



SEASON IN REVIEW 2025-2026



DUCK POPULATIONS, HABITAT CONDITIONS,
WINTER WEATHER, & REPORTS FROM THE FIELD



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2025-2026 Season in Review

The 2025–26 waterfowl season began against the backdrop of a below-average fall flight, intensifying drought across the midcontinent, variable habitat conditions, and a strengthening La Niña. The 2025 Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey estimated 33.98 million ducks in the traditional survey area—unchanged from 2024 but still 4 percent below the long-term average (LTA). Mallards held steady, but remained 17 percent below the LTA. However, pond counts were sobering, falling 19 percent from 2024 and registering the lowest total since 2004. Like the previous season, widespread drought caused early migrants to overfly the prairies in favor of northern boreal and subarctic habitats where conditions were more reliable.

Despite these challenges, several species showed remarkable strength. Gadwall, northern shovelers, canvasbacks, and redheads remained above average, while pintails increased a modest 13 percent. Still, productivity in the traditional survey area was fair to poor, setting expectations for a fall flight dominated by well-educated adult birds. Hunters in the Atlantic and Pacific flyways were cautiously optimistic, as improved habitat and recovery of local breeding populations laid the foundation for potentially favorable fall flights.

Weather shaped nearly every aspect of the 2025–26 hunting season. Warm conditions persisted through early fall, delaying migration across all four flyways. In the Pacific Flyway, periodic floods and a prolonged fog inversion in California's Central Valley dispersed birds across newly available habitats and limited consistent success. Hunters in the Pacific Northwest and Great Basin saw improved action only after January cold brought new birds into the region. The Central and Mississippi flyways were dominated by extreme dryness, particularly across the Mississippi Alluvial Valley, where Arkansas endured one of its driest seasons in more than a century.

Natural flooding was nearly nonexistent, creating stark differences between hunters with pumping capacity and those without. Diving duck hunters in the Upper Midwest fared well with strong numbers of redheads, scaup, and ringnecks, while mallard hunting was highly dependent on the timing of snow and cold fronts. A late-season freeze produced the best hunting of the year for those who found open water. In the Atlantic Flyway, early-season drought and warmth gave way to improved habitat and more consistent hunting as winter set in. Freezing conditions in northern states concentrated birds on deeper lakes, rivers, and coastal systems, and a series of late-January winter storms helped deliver a strong finish.

Looking ahead to the 2026 breeding season, managers remain cautious. Soil moisture has improved in parts of the U.S. prairies, but Canadian prairies and many boreal regions remain dry. Wetland basins across much of the Prairie Pothole Region will require substantial winter snow and spring rains to recover meaningfully, and snowpack in the western U.S. is well below normal. With limited production in 2025 and persistent drought across key landscapes, biologists expect a below-average breeding duck population in 2026, making spring moisture once again the critical factor shaping next fall's flight.



DUCK POPULATIONS, HABITAT CONDITIONS, WINTER WEATHER, & REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

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Many factors combine to influence the abundance and distribution of waterfowl during fall and winter, including temperature, snow and ice cover, precipitation, habitat quality and quantity, fall population size (a function of breeding population and productivity), disturbance, and agricultural land use. These have been documented and discussed by many authors, including peer-reviewed scientific publications ([Nichols et al. 1983](#), [Schumer et al. 2010](#), [Hagy et al. 2016](#)) and popular magazine articles ([Brasher 2019](#), [Moorman 2019](#), [Moorman 2020](#)).

This report provides an overview of biological and environmental conditions in the contiguous U.S. during the 2025–26 waterfowl hunting season and their potential influence on duck abundance and distribution. Notable among these are breeding habitat conditions, which are pivotal in determining

productivity and the fall flight, as well as large-scale weather patterns and landscape conditions during fall and winter. The relative influence of these factors varies across space, time, and among waterfowl species. Descriptions in this report should not be viewed as definitive assessments of waterfowl distributions or the conditions that affected them. During the non-breeding season, waterfowl make short and long-distance movements, often in many different directions. These movements may occur quickly in response to changing environmental conditions. This report also includes summaries and anecdotal observations of the 2025–26 waterfowl hunting season from DU staff, wetland managers, and hunters across the four flyways.



Scan for the 2025–26 Great Lakes Season Recap





BREEDING POPULATION & HABITAT CONDITIONS

Despite an intensifying drought across the midcontinent, waterfowl demonstrated remarkable resilience in 2025. Total breeding ducks in the traditional survey area were estimated at 33.98 million, unchanged from 2024 but remaining 4 percent below the long-term average (LTA).

“Waterfowl again demonstrated their adaptability despite relatively dry conditions in 2024, as late-nesting species capitalized on spring rains on the prairies and those that settled in the Boreal held their own,” said DU Chief Scientist Dr. Steve Adair. “Flexible breeding strategies and use of continental habitat resources appear to have contributed to decent production last year, which carried over to a similar breeding population this spring.”

The most significant report from the 2025 survey was the dramatic decline in breeding habitat. The May pond estimate, an index of breeding habitat quality across the U.S. and Canadian prairies, fell to 4.18 million, representing a 19 percent decrease from 2024 and the lowest since 2004. The decline was steepest on the U.S. prairies, as pond estimates dropped 34 percent year-over-year to 1.6 million, 6 percent below the LTA.

In Prairie Canada, moisture levels were similarly poor. Although the region received above-average winter snowfall, much of that was absorbed by parched soils rather than filling wetland basins. The resulting estimate of 2.5 million ponds in prairie Canada was 27 percent below the LTA.

Scattered rains in May and June offered localized improvements for late-nesting species, but they

arrived too late to benefit early nesting mallards and pintails. For the second year in a row, early arriving birds encountered dry prairies, causing an overflight to more northern breeding areas in search of better conditions.

Despite these challenges, many species showed resilience. The continental mallard population was estimated at 6.55 million birds, roughly unchanged from 2024. Yet this figure was 17 percent below the LTA and marks a 44 percent decline from the record high of 2016. Pintails provided a notable surprise, as their population increased 13 percent from 2024. Diving ducks such as canvasbacks and redheads showed continued strength. Canvasbacks increased 22 percent over 2024 while redheads rose 17 percent, both above their LTA. Gadwall and northern shovelers remained strong relative to their LTA, while green-winged teal and scaup declined.



2025 WATERFOWL SURVEY
DUCKS.ORG/DUCKNUMBERS

SPECIES	2025	2024	% CHANGE FROM 2024	% CHANGE FROM LTA
MALLARD	6,554	6,609	-1%	-17%
GADWALL	2,414	2,284	+6%	+17%
AMERICAN WIGEON	3,191	2,922	+9%	+22%
GREEN-WINGED TEAL	2,550	3,005	-15%	+16%
NORTHERN SHOVELER	2,758	2,646	+4%	+4%
BLUE-WINGED TEAL	4,432	4,599	-4%	-13%
NORTHERN PINTAIL	2,239	1,975	+13%	-41%
REDHEAD	0,918	0,782	+17%	+25%
CANVASBACK	0,690	0,566	+22%	+17%
SCAUP	3,675	4,069	-10%	-25%
TOTAL DUCKS	33,980	33,988	0%	-4%
MAY PONDS (US & CANADA)	4,180	5,159	-19%	-20%

Numbers in millions. *Traditional Survey Area. LTA (Long-term Average)
From USFWS Waterfowl Population Status Report

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Figure 1. Breeding population estimates for the 10 most common duck species in the traditional survey area during spring 2025.

