

Migratory Game Bird Committee Meeting

November 13, 2013

Comfort Suites, N5780 Kinney Rd., Portage, WI

Attendance: Kent Van Horn (WDNR-Chair), Meghan Cibarich (WDNR Waterfowl Assistant), John Wetzel (WWF), Steve Hoffman (WDNR-Northern District), Jeff Nass (HRC), Bill Hirt (WDNR-West Central District), Don Kirby (WWA), John Edelbute (CC), Jason Fleener (WDNR-Acting Wetland Habitat Specialist), Ron Gatti (WDNR-Science Services), Phil Peterson (USDA-APHIS), Jim Holzwart (WDNR Northeast District), Brian Glenzinski (DU), Kurt Waterstradt (USFWS). Absent: Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, Lacrosse County Conservation Alliance, Green Bay Duck Hunters, Representatives from Customer Service and Law Enforcement.

Meeting begins at 9:00 a.m.

Introductions around the table

Wisconsin Waterfowl Season Review and Discussion (Powerpoint by Kent Van Horn)

- Good precipitation early in the year for brood rearing
- Summary of 2013 duck season dates by zone
- New in 2013 – Open water hunting expansion, 10 new lakes now open
- Summary of 2013 goose season dates
- Reported harvest from early goose season = approximately 19,000 (5th highest on record)
- Exterior zone goose season reported harvest = 31,000 in exterior zone (to date). Similar to 2012
- Cumulative harvest in exterior zone – estimated 85% reporting compliance
- Estimated 60% of harvest consists of MVP geese with Wisconsin being the largest harvester in the flyway.

Committee's reaction/report of waterfowl seasons so far in 2013

- No significant increase in activity or complaints reported on 10 lakes now open for open water duck hunting
- John E. – Overall hunters appear to be satisfied with duck and goose season structures and dates.
- John E. – Some hunters have expressed interest in allowing all Horicon tags to be used on the same day.
- This year was the earliest possible duck season opener date, but will be the latest next year. This date shifts each year with the federal regulation calendar of opening the Saturday nearest September 24. In 2013 this was September 21, in 2014 it will be September 27. Therefore, folks that want the season a little later will get that in 2014.
- Current conditions – Small ponds and bays are iced over in the north and on the Mississippi backwaters.

- Teal were present for northern opener, but not around the Mississippi until the 2nd opener.
- Lower duck/goose production was suspected around the Mississippi due to flooding, and low production in parts of the north due to the May snow storm.
- Ron G. – Nesting survey at Zeloski Marsh observed nests flooded out on the island.

New Horicon Zone Boundary for 2014

- Rule changes approved in 2013 to be implemented in 2014 season.
- Horicon Zone boundary will shrink, beginning in 2014
- 1-800 harvest reporting system will be used for Horicon in 2014. Permits will be punch type from ALIS system. Just like Exterior Zone
- Mailing survey will eventually be phased out for Horicon zone hunters.

Kent stated that there is a need to communicate the Horicon Zone changes so that hunters are not confused or purchase the wrong zone permit. He asked for committee input and suggestions.

Committee suggestions are summarized below:

- Communications need to begin early, prior to the start of the 2014 licensing year (March 2014) and Conservation Patron License sales.
- Press releases and communications needed through WDNR and Wisconsin Outdoor News.
- Potential prompt that comes up in ALIS for clerk to notify customers of the changes prior to license purchase. Also on website purchases. Committee members thought this was an ideal approach
- Possibly distribute posters to ALIS agents showing the new boundary and former boundary
- Send post-cards to hunters who have purchased Horicon tags over the last few seasons. Committee members also strongly supported this idea and go back a couple of years for data on Horicon zone purchasers
- Gov. Delivery messages to waterfowl hunting subscribers
- Provide updates on WDNR website
- Consult with Customer Service and Licensing to see if hunters can exchange their tags from Horicon zone to Exterior if they made a mistake. Wildlife and CS will need to develop a policy and process for this issue.
- Wardens should educate hunters of the changes the first year rather than issue citations if they have the wrong permit for the area that they are hunting.

