

Challenging waterfowl hunting on tap in eastern CO due to drought

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Waterfowl hunters will have their work cut out for them this season, as drought conditions have negatively affected habitat across the eastern plains.

“Due to the lack of moisture, many birds may fly quickly past Colorado in search of better conditions,” said Jim Gammonley, avian research program leader for Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

“This year’s drought is so extensive there aren’t a lot of other options, so birds could move far south earlier than usual, or some may even move back north for a while until the weather pushes them back again.”

CPW biologists found that local production for waterfowl was below average, although sites that had adequate water fared better than most. Continentally, however, there are a record number of breeding ducks, production of which will likely be high due to late moisture coming to the Canadian prairies. This indicates that many ducks should be heading south, but the timing and pattern of fall migration will depend on the weather. As many waterfowl hunters know, cold weather is a key requirement to bring birds south to Colorado.

“Waterfowl hunting in the northeast will be dynamic this year and will likely change weekly based on precipitation and drought conditions,” said Tom Kroening, area wildlife manager for Brush. “Hunters will want to scout areas and check on local conditions, which could yield great hunting or a tough outing.”

Wintering mallards and geese may also be affected by less agricultural production, such as corn and other grains. Persistent waterfowlers may find birds are drawn to local situations where there is water and habitat, yielding some great hunting for a period. However, this may be a tough waterfowl season.

“Waterfowl hunters may have to travel farther and work harder to find birds this year,” said Allen Vitt, a terrestrial biologist from Pueblo. “Conditions are dry in southeast Colorado, but there are places where hunters will be able to find birds if they do their homework before heading out.”

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Area Wildlife Manager Travis Black from Lamar agrees. “Most of our lakes down here are extremely low or dry, and birds may move through in a hurry this year. However, Two Buttes Reservoir has water in it for the first time in several years. This could be a hot spot for short stopping some migrates. “

Black adds that the Arkansas River is low and even dry in a few spots closer to the state line. “Typically, as the lakes freeze, ducks move to the river. River hunting for ducks may be tough this year, and ducks may move out with a cold snap,” he said.

While the drought may make things more difficult for hunters this year, it will pay long-term dividends for both the ducks and goose hunters. Wetland habitats are adapted to wet and dry cycles. A year or two of dry conditions helps nutrient cycling in wetlands and makes them more productive when they are wet again.

Once again this year, Colorado Parks and Wildlife will operate a reservation system for waterfowl hunters using certain State Wildlife Areas on the South Platte River and selected SWAs in western Colorado. A total of 19 properties in northeast Colorado and seven in western Colorado are part of the system.

Hunters who call the reservation system will be able to get additional information this year to ensure they are making informed decisions about when and where to hunt.

—When making a reservation, the customer service representative will have the most recent water conditions available to them. However, because weather is unpredictable, conditions can change quickly. The reservation confirmation letters will also have the water conditions printed on them in the “Special Alerts” section.

—A water conditions report has been added to the Reservation page on the website (<http://wildlife.state.co.us/Hunting/Waterfowl/Reservations>). At the time, CPW is only including reservation properties on the page.

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—The hunting reservation phone line also has reminders to check the water conditions report for the properties affected in the Central Flyway.

Hunters in northeast Colorado can make reservations for waterfowl blinds on State Wildlife Areas by calling 1-800-846-9453 (UGO-WILD). West Slope waterfowl hunters can call 970-255-6161. Reservations lines are open 9 a.m.-4 p.m., Monday-Friday, excluding state holidays.

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