2025 EASTERN SURVEY AREA
DUCKS.ORG/DUCKNUMBERS

SPECIES	2025	2024	% CHANGE FROM 2024	% CHANGE FROM LTA
MALLARD	1,137	1,142	0%	-10%
AMERICAN BLACK DUCK	0,791	0,840	-6%	+11%
GREEN-WINGED TEAL	0,342	0,452	-24%	-7%
RING-NECKED DUCK	0,756	0,695	+9%	+6%
GOLDENEYE (COMMON AND BARROW'S)	0,722	0,974	-25%	+7%
MERGANSER (COMMON, RED-BREASTED AND HOODED)	1,090	1,079	+1%	+28%
WOOD DUCK*	0,900	0,900	0%	0%

Numbers in millions. *Atlantic Flyway Estimate. LTA (Long-term Average)
From USFWS Waterfowl Population Status Report

Sponsored by **ON X HUNT**

Figure 2. Breeding population estimates for 7 common duck species groups in eastern North America during spring 2025.

In the Pacific Flyway, breeding duck estimates were 6 percent above the LTA. California was a standout regional success story, with a 27 percent increase in total breeding ducks, highlighted by a 49 percent increase in mallards following several wet years. However, habitat conditions were variable across northern breeding areas, with some rivers and lakes in Alberta and the Northwest Territories reaching record-low levels due to intense drought.

“Poor habitat conditions in the Boreal Forest raised concerns about waterfowl production in the Pacific Flyway in 2025,” noted Dr. Dan Smith, waterfowl scientist in DU’s Western Region. “Two bright spots included the 30 percent increase in pintails in Alaska and record mallard counts coupled with excellent habitat conditions in north-eastern California.”

Duck production in the Mississippi and Central flyways was heavily impacted by the midcontinent drought. Total breeding ducks on the Canadian prairies were 20 percent below the LTA. In contrast, duck numbers in the Western Boreal Forest were 27 percent above the LTA as birds bypassed the prairies.

In the Atlantic Flyway, populations and habitats remained stable. The eastern survey area reported good conditions across eastern Canada and the northeastern U.S., with duck populations 6 percent above the LTA. Eastern mallards were stable at 1.14 million birds, and American black ducks were 11 percent above their LTA.

For the 2025–26 season, fair to poor production was expected across the prairies and Western Boreal Forest, creating expectations for a below-average fall flight dominated by experienced, adult birds. In the East, stable habitats and healthy duck populations set the table for average or better production for Atlantic Flyway hunters.

Although waterfowl are highly resilient, they rely on landscapes under accelerating pressures. The continued loss of wetlands and grasslands in the Prairie Pothole Region remains the single greatest threat to North American waterfowl. Late-summer rains in 2025 provided a temporary break in the drought, but significant improvements in moisture conditions will be necessary to refill wetlands and create a productive landscape for breeding ducks.

NORTH AMERICAN DROUGHT MONITOR

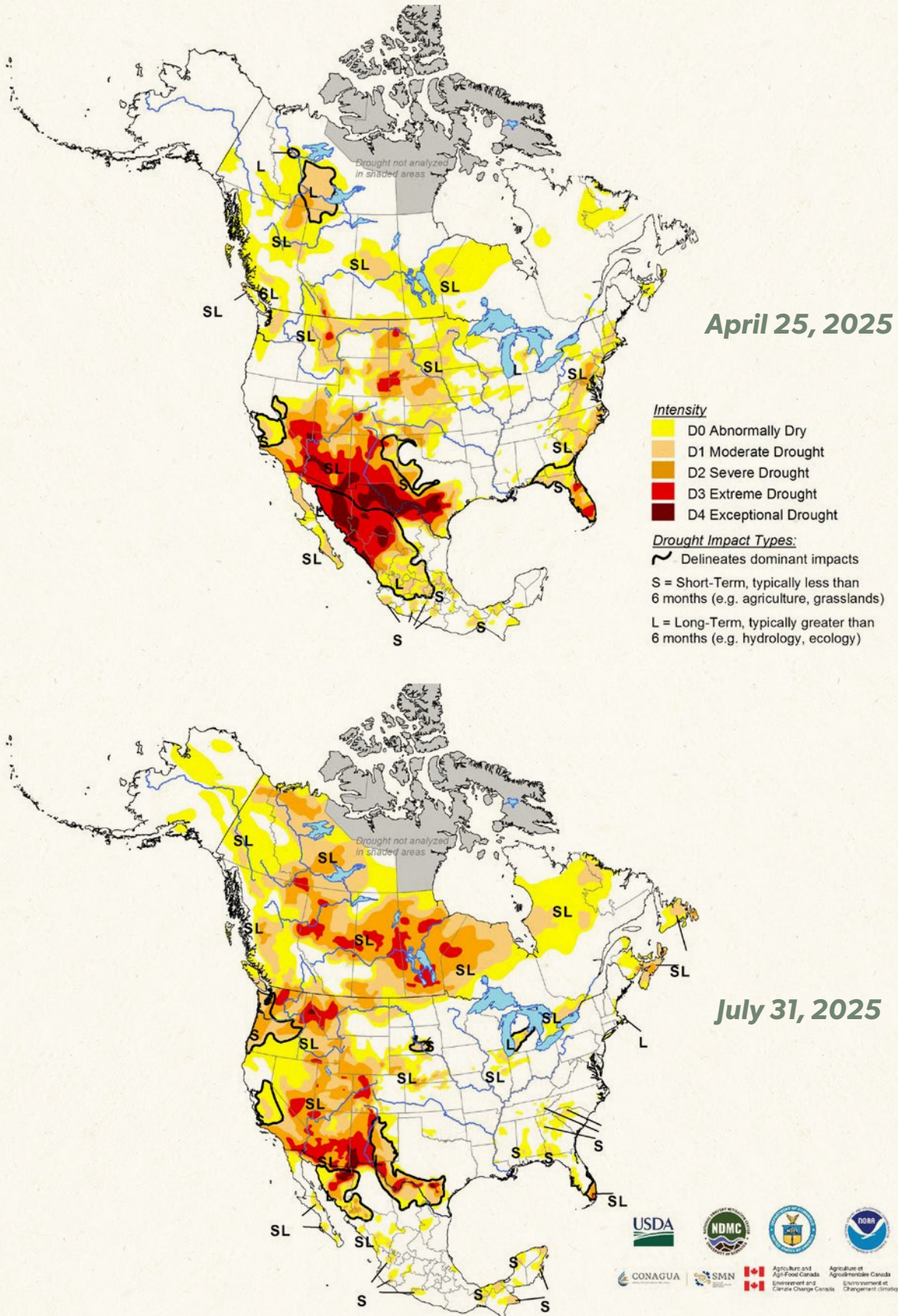


Figure 3. Status of drought in North America on Apr 30 and Jul 31, 2025. Maps from the North American Drought Monitoring program, <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/temp-and-precip/drought/nadm>.

SCIENCE BRIEF

Are Winter Distributions Changing?

New research adds scientific insight to what many DU volunteers and waterfowl hunters have observed in the field—winter distributions of several duck species are changing, although important nuances emerge from the data. Using 60 years of band recoveries, scientists studied the recovery locations of banded mallards, northern pintails, and blue-winged teal across the Central and Mississippi flyways to understand how their winter ranges have changed since the 1960s.

