies have been initiated and a recommendation will be developed for the February 2012 Mississippi Flyway Council technical section meeting.
- In fall of 2010 we held public meetings to measure interest in additional open water duck hunting lakes and learn from local residents about the impacts of a regulation change on 13 lakes recommended by an ad hoc committee. Some lake associations requested that we delay proposing a rule change until they had time to discuss the issue at their spring or summer annual association meeting. We agreed to wait until September 2011 to accommodate this request but we heard very little back from these associations. In October, wildlife, law enforcement and customer service staff held an annual rules meeting where open water duck hunting lakes were discussed. It was agreed that we should move forward with a 2012 Spring Hearing Advisory question on this topic.
- Participation of Department staff in the regulatory process with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and as a member of the Mississippi Flyway Council is critical to managing Wisconsin waterfowl hunting and to cooperatively managing migratory bird populations. Continental duck populations were at a record high level in 2011 of 46 million ducks so regulatory challenges were few. Under high population conditions, federal regulations are more liberal and less complicated.
- A new idea presented in the 2007 strategic plan was to address management of hunter density, hunting pressure, refuge areas and shooting hours on densely hunted properties in order to improve the waterfowl hunting experience. During 2008, an ad hoc committee was created to explore management strategies to improve the waterfowl hunting experience on some of our popular waterfowl hunting areas. This group developed several rule and legislative proposals. In 2009, several of the committee’s ideas, including 4 refuge changes, special shooting hours at Mead and Lake Mills Wildlife Areas, and no early season waterfowl hunting on Mead Wildlife Area, were approved for implementation in 2010. Property managers at both locations reported positive responses from duck use and duck hunters so it was recommended in 2011 that these property level strategies be maintained into the future.

Objective 4 – Manage resident Canada goose populations at a level that balances conflicting societal perspectives. One segment of society values our resident Canada goose population for hunting and wildlife viewing while another segment considers them a nuisance or a source of damage to agricultural interests.

- Each spring we conduct a breeding waterfowl survey which includes the resident Canada goose population in Wisconsin. After a 5 year period of relatively stable numbers, it appears that an increasing trend has developed after population estimates recording an increase from 2009, 2010 and 2011.
- The Early Canada goose season harvest during the first 15 days of September was about 18,500. This year's harvest was up from the 15,851 geese harvested in 2009, but below the over 20,000 harvested in 2010. The Canada geese harvested in this season are over 90% Wisconsin breeding Canada geese.
- In addition to the early season, about 50% of the regular season Canada goose harvest consists of locally nesting geese. As of November 15, there were an estimated 28,000 Canada geese harvested in the regular season exterior zone. For 2011, that would represent about 14,000 local Canada geese harvested. Harvest of Canada geese in the 2011 regular Exterior Zone season was similar to 2010, but down from some recent years. Data from a mail survey of Horicon zone hunters will not be available until early February. An annual report on Canada goose harvest is published to document these data based on the phone-in Canada goose registration system and a Horicon zone survey <http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/wildlife/hunt/waterfow/report.pdf>.
- Feedback from hunters and local communities indicates that while there is an increasing number of Canada geese present in the fall, many geese spend much of their time in areas where hunting is not allowed (city parks, lakes within municipalities, farm fields within city limits etc.). This is a continuing challenge to effectively using hunting to impact local Canada goose populations.
- Department staff continued to work in partnership with USDA – Wildlife Services and local governments in the control of local Canada goose populations that conflict with human activities. In 2011, Wildlife Services received 100's of contacts for assistance with Canada goose issues, conducted goose round ups at 28 locations removing 1,950 geese and the Department issued 128 Canada goose nest and egg depredation permits in 27 counties, with 58 of these permits being issued in Milwaukee and Waukesha Counties. Permits for removal of adult Canada geese that are causing agricultural damage in the spring were issued to 50 landowners in 17 counties with 259 Canada geese removed. Department staff have been working to improve the reporting system for these permits to provide a more effective system of tracking the take of nuisance Canada geese and eggs. The data presented here are preliminary.

Objective 5 – Strengthen and maintain Wisconsin's long waterfowl hunting heritage by developing new strategies for waterfowl hunting education and recruitment and by building upon existing programs.

- Wisconsin is fortunate to be a state with relatively stable waterfowl hunter numbers for over 25 years while many other states have shown a decline in hunter numbers. A commitment by existing waterfowl hunters and the hunting culture of Wisconsin contribute significantly to this trend. The Wisconsin waterfowl hunter survey showed that 83% of Wisconsin waterfowl hunters have introduced an adult, child or both to the sport. Existing hunters are clearly our best resource for strengthening the waterfowl hunting heritage. It was decided that the best strategy for the Department was to aid existing programs and local efforts by duck hunting organizations by providing staff assistance and guidance which we continued in 2011.

- Department wardens and biologists assist local organizations in various waterfowl hunting workshops and in 2011 there were 5 recorded waterfowl Learn to Hunt events with 53 participants. The Wisconsin Waterfowl Association put an increased emphasis among its volunteers for waterfowl hunting workshops but only 5 of the 11 planned events were completed. Events were cancelled because of trouble scheduling volunteers and low registrations.
- Department staff conduct an annual survey of youth waterfowl hunters which estimates that approximately 3400 youth participate in the 2 day special hunt each year.
- Decreased access to hunting areas has been identified as a barrier in several forms of hunting. In 2011, the Department initiated a federally funded program, Voluntary Public Access, to offer financial incentives to landowners to open their lands for hunting, fishing, trapping and wildlife observation. To date, the program has 1140 lease agreements totaling 25,470.52 acres. It is estimated that 75% of the land enrolled in this program is suitable for duck or goose hunting.

Objective 6 - Through continued research, refine and better understand the variables that affect resident breeding and migration populations of waterfowl and apply this knowledge to management strategies.

- From 2007- 2009, blue-winged teal hens were captured and released with radio transmitters attached so that researchers could document the nesting and brood rearing habitat needs for these ducks. Preliminary results suggest that idle grassland, wet meadow and alfalfa are the most preferred nesting cover. However, the short mowing cycle in alfalfa would not have allowed for successful nesting of blue-winged teal in those areas. Adult hen blue-winged teal survival was much lower than survival of mallard hens studied in similar landscapes in Wisconsin. Raptor (21%) and mammalian (46%) predation resulted in most of the hen mortality. Captive decoy teal are necessary for capturing the wild teal hens used in the study. Disease problems within the decoy flock have required a new strategy of raising the decoys from eggs. This has delayed the final field season from 2010 to 2012 while this issue is addressed. During this 2 year period, staff had to develop a duck rearing facility in cooperation with the Oregon Correctional Center. The first year, 2010 had lower than expected survival but 2011 has been a better year. The project is on track to meet the goal of 150 hens for decoy trapping in April 2012. A fourth and final year of telemetry fieldwork is planned for the spring of 2012. Study site selection will take place in December 2011, with landowner contacts beginning in January 2012.
- Ongoing monitoring of waterfowl disease events continues. In recent years, we were able to conduct more comprehensive sampling and fund hunter bag checks through the use of federal funding of Avian Influenza sampling. Hunter bag checks for disease monitoring were not conducted in 2011.
- New initiatives presented in the strategic plan for fall surveys and duck distributions, spring habitat conditions and waterfowl disturbance issues would require new staff and funding which has not been approved. We do not anticipate that these efforts will be funded in the near future.