

2023 DUCK HUNTER SURVEY SUMMARY



Department of
Environmental
Conservation

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Choosing the “best” duck season in New York has always been a challenging task, because duck abundance and migration, land and water access, weather, and habitat vary widely across the state and through the year. Too, season dates preferred by hunters chasing wood ducks on small ponds and wetlands may be very different than seasons preferred by someone who hunts diving ducks on large water bodies. To select the season dates in each zone that may work best for most hunters, we need to understand what hunters think is important and pair those values with actual data on duck abundance, migration, and temperatures.

In 2023, DEC surveyed all duck hunters who indicated during their Harvest Information Program registration that they hunted ducks the prior year. The goal of the survey was to gauge the relative importance of several factors that influence satisfaction with duck season dates, updating the data from DEC’s 2017 survey of duck hunters.

By using a statewide survey, DEC gives all duck hunters a voice in the decision process, and data can be analyzed by zone to see how hunter values and preferences vary across the state. The results are being combined with migration and abundance data to determine the dates for the future duck seasons. The future duck season dates (2024-2025 and beyond) will be announced in February 2024. Using a multi-year season format identifies season dates ahead of time (barring changes to the federal frameworks) and allows hunters to plan their season well in advance.

The 2023 duck hunter survey asked hunters to rank four objectives based on what is most influential to their satisfaction with season dates:

- a. Maximize the opportunity to hunt when ducks I like are most abundant
- b. Maximize the opportunity to hunt when ducks I like are migrating
- c. Maximize the opportunity to hunt when ducks are concentrated due to ice
- d. Maximize the opportunity to go hunting – holidays

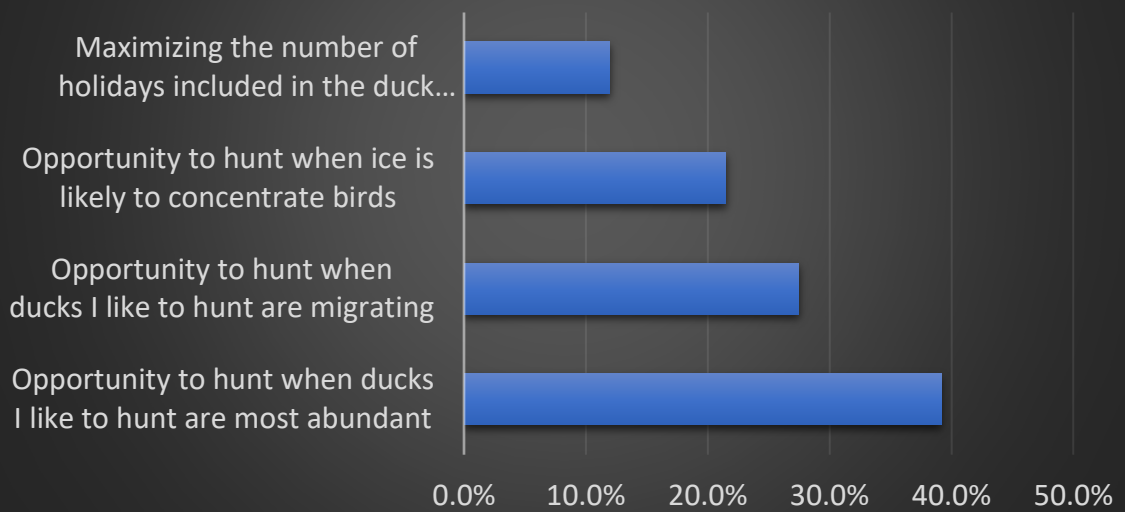
These objectives were established based on input from duck hunters to DEC. Of note, while duck hunters appreciate migration for its increased effectiveness in decoying ducks, many also considered the icing and concentration of ducks to be potentially even more significant. In the current process, the influence of ice is separate from migration to tease out which is more important to duck hunters. Icing can often create the illusion of “migration” as birds make short-distance movements. A late-season influx of birds to larger water bodies may give the impression of migrating birds when, in fact, ducks were forced off surrounding smaller bodies of water by ice. This is especially true for Mallard and American Black Duck, which tend to favor smaller bodies of water until forced off by snow and ice.

Zone by zone breakdowns will be available when the results of the season selection process is announced during spring 2024.

DEC sent e-mail surveys to the 87% of Harvest Information Program (HIP) registrants that provided a valid email address. The remaining 13% were mailed a letter with a QR code and link to participate in the survey on-line. Respondents were only allowed to complete the survey once.

Overall, the response rate was slightly over 27%. Responses per zone were proportional to where duck hunters live (i.e., about 54% responses we received were from hunters who hunt the Western Zone and about 54% of hunters live in the Western Zone).

