



## Overview of Changes for 2023-2024 Migratory Game Bird Seasons

### INCREASE IN THE MALLARD BAG LIMIT IN THE ATLANTIC FLYWAY

#### *Background and development of a new harvest strategy*

In 2019, in response to sharp and sustained declines in mallard populations breeding in the northeastern US and parts of eastern Canada, the Atlantic Flyway Council and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) restricted the mallard bag limit from 4 per day (no more than 2 hens) to 2 per day (no more than 1 hen). The change in bag limit was made as an interim step while Atlantic Flyway biologists could develop a new population model and strategy to guide mallard harvest management. As part of that process, managers had to determine the goals for mallard management in the flyway. The fundamental objectives for mallard management in the Atlantic flyway are to:

- 1) Sustain an eastern mallard population that meets legal mandates and provides hunters and non-hunters the opportunity to enjoy this species; and
- 2) Maximize harvest opportunity in accordance with hunter desires (i.e., minimize closed seasons, maximize the average season length, maximize the population size, minimize the frequency of regulatory changes).

The new harvest strategy uses data from the nearly 10,000 mallards that are banded annually in the Atlantic Flyway, population estimates from large aerial and ground surveys that extend from eastern Canada to Virginia, harvest information from the USFWS parts survey, and recovery information from hunters who report the band numbers on harvested birds. This data helps managers understand what drives populations for eastern mallards and in turn, select bag limits that accomplish the two objectives. Annually, based on the most recent population information and a prediction of how various harvest rates will result in the following year's mallard population, the mallard bag limit will be either a liberal package of 4 birds (no more than 2 hens), a moderate package of 2 birds (no more than 1 hen), or one bird of either sex, as part of the regular duck bag limit.

#### *Current population status and trends*

The new harvest strategy accounts for mallards breeding in areas of eastern Canada that were not previously considered in Eastern Mallard Adaptive Harvest Management. The increase in geographic scope enables managers to account for most breeding mallards that are harvested in the Atlantic Flyway rather than just those that are hatched here. The breeding population estimate for eastern mallards in 2022 was 1.2 million mallards, resulting in a liberal recommendation of 4 mallards per day (no more than 2 hens) for the 2023-2024 hunting season. Since harvest restrictions went into place in 2019, mallard numbers have rebounded slightly,

mostly driven by increases in eastern Canada. Although the increase is encouraging, the northeastern US population continues a stable to slightly decreasing trend. Hunters should understand that the mallard regulation can go back the other way should population numbers and other data warrant a more conservative harvest regimen. Each year, the decision will be revisited with new population and demographic data to determine the optimal bag limits for mallards. This may result in a return to more moderate bag limits if the data supports such a change.

## **INCREASE IN THE CANADA GOOSE BAG LIMIT IN THE NORTHEAST HUNT ZONE**

The Atlantic Flyway Council recently adopted a revised Atlantic Population (AP) Canada Geese Harvest Strategy to guide setting of AP Canada geese hunting regulations beginning with the 2022-2023 season. During this process, and after careful review of trends in hunter harvest and participation over the last 10 years within North Carolina's Northeast Canada Goose Hunt Zone, the revised harvest strategy allows 30 total hunting days in the Northeast Hunt Zone when the status of the AP goose population prescribes either a restrictive, moderate, or liberal hunting season. The Northeast Hunt Zone bag limit will remain at 1 goose/day during restrictive and moderate hunting seasons and will increase to 2 geese/day during liberal seasons. For 2023-2024, the status of AP geese prescribes a liberal hunting season for the Northeast Hunt Zone, therefore the bag limit will increase to 2 geese/day. Similar to 2022-2023, no permit or harvest survey will be required.

## **DECREASE IN DAYS OFFERED AND BAG LIMIT FOR ATLANTIC BRANT HUNTING**

In response to further declines in the Atlantic brant population, this year's federal frameworks will decrease the brant hunting season from 50 days to a 30-day season with a 1-bird daily bag limit.