Dove Hunting/Field Management - Kent Presented background on Dove hunting in Wisconsin and other states

- WI began hunting doves in 2003. While dove hunting has a long history in the US there are aspects of WI dove hunting that we need to learn as we go. So we continue to adapt and improve our management each year.
- 10-15,000 hunters harvest about 100,000 doves each season in Wisconsin

- The season is currently 70 days beginning September 1 with a 15 bird daily bag limit. The season may be lengthened in the eastern United States to 90 days
- 80-90% of all doves are harvested within the first 2-3 weeks of the season in all states.
- Over the last 10 years the dove population trend in Wisconsin has increased about 0.5% annually.
- Most dove hunting states manage public crop fields for dove hunting.
- Fields are leased on private lands for hunter access in some other states, and farmer gets to harvest crop after dove season.
- Currently WDNR is managing 300 acres of dove fields across 15 counties (40 fields total).
- The primary crop has been Clearfield brand of sunflowers which require a 90-day growing season. This is difficult in Wisconsin because of short growing season, particularly north of the Southern District.
- Average dove field size is 7 acres in Wisconsin. Other states have a wide range from 1-50 ac.
- Hunting pressure is intense during the first 2 days and heavy the first 2 weeks. After that there is very little use of the fields. The initial intense hunting pressure presents safety, hunt quality and neighbor issues. However, the hunting public views dove hunting fields very favorably.
- Most other states limit shooting hours on public dove fields (afternoon or morning hunts) and some manage hunter density.
- Approximately half of other dove hunting states limit hunter numbers through special permits, but statutory authority does not exist in Wisconsin.
- Challenges exist in establishing good sunflower crops in time for the season opener with a short growing season.

Case Study – Kent showed the group one public field example to show the good and bad

- Site is 13 acres split into 2 fields.
- Rotation of corn (or other crop) and sunflowers occurs every year between the 2 fields
- Easy access and visible from road. Parking lot shared with duck hunting access
- On property edge with private land on 1 side and county road on another
- In 2013, the west half of a field was planted to corn, while the eastern half was planted to sunflowers.
- Sunflower field was adjacent to private property with a residence. Portions of the field were within 100 yards of the residence and too near the road.
- Need to address proximity of fields to residences, roadways and power lines in the future and the layout of the fields (direction of rows and where sunflowers are cut).

Areas of Management guidance and policy for dove fields identified through staff discussions

1. Address scope of feasible dove field work – We have 8,000 ac of crop land on WA's but not everywhere is suitable for a dove hunting field.
2. Evaluate policy and administrative rules in relation to other practices

3. **Establish practical field management guidance** (property choice, field locations, field management practices)
4. **Communication of dove field opportunity**; work load, method, level of detail

- We are addressing the last 2 items by December. #1 and 2 later by different staff
- Ad-hoc dove team and consultation with Migratory Game Bird Committee (feedback from this meeting) and then presented to the WPT in December
- Wildlife Policy Team, Law Enforcement and Legal Services will be involved in the rule evaluation/change
- The following draft guidance was developed by an ad hoc team of wildlife and law enforcement staff

Draft 1. Dove Field Guidance – Property Selection

- Wide upland areas preferred
- Property with prior cropping history preferred, in agricultural landscape
- Good access for farming and hunters
- Dove field needs to be consistent with property master plan
- Establish multiple fields within and among properties in same area if possible to spread out hunter pressure
- Explore northern limits of growing sunflowers and use of other crop types
- Avoid residential areas

Committee suggestions and discussion:

- When selecting new properties for fields this would be the place to try new regulations such as reduced hours since there is no historic use already. Reduce any complaints
- Committee supports testing alternative crops in more northern field locations
- Houses next to wildlife areas may be a zoning issue that is bigger than dove fields
- Staff indicated that they need clearer guidance on the agency's over all approach toward crop fields on state land
- Can we find money to lease private crop land for public dove hunting? (alternative programs to VPA)
- In property selection, food plots should be a part of the existing master plan or amendments would be needed

Draft 2 Dove Field Guidance – Field Placement

- Coarse, dry soils are preferred; earlier planting and better dove use
- Consider distance to water and roost sites (conifer, dead trees) as dove use these daily

