

October 19, 2018 – Aerial Waterfowl Inventory Blog

We completed the waterfowl inventory on Thursday October 18th and witnessed drastically different conditions along the rivers. To borrow from Charles Dickens, it's a Tale of Two Rivers! Duck numbers (147,565) along the Illinois River were up 33% from the 10-yr average for the middle of October; however, the central Mississippi River numbers (59,770) were down 12% from average. The cooler temperatures over the last couple of weeks have pushed in a variety of ducks along the Illinois River and numbers of mallards, gadwall, and ruddy ducks are well above average. We even saw some lesser scaup (bluebills) and canvasbacks along the upper river. This should coincide nicely with the northern Illinois waterfowl season opener on Saturday, October 20th. In contrast, the central Mississippi River was flooded extensively along the entire survey route from Grafton to New Boston, IL. The abundant food resources noted during early September 2018 in the confluence region have all been lost due to flooding. The table was set with a bountiful crop of moist-soil vegetation for those hungry migrating ducks, but the swollen Mississippi River has put those duck foods under several feet of water. The staggering numbers of ducks recorded in early November, 2017 in the confluence region will likely not repeat during fall 2018.

I had a request for some habitat photos along the upper Illinois River last week. Unlike the Mississippi, the upper Illinois River (above Peoria) has had low-water levels during the growing season. Duck foods are abundant this fall even in the connected backwaters of the upper Illinois. Places like Billsbach and Weis lakes and Sawyer and Hitchcock sloughs have some phenomenal duck foods along the fringes. Even the riverbanks along the upper Illinois are covered in sedges and wild millets this fall. The stage is set for some quality hunting along the Illinois River, let's hope Mother Nature cooperates!

Good luck on the north zone opener and central zone youth season on October 20th. For more information about the waterfowl survey, check out our webpage at www.bellrose.org. Stay tuned for more updates next week.....



Billsbach Lake near Henry, IL October 18, 2018.



Sawyer and Hitchcock sloughs, October 18, 2018.



Extensive flooding at Swan Lake, Two River NWR, October 18, 2018.