The study found northward shifts in where these species are wintering, especially in December and January. For mallards and pintails, average recovery locations moved 35 to 240 miles north depending on the sub-population, with all showing contractions from historical wintering sites along the Gulf Coast. Mallards banded in prairie Canada and the Western Boreal Forest are now more likely to be recovered in the south-central Great Plains, yet recoveries of mallards

banded in the U.S. prairies remain concentrated in Arkansas. In contrast, January recoveries of Great Lakes and Ontario mallards have shifted northeastward into the Ohio River Valley. At the same time, the breadth of winter ranges has expanded in the north, indicating ducks are utilizing landscapes more widely than in past decades.

Migration is a flexible strategy that allows waterfowl to access resources that vary across space and time and is largely responsible for their resilience in the face of mounting landscape pressures. This research is enhancing our understanding of how ducks adapt to dynamic environments and will support strategic planning for future conservation. Ongoing work aims to identify the drivers behind these shifts to ensure DU is proactive in protecting and restoring the habitats that waterfowl depend on across a changing continent.

To learn more, visit www.ducks.org/migrationchanges

ED WALL MEDIA



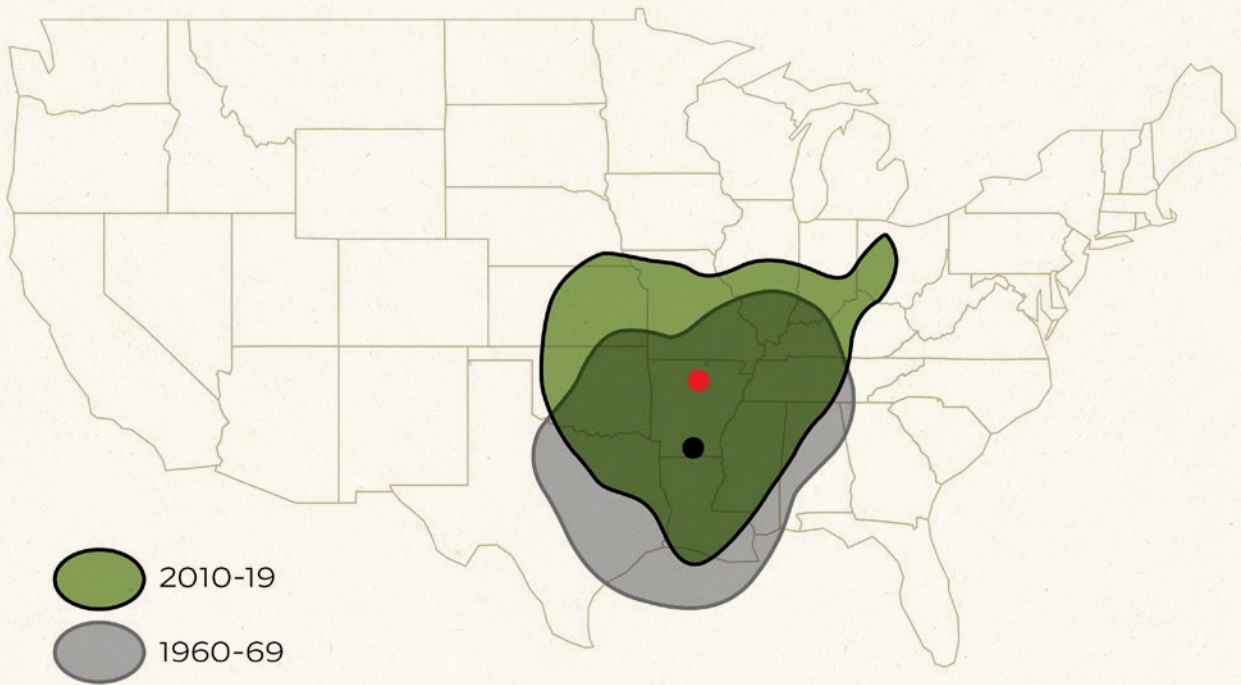


Figure 4a. The overall distribution and average location of January recoveries for mallards banded in the U.S. Prairies shifted north between the 1960s and 2010s (black dot = centroid of overall recoveries in 1960s; red dot = centroid of overall recoveries in 2010s).

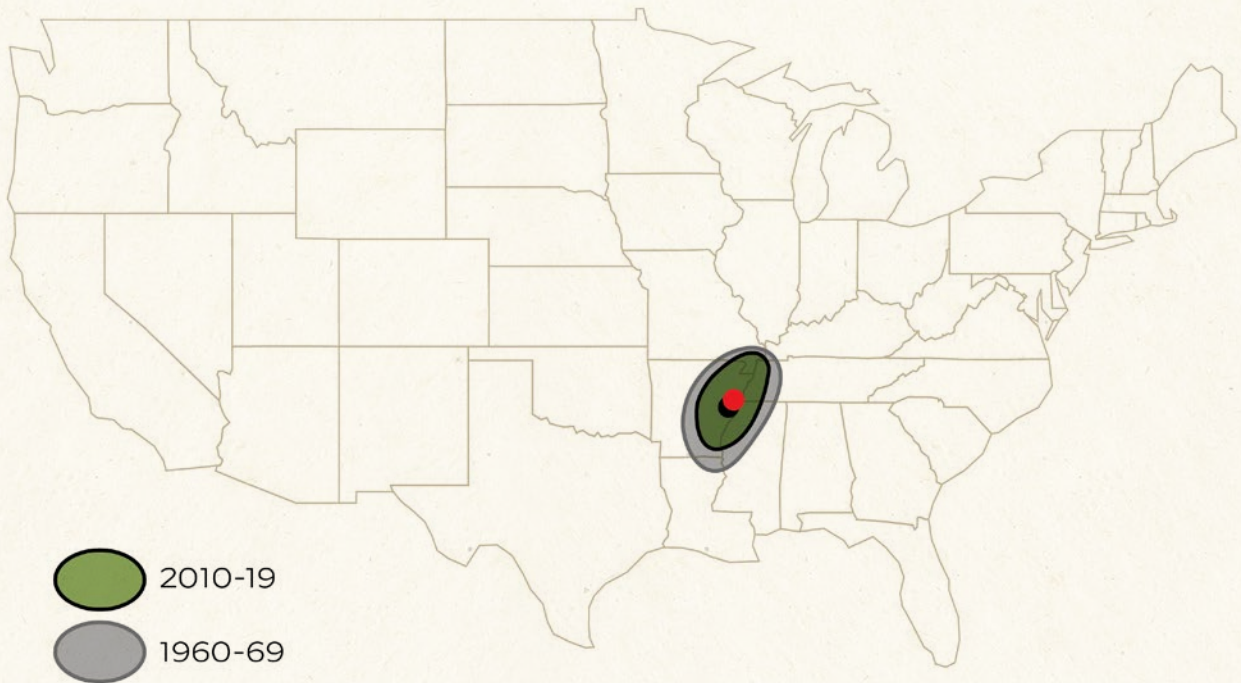


Figure 4b. The core distribution of January recoveries for mallards banded in the U.S. Prairies changed little between the 1960s and 2010s, with the greatest concentration of recoveries remaining in Arkansas (black dot = centroid of core recoveries in 1960s; red dot = centroid of core recoveries in 2010s).

