

Waterfowl outlook looks good this year

By Veronica Monier

Waterfowl hunting should be fair to good this year, the experts say.

"Bobber" Bill Klein of Norton, an avid sportsman, said the reports are good on waterfowl to the north. A friend of his up north, he said, thinks the forecast looks good.

Steve Price, a regional fisheries and wildlife supervisor with the Wildlife and Parks Region 1 office in Hays, said the outlook is good. Mallard and goose hunting, he said, both look optimistic.

Mr. Klein said with the water level at Sebelius Reservoir as low as it's been the last few years, duck hunting has been fair. He said hunters will have to see what happens with geese.

"We'll have some good pushes," he said, "but on average it'll be fair."

The fall duck hunting season started Oct. 8 in the High Plains Zone (everything west of U.S. 283) and run until Jan. 3. The second season will run from Jan. 21 to Jan. 29. The special season for pintails and canvasback is Oct. 8 through Nov. 15.

In the Low Plains Early Zone, the fall duck season began Oct. 15 and will run until Dec. 11. The season will be open again from Dec. 17 to Jan. 1. The season for pintails and canvasback is Oct. 15 through Nov. 22.

In the Low Plains Late Zone, duck season runs from Oct. 29 to Jan. 1 and Jan. 21 to Jan. 29. The pintail and canvasback season is Oct. 29 to Dec. 6.

The purpose of the split hunting zones and seasons are to allow better hunting opportunities, Mr. Price said. For example, he said, the Low Plains Early Zone has a lot of shallow wetlands which are big waterfowl hunting areas, such as Cheyenne Bottoms. The shallow wetlands freeze quickly, and having an early season allows hunters to get out there

before that happens.

"We're trying to provide the greatest opportunity and diversity for hunters," he said. "Some hunters like to hunt the early season, while others like to hunt the late."

Waterfowl hunting can be found in western Kansas at all of the state reservoirs — Sebelius (High Plains), Webster and Kirwin (Low Plains Late), and Cedar Bluff (Low Plains Early), said Mr. Price.

There are also a lot of smaller hunting areas, including private waters, he said. Some of the private waterfowl hunting areas are part of the state's Walk-In Hunting program.

One thing a lot of people don't know about, he said, are playa lakes, which are fabulous areas for waterfowl hunting. Playa lakes, he said, are clay basins, most of which are in western Kansas. A lot of people in western Kansas call them lagoons or buffalo wallows, he said.

Mr. Price said the playa lakes are low spots in fields where clay accumulates and then fills with water when it rains. Not only are the lakes good spots to find waterfowl, he said, but they are also the most important recharge of the Ogallala Aquifer, with recharge rates that are higher than any other land mass in the state.

There are roughly 10,000 playa lakes in the state, he said. Most are on private land and require permission to hunt on. There are some on public lands in southwestern Kansas, but none that are public in northwestern Kansas.

Duck hunting in Norton County, Mr. Klein said, is mainly confined to the area around Sebelius Reservoir, while goose hunting is generally off the lake on private land.

Goose hunting is open Oct. 29-30 and Nov. 12 to Feb. 12 for Canada geese, Oct. 29-30 and Nov. 12 to Jan. 20 for white-fronted geese, and Oct. 29 to Feb. 12 for light geese, including Ross', snow and blue.

There is a light goose conservation order that allows these birds to be taken from Feb. 13 to April 30. During the order, there are no bag or possession limits and unplugged shotguns and electronic calls, usually banned, can be used.

"Sebelius is one of the most western lakes (in Kansas), and that's where you'll find most of your ducks," he said, "but we have a couple of ponds in Norton County that we get permission to hunt on for ducks and geese."

"At certain times, pond hunting can be as good or better than at the lake. We really appreciate the guys who let us hunt on their land. When it's good, it's good."

Mr. Klein said on average, the bulk of birds are shot between sunrise and 9 or 9:30 a.m. But, he said, there are days at mid-morning when there is a good resting area on the water that can provide good hunting.

A majority of ducks will leave the lake to feed at daybreak in cold weather, he said. When that happens, there can be a good mid-morning flight, but there has to be a large num-

ber of ducks around.

"Early morning is usually best," he said, "but there are times when mid-mornings will be good. But you have to have a good spot where they are resting after they feed."

Mr. Klein said if the water level at Sebelius would go up a foot or two, it would increase the waterfowl habitat, which would lead to some of the best duck hunting around.

"Two foot of water would do a tremendous amount for waterfowl hunting," he said. "One and a half to two feet come spring would also make a tremendous difference in fishing."

The best mallard hunting, Mr. Klein said, will be right before the freeze up, generally between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

"Thanksgiving is generally a good time to go for both duck and geese," he said.

Also, sometimes, the late season in January is a good time to hunt.

"If you have the right weather conditions and a little thaw out, you can have a tremendous hunt," he said. "Plus, most people are done hunting by then."

Turkey hunting is good in almost every county

Wild turkeys were reintroduced into Kansas in the 1960s, and the program has been a great success. Today, huntable populations of turkeys exist in nearly every county. The Rio Grande subspecies dominates the western two-thirds of the state. Low numbers in the southwest provide only limited hunting. Hybrid Rio Grande/Eastern birds are found in the northcentral region. The Eastern subspecies is common in the northeast and far southeast regions, where numbers have grown tremendously in recent years.

Turkey Permits & Tags

Turkey Spring/Fall (Archery Or Firearms) - Except for limited, resident-only spring turkey permits in Unit 4, all turkey permits can be bought over the counter or online

- General resident: \$22.15
- Nonresident (unlimited unit): \$32.15
- Landowner/Tenant: \$12.15
- Second Turkey Game Tag: Any individual who has purchased a spring turkey permit is eligible for one second turkey game tag. Game tags are valid for Units 2 and 3 ONLY.
- Resident: \$12.15
- Nonresident: \$22.15

Turkey Management Units

Your permit specifies the unit or units in which you may hunt. Any individual who has purchased a turkey permit may purchase a second turkey game tag. All turkey permits purchased for an unlimited unit are valid in any unlimited unit. Second turkey game tags may be used in Units 2 and 3 only.



Early reports of waterfowl say hunting should be good this year.

— Photo by Bill Bussen

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