



Ducks Unlimited's Work in Migration Areas

The Bottom Line:

“Enormous acreages of wetland habitats have been lost in many critical migration areas. Ducks Unlimited restores key habitats in migration areas that are most important for waterfowl survival and breeding success.”

What causes ducks to migrate at particular times?

- Shorter day lengths in northern breeding areas trigger behavioral and physiological changes that cause the birds to prepare for migration. The actual “triggers” to migrate are factors such as food availability, air temperature, snow cover and wind direction. Hunting pressure can also be a trigger. Where it is high, the birds may migrate sooner. Where it is low, the urgency to leave will be less.
- Snow and ice that freezes wetlands and covers food on agricultural fields are normally the final cues that send even latest birds south. When winters are mild in mid-latitude states, birds will stay farther north than usual.
- Migration requires a lot of work and energy. Many ducks simply have a better chance of surviving and reproducing if they don't use energy to migrate if they don't have to. Many mallards and Canada geese, for example, will stay as far north in the fall and winter as they can find food and open water.

Do waterfowl use the same habitats during the fall and spring migrations?

- Fall and spring migrations are not the same.
- In the fall, waterfowl tend to use larger wetlands that provide refuge from hunters and often have the kinds of food that the birds need. During this time of the year, most species depend on plant foods such as aquatic vegetation, waste grains and seeds from moist soil plants.
- In the spring, waterfowl are generally more spread out across the landscape and occur in smaller groups. At this time they tend to use smaller, temporary wetlands because they warm faster and produce aquatic invertebrates for foods needed for egg production and nesting. In the spring pairs also avoid disturbance from other birds as they prepare to breed.

- Some of the most important migration areas for North American waterfowl include: Rainwater Basin (Nebraska); Klamath River basin (northern California, southern Oregon); Great Lakes coastal marshes (e.g., southwest Lake Erie, Ohio); the big river systems of the Midwest (Illinois, Missouri, Ohio, Iowa, Minnesota), and; Chesapeake and Delaware Bays on the east coast.

What kind of habitat work is Ducks Unlimited doing in migration areas?

- Ducks Unlimited has actually done relatively little habitat conservation work that is designed specifically for migrating waterfowl. DU's work more typically addresses habitat needs for breeding birds.
- Breeding and wintering habitats usually provide additional benefits for spring migrating birds when these areas are flush with water from winter rains and spring run-off from snow melt. In most mid-latitude and northern regions agricultural fields are usually partially flooded from snow melt providing important food resources in the form of spilled grain, weed seeds and some invertebrates.
- Fall-staging projects typically focus on large, protected complexes that are usually managed to produce abundant moist soil waterfowl food plants. These are often on public lands where most large wetlands are still protected and there is already a significant infrastructure in place to actively manage water.
- Projects on public lands also enhance local hunting opportunities and success during the fall hunting seasons. Other than rivers and lakes these public lands are often the only habitats remaining in many mid-latitude regions of the country.

But don't DU projects short-stop waterfowl on their way south in the fall?

- No. Millions and millions of acres of wetlands previously used by migrating waterfowl have been lost. DU's work is critical in some areas just to maintain the most basic ability of the habitats to sustain waterfowl during migration.
- DU's programs cannot cause waterfowl to stay farther north than they otherwise would (i.e., short-stop). Low temperatures, snow cover and hunting pressure are still the main factors that will cause the birds to migrate.

Does DU artificially feed waterfowl in the migration areas, or pump water to prevent it from freezing and hold birds farther north in the fall?

- Absolutely not. We have no programs to artificially feed birds or keep water open to prevent migration. There are already millions of acres of spilled grain on agricultural fields that would overwhelm any attempt to further change migration patterns. Thousands of miles of rivers and thousands of acres of lakes would similarly overwhelm any effort to provide open water to change the migrations of birds.

Are migration patterns changing?

- That appears to be the case, for the short-term at least. Fall migration patterns have apparently been influenced in recent years by warmer than normal temperatures and higher than normal rainfall patterns. On top of that, there are now millions of acres of agricultural fields that are left uncultivated to prevent soil erosion that also provide abundant spilled grain for field-feeding waterfowl. As another example, zebra mussels in the Great Lakes have changed migration patterns of some diving ducks.
- Long-term changes in migration patterns may occur as a result of large, permanent changes in habitat conditions, such as the clearing of millions of acres of bottomland hardwoods in the lower Mississippi valley, or weather patterns, such as could be the case if recent weather patterns are an indication of global climate change.