TEMPERATURE

Temperatures were above average well into the 2025–26 duck season, yet periodic Arctic weather and a historic freeze late in the season provided opportunities for memorable hunts in the eastern U.S. The season began with a mild autumn, as September and October were dominated by widespread, above-average temperatures across the northern U.S. and prairie Canada. Lingering warmth stalled the early migration, resulting in stale birds that stayed in the same areas for weeks. Patterns began to shift in November and December, as a series of cold fronts brought temporary freezes to the Upper Midwest and Great Lakes. These events produced the first major pushes of mallards and divers into the mid-latitudes, but much of the southern U.S. remained

unseasonably warm and dry, giving ducks little reason to continue southward. Temperatures in the western half of the U.S. were above average, allowing birds to remain north well into the season. Intense cold finally arrived in the Mississippi and Atlantic flyways in January, closing the door on many northern wetlands and concentrating birds on the remaining open water. For hunters that braved the icy conditions, the January cold was the season's saving grace, as birds were pushed into traditional wintering grounds to close out the season. In the West, cooler temperatures finally arrived by mid-January, bringing fresh migrants and a change in bird behavior that offered improved hunts.



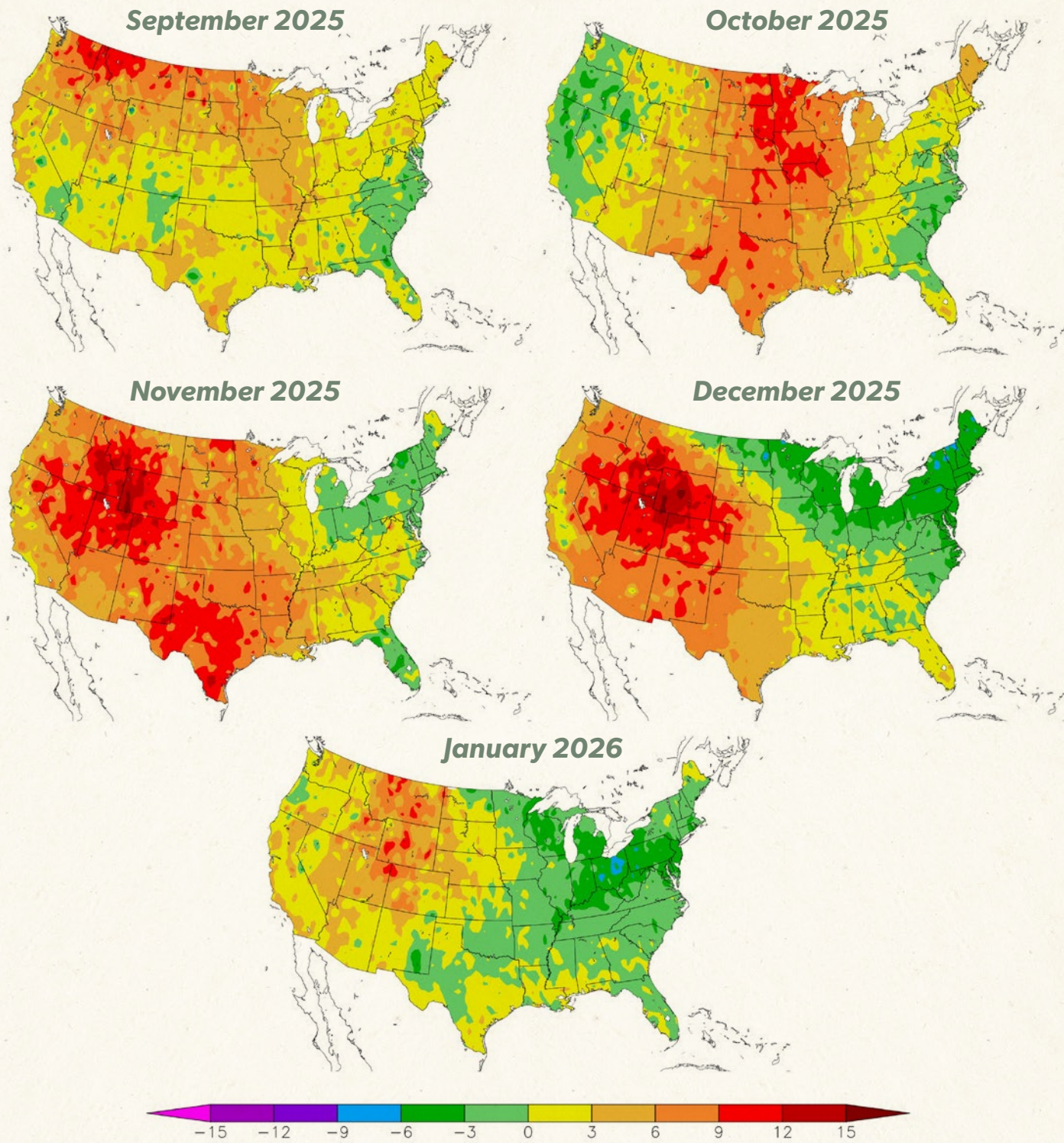


Figure 5. Average monthly temperature ($^{\circ}\text{F}$) departure from normal for the contiguous U.S., Sep 2025–Jan 2026, <https://hprcc.unl.edu/maps.php?map=ACISClimateMaps>.

PRECIPITATION & STREAMFLOW

Precipitation varied during the 2025–26 season, as most hunters were forced to adapt to increasingly dry conditions while others contended with occasional floods that distributed ducks widely. A relatively wet spring boosted moist-soil plant production in the southeastern U.S., but drought developed during summer and intensified into fall. Throughout the Mississippi River Basin, the dryness was historically significant, as Arkansas experienced one of its driest duck seasons in 134 years. By late January, over 99 percent of the state was in moderate to extreme drought. Broad portions of the mid-continent and the southern Mississippi and Central flyways suffered deep rainfall deficits, and river gauges recorded exceptionally low flows. With little natural runoff, shallow water and seasonal wetlands were

largely absent, concentrating birds on permanent waters and managed wetlands. This created challenging conditions for hunters that rely on naturally flooded habitats but benefited those that had the capacity to pump water. Although well-managed complexes supported ducks throughout the season, the absence of new habitat and consistent pressure made birds increasingly wary. Meanwhile, the Pacific Flyway experienced bursts of heavy rain, as atmospheric rivers expanded habitat but scattered birds across newly flooded areas. Ultimately, the contrast between widespread drought east of the Rockies and periodically flooded landscapes in the West made 2025–26 a season of extremes, rewarding those with access to a limited habitat base and others that adapted to abruptly changing conditions.



