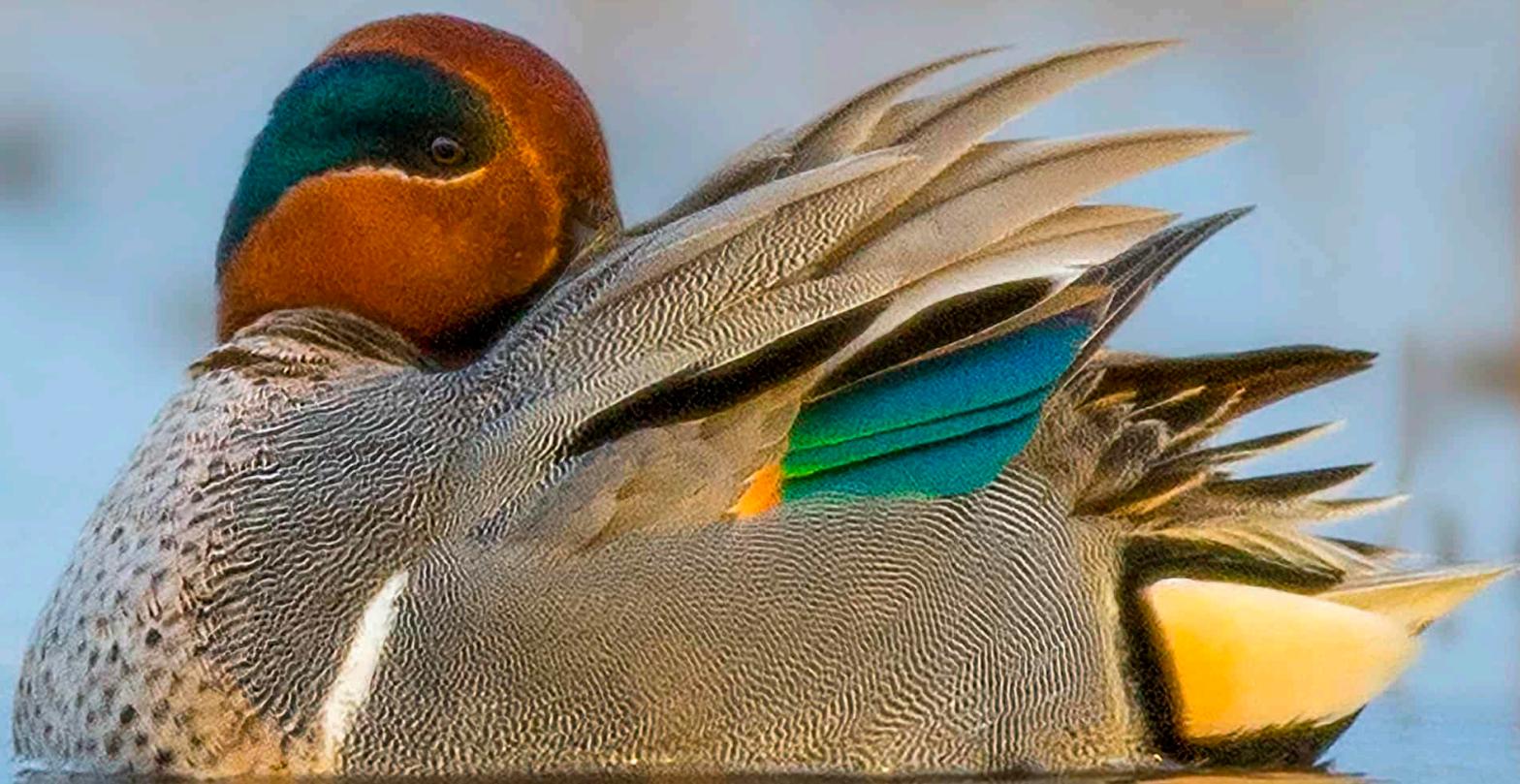


SEASON IN REVIEW

2024-2025



**Duck Populations, Habitat Conditions, Winter Weather,
and Reports from the Field**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



For the first time in nearly a decade, 2024 brought a rebound in duck populations in the traditional survey area, increasing a modest 5 percent from 2023 but raising hope for a slowing of recent declines. Mallards increased by 8 percent but were 16 percent below the long-term average. Wigeon, green-winged teal, and scaup saw notable gains, while pintails and blue-winged teal declined. May pond counts increased 4 percent overall, but wetland conditions varied dramatically, increasing by 49 percent in the U.S. and dropping to a 20-year low in Canada. Spring came early in 2024, causing many ducks to migrate through the prairies when conditions were still dry, overflying to the Boreal Forest. Breeding habitat conditions varied elsewhere, with good to excellent conditions in the east and average conditions across western states. The combined effect of below average duck populations and variable habitat conditions set the stage for an average or slightly below average fall flight. Highly pathogenic avian influenza returned to the headlines during 2024. While impacts on continental waterfowl populations appear limited, unexpected outbreaks in dairy cattle dominated the news, and a surge in wild bird and poultry outbreaks during fall and winter renewed concerns. New viral strains were detected and the first human death from HPAI was documented earlier this year, although the overall risk to humans remains low.

The 2024–25 hunting season was characterized by record warmth, delayed migration, dry conditions, and a dramatic swing to record cold to close the season. September through December was among the warmest in 130 years, which kept ducks farther north across much of the central and eastern U.S. Mid-latitude hunters reported good success following a December freeze and subsequent thaw that kept birds around until January. Meanwhile, hunting prospects were grim in the southern U.S. until record-breaking cold triggered a significant migration and brought opportunities for excellent late-season hunting. The Pacific Flyway saw mixed success. Migration was delayed in many areas, but periodic weather systems shuffled birds and improved hunting success. The San Joaquin Valley was a notable bright spot as birds arrived unusually early and hunters experienced sustained success on green-winged teal. In the Atlantic Flyway, warm and dry conditions early in the season made for challenging hunts, while wetland conditions improved by mid-season and January brought an influx of birds to the Mid- and South Atlantic.

Looking ahead, snowpack conditions have improved across the Canadian prairies, but dry conditions have returned to the U.S. prairies. Spring and summer rains will again be needed to lift this important region from entrenched drought. The Western Boreal Forest shows improvement, while western water and mountain snow are near or above average. Eastern habitats are primed for good to excellent conditions, although portions of the Great Lakes will need additional rain to overcome emerging drought. Despite a slight increase in breeding ducks in 2024, most biologists expect populations to be relatively unchanged when the 2025 numbers are released later this year.

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

Mike Brasher, PhD, Senior Waterfowl Scientist, Ducks Unlimited, Inc.

