

Survey shows duck numbers lowest on record

An annual mid-winter survey shows wintering duck populations in the Pacific Flyway to be the lowest on record, according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists.

About 3.4 million ducks were counted in Pacific Flyway states in early January 1989. This is 7 percent below the previous winter low of 3.6 million in 1987, 32 percent below the winter count of 1988 and 46 percent below the winter average of the last 33 years.

Wintering mallards fell to a flyway record low of 1.1 million, down 37 percent from their long-term winter average. Pintails were down 70 percent from their long-term winter average. Biologists counted about 685,000 pintails, which winter primarily in California's Central Valley.

"This survey confirms the serious downward trend we saw last year when biologists counted extremely low numbers of nesting waterfowl in Canada and the northcentral United States," said Marvin Penert, regional director of the agency. "Long-term drought and habitat loss have hit duck populations hard, and we are going to have to continue with some strong medicine to bring them back."

The wintering waterfowl surveys were conducted by federal and state biologists at the end of the hunting season in early January. Most counts were made from aircraft.

While the immediate problem has been a devastating drought in duck nesting areas of the mid-continent prairies, the underlying problem is continent-wide habitat loss.

In one bright note, the service reported that most goose populations in the Pacific Flyway appear to be holding steady or increasing. Biologists attribute this to the fact that geese nest farther north and have not been as affected by drought conditions.