

# DUCK SEASON PREVIEW

*Waterfowlers hope for success in a crazy year*

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With unseasonably warm weather this fall, surging hurricanes and a worldwide pandemic, Alabama waterfowlers face many challenges in this crazy year, but with some scouting and luck, they should bag some birds.

“With COVID-19 happening this year, federal biologists didn’t get to do the population survey they traditionally do in the spring,” reported Seth Maddox, the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division top migratory bird biologist. “In terms of waterfowl habitat, we lost some timber in South Alabama and other areas from the hurricanes. Overall, we had good precipitation throughout the summer with good growing conditions for crops and native vegetation. It’s looking good waterfowl in Alabama. Whether they get here or not – that’s a different question!”

Duck, coot and merganser season opens Nov. 27-28. It reopens Dec. 5 and runs through Jan. 31, 2021, with a limit of six ducks per day. A special late hunt for youths, active military and veterans will be held on Feb. 6, 2021. For more specific information on season dates and limits, see [www.outdooralabama.com/seasons-and-bag-limits/waterfowl-season](http://www.outdooralabama.com/seasons-and-bag-limits/waterfowl-season).

“Most species are still at high population levels, except for pintail and scaup,” Maddox commented. “Those species have been on the downward trend for years. We had pretty poor seasons during the last two years. Weather people are predicting this season to be a little drier with some cold snaps in December, but above average temperatures in January. The quality of hunting might not be as good as it has been in the past, but it might be a little better than the last couple of years.”

New this year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service dropped the daily scaup limit from three to one. Sportsmen need to watch what they shoot, particularly when hunting along the coast or in large waterbodies. While waterfowlers can only keep one scaup, people can still shoot six ring-necked ducks per day. Lesser scaup and ringnecks look very similar, especially under low-light or rainy conditions, and frequently flock together.

“Scaup used to be very common with around five to six million birds,” Maddox recalled. “In the mid-1980s, the scaup population started dropping. Now we have about



Photo by John N. Felsher

**Skyler Roberts** shows off a mallard drake she bagged during a hunt. Among the most prized ducks, mallards usually head south as colder weather arrives.

half as many. We’re trying to figure out what’s going on with those species.”

Hunting success in South Alabama largely depends upon the weather. Some birds fly south regardless of the temperature, but a strong cold front can push more mallards and other ducks farther south.

“It’s been warm this fall and wet across the state since last spring,” Maddox detailed. “With the hurricanes, the Mobile-Tensaw Delta had a lot of tidal influx this year. It has good vegetation in some areas, but we probably lost a good bit of aquatic vegetation because of the storm surges and flooding events.”

The Mobile-Tensaw Delta remains one of the better waterfowling areas in Alabama. The more timbered Upper Delta Wildlife Management Area holds abundant wood ducks, but also attracts some mallards, gadwalls and teal. People could possibly find some beautiful hooded mergansers. Cold weather can bolster the local wood duck population with birds migrating down from farther north.

“We have a good population of resident wood ducks that reproduce in Alabama,” Maddox advised. “Wood ducks are always

in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, but in some years, we get a significant influx of birds coming down from the north when the weather turns colder. In the delta, we have plenty of nest cavities for them with all those giant trees. We’ve also put up some nesting boxes.”

One of the most striking waterfowl in North America, wood ducks flourish in swamps, wooded lakes, sloughs and other sluggish freshwater systems. Woodies habitually follow the same flight patterns each day. At first light, they fly from their roosts to feeding areas and reverse course in late afternoon. The late flight commonly doesn’t even start until after shooting hours end.

Waterfowlers must do their scouting to bag woodies. Look for out-of-the-way sloughs, ponds and oxbow lakes where ducks can find their favorite food, acorns. In the right spot, waterfowlers can enjoy fast action, it only briefly. The morning flight might only last 15 or 20 minutes and often ends before the sun even fully rises.

Sportsmen hunting the lower Mobile-Tensaw Delta marshes and bays might bag just about any duck that passes through Alabama. The bag typically contains gadwalls and green-winged teal, but waterfowlers might also shoot a few wigeons, pintails, mallards, assorted divers and other species. Look for bays and pockets growing with aquatic grasses. In warm years, sportsmen might encounter fulvous or black-bellied tree ducks, which breed in the United States and fly to Mexico for the winter. In recent years, these odd birds became more common in Alabama.

“Wood ducks are usually our number one species harvested across the state, but people also kill a lot of gadwalls,” Maddox said. “Because of the storms this year, some areas of the Lower Delta might hold less food than normal this year. Wood ducks eat a lot of acorns, but so do mallards. Gadwalls eat some acorns, but they mainly eat aquatic vegetation. Early in the season, before available food disappears, waterfowlers might bag some birds.”

Boaters cannot operate gasoline-powered motors from the second Saturday in November through the second Saturday in February in the delta Waterfowl Management Zone, which includes Big Bateau Bay and Bay Grass. People can still hunt those areas if they enter without using gasoline-powered motors.

In addition, people cannot hunt in the 210-acre Apalachee Refuge, a triangular waterfowl sanctuary between Interstate 10 and the Mobile Causeway at the southern edge of the Lower Delta west of the Apalachee River. Moreover, people cannot hunt waterfowl from the CSX Railroad south to I-10 on Mondays and Tuesdays and must stop waterfowl hunting every other day by 1 p.m. For more specific guidance, see [www.outdooralabama.com/sites/default/files/2020-08/2020-21%20Waterfowl%20Hunting%20Guide.pdf](http://www.outdooralabama.com/sites/default/files/2020-08/2020-21%20Waterfowl%20Hunting%20Guide.pdf).

People can also hunt ducks south of the Mobile Causeway throughout Mobile Bay and in Mississippi Sound. In the big waters, waterfowlers normally kill redheads, canvasbacks, scaup and ringnecks, but might occasionally bag a few green-winged teal, gadwall, bufflehead or other ducks. In the salty marshes along the coast, sportsmen might find some mottled ducks. Waterfowlers can also find many other places to hunt across the state.

“The Tennessee River is our top area for waterfowl hunting in the state,” Maddox said. “The Jackson County waterfowl areas and Swan Creek WMA in Decatur are always good. In the southern half of the state, Lowndes WMA west of Montgomery is a really good spot to go duck hunting. It’s just off the Alabama River. Farther west, David K. Nelson WMA on the Tombigbee River near Demopolis is a really good area for waterfowl hunting.”

Lakes, such as Guntersville, Wheeler and Eufaula, also provide good duck hunting opportunities. Natural waterways in Alabama belong to the public. On most navigable rivers, lakes and bays, people with boats can stop and begin hunting almost anywhere that safety permits unless otherwise prohibited.

Local authorities might impose more restrictions in certain areas and waters. In addition, season dates and other regulations on public hunting properties might differ from the rest of the state so always check the regulations before hunting anywhere.

Have a Happy Thanksgiving.

**(Felsher is always looking for ideas or outdoors adventures that will make good stories. If you have a good idea, contact him at [j.felsher@hotmail.com](mailto:j.felsher@hotmail.com) or through Facebook.)**

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