Nathan Ratchford, Conservation Communications Coordinator

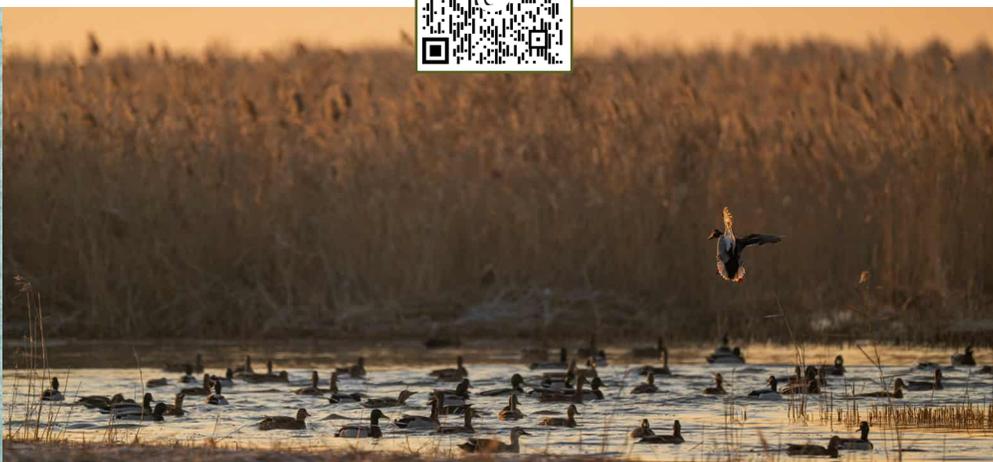
Steve Adair, PhD, Chief Scientist, Ducks Unlimited, Inc.

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 practices. These have been documented and discussed by many authors, including peer-reviewed scientific publications (Nichols et al. 1983, Schummer 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 2024–25 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 2024–25 waterfowl hunting season from DU staff, wetland managers, and hunters across the four flyways.



2024-25 WATERFOWL SEASON IN REVIEW



BREEDING POPULATION & HABITAT CONDITIONS



For the first time in nearly a decade, 2024 brought a rebound for duck populations in the traditional survey area, increasing a modest 5 percent from 2023. Drought conditions across the prairies in 2023 likely constrained production, but results from the 2024 breeding population survey offer hope that the recent decline may have slowed. Mallards increased by 8 percent to 6.6 million, but their numbers remain well below (-16 percent) historical averages. Wigeon (+55 percent), green-winged teal (+20 percent), and scaup (+16 percent) saw major gains, while pintails (-11 percent) and blue-winged teal (-12 percent) declined.

Total pond counts, an index of breeding habitat quality, increased by 4 percent, but conditions varied across the prairies. Thanks to heavy spring rains, the U.S. prairies experienced a 49 percent increase in May ponds, which was the highest in 10 years. Although isolated portions of the Canadian prairies enjoyed a brief recovery in wetland levels during spring, this was overshadowed by a moisture deficit from widespread drought, as Canadian ponds dropped 19 percent from 2023 and were at their lowest level in two decades. Waterfowl numbers in the Pacific Flyway surged by 20 percent, thanks to strong breeding conditions in Alaska and the Yukon, where mallards and wigeon saw major increases. California, however, continued its long-term decline in breeding mallards, despite improved water availability.

“The declines in breeding ducks in California are particularly concerning,” says Dr. Dan Smith, waterfowl scientist for DU’s Western Region. “Although the causes for these declines remain a topic of investigation, we suspect land-use changes, which are reducing the availability of nesting habitat, are playing a key role.”

In the Central and Mississippi Flyways, duck numbers rose by 5 percent, but settling patterns were not conducive to good production. A warm spring led to accelerated migration of early-nesting species, with birds arriving on the prairies before precipitation arrived, leading to an overflight to the Boreal Forest. Breeding duck populations were up 27 percent in the Boreal Forest, while estimates for the U.S. and Canadian prairies were down 10 percent. Meanwhile, the Atlantic Flyway saw a 12 percent increase in duck numbers, with notable jumps in black ducks, goldeneyes and green-winged teal, while mallards declined 4 percent from 2023.

Despite the slight increase, breeding duck populations in the traditional survey area were 4 percent below the long-term average and 31 percent below the record high of 2015. This recent trend serves as a reminder of how the loss of habitat affects duck populations, whether due to short-term weather or permanent conversion. It further amplifies the importance of protecting and restoring high-quality wetlands and grasslands that make the Prairie Pothole Region the most productive duck landscape in North America.

DUCKS UNLIMITED		2024 WATERFOWL SURVEY DUCKS.ORG/DUCKNUMBERS			
SPECIES	2024	2023	% CHANGE FROM 2023	% CHANGE FROM LTA	
 MALLARD	6.609	6.126	+8%	-16%	
 GADWALL	2.284	2.561	-11%	+11%	
 AMERICAN WIGEON	2.922	1.890	+55%	+12%	
 GREEN-WINGED TEAL	3.005	2.503	+20%	+38%	
 BLUE-WINGED TEAL	4.599	5.250	-12%	-10%	
 NORTHERN SHOVELER	2.646	2.858	-7%	0%	
 NORTHERN PINTAIL	1.975	2.219	-11%	-49%	
 REDHEAD	0.782	0.930	-16%	+6%	
 CANVASBACK	0.566	0.619	-8%	-4%	
 SCAUP	4.069	3.517	+16%	-17%	
TOTAL DUCKS	33.988	32.305	+5%	-4%	
MAY PONDS (US & CANADA)	5.159	4.975	+4%	-1%	

Numbers in millions. LTA (Long-term Average)
Based on Traditional Survey Area
Waterfowl Photos: michaeljurtman.com

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FIGURE 1. BREEDING POPULATION ESTIMATES FOR THE 10 MOST COMMON DUCK SPECIES IN THE TRADITIONAL SURVEY AREA DURING SPRING 2024.

DUCKS UNLIMITED		2024 EASTERN SURVEY AREA DUCKS.ORG/DUCKNUMBERS			
SPECIES	2024	2023	% CHANGE FROM 2023	% CHANGE FROM LTA	
 MALLARD	1.169	1.222	-4%	-9%	
 AMERICAN BLACK DUCK	0.862	0.736	+17%	+23%	
 GREEN-WINGED TEAL	0.468	0.384	+20%	+29%	
 RING-NECKED DUCK	0.731	0.666	+9%	+2%	
 GOLDENEYE (COMMON AND BARROWS)	1.201	0.836	+42%	+76%	
 MERGANSER (COMMON, RED-BREADED AND HOODED)	0.993	0.987	+1%	+23%	
 WOOD DUCK*	0.900	1.000	-10%	0%	

Numbers in millions. LTA (Long-term Average)
*Atlantic Flyway Estimate
Waterfowl Photos: michaeljurtman.com

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FIGURE 2. BREEDING POPULATION ESTIMATES FOR 7 COMMON DUCK SPECIES GROUPS IN EASTERN NORTH AMERICA DURING SPRING 2024.



Waterfowl breed across a vast North American landscape, each year characterized by variable habitat conditions. Entering spring 2024, the Prairie Pothole Region remained entrenched in severe drought, resulting from dry conditions during fall and winter of 2023–24. Fortunately, late-spring rains improved wetland conditions in the Dakotas, but largely after early nesting species had overflowed to the Boreal Forest.

“This was a classic case of early migrants overflying the prairies when they were dry and settling farther north in the Boreal Forest,” notes Dr. Matt Dyson, DU Canada waterfowl research scientist. “Unfortunately, persistently dry conditions in portions of the Boreal Forest resulted in wildfires and reduced habitat availability in some areas, but breeding ducks should have found suitable conditions elsewhere in this vast landscape.”

