

# Early birds

## *Teal season provides waterfowlers a tune-up*

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

Enveloped in darkness, we waited as various delta creatures greeted the imminent birth of a new day with their contribution to the natural cacophony echoing through this warm, humid wetland on a September morn.

Above us, unseen rapidly beating wings followed by the sound of something splashing into the pond caught our attention. Faint whistles and high-pitched squeals trumpeted the movements of other small twisting shapes rocketing low over the grass before vanishing into the still dark sky.

Crouching in high reeds, we counted down the minutes until legal shooting hours. Soon, distant thunder rumbled across the marshes and bays, but the sound didn't come from a cloudless sky. After months of anticipation, another waterfowl season had begun.

### Fast migrations

Blue-winged teal migrate much earlier than most other ducks. Therefore, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service allows some states like Alabama to hold special September teal seasons. Bluewings typically reach the Gulf Coast by early September and depart for places farther south. They often disappear before the regular duck season opens.

"Blue-winged teal are among the first nesters and breeders on the northern prairies, so they are the first waterfowl to migrate," explained Seth Maddox, the

Alabama Division of Wildlife & Freshwater Fisheries Migratory Game Bird Coordinator. "They don't wait for cold weather. They look at the photo periods of how much sunlight is in a day. The peak of the migration through Alabama usually occurs in the second or third week of September."

### Hunting days

This year, teal season runs from Sept. 12-27. During teal season, sportsmen may bag up to six ducks in any combination of blue-winged and green-winged teal, but no other duck species. However, sportsmen can shoot geese during Sept. 1-30.

"We weren't able to fly the breeding population surveys this year because the Canadian border was closed due to the COVID virus," Maddox advised. "Overall, though, the long-term population averages for both blue-winged and green-winged teal are doing well. Bluewing populations have been increasing over the last 10 to 15 years. The greenwing population is stable. Sportsmen normally don't see many green-winged teal in Alabama during the early season, but they might see a few."

Small, fast and tremendously agile, teal habitually fly at first light. On a good day, hunters might bag limits before the sun even fully rises. Teal characteristically fly in tight flocks maneuvering as one unpredictable unit. They frequently fly extremely low and erratic over the marsh grass, then buzz the decoys.



Photo by John N. Felsher

**After fetching** a blue-winged teal, a Labrador retriever presents it to his master. The federal government allows states like Alabama to hold September teal seasons to increase the harvest of early-migrating blue-winged teal. The Alabama teal season runs from Sept. 12-27.

Sometimes, teal seem to materialize out of nowhere and vanish just as quickly without sportsmen knowing where they came from.

"Teal hunting can be hit or miss in Alabama," Maddox said. "We never know when teal will push down into Alabama. Usually sportsmen get at least one good weekend during the season."

Some of the best teal hunting in the Cotton State occurs in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta and the marshes along the Gulf of Mexico coastline. The large bays in the lower delta just north of the Mobile Causeway and surrounding marshes can provide good waterfowl gun-

ning at times, but the area gets heavily pressured. Look for out of the way places and small potholes to throw a few decoys. People can also hunt in Mobile Bay and Mississippi Sound.

"The lower or upper Mobile-Tensaw Delta areas are really good places in south Alabama to hunt teal," Maddox recommended. "People can also hunt along the coast by Grand Bay Savanna Wildlife Management Area. Along the Perdido River is another place where waterfowlers might find some teal in September. Anywhere they can find a small shallow pond or other shallow water with some vegetation in it, sportsmen might find teal."