



Take a Second Look  
42 Baker Avenue  
Lexington, MA 02172

1996-97 TASL Winter Census Dates: November 24, January 12 (weather date: January 26) February 9, March 9; for more information, call (617) 863-2392 or (617) 268-7571

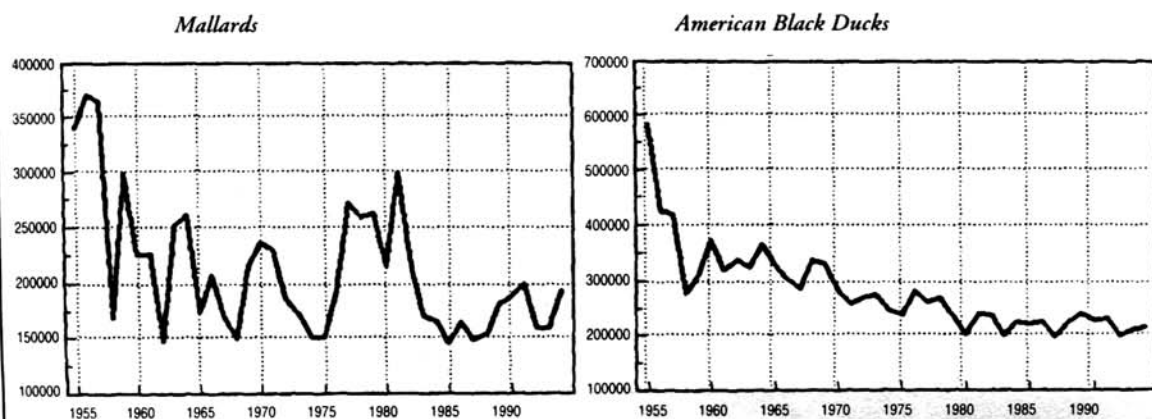
## Are They Disappearing?

In Part I (TASL News, Fall 1995) the question of whether American Black Ducks are being genetically swamped by Mallards was discussed. The tables in that article were derived from TASL winter data and the US Fish & Wildlife Service (USF&WS) winter waterfowl counts. (These latter are annual reports created by the federal fish & wildlife agency using data from state fish & wildlife personnel.)

The data showed mild fluctuations in the TASL black duck counts over 13 years and even smaller fluctuations in the Massachusetts and Atlantic Flyway counts from 1979 to the present. From this data it is not possible to deduce a trend, either up or down, in the numbers of wintering American Black Ducks. So the question comes up: why has there been a lot of talk and worry that the black duck is "threatened" or "endangered?"

### Part II: Raising some questions

The two graphs on this page are reproduced from Results of the 1994 Midwinter Waterfowl Survey in the Atlantic Flyway States, compiled by J. R. Serie of USF&WS, Laurel, MD. They show line graphs for American Black Duck and Mallard counts from 1955 to the present. In 1955 the black duck number is close to 600,000, but it falls precipitously to 300,000 by 1958. Then with some fluctuations it sinks to its present level by 1980, where



it stays stable. Mallard numbers also start high in the mid-'50s, drop until 1975, rise in the early '80s then drop to a fairly stable pattern ever since. (Note: The vertical scale in the two graphs is not identical.)

Might we guess that the concern about the fate of the American Black Duck started in the mid-seventies, and peaked—along with Mallard numbers—in the early eighties? Can we be sure, by looking at the numbers alone, that there is anything particularly bad happening to American Black Ducks right now?

I would like to explain several problems with the USF&WS data that we have. One is that no description is given in the documents themselves of how the data are gathered, either in this state or elsewhere. I know from previous research that some of the numbers are gathered from the air and others, such as around Boston Harbor, by land and boat observers. In the case of counts from the air,

in particular, I worry that a single observer, trying to cover a large area on limited time and funds, might not be able to go where all those little flocks of black ducks, for example, hang out in salt marshes and estuaries—on black mud, no less!

J. Barton has brought up a related question (in "Touching Sight," TASL News, Fall 1995): How do you tell Sallow Puddlebirds (Barton's name for the local black-duck/Mallard half-breeds) from the genuine article from the air? How many of the American Black Ducks being tallied by fish & wildlife are actually hybrids? This question is relevant to our TASL counts as well, of course.

Thirdly, I know these counts don't cover the whole flyway. Here are selected Oldsquaw totals for the past three winters:

	1992/3	1993/4	1994/5	1995/6
Nantucket Christmas Count	158,924	16,112	50,143	251,754
Tuckernuck Christmas Count	2,606	(no data)	125,000	7,500
USF&WS Mass Data	315	2,470	1,015	405

The Nantucket/Tuckernuck Oldsquaw have reliably been counted into the 100- to 200-thousand range for many years. They winter around Nantucket Sound and Nantucket Shoals; no significant numbers of them show up anywhere else in the Atlantic Flyway report. By comparison, our black ducks are easily (we think) visible and countable. Still, when the official duck count each year routinely misses 100- to

200- thousand Oldsquaw, shouldn't we wonder about other methodological errors?

