



# Delta Waterfowl Programs Boost Duck Production

Breeding waterfowl fare better this spring as water returns to the prairie

Wet-dry cycles are a natural and necessary part of life in the Prairie Pothole Region. Dry years — and even drought — can curtail or even devastate duck production in the PPR, which is often called North America’s “duck factory” because 50 to 70 percent of the continent’s duck hatch occurs there most years.

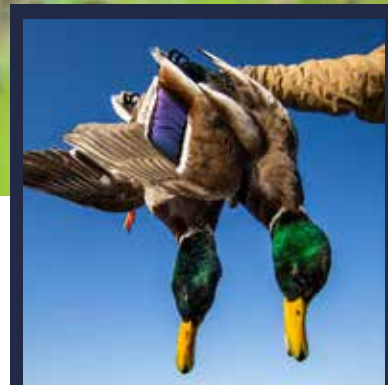
Starting in late 2020 and continuing through 2021, a large swath of the PPR was dry. The PPR stretches from northern Iowa and western Minnesota, up through the Dakotas into Montana,

and encompasses southern Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Drought gripped PPR, the Dakotas, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, resulting in poor duck production.



**DELTA'S PROVEN INTENSIVE MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS PRODUCE DUCKS.**

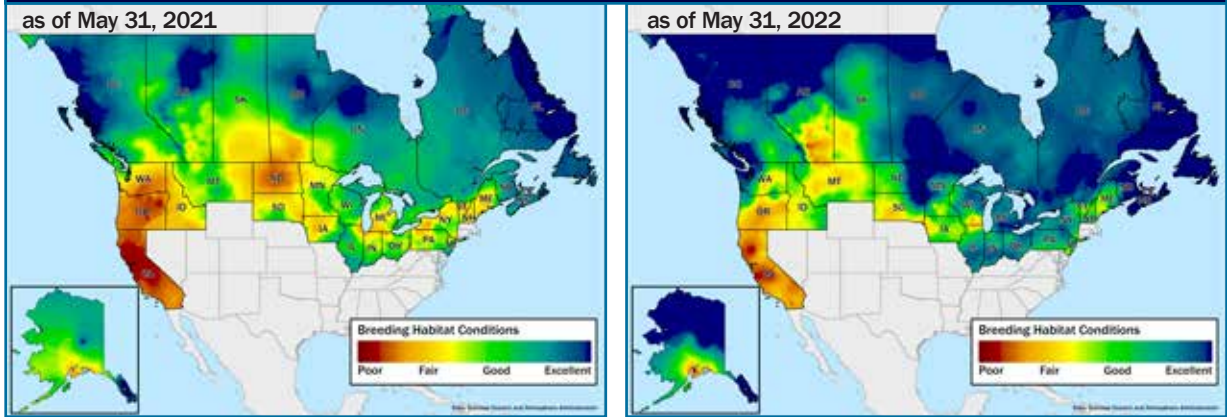
Age ratios published in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2021-2022



**Delta Waterfowl measures success by the ability to put MORE DUCKS INTO THE FALL FLIGHT.**

Migratory Bird Hunting Activity and Harvest Report reflect poor duck production in 2021. For example, only .79 juvenile mallards were shot for every adult mallard taken by hunters. The previous year, 1.05 juveniles were shot for every adult mallard. For redheads, which breed primarily in the areas of the PPR hit hardest by drought in

## Waterfowl Breeding Habitat Conditions



Heavy snow and rains improved waterfowl habitat in 2022 across the Prairie Pothole Region.

2021, the age ratio comparison is even more stark — 1.79 juveniles per adult in the 2020-2021 season, followed by .76 juveniles per adult in 2021-2022. The report is telling in another way: total U.S. duck harvest for last season was 9.46 million, a sharp decrease from 11.14 million during the 2020-2021 season.

Now for the good news: Habitat conditions across much of the PPR improved remarkably for the 2022 waterfowl breeding season thanks to heavy snowfall and spring rains. Wetland conditions in the Dakotas ranged from good to excellent in May 2022, and Manitoba was near-record wet. The 2022 Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey put the pond index at 5.45 million, which is 4 percent above the long-term average. North Dakota Game and Fish estimated the state’s duck brood index increased 37% in 2022. Duck production received a needed boost. The result should be more ducks over decoys this season.

### Delta Waterfowl Duck Production

The Duck Hunters Organization continues to work across the breeding grounds to maximize duck production, primarily through Delta’s Predator Management and Hen House programs.