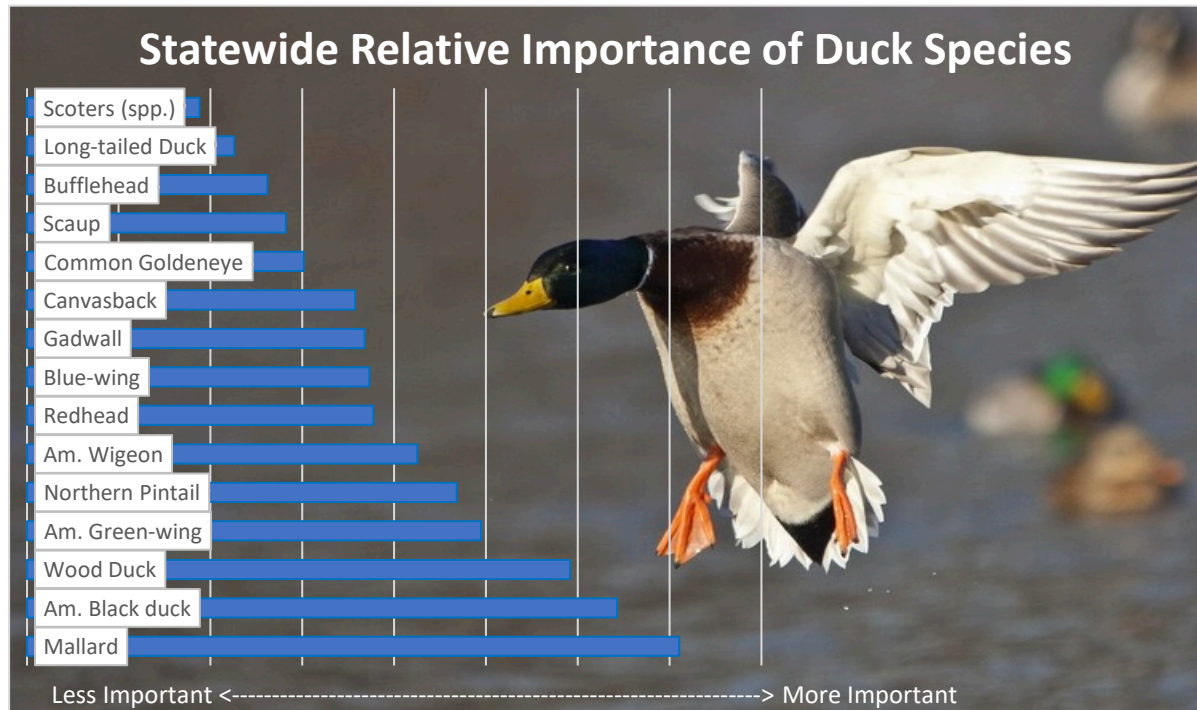
Mean Importance Weight for Duck Hunter Objectives



Hunter values across all zones were similar, with “Opportunity to hunt when duck species I like to hunt are most abundant” being the most important objective, followed by “Opportunity to hunt when duck species I like to hunt are migrating”, “Opportunity to hunt when icing is more likely to concentrate ducks”, and lastly the importance of “Maximizing the number of holidays included in the duck season” (Figure above). While all four of the objectives are important to some hunters (i.e., each objective was ranked #1 most important by some hunters), participants indicated that maximizing abundance of species they prefer to hunt was greater than 1.4 times as important as any other consideration. The difference in hunter values between zones was minor (<5% difference in objective importance). In all zones, the order of importance was the same.



The relative importance of duck species varies by hunter and by zone. Based on previous research, ducks that make better table fare, respond well to decoys or calling, and are larger, tend to be more preferred. In the survey, we asked hunters who had species preferences to rate 15 different species from “Not important at all” to “Extremely Important.” As expected, statewide the top three species were Mallard, American Black Duck, and Wood Duck, respectively (Figure below). The top 3 were identical in all 3 upstate zones, but in the Long Island zone, American Black Duck was the most valued species by hunters followed by Mallard and Northern Pintail. In all zones, dabbling ducks were clearly preferred over diving ducks. The highest ranked diving duck in any zone was Redhead in the Western zone where it was the 6th most important duck species. Among the diving duck species Redhead and Canvasback scored the highest among hunter preferences, while sea ducks (Bufflehead, Long-tailed Duck, and scoters) were least preferred.



In addition, hunters were also asked to provide the number of days that they hunted in various areas of their preferred zones. In each waterfowl zone, all subregions were evenly utilized by duck hunters. For example, in the Western Zone the Finger Lakes accounted for approximately 27% of the hunting effort, the Lake Plains accounted for 25% the Great Lakes shoreline and Niagara River accounted for 24%, and the Southern Tier accounted for 24%. The results highlight why season setting is such a challenging issue and why DEC must consider all duck hunter values from all hunters across a zone, not just from select hunter groups or particular areas.