**Precipitation departure from normal
November 2025 - January 2026**

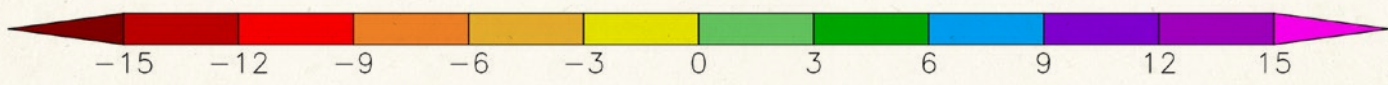
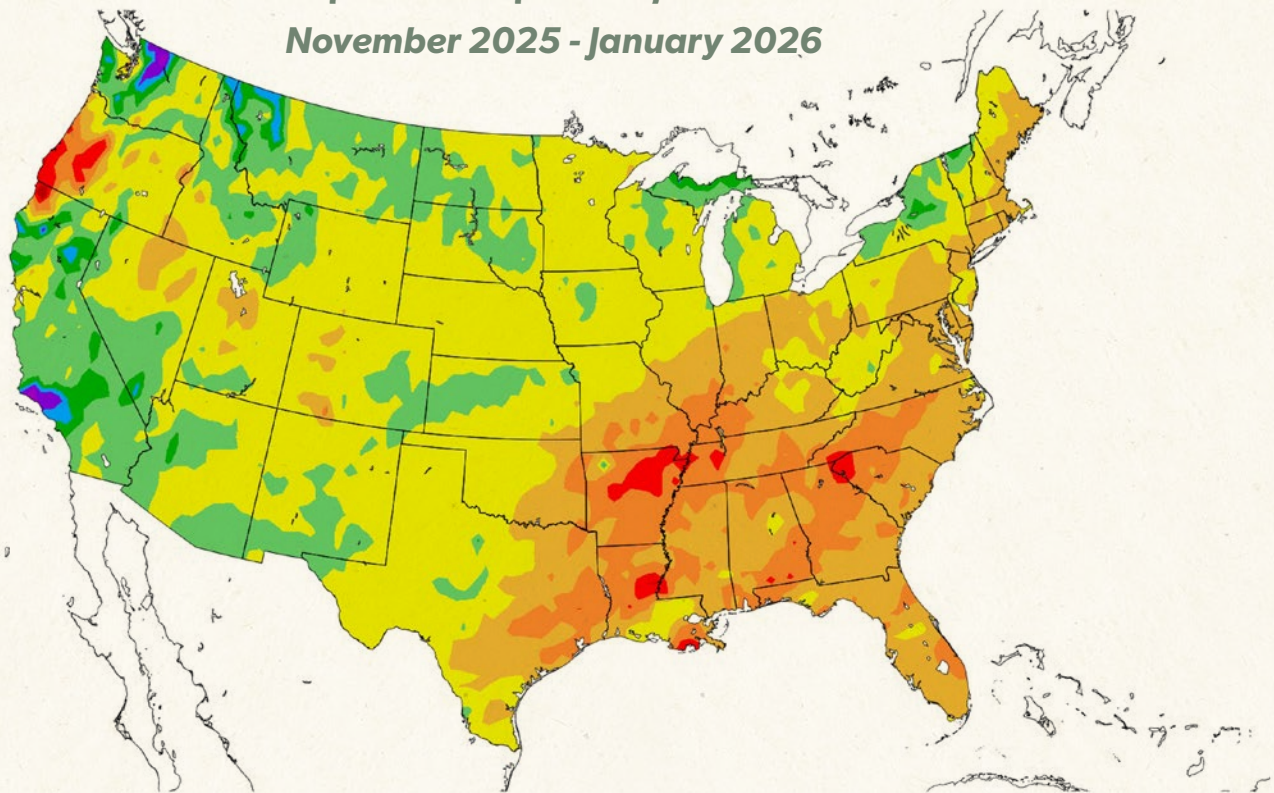
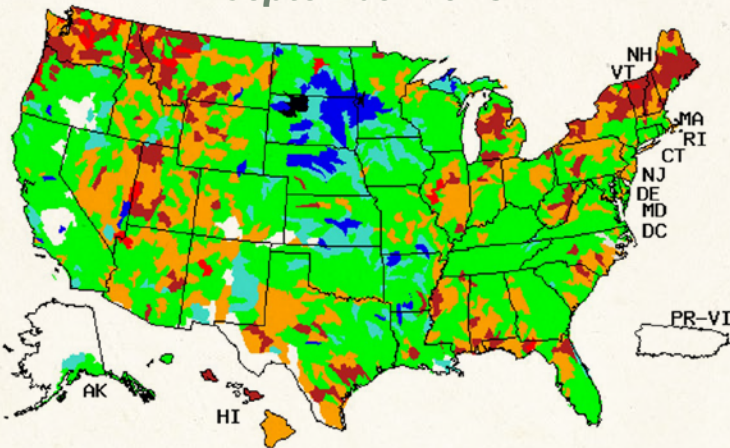


Figure 6. Total precipitation (in), departure from normal for the contiguous U.S., Nov 2025–Jan 2026,

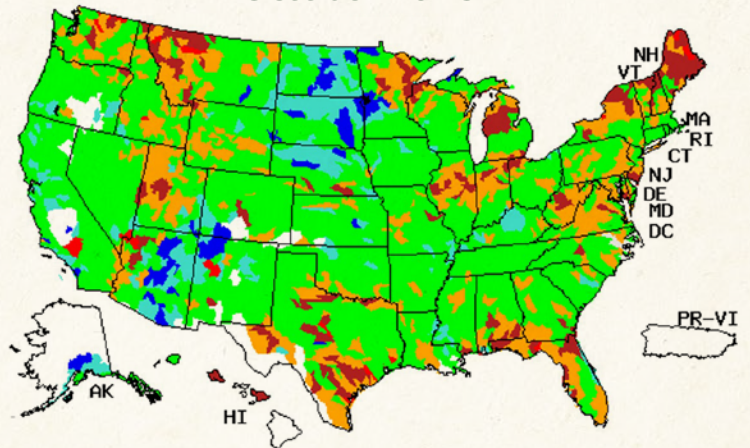
<https://hprcc.unl.edu/maps.php?map=ACISClimateMaps>



