



New York State Duck Season Setting Process: Frequently Asked Questions

This spring, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) completed a process to establish duck season dates in all zones (excluding Lake Champlain where dates are set by the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Board) for the 2024-2025 through 2026-2027 seasons. These dates incorporated [hunter values](#), migration and abundance data, and temperature data from each zone to identify the season dates that best fit what duck hunters value. Below is a list of questions hunters may ask about the process and results. If you have additional questions, please contact wildlife@dec.ny.gov.

General

Q: Why do the three upstate zones open on the same day? Doesn't that defeat the purpose of having multiple zones?

A: The DEC season setting process is designed to identify the “best” duck season dates that satisfy what hunters value *for each zone independently*. Although having concurrent opening dates was not the goal of this process, it does provide an opportunity to minimize competition and spread out opening day hunting pressure across the three zones. Additionally, most duck hunters (approximately 75%) hunt only one zone and will not be impacted by the concurrent start dates.

The purpose of season zones is to allow states to select dates that reflect the duck migration for a specific zone, not to create multiple opening days and expose ducks to greater than 60 days of harvest pressure. In fact, DEC's use of multiple season zones is controlled by federal regulations.

Q: Why did DEC change the duck season setting window from 5 years to 3 years, and how does that affect duck hunter input and surveys?

A: Multi-year season formats for each zone provide hunters the opportunity to anticipate future seasons, make hunting plans in advance of the season, and create stability between years. However, waterfowl hunters expressed concern that using a 5-year window for duck seasons was too long and was not responsive to weather changes over that period. Thus, DEC agreed to shorten the window to three years.

Although DEC will be updating migration, abundance, and weather data on a 3-year interval, statewide surveys evaluating duck hunter values will be implemented every 5 years. Hunter values and preferences change slowly through time and do not require as frequent re-evaluation.



Q: How does DEC measure duck abundance and migration timing?

A: DEC estimates relative abundance and migration timing within each zone using data collected by eBird, based on millions of recorded observations from birders, bird watchers, and hunters. All eBird records are [individually reviewed](#) to ensure they are valid before being included in any analyses. With this enormous dataset, researchers are able to estimate weekly relative abundance of waterfowl species at a very small scale (approximately 1.5 mi²). DEC then takes the fine-scale data and summarizes this information for an entire zone (Figure 1). In this way, when evaluating season date alternatives, DEC is using migration data of a particular species in a particular zone. DEC incorporated abundance and migration data for 15 species and weighed the data based on survey results on how important each species was to hunters in that zone. For example, in the Western Zone, the abundance of mallards was weighted twice as much as the abundance of redheads, but only 1.15 times as much as wood ducks.

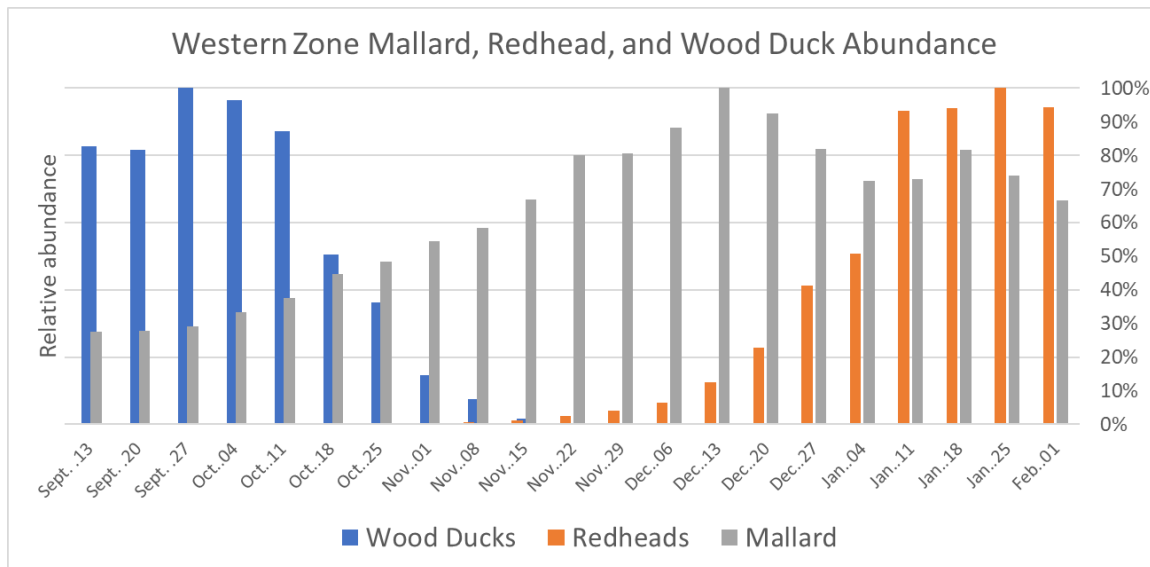


Figure 1. Western Zone mallard, redhead, and wood duck abundance from September 13th-February 1st. Estimates derived from [eBird status and trends modeling](#).