Rains continued across the U.S. prairies into May and June, which provided excellent conditions for later-arriving species such as gadwall and blue-winged teal and improved brood-rearing habitat and renesting opportunities. Spring and summer rains provided relief across isolated portions of the Canadian prairies, but conditions overall remained poor, and drought returned by late summer. Outside of the Dakotas, duck production in the Midcontinent was expected to be average at best in 2024.

Habitat conditions varied widely across important breeding regions of the Pacific Flyway. Excellent conditions for ducks returning to Alaska should have supported good production, while drought in the Western Boreal Forest likely constrained productivity. Breeding habitat conditions were generally poor in Washington but improved in Oregon. Water availability and wetland conditions in California were good, although spring flooding hindered rice planting and may have reduced breeding habitat in the Central Valley. Precipitation and habitat conditions were above average across portions of the Great Lakes, central Canada, Atlantic Canada and the northeastern U.S., offering optimism among Atlantic Flyway hunters for good production in 2024.

Overall, the effect of below average duck populations and variable breeding habitat conditions set the stage for an average or slightly below average fall flight. Nevertheless, a reprieve from recent declines in population levels was encouraging. As fall approached, there was widespread hope that the 2024–25 season would offer an improvement over the previous year, a season largely considered the worst in memory.



NORTH AMERICAN DROUGHT MONITOR

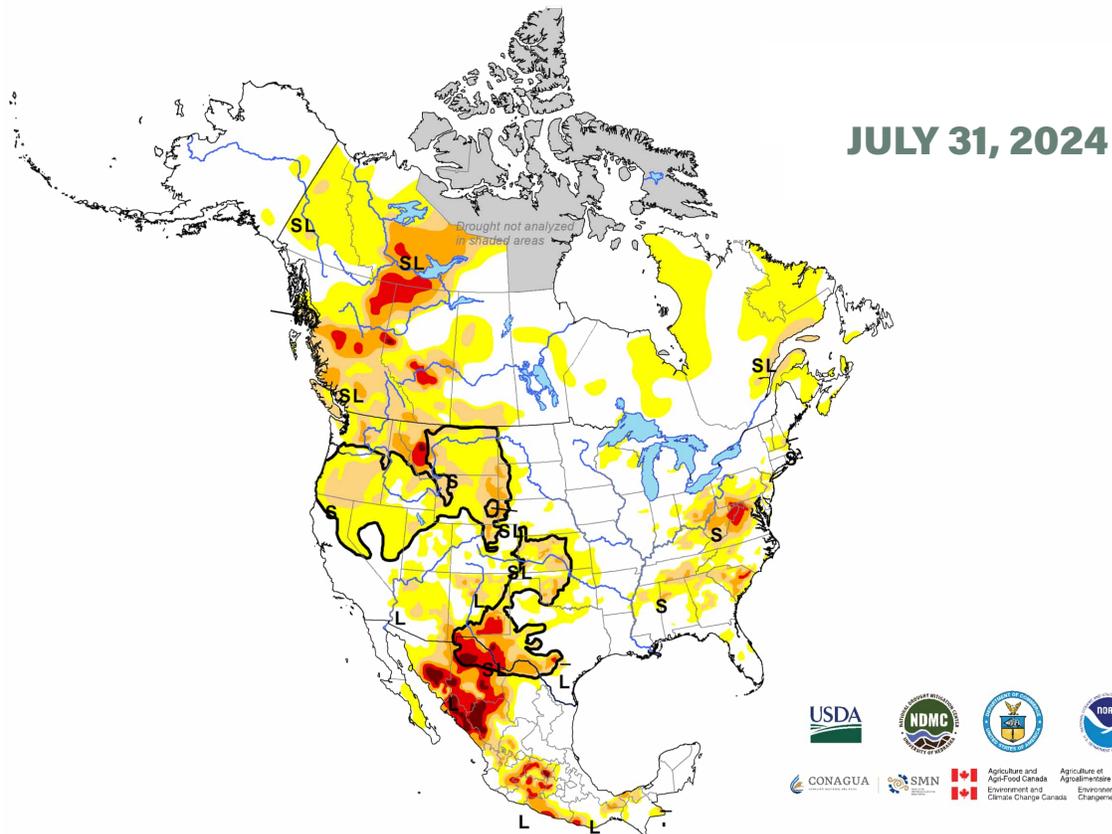
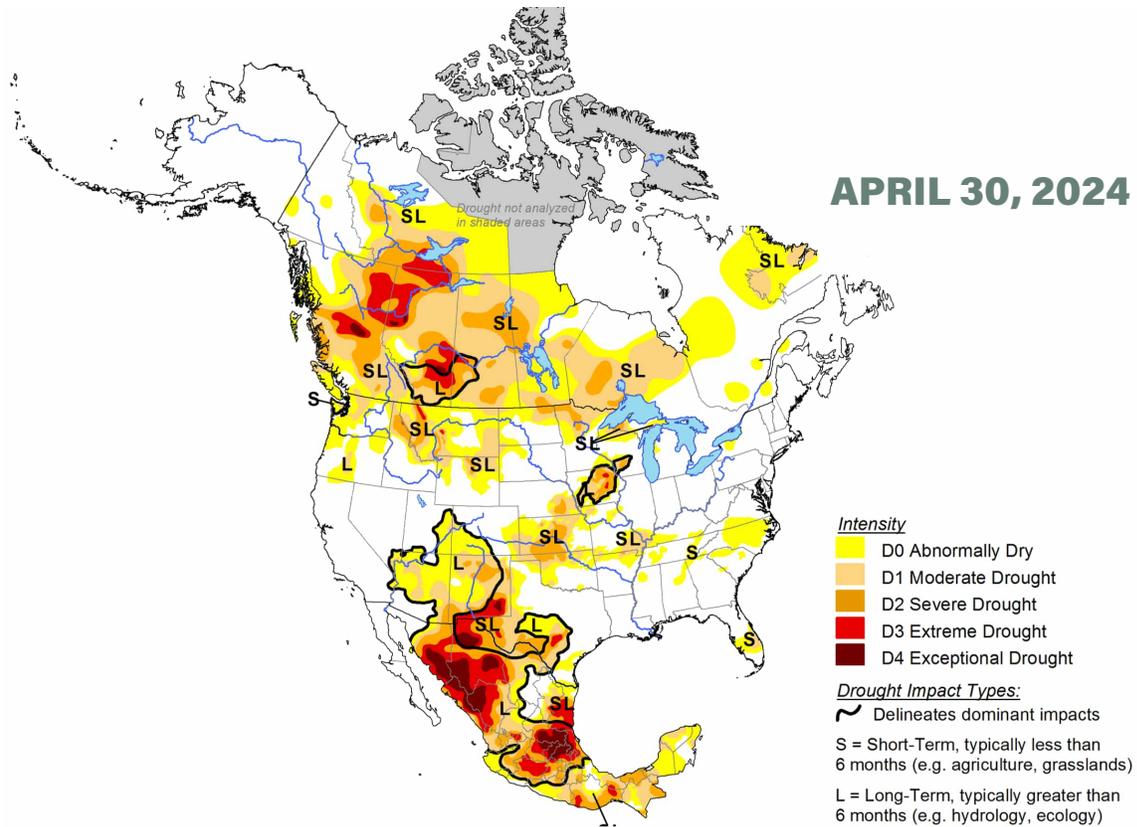