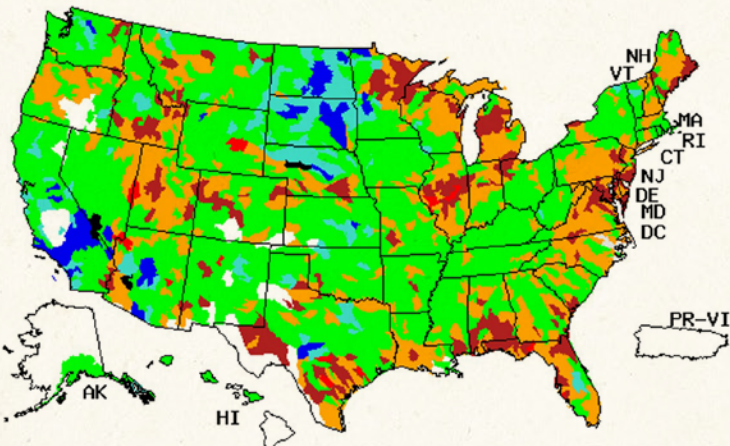
September 2025



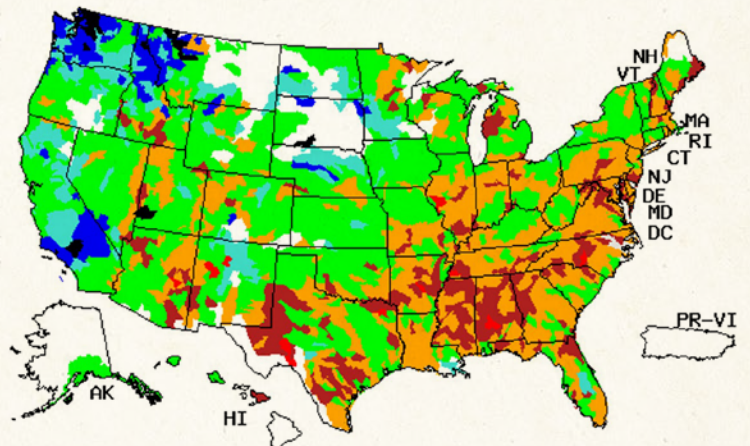
October 2025



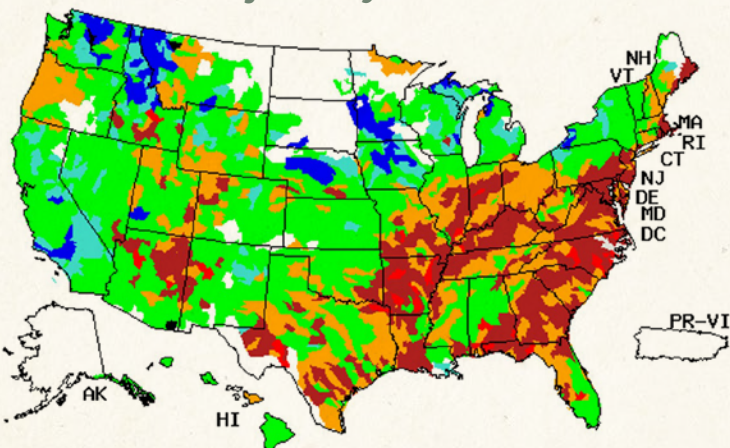
November 2025



December 2025



January 2026



Explanation - Percentile classes

	<10	10-24	25-75	76-90	>90	High	No Data
Low	Much below normal	Below normal	Normal	Above normal	Much above normal		



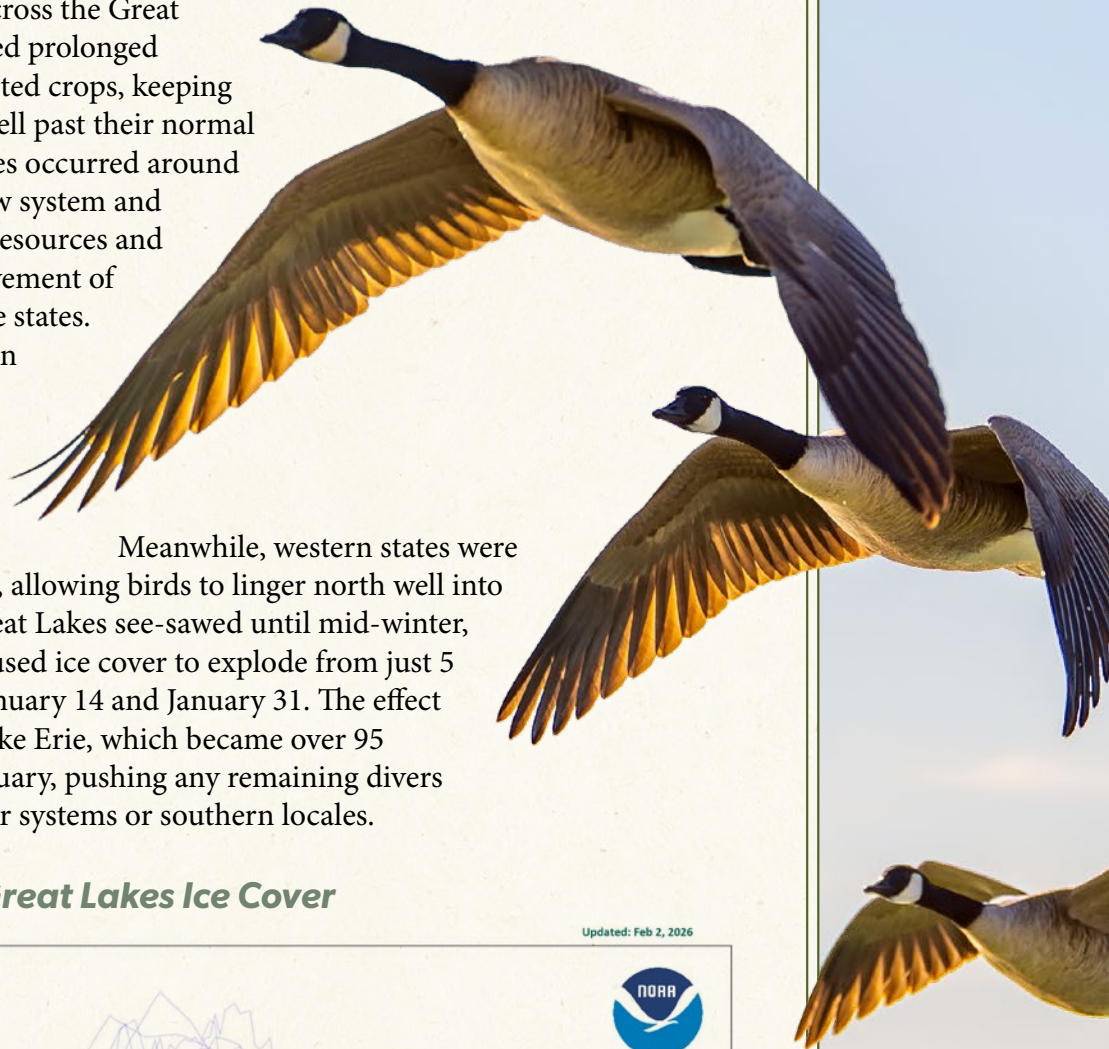
Figure 7. Monthly streamflow percentiles for the contiguous U.S., Sep 2025-Jan 2026, <https://waterwatch.usgs.gov/index.php?ym=202201&m=nwc>.

SNOW & ICE COVER

Winter arrived late for hunters east of the Rockies, finally breaking the stagnation caused by a mild fall. Early in the season, minimal snowpack across the Great Plains and Upper Midwest allowed prolonged access to waste grain from harvested crops, keeping birds in northern staging areas well past their normal departure dates. Dramatic changes occurred around Thanksgiving, when a major snow system and frigid temperatures buried food resources and triggered a broad southward movement of ducks and geese into mid-latitude states.

In late January, Winter Storm Fern and subsequent weather systems delivered deep snow and ice to broad areas of the East and Midwest, pushing ducks to southern portions of the flyways.

Meanwhile, western states were plagued by a lack of cold weather, allowing birds to linger north well into January. Ice formation on the Great Lakes see-sawed until mid-winter, when a sharp Arctic outbreak caused ice cover to explode from just 5 percent to 51 percent between January 14 and January 31. The effect was especially pronounced on Lake Erie, which became over 95 percent ice covered by early February, pushing any remaining divers and puddle ducks into major river systems or southern locales.