Delta operated 26 Predator Management sites in the PPR in 2022 — 23 in North Dakota and three in Manitoba. Managing key mammalian nest predators such as raccoons and skunks in areas with high densities of breeding ducks (>60 pairs per square mile) but

with a low percentage of grassland nesting cover can dramatically boost nest success. Delta’s Predator Management restores a more equitable predator/prey balance, and allows ducks to successfully hatch nests and raise broods on the prairie landscape.

Delta’s professional trappers were challenged by deep snowfall, spring rains and high water this spring. While the conditions posed difficulty early on to keep traps working, the water was welcome because it filled up wetlands and encouraged robust waterfowl nesting efforts.

Trappers reported fewer predators on the landscape this spring, and those they caught skewed more heavily toward adult animals. The drought, along with a harsher winter in 2021-2022, likely helped to depress predator populations.

As they wrapped up their work in July, Delta trappers reported seeing high numbers of duck broods on many of the ponds. Duck production was strong on Delta’s Predator Management sites in 2022, which means tens of thousands more ducks migrating south this fall.

In preparation for the 2022 nesting season, Delta installed 650 new program Hen Houses in the PPR. Used primarily by mallards, Hen Houses are proven to increase nest success dramatically — up to 12 times higher than a nesting hen in the nearby grass.

A nesting cylinder lined with flax straw mounted on a pole over a shallow semi-permanent wetland, Hen Houses keep the hen and eggs safely out of reach of most mammalian predators.

During winter, 250 new nest structures were installed in Manitoba, while Delta added 200 each in Alberta and North Dakota. Delta added the Hen Houses through the support of grants from the Manitoba Conservation Trust, Wildlife Habitat Canada, the North Dakota Outdoor Heritage Fund, as well as major private funding from Jim Flores, Michael H. Mooney, Stan Grad, Fred Mannix and William Turnbull.

Delta now has 9,655 program Hen Houses in key breeding areas for mallards, including Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, North Dakota,



A mallard using a Delta Hen House is up to **12 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO HATCH** a nest than a mallard nesting in the grass.



## **DELTA PILLAR: DUCK PRODUCTION**

Nest success is the primary driver of duck populations in North America. In general, 15% to 20% of nests need to hatch just to maintain the population. In many areas of the prairie breeding grounds, nest predators such as raccoons, skunks and a host of other mammalian predators are overly abundant. As a result, nest success is poor, often less than 5%.

Through more than three decades of innovative research, Delta Waterfowl has tested and refined solutions to cost-effectively produce ducks. Delta's proven duck production programs — Hen Houses and Predator Management — significantly boost nest success.

Delta maximizes the impact of our duck production work by removing predators and installing

nest structures in areas where ducks breed in high numbers, but where nest success is low because of heavy predation and a lack of nesting cover.

Predator Management and Hen Houses are the perfect complement to dollars spent to conserve wetlands on the breeding grounds. These Delta programs are the best available tools to restore a reasonable predator/prey balance and make quality wetlands actually result in increased duck production.

Predator Management and Hen Houses are proven tools to add ducks to every fall flight for the benefit of hunters. We're fulfilling the promise of our mission as The Duck Hunters Organization to produce ducks and ensure the future of waterfowl hunting.



MILLION DUCK CAMPAIGN GOAL:

1,000,660

DUCKS PRODUCED ANNUALLY

Minnesota, Iowa, Pennsylvania and Colorado.

Hen House technicians check the usage of structures each year during winter, so they will report usage rates and nest success for the 2022 nesting season in a few months. Dry conditions in 2021 certainly lowered usage rates, but where the water stayed, 55 to 85% of Hen Houses were used. Usage rates and nest success are certain to be much better overall in 2022, which again, means more ducks in the fall flight.

**Increasing Delta's Impact**

Buoyed by the launch of Delta's Million Duck Campaign in July, Delta's duck production programs are headed toward an even larger impact. Delta's goal, upon reaching a fully funded \$250 million campaign, is to produce 1 million additional ducks every year. With full-scale delivery of the Million Duck Campaign, Delta plans to have

more than 110,000 Hen Houses and 366 Predator Management sites across the PPR.

**90%**  
of failed duck nests  
are lost to predators

**Predator Management  
boosts nest success!**

For 2023, Delta plans to add three new Predator Management sites in the parklands of Saskatchewan as part of research to refine a new technique of determining duck nest success by monitoring brood survival. Delta will have 29 sites in 2023. In addition, Delta has plans to install 1,855 new Hen Houses during the winter of 2022-2023, the largest one-year expansion in the program's history.

Delta's duck production programs continue to deliver for North America's duck hunters in every flyway. With the ducks encountering much better water conditions across many key areas of the breeding grounds this spring and summer, hunters should see more ducks this season.

Of course, all of Delta's duck production work is a partnership with you — our valued members, volunteers and donors. Thank you for your continued support, and have a great season!