FIGURE 3. STATUS OF DROUGHT IN NORTH AMERICA ON APRIL 30 AND JULY 31, 2024. MAPS FROM THE NORTH AMERICAN DROUGHT MONITORING PROGRAM, [HTTPS://DROUGHTMONITOR.UNL.EDU/NADM/MAPS.ASPX](https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/nadm/maps.aspx)

AVIAN INFLUENZA BRINGS RENEWED CONCERNS

For much of 2024, detections of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in wild birds were at their lowest levels since the outbreak began in 2022. For a brief period, the U.S. government was poised to rescind their import restrictions for wild game birds harvested in Canada. Yet days before the announcement was to occur, HPAI infections resurfaced in Canada, causing the restrictions to remain in place. Since then, HPAI has been detected in multiple waterfowl species across the U.S. Breakouts were observed in cackling geese in Oregon, ring-necked ducks in north Florida, and multiple goose species in the Central and Mississippi Flyways. Illness and mortality appear to primarily affect first-year birds, although some hunters reported a higher number of adult geese affected this year. While mortality events in southern areas faded as winter progressed, outbreaks increased in northern states during February and March. Waterfowl biologists continue to suggest that avian influenza has relatively small effects on waterfowl populations at a continental scale.

During 2024, the effects of HPAI were felt acutely by the dairy industry, infecting over 700 herds across 15 states. While cattle typically recover, infections reduce milk production, causing economic hardship and prompting nationwide milk testing. Poultry outbreaks surged in fall and winter, with significant effects on egg laying facilities and driving egg prices to record highs. Human cases of HPAI also increased, with over 65 documented and likely many more unreported. Most human cases were mild and came from direct contact with an infected animal, although the first ever human mortality in the U.S. was reported in Louisiana in early 2025. Genetic testing documented additional mutations in the virus, although transmission risk and virulence to humans remains low. Surveillance by partner agencies plays a crucial role in tracking the ongoing impact to wildlife, agriculture, and public health. Ducks Unlimited will continue our outreach to hunters on health risks and how we can help curb the spread.



FIGURE 4. SCIENTISTS AT THE US DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND US GEOLOGICAL SURVEY WORK WITH WATERFOWL BANDERS AND HUNTERS TO TEST FOR HIGHLY PATHOGENIC AVIAN INFLUENZA. ACTIVE SURVEILLANCE IS CRITICAL FOR SCIENTISTS MONITORING OUTBREAKS AND EARLY DETECTION OF GENETIC CHANGES IN THE VIRUS.

TEMPERATURE

Record warmth defined the 2024–25 duck season for most hunters, although a January freeze punctuated a dramatic turnaround for many. Early in the season (Sept–Oct), widespread warmth across the northern and central U.S. delayed migration, keeping ducks in staging areas longer. Warm patterns remained in place through the end of the year, with each month ranking in the top 6 warmest in 130 years. Without strong cold fronts, mid-latitude hunters in states like Missouri and Illinois saw fewer fresh birds, while the Dakotas and Minnesota experienced inconsistent flights. Periodic cool downs brought relief, but meaningful change didn't arrive until an Arctic outbreak in late November and early December plummeted temperatures and froze wetlands across mid-latitude states east of the Rockies. Yet the reprieve was brief, as temperatures warmed through the end of the year. Ducks lingered in mid-latitude states with ample food and open water, while southern hunters' success declined. Cooler conditions brought periodic improvements to the Pacific Northwest and other western states. Eastern hunters also benefitted from cooling trends that improved movements in the Atlantic Flyway. A major shift occurred in January 2025, when a prolonged Arctic air mass engulfed much of the U.S. and produced the coldest January since 1988 and the third coldest on record. This sudden drop brought new birds to southern latitudes and concentrated them on the limited open water that remained. The eventual thaw produced “epic” hunts for many and created good to excellent late-season conditions. Overall, a warm early season delayed migration, while mild conditions in November and December scattered ducks and made hunting inconsistent. However, the deep freeze in January salvaged the season for many hunters.

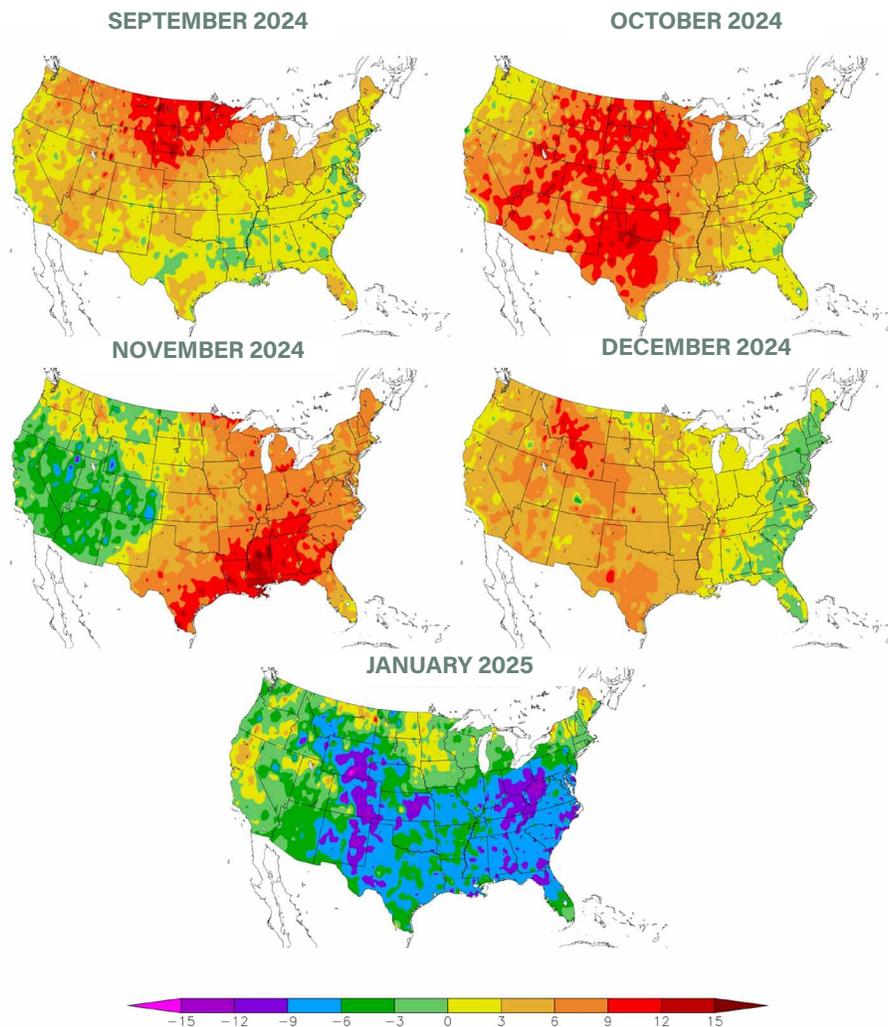


FIGURE 5. AVERAGE MONTHLY TEMPERATURE (°F) DEPARTURE FROM NORMAL FOR THE CONTIGUOUS U.S., SEP 2024–JAN 2025, [HTTPS://HPRCC.UNL.EDU/MAPS.PHP?MAP=ACISCLIMATEMAPS](https://hprcc.unl.edu/maps.php?map=acisclimatemaps)