- Locate potential sharecroppers in the area to plant fields
- Good field access for farming equipment and hunters
- Good neighbor – Avoid areas where neighbors may be disturbed or concerned by shooting activity
- Locate field toward interior of properties so surrounding land use is wildlife area.
- At least 2-3 fields per property with several acres each to allow crop rotation
- Avoid areas where hunters may be tempted to shoot within 50 feet of roadway center
- Avoid planting within 100 yards of residences/private buildings

Committee suggestions and discussion:

- Utilize existing pheasant stocking fields for future dove field plantings because this is a similar public activity.
- Locating field in the interior can be difficult because many of our properties have a central wetland feature and don't have enough upland to accomplish this.
- Avoid planting next to power lines
- Avoid areas with high deer numbers . Staff have observed heavy deer browse keeping the sunflowers from growing.
- Consider not planting a field within 300 yards of residence or private buildings

Draft 3 Dove Field Guidance – Field Management

- Clearfield variety of sunflower seeds has the preferred crop – 90 day growing season
- Plant before May 10 if possible to allow optimal growth and maturity of seeds by season opener, Sept 1
- Manipulate crops (cut) during the last two weeks of August
- Leave half of field standing
- Share-cropper typically does planting, pre-treatment, and manipulation. DNR staff often do the post-emergence spraying.
- Manipulate the rows during planting to create ideal shooting direction
- Experiment with crops other than sunflowers (e.g. wheat, millet)
- Weed control important to create ideal bare ground conditions for the birds

Committee suggestions and discussion:

- The committee recommends we restrict shooting hours on dove fields to morning or afternoon hunts and consider limiting the days/week they are open.
- There is a desire to balance simplification and rule consistency with current needs.
- Staff explained that under WI law time could be limited on fields (daily time closures), but number of hunters cannot be limited. Traditionally there has been very little legislative interest in changing the law to allow limiting hunter numbers.
- Test using staggered manipulation of the fields to extend the useful life of the field

- Suggest we look at alternative crops – Plant winter wheat. Wheat provides nesting cover in spring and fields can be harvested just prior to the dove season as a normal agricultural practice
- Wheat is heavily planted in central Wisconsin on farms, but little observed usage by doves in late summer
- Committee members discussed the merits of a rotation that included a year of fallow/weed fields or 2-3 years of grass rotated with sunflower or other crops. Jim indicated that he had attempted to mow a fallow weed field to see if doves would use the site for seed but it was not used by doves.

Draft 4 Dove Field Guidance – Providing Information on Dove Fields

- The public desires information on dove fields but public requests are quite varied
- List of dove fields and coordinates were posted on DNR web page the last 2 years
- List of coordinates had complaints, even when they were accurate. Does not seem like this is the best method to tell folks where fields are located
- Providing coordinates has likely increased public inquiries, rather than decrease inquiries as was suggested as a reason for posting this information
- Recommendation – List fields on web page with a link to the wildlife area webpage and a map that shows where the fields are located. Then the user is directed to additional information on the property and is shown the context of the field.
- Detailed information on field condition and dove use cannot be provided with current staff time
- List all managed fields and then let hunters scout the areas for dove use

Committee suggestions and discussion:

- Committee supports some type of location information on the website but not necessarily coordinates. DNR website also has interactive map to view properties and satellite photos.
- Use of wildlife area maps seems a good approach. A couple of committee members noted that they do not use a GPS to find their way
- If provide coordinates then important to be consistent with how GPS coordinates are determined (parking lots, center of fields etc.)
- If a map is used then the public can see all the crop fields on the wildlife area and relationship to other land features. Then the hunter can scout the fields each year to see which ones have crop growth that the individual hunter judges to be a good site for dove hunting

Exploration of Early Teal Hunting Season Possibilities in Wisconsin

Teal season change issues:

- Harvest Assessment – Continental BWTE populations can sustain 2-9 times the current harvest levels

- 2013 – A bag limit increase from 4 to 6 birds for mid-latitude and southern states with an existing teal season
- Some northern states asked for early teal or early duck season
- USFWS supports something for northern states in the flyway, but presents several obstacles
- USFWS major concern is non-target kill of resident breeding birds (i.e. wood ducks and mallards)