Great Lakes Ice Cover

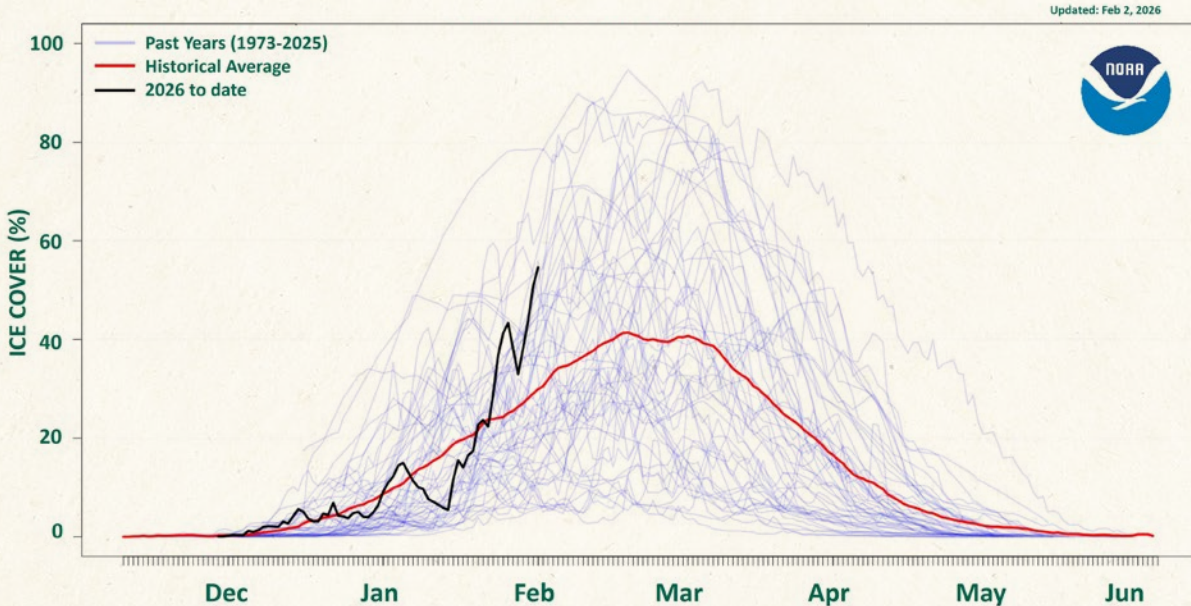


Figure 8. Winter pattern of long-term (1973–2025) average ice cover (%) on the Great Lakes, compared to current year, as of Feb 2, 2026. <https://coastwatch.glerl.noaa.gov/statistic/statistic.html>

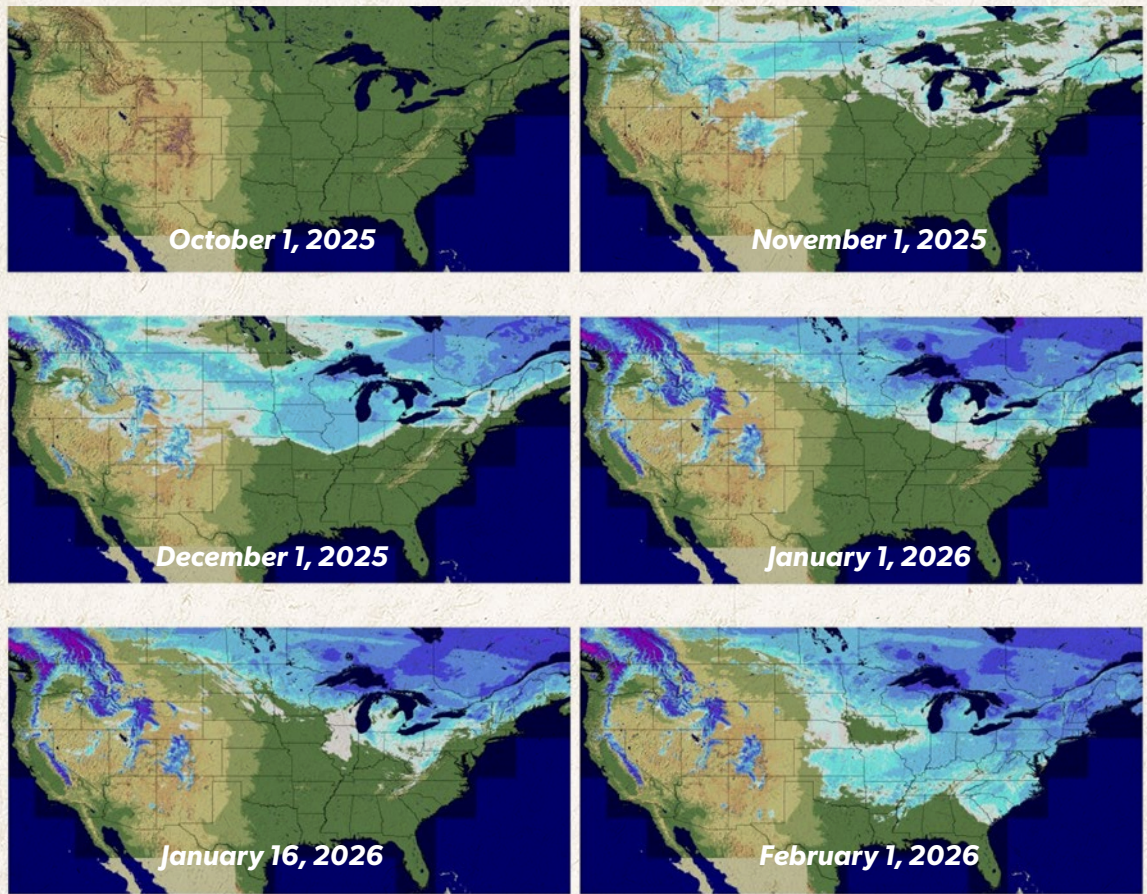


Figure 9. Daily snow depth (inches) on selected dates, Oct 2025–Feb 2026, for the contiguous U.S., <https://www.nohrsc.noaa.gov/nsa/>.



REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

The following summaries provide a snapshot of the prevailing messages that DU biologists and partners heard throughout the 2025–26 season.

PACIFIC FLYWAY

The 2025–26 season across the Pacific Flyway was marked by erratic weather and abrupt swings that challenged even the most seasoned hunters. In the Pacific Northwest, record-breaking rainfall paired with mild temperatures through December made for unpredictable success. Early-season rains replenished drought-stricken wetlands in Utah, but the abundance of habitat allowed birds to spread across newly flooded landscapes, leading to stale conditions and nocturnal feeding. Some hunters on the Great Salt Lake reported their worst year in memory, as warm weather had them fighting mosquitoes into December. Washington saw a similar slowdown as mild weather and ample food kept birds from pushing south. When winter finally arrived in January, hunters across the Great Basin and Pacific Northwest enjoyed strong finishes, with consistent shoots to close out the year. Farther south, California's Central Valley experienced similar challenges, although the Klamath Basin enjoyed improved habitat conditions and avoided early freeze-ups. The Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys contended with a month-long fog inversion and a series of atmospheric rivers, inundating floodways and dispersing birds across flooded

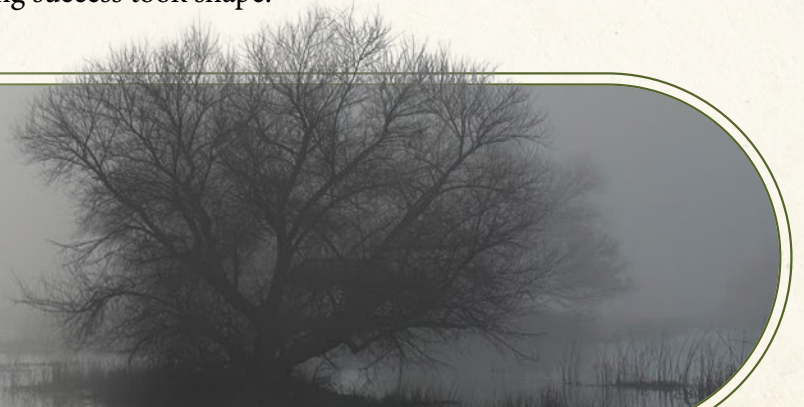
rice and natural wetlands, leading to unpredictable bird movements and intermittent hunting success. Although pintail and green-winged teal numbers appeared lower than average in some managed habitats, a late-season push brought fresh birds, with some hunters reporting fantastic hunts during the final weeks. By most accounts, California hunters experienced a below-average season, as unfavorable flood events and mild temperatures limited opportunities for sustained success.