PRECIPITATION & STREAMFLOW

The duck season started off dry for many hunters, including parched landscapes across the prairies that made huntable water scarce. Dry conditions expanded during October, including in the Midwest, Great Lakes, and northeastern U.S. Numerous weather stations across the Mid-Atlantic set records for the number of consecutive days without measurable rain. Precipitation in the western U.S. was variable, with wet conditions in the Pacific Northwest and record drought in the southwestern U.S. Southern states from Texas to North Carolina experienced one of their driest Octobers on record. By November and December, increased rainfall in the Mississippi and Central Flyways improved wetland conditions, leading to rising streamflow levels along major rivers such as the Mississippi and Ohio. Wetland counts exploded in the Texas panhandle as multiple storms dropped record rainfall, and Oklahoma ended with its wettest November on record. This created abundant habitat for ducks and geese across the southern plains. The western U.S. continued its weather roller coaster as a bomb cyclone brought heavy winds and rain to the Pacific Northwest and California hunters experienced improved wetland conditions of their own. Although temperatures improved in January, precipitation was limited. Isolated rain events in portions of the Mid-South produced temporary overbank flooding of major river systems and offered expanded but short-lived hunting opportunities. January precipitation was virtually nonexistent for western states, with most experiencing one of their top 10 driest on record. Overall, a dry early season slowed migration and limited habitats for waterfowl. Improving conditions in mid-season allowed ducks to disperse widely, but dry conditions returned in January and once again put a premium on opportunistic hunts.

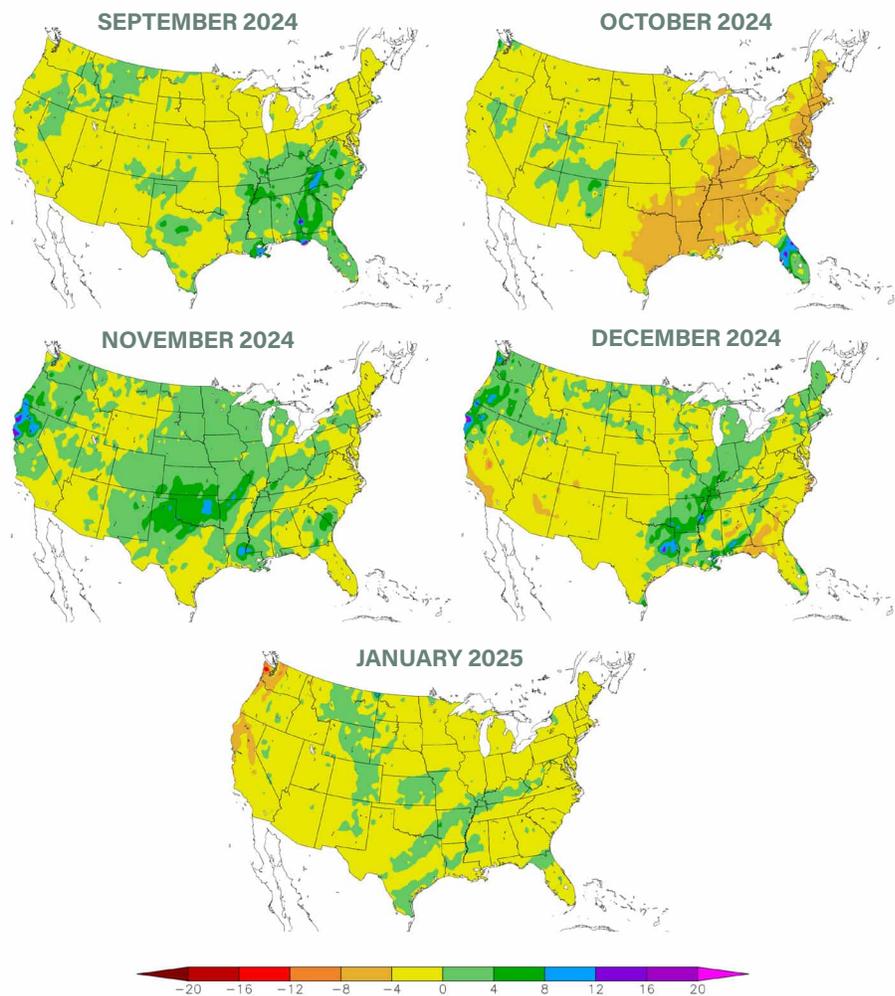


FIGURE 6. TOTAL MONTHLY PRECIPITATION (IN), DEPARTURE FROM NORMAL FOR THE CONTIGUOUS U.S., SEP 2024–JAN 2025, [HTTPS://HPRCC.UNL.EDU/MAPS.PHP?MAP=ACISCLIMATEMAPS](https://hprcc.unl.edu/maps.php?map=acisclimatemaps)