Past and present teal seasons

- Of 14 states in the Mississippi Flyway, only MN, MI, WI and IA are not allowed a teal season
- IA is allowed to use 5 days out of their 60 and schedule early but this not additional hunting days
- TN & KY have a 5-day teal/wood duck season, but USFWS is concerned about this
- Other 8 states have an early teal season that had a 4 day daily bag limit, but now a 6 bird limit
- 9 day season when BWTE are at 3.3 million and a 16 day season when at 4.7 million
- The last few years the BWTE population has been over 6 million

Discussion of Potential Early Teal Season in Wisconsin

- Could result in early disturbance during duck build up
- Placement of a season would have to work around the youth duck hunt
- Placement of early teal season would have to consider timing of regular duck season openers
- Difficult to place season at an ideal time during September
- Not sure of timing of USFWS decision
- Evaluation of season required
- Next Steps – Hunter survey, continue discussions, other ideas

Options

- Do Wisconsin hunters even want an early teal season? Keep seasons status quo?
- Current framework allows 9-16 day early teal season
- Would Wisconsin hunter prefer a shorter teal season or use the maximum allowable days?
- Should early season start at sunrise, rather than ½ hour before to enable better identification of duck species?
- 3 states have short teal seasons (5 days) for teal and wood duck. USFWS prefers to not allow early harvest of wood ducks.

Discussion – Committee comments and questions

- When should the season be placed (if at all)?
- Concerns of birds disturbed before the regular duck season openers.
- If non-Wisconsin teal move through later would an early season have a greater impact on the local breeding population of teal, which is in decline?
- Most Wisconsin breeding teal have left the state by Oct. 1 and many leave before Sept. 1

- An early teal season connected to the beginning of the regular duck season would essentially create an early duck opener and potentially disturb all ducks prior to the regular season.
- If an early teal season is allowed, it may be best to give at least 1-2 weeks break before regular duck season to allow birds to settle down.
- An early teal season would have to be shorter than 16 days
- Do not overlap early teal season with youth duck hunt
- Early teal season would disturb and result in incidental take of wood ducks
- If an early teal season for northern states goes into effect, all states (WI, MN, IA, MI) should have a unified proposal to USFWS (all or nothing).

2013 Conservation Congress Spring Hearing Resolutions

- Resolution #370113 – Increase daily bag limit of hen mallards to 2
 - In 2007 and 2009 duck hunter questionnaires, only 33% of hunters were in favor of a 2 hen mallard bag limit
 - Recent analysis shows that hen mallards in Wisconsin are already being harvested at a rate that may not be sustainable and may cause a population decline. Increasing harvest on these females may make the situation worse.
- Resolution #060413 – Control of brown headed cowbirds
 - Would allow private citizens and conservation groups to engage in control activities
 - Control permits can currently be obtained through APHIS so there is no need for a additional government program.
 - According to breeding bird atlas, the population of cowbirds appears to be declining in Wisconsin
 - Cowbird parasitism can be minimized in bluebird nest boxes if the hole is of the proper dimensions
- Resolution #490113 – Northern Waterfowl Zone season dates
 - Create a season split around the deer season instead of early November
 - Late season split around deer season would only impact the season during certain years since the 60-day season ends before deer season in years that the season starts early
 - According to hunter surveys, most hunters do not want to see a split in the north
 - In 2012, northern zone split was in early November. Some good hunter feedback and some bad. Some hunters want to hunt early November ducks, while others like to hunt in December in open waters not covered by ice.
 - Steve H.- best not to have any northern split, but put toward the very end of the season if absolutely necessary
 - Northern chapters of WWA were in favor of a northern split
 - All other committee members were not in favor of a northern split

Mississippi Council Updates

- Early teal season proposal from northern states needed by Feb. 2014. Kent is working with the other northern states to develop a consensus proposal.

- Tennessee begins first sandhill crane hunt on November 28
- Discussion needed on better control of captive mallard releases
- Discussion of changes to regulatory cycle using prior year data and earlier annual decision on the hunting seasons.

Public Comments

- No members of public or non-committee members present at meeting

Meeting Adjourned – 2:00 p.m.