

November 21, 2018 – Aerial Waterfowl Inventory Blog

We flew the waterfowl survey on Tuesday, November 20th. Much of the ice from the previous week had thawed and the ducks had spread out again on the landscape. Duck numbers along the Illinois River declined about 14% to just under 332,000 ducks. The largest concentration on the Illinois River was found at Chautauqua NWR (73,000 ducks) near Havana. The other major concentrations on the Illinois were near Chillicothe at Douglas (22,500 ducks) and Goose lakes (59,400 ducks), and the Cuba Island complex (35,500 ducks) at Sanganois SFWA near Chandlerville. The decrease in duck numbers along the Mississippi River was more drastic (-42%) where the duck count was estimated at 565,000 ducks. The biggest decreases were in mallards that totaled around 284,000 birds on Wednesday. I suspect a bunch of those mallards headed further south once the St. Louis, MO area was blanketed with snow; however, I believe several of those mallards redistributed on the landscape once the snow and ice receded in the private clubs on the Missouri side of the floodplain. Many of the canvasbacks from Pool 19 must have departed southbound as I estimated about 14,000 canvasbacks this week, down from 71,000 the week prior.

I witnessed an interesting foraging behavior of northern shovelers yesterday while flying over Hennepin & Hopper lakes near Hennepin, IL. Northern shovelers have a bill that is very specialized for capturing aquatic invertebrates or zooplankton found in the water column. Because of this highly adapted bill, they are often called “bootlips, hollywoods, or smiling mallards”, to name a few. What I captured with the camera yesterday was a collaborative or cooperative foraging behavior of the birds. The ducks were spinning around in tight circles on the water while aggressively paddling their feet. This movement in the water was churning up and concentrating the zooplankton (ostracods and copepods, etc.). If you scan the photo below, you will find several groups of spinning shovelers feasting on these tiny invertebrates.

Good luck duck hunting and Happy Thanksgiving! For more information about the waterfowl survey, check out our webpage at www.bellrose.org. Stay tuned for more updates next week.....



