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"BLUE-WINGED TEAL" BY JOHN WILSON. ARTWORK PROVIDED COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND WILD WINGS, 800-445-4833. WWW.WILDWINGS.COM.

# Keeping Watch On Mottled Ducks

By John Flores

**L**oading two airboats on this eerily quiet, inky dark night in early August, Tom Hess, Will Selman, Brett Baccigalopi and his cousin Chance Baccigalopi were ready to make a hunt. There were no frog gigs, archery equipment or firearms among any of the items loaded. All that was needed were a couple of 400,000-candlepower hand-held spotlights, several specially designed crates and an ice chest with a few bottles of water.

Since 1994, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) has been banding mottled ducks along the Gulf of Mexico coastline. Those early efforts were initiated to determine the mottled duck's distribution in the western gulf and develop survival rates in order to study and manage the species better.

The old-timers call them summer mallard, black mallard or French duck. Coastal waterfowl hunters consider them a prized duck, one to be admired outside the cleaning shed.

Culturally Cajun, it's one of two duck species native to and found year-round in Louisiana—the other being the wood duck.

With some 35,000-plus mottled ducks banded since the inception of the banding program, and well over 10,000 in the past decade, the effort has produced important data concerning a population in decline—a decline in which Louisiana hunters have seen the bag limit reduced from three mottled ducks to one over the past several seasons.

Tom Hess, a biologist supervisor at Rockefeller Refuge, is one of the early pioneers of the mottled duck-banding program. A 25-year department veteran, Hess would be operating the airboat I'd be riding in to observe, while Selman would be doing the catching.

The Baccigalopi boys would be operating the second airboat, working adjacent to our boat to transect more efficiently.

"A lot of people said we couldn't band enough to have an ample sample size to study survival," Hess said. "We banded 1,500 that first year. We were able to convince the powers that be that it was doable, and early on we determined mottled duck movement and survival to some degree."

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department began banding mottled ducks three years later. Eventually, through cooperative effort and information exchange, personnel from three agencies that included the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) began looking at the mottled duck population in the western gulf as a whole.

Though the mottled duck of central to south Florida is the same species as its western gulf coast cousin, the two remain geographically separated, and therefore comprise



Captured in a Louisiana nighttime roundup, a mottled duck gets a shiny new band before release.

two populations.

"We band in July and August, with August being the best month," Hess explained. "That's when the adult birds are at their peak molting period and can't fly. And we try to do this at the dark of the moon because they're less skittish—the darker the better. When there is no moon they can't see where the boat's coming from."

Scanning side-to-side with hand-held sealed beams, it wasn't long before we spotted our first ducks of the night. Attempting to escape to the safety of some soft rush grass, the ducks were no match for the highly maneuverable airboat and Hess's skill at cutting them off.

The birds swam toward open water, where Selman leaned over the side of the boat and scooped up the first with his hands, while Hess vectored the craft for another pass, intent on catching the second. Clearly, the two biologists had worked together before. Within seconds, after securing the ducks, we were off scanning the marsh again.

## {Things That Matter }

## Mottled Ducks

Hess, with thousands of mottled duck catches under his belt said, “Early on we used nets and then found out you can’t hurt a mottled duck. You just hang off the side of the boat and grab them and flip them in. You don’t hurt them. It’s a more efficient technique and we’ve had very little mortality that way over the years.”

Estimates place the western gulf coast mottled duck population at somewhere around 630,000 birds. Alabama and Mississippi’s populations are included, but they pale in comparison to the Louisiana/Texas population. Moreover, Louisiana’s population makes up well over half of the regions’ total because of its massive expanse of proper habitat.

Few daily bag limits ever include three mottled ducks. However, psychologically, a reduction from three to one for some Louisiana duck hunters was a tough pill to swallow. All indications with respect to population models pointed to declines in Texas, whereas Louisiana’s numbers were stable.

Biologist Larry Reynolds represents Louisiana on the Mississippi Flyway Council and is responsible for making recommendations concerning season lengths and bag limits.

Reynolds concurs with the USFWS’s reasoning for lowering the bag limit. “The population is declining in Texas, no doubt about it. It’s solid. It’s long term. It’s not declining in Louisiana. But all populations have a core distribution and they have edges of distribution. When a population begins to decline, there is a point where you need to act. Do you act when the population declines on the edges, or do you wait till it declines on the absolute core of its distribution? The Service decided that they were going to act on the edges.”

For several years before the 2009-2010 Louisiana waterfowl season, mottled duck harvest figures, typically about 3 percent of Louisiana’s total annual harvest for all species, rose from 25,000 to 42,000 to 49,000 to 67,000.

During the same period, mid-winter aerial surveys remained somewhat constant.

Reynolds said, “Our harvest was going up, but our mid-winter survey was staying constant. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service is not satisfied with harvest reductions.” The USFWS and LDWF only saw a 7 percent harvest reduction during the first three years of reduced bag limit instead of the 18 to 20 percent anticipated.

“I don’t know if the United States Fish and Wildlife Service intends to take further action to reduce mottled duck harvests in Louisiana,” Reynolds said. “As of right now Texas has a more liberal season than we do, with 69 days and one bird bag versus our 60 days with one bird bag limit.”

Selman banded each bird caught and held in our tempo-

rary custody with a leg bracelet, while Hess meticulously recorded its age and sex. Upon release, each duck swam off as if his or her life depended on it. And, indeed, it did. ✈

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