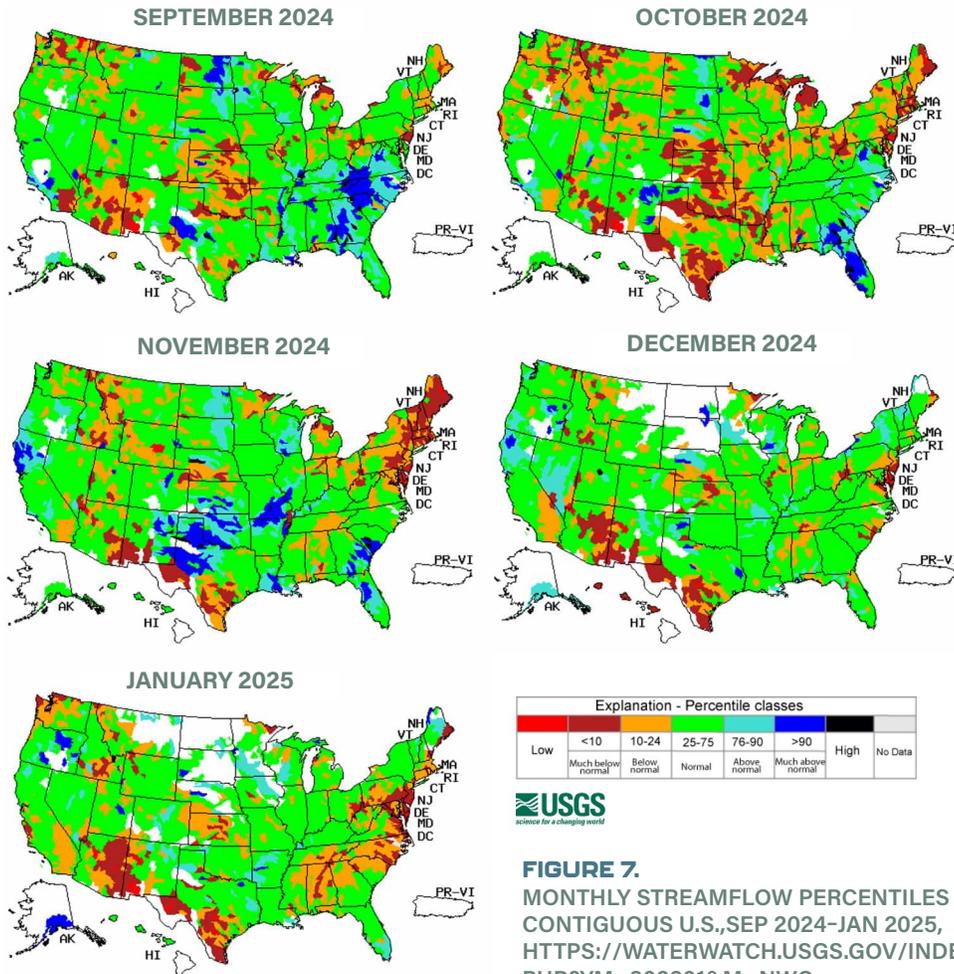


FIGURE 7. MONTHLY STREAMFLOW PERCENTILES FOR THE CONTIGUOUS U.S., SEP 2024-JAN 2025, [HTTPS://WATERWATCH.USGS.GOV/INDEX.PHP?YM=202201&M=NWC](https://waterwatch.usgs.gov/index.php?YM=202201&M=NWC)

NORTH AMERICAN DROUGHT MONITOR

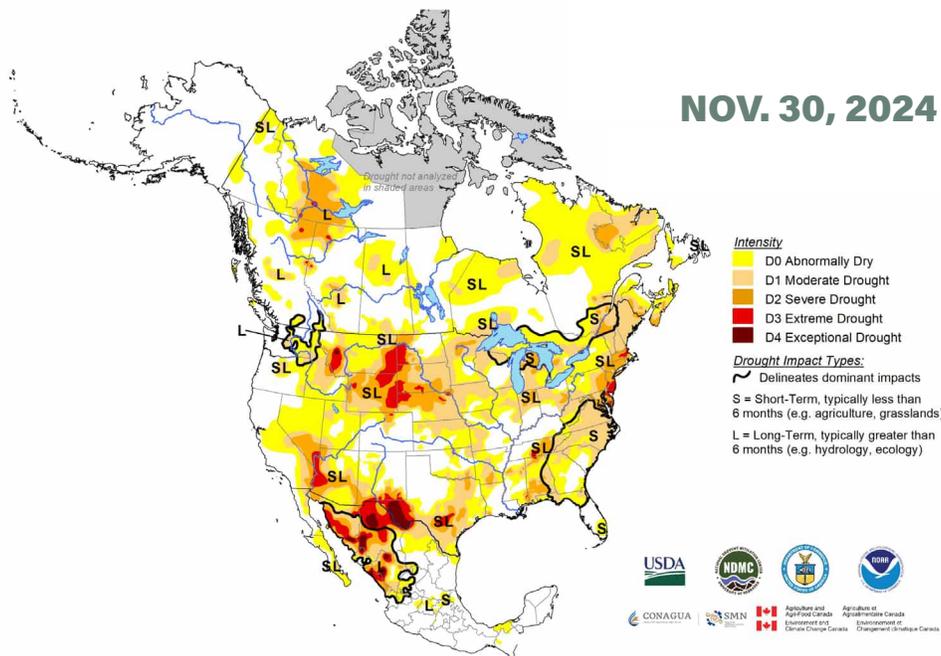


FIGURE 8. STATUS OF DROUGHT IN NORTH AMERICA ON NOVEMBER 30, 2024. MAPS FROM THE NORTH AMERICAN DROUGHT MONITORING PROGRAM, [HTTPS://WWW.NCDC.NOAA.GOV/TEMP-AND-PRECIP/DROUGHT/NADM](https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/temp-and-precip/drought/nadm)

SNOW & ICE COVER

The first notable snow of the season arrived in late-November, bringing several inches to the Canadian prairies and lake-effect snow in the Great Lakes. By December, snowpack expanded across the Upper Midwest and Great Lakes, but much of the central U.S. remained snow-free, allowing ducks to linger longer than usual. A major shift occurred in January, with deepening snow cover spreading south into the Plains, Midwest, Northeast, and even as far south as the Gulf Coast. This constrained feeding opportunities in mid-latitudes and triggered one of the most significant migration events of the year, aligning with a strong finish to the hunting season in traditional wintering areas.

Exceptional warmth delayed ice-up for the Great Lakes, with below-average ice cover persisting through December and early January. Warmer-than-normal conditions kept much of the region's water open, allowing diving ducks such as scaup, canvasbacks, and redheads to remain longer than usual. This stalled major movements to traditional southern and East Coast wintering areas, frustrating southern hunters. Extended record cold caused a significant shift in January as ice cover rapidly increased, reaching near-average levels by early February. While the early-season delay created inconsistent hunting, the sharp January increase in ice cover likely contributed to a memorable late-season finish for many hunters.

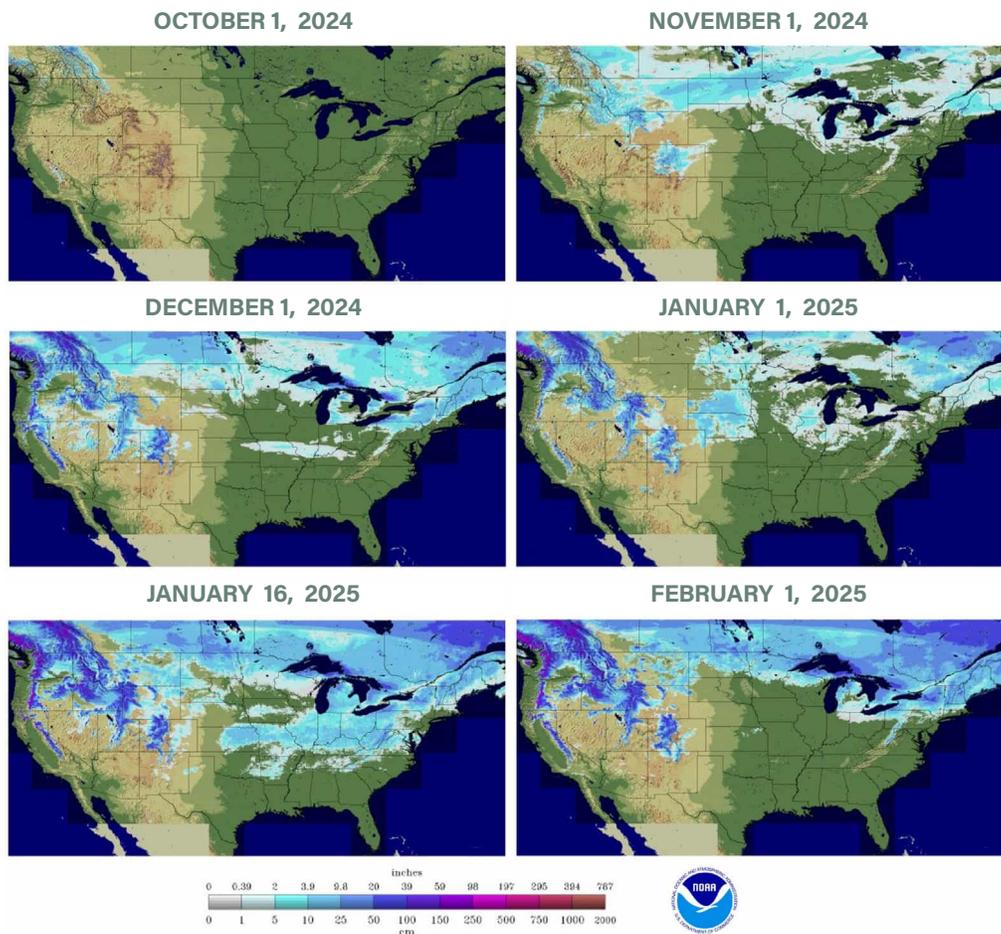


FIGURE 9. DAILY SNOW DEPTH (INCHES) ON SELECTED DATES, OCT 2024–FEB 2025, FOR THE CONTIGUOUS U.S., [HTTPS://WWW.NOHRSC.NOAA.GOV/NSA/](https://www.nohrsc.noaa.gov/nsa/)