CENTRAL & MISSISSIPPI FLYWAYS

Conditions in the Central and Mississippi flyways were marked by a delayed migration and an intense drought across the South. Warm, stagnant conditions across the Upper Midwest and Great Lakes delayed migration and limited duck movement for much of the season. Many hunters reported a scarcity of mallards, though occasional bouts of favorable weather produced strong hunts. Reports from diving duck hunters were consistently good, with abundant redheads, scaup, and ringnecks on major lakes. When fronts aligned, birds moved and rewarded hunters who remained adaptable. Farther south in the mid-latitude and plains regions, weather-driven hunting success took shape.

ATLANTIC FLYWAY

The northern Atlantic Flyway was challenged by early drought, warm fall, and delayed migration. Although October rains began to refill some wetlands, meaningful improvement came too late for the early season. As winter arrived, freezing temperatures locked up shallow wetlands and pushed birds to deeper lakes and major rivers, where late-season hunters found consistent success. Drought in the Mid-Atlantic made it difficult to flood managed wetlands, leading to patchy hunting and below-average dabbling duck numbers. Despite good stands of aquatic vegetation, diving duck numbers in Chesapeake Bay were disappointing. Many birds appeared to bypass traditional areas in favor of North Carolina's coastal waters, where large rafts of redheads and scaup appeared by mid-January. Farther south, early-season drought limited available habitat, but November and December cold fronts delivered strong numbers of ducks into Virginia and the Carolinas. Hunters in Georgia and South Carolina reported solid early success, followed by a warm weather lull before late January cold produced excellent hunting and a strong close across much of the Atlantic Flyway.





SUMMARY & LOOKING AHEAD

The 2025–26 waterfowl season was broadly defined by delayed migrations, severe drought in the Southeast, a late-season Arctic plunge, and periodic bouts of weather-driven success. Warm early conditions across all flyways kept birds scattered and limited consistent hunting. In the Pacific Flyway, extended warmth, record floods, and prolonged fog in the Central Valley were principal challenges. Central and Mississippi flyway hunters were plagued by slow early movements and a historically limited base of habitat across traditional strongholds. Those with access to water fared well, while others were forced to be more opportunistic and took advantage of severe winter weather. The Atlantic Flyway battled early drought and a warm fall before winter freezes concentrated birds. Overall, hunting was highly variable, with late arrivals and short windows of success for most hunters.

Looking ahead, the 2026 breeding season will be marked by its own set of challenges. Soil moisture has improved across portions of the U.S. prairies, but the Canadian prairies remain dry. Across the PPR, many wetland basins remain without water—the lingering effects of multi-year drought. Continuing the refrain from past years, significant late-winter snow and spring rain will be needed to spark a meaningful recovery. Drought conditions have expanded across the Boreal Forest, renewing concerns for these critical breeding landscapes. Snowpack levels across the West are below average, and additional winter storms are urgently needed to support spring and summer runoff that fuels breeding habitats. With limited production from this past year, biologists widely expect breeding duck populations to remain below average in 2026. Spring weather will ultimately determine wetland availability, nesting success, and the production that shapes next year’s fall flight, but managers are already viewing the coming year with caution.



North American Drought Monitor December 31, 2025

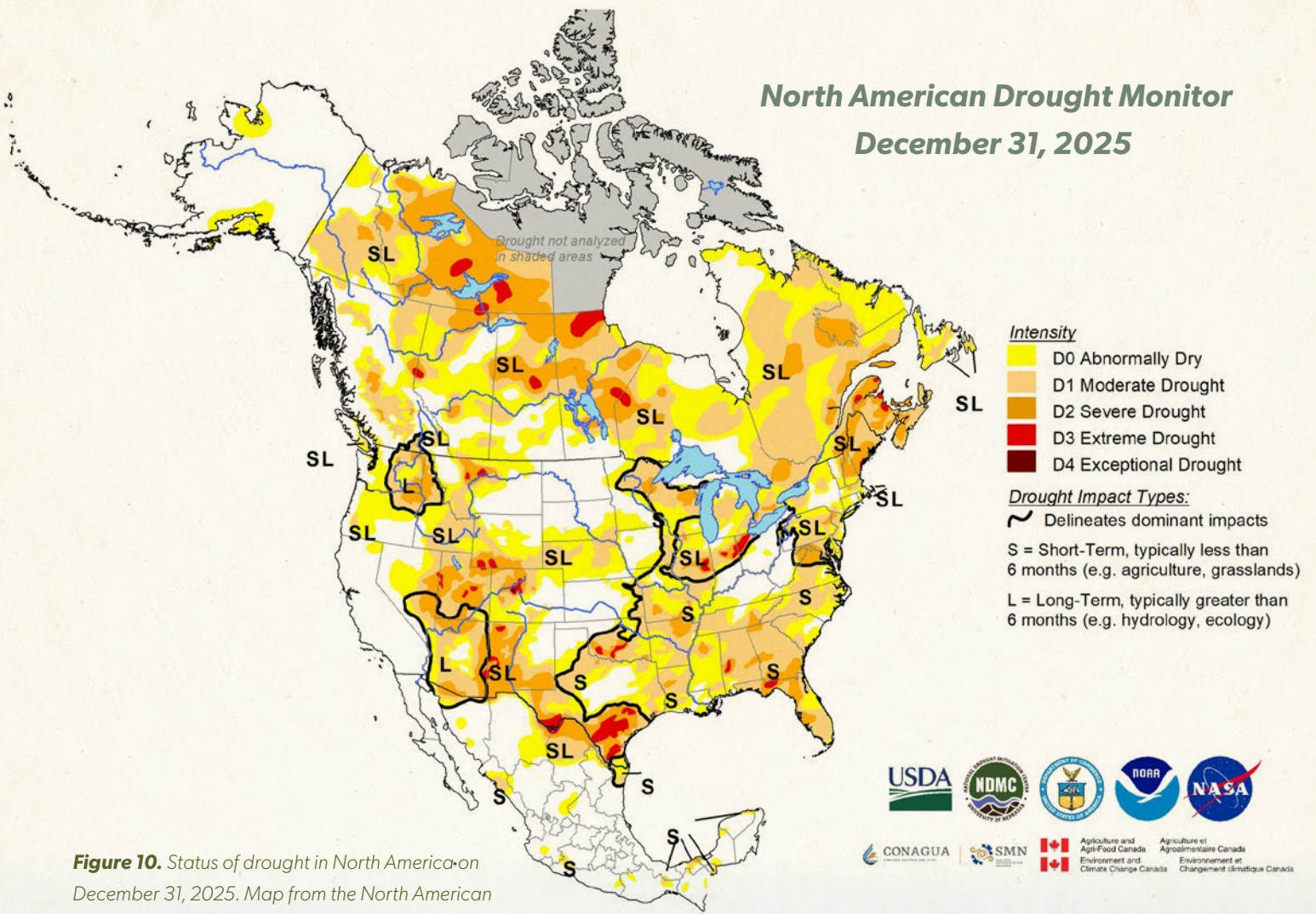


Figure 10. Status of drought in North America on December 31, 2025. Map from the North American Drought Monitoring program, <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/temp-and-precip/drought/nadm>.



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