Western Zone

Q: Will the later closing date impact hunter access to larger bodies of water?

A: Any season alternative has trade-offs that balance the values that hunters place on certain aspects of duck hunting. Western zone hunters indicated that hunting when ice conditions force ducks to leave small frozen wetlands to congregate on open water was the 3rd most important objective of a season behind maximizing abundance and migration of ducks. The later a season runs, the higher the risk that any body of water becomes inaccessible as ice conditions prevent wading or using boat launches.

Northeast Zone

Q: Why is the zone opening later in October and ending later in December than in the past?

A: Hunters in the Northeast zone have indicated that they want to hunt ducks during prime periods of abundance and migration. The 51-day first split captures virtually all of the highest levels of duck abundance and almost the entire migration for the zone during October and November. The later December dates represent the value hunters place on icing conditions that concentrate duck activity on large bodies of water. Migration in the zone dwindles significantly in December, but as ice develops across the landscape, the remaining ducks are forced to use larger water bodies that freeze more slowly.

With a 60-day duck season and federal regulations that prevent more than 2 splits, the only way to extend the season later into December is to take a week off the front end of the season. Placing a split during the peak abundance and migration of species that are important to Northeast Zone hunters would conflict with what hunters have indicated is most important to them.

Q: Will hunters miss opportunity at wood ducks and teal with the later opening day?

A: Yes, based on abundance data of wood ducks and blue-winged teal, hunters in the Northeast Zone will have slightly less opportunity to hunt those species (Figure 2). Wood ducks and blue-winged teal peak in abundance during September and are essentially absent from the zone by early November. Although wood ducks were the 2nd most important duck to hunters in the zone, the abundance and migration of other important ducks, like mallards and black ducks, drove the season later. Additionally, the interest in hunting when icing occurs also resulted in a later opener. Selecting the “best” dates is a complicated set of tradeoffs, and 60-days cannot capture all of the potential hunting opportunity for all duck species within a zone.

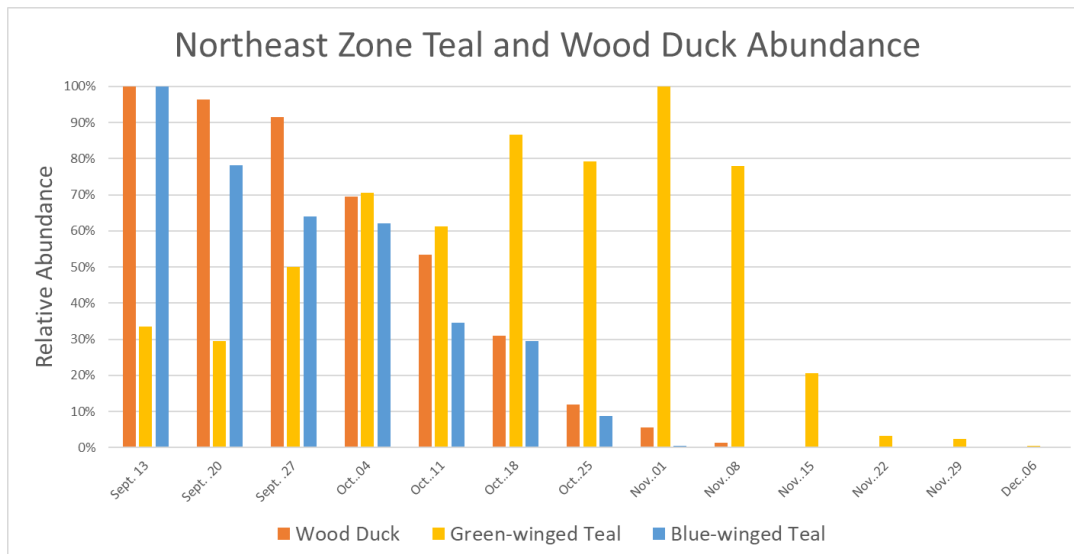


Figure 2. Northeast Zone wood duck, green-winged teal, and blue-winged teal abundance from September 13th-December 6th. Estimates derived from [eBird status and trends modeling](#)

Southeast Zone

Q: Why doesn't the new season include the highest rates of migration?

A: The total season can only be a maximum of 60 days and must have one split. When selecting dates, there will always have to be compromises. Duck migration in the Southeast Zone is more prolonged than other zones (e.g., Northeast). Overall, the selected season dates best balance abundance (which is most important to Southeast duck hunters), migration, time when icing is likely to occur, and desired overlap with holidays.

Long Island Zone

Q: Why doesn't the season start on December 3rd and run straight through January 31st?

A: In addition to migration and abundance data, DEC considered the importance of weekends and holidays. Hunter effort data shows that weekend days throughout the season are hunted approximately six times more than weekdays. By including Thanksgiving week, the season dates capture an additional holiday opportunity. The additional holiday is more important than the marginal gain in duck abundance that would be gained by extending the season 1-6 days longer (depending on how the calendar falls).