GREAT LAKES ICE COVER

Updated: Feb 4, 2025

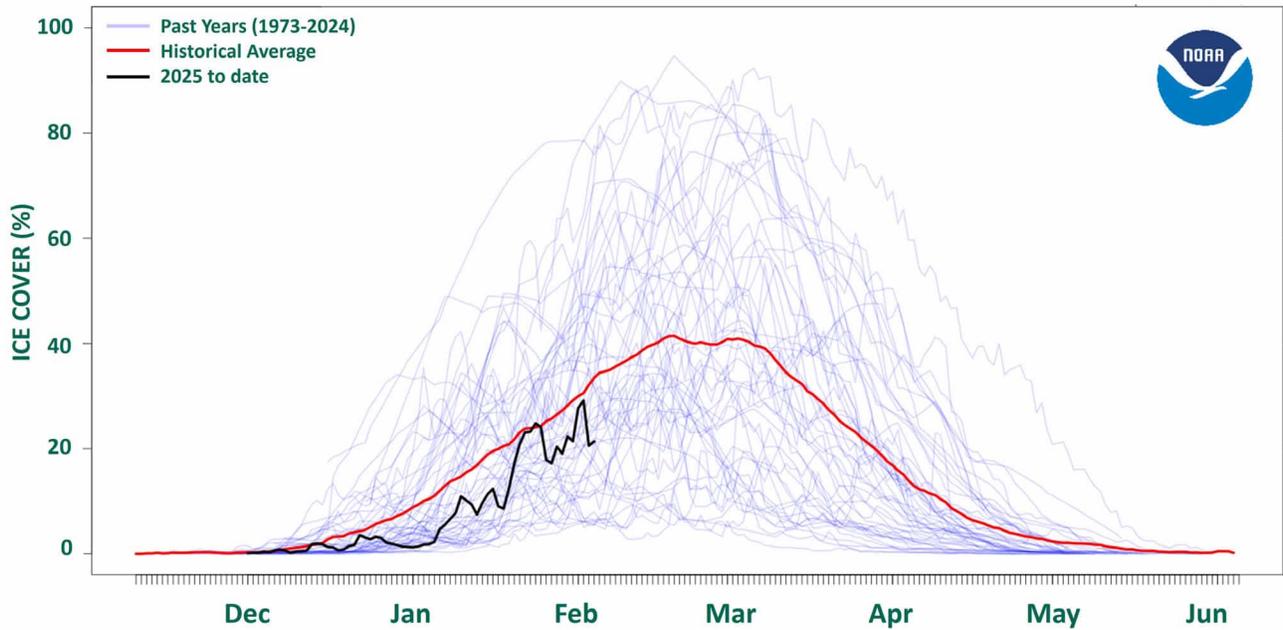


FIGURE 10. WINTER PATTERN OF LONG-TERM (1973–2024) AVERAGE ICE COVER (%) ON THE GREAT LAKES, COMPARED TO CURRENT YEAR, AS OF FEB 4, 2025. [HTTPS://WWW.GLERL.NOAA.GOV/DATA/ICE/GLICD.PHP](https://www.glerl.noaa.gov/data/ice/glicd.php)

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

The following summaries provide a snapshot of the prevailing messages that DU biologists and partners heard throughout the 2024-25 season.



PACIFIC FLYWAY

Waterfowl managers and hunters throughout the Pacific Flyway described the season as hit-or-miss, owing to the timing and intensity of multiple precipitation events and temperature swings. In Washington, mild fall temperatures and abundant water supported birds well into winter. Large numbers of ducks and geese remained on northern refuges throughout much of the season, particularly on Puget Sound's tidal flats. Inland hunters struggled with widely dispersed and inactive flocks, with many reporting below-average success compared to previous years. Oregon experienced similar issues. January surveys by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife reported one of the lowest duck harvests in decades at Sauvie Island, one of the state's most popular hunting areas. Eastern Oregon wetlands fared slightly better but remained below long-term averages, as warmer-than-normal conditions in British Columbia allowed many ducks to stay farther north, limiting migration into Oregon for much of the season.

California's season was more dynamic. Early, warm weather delayed migrations into the Sacramento Valley, leaving many rice fields largely empty. By November, an atmospheric river brought significant rain to the Valley, drastically improving habitat but also deeply flooding some waterfowl areas and spreading birds across the landscape. The Grassland Ecological Area in the San Joaquin Valley provided some of the most consistent hunting, with green-winged teal dominating the harvest. Mendota Wildlife Area and Mystic Lake also held solid teal numbers, while flooded rice fields attracted large flocks of white-fronted, snow, and Ross's geese. Across multiple areas, mallard numbers appeared higher than recent years, which was a welcome surprise given recent declines in breeding numbers.





CENTRAL AND MISSISSIPPI FLYWAYS

Early-season mild temperatures across the Prairie Pothole Region slowed the southward movement of birds, leading to a staggered migration. One of the biggest takeaways was the unprecedented warmth, as the 3-month period October–December was the warmest in 130 years. This extended warmth kept wetlands open far longer than usual, delaying migration and allowing birds to hold in mid-latitude regions instead of pushing south. Waterfowl season across the Great Lakes region was marked by inconsistent bird numbers and challenging conditions. An unusually warm fall delayed migrations, leading to slow early-season hunting in many areas. Mid-season hunting was erratic, with birds becoming stale in some locations, but a late cold front in December helped many hunters finish strong.

Bird numbers fluctuated across the Mid-South. Dry conditions persisted through September and October, but November brought needed rainfall to parts of the flyway. An arctic system in late November brought the first major freeze east of the Rockies, pushing birds out of Canada and freezing many wetlands. A rapid warm up reopened much of the landscape and improved hunting conditions in mid-latitude states with sustained success in areas such as Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Illinois. A common complaint this season was the lack of mallards and wood ducks in flooded timber of Arkansas, Mississippi, and northern Louisiana. A poor acorn crop likely played a role, but the unseasonably warm fall kept many birds further north on open water. Mid-latitude states reported large concentrations of mallards on open rivers well into January, withstanding some of the coldest late-season temperatures experienced in decades. Nevertheless, record-breaking cold and multiple snow events created a dramatic turnaround for southern hunters, with some reporting “epic” hunts and consistent success over multiple weeks in January. In Texas, November rains significantly improved wetland conditions, particularly in the High Plains, where playa wetlands attracted over 1.2 million ducks by midwinter.

ATLANTIC FLYWAY

Warm conditions also delayed migrations in the Atlantic Flyway, with inland wetlands remaining ice-free well into November. Sea duck hunters along the North Atlantic Coast reported success by Thanksgiving, with good numbers of scoters and eiders observed from Maine to Massachusetts. In the Chesapeake Bay region, hunting success varied throughout November and December. The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources reported dry conditions that limited habitat for dabbling ducks, though sea ducks and divers began to concentrate in the area as colder weather arrived. Maryland's Eastern Shore saw a gradual buildup of Atlantic Population Canada geese, with surveys showing numbers nearing seasonal averages by late December. Further south, North Carolina and Virginia's coastal marshes filled with redheads, bluebills, and mallards as colder weather pushed birds into the area in December. Managed wetlands in South Carolina and Georgia benefited from consistent rain, attracting mallards, gadwalls, and wood ducks by January.

The most significant migrations occurred in late January, driven by strong cold fronts. Aerial surveys and hunter reports in Maryland and Virginia noted increased puddle duck and goose numbers compared to December. In South Carolina, the Department of Natural Resources reported a 25 percent increase in mallard numbers compared to their December survey, particularly in managed wetlands. Georgia also saw a late-season influx of wood ducks and teal, improving hunting success in the state's coastal marshes. The season ended on a high note across much of the Atlantic Flyway, as late-season cold fronts brought large numbers of birds into the region.



SUMMARY AND LOOKING AHEAD

The 2024–25 waterfowl season was shaped by a modest rebound in duck populations, variable habitat conditions, and dramatic weather swings. A record-warm early season delayed migration, leading to inconsistent hunting across much of the country. Mid-season rains improved conditions across the flyways, but ducks remained widely dispersed and difficult to pattern amid otherwise warm conditions. A deep January freeze triggered a major migration, concentrating birds and producing some of the best hunts of the season. While early challenges frustrated many hunters, the season ended on a strong note in several regions.

Although 2024 brought a modest increase in breeding ducks, habitat conditions likely supported only average production. Most biologists expect the 2025 breeding population to be similar to last year. Presently, habitat conditions across major breeding areas are varied. Snow accumulation on the Canadian prairies has created a useful base of moisture, but scarce snow and low wetland levels prevail across the Dakotas. Additionally, soil moisture was low entering fall, meaning there is reduced opportunity for runoff into wetland basins for areas with snow. Widespread spring and summer rain will be needed to improve conditions across the Prairie Pothole Region, which is now entering its eighth consecutive year without full drought recovery. Farther north, conditions have improved across portions of the Western Boreal Forest, which is welcome news after multiple years of drought and wildfires in this normally stable landscape. California lake levels are above average, and mountain snowpack is near or above seasonal averages in key watersheds, which bodes well for water availability for rice production and wetland management. Conditions appear good to excellent in eastern Canada and the northeastern U.S., although drought is emerging across the Great Lakes. Birds are now well into northward migration, and weather events over the coming months will ultimately determine settling patterns, the habitats they encounter, and the production that will fuel yet another eagerly anticipated fall flight.



NORTH AMERICAN DROUGHT MONITOR

JANUARY 31, 2025

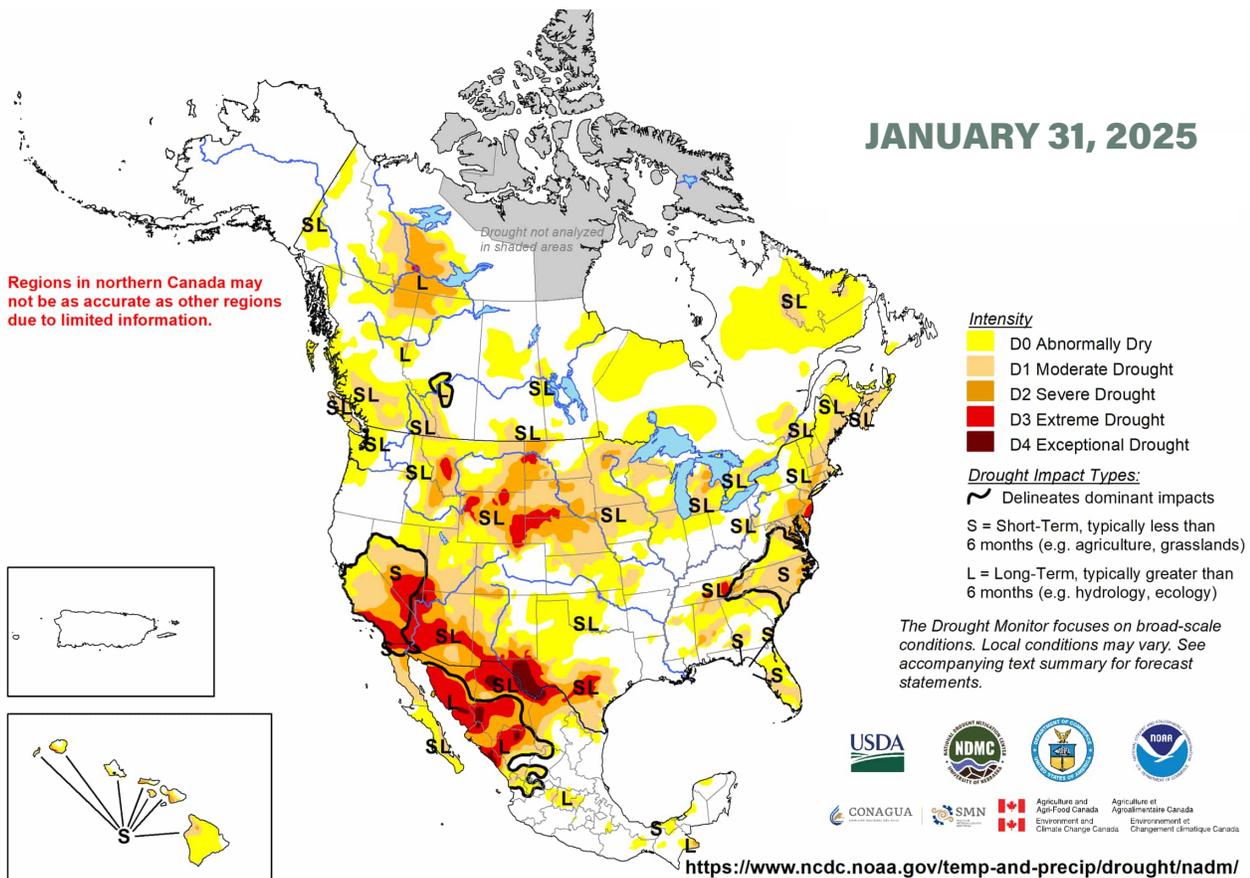


FIGURE 11. STATUS OF DROUGHT IN NORTH AMERICA ON JANUARY 31, 2025. MAP FROM THE NORTH AMERICAN DROUGHT MONITORING PROGRAM, [HTTPS://DROUGHTMONITOR.UNL.EDU/NADM/MAPS.ASPX](https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/nadm/maps.aspx)

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