Finally, I don't know, and have as yet found no reference to, the possible reasons for the big drop in duck numbers in the late fifties. The

F&WS graphs show drops in the totals of dabblers, as well as species like Canvasback, from 1955 to 1960. Until we know better what caused these population drops, and have some answers to the other questions raised here, we cannot feel comfortable with current black duck population levels.

### Part III: The Wildlife Biologist Speaks

After publishing the first part of this article last fall I received a note from H. Heusmann, wildlife biologist for the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, inquiring about the second part. Mr. Heusmann also included his own memorandum regarding black duck populations.

It seems that wherever biological systems intersect with the world of humans, there is always more complexity than meets the eye at first. For example, the Black Duck Joint

Continued on page 2

## 1995-96 Winter TASL Censuses in Boston Harbor

SPECIES	11/19/95	1/7/96	2/4/96	3/17/96
RED-THROATED LOON	71	4		8
COMMON LOON	36	6	1	9
HORNED GREBE	189	19	21	142
RED-NECKED GREBE	20		2	21
NORTHERN GANNET				2
GREAT CORMORANT	10		1	
DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT	188			14
CORMORANT (sp.)	81			
GREAT BLUE HERON	8			
MUTE SWAN	5	2	.2	7
BRANT	1476	448	772	2368
CANADA GOOSE	135	722	176	262
GREEN-WINGED TEAL	8			
AMERICAN BLACK DUCK	1316	1171	1299	1057
MALLARD	248	454	316	204
GREATER SCAUP	54	743	947	666
COMMON EIDER	5431	8970	8606	9110
HARLEQUIN DUCK			1	
OLDSQUAW	16	3	2	
BLACK SCOTER	1			1
SURF SCOTER	301	338	36	78
WHITE-WINGED SCOTER	945	666	207	179
SCOTER (sp.)	1020	1200	100	
COMMON GOLDENEYE	263	1028	597	817
BARROW'S GOLDENEYE			1	
BUFFLEHEAD	1836	1005	744	1929
HOODED MERGANSER	5	1	1	
COMMON MERGANSER			1	1
RED-BREASTED MERGANSER	1899	573	388	1285
RUDDY DUCK	19			
NORTHERN HARRIER	1			
SHARP-SHINNED HAWK	2	1		1
COOPER'S HAWK		1		1
RED-TAILED HAWK	3	2	3	5
Large Buteo or Eagle		1		
AMERICAN KESTREL	1	1		
MERLIN	1	1		
PEREGRINE	2			
BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER	58			
KILLDEER	3			7
GREATER YELLOWLEGS	21			
RUDDY TURNSTONE	5			
SANDERLING	525	20	44	
PURPLE SANDPIPER	29	12		7
DUNLIN	221			
LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER	1			
LAUGHING GULL	12			
COMMON BLACK-HEADED GULL	5	3	6	2
BONAPARTE'S GULL	1084	150	58	1
ICELAND GULL		1	1	3
LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL				1
COMMON MURRE			1	
BLACK GUILLEMOT				2
HORNED LARK		36		
NORTHERN SHRIKE	1	2		
FIELD SPARROW	4			
SNOW BUNTING	49	24	1	
HARBOR SEAL	9	3	2	2
WEATHER	Hazy early	Cloudy	Cloudy	Sunny
WIND	Calm/NE 10	NW 5-10	N 10	WNW 10-15
TEMP	35-42° F	5-10° F	0-8° F	28-45° F
HI TIDE	7:52 AM	NOON	11 AM	9 AM

[The] assault on the national government is represented as a disinterested movement to "return" power to the people. But the withdrawal of the national government does not transfer power to the people. It transfers power to the historical rival of the national government—the corporate interests.

Historian Arthur Schlesinger

### Participants in the 1995-96 TASL Counts:

Wayne Barron, Jim Barton, Fred Bouchard, Bob Bowker, Shawn Carey, Paula Chasan, Ronnie Donovan, Mike Fager, Paul FitzGerald, Kathy Foley, Toby Gooley, Maury Hall, Craig Jackson, Joan Labby, John Lane, Ted Mara, Terry Mulligan, Mimi Murphy, Jane Nalwalk, Karen Ogden, Dennis Oliver, Michelle Parham, Mike Porter, Pat Randall, Marj Rines, Polly Stevens, Bob Stymeist, Ed Sullivan, Fay & Peter Vale, Soheil Zende, Bill Zuzevich

Thanks to all; apologies if I misspelled your name or left it off.

### On the 'Net

I have been sending out the latest TASL Census data by e-mail. Thus, shorebird census results were in some participants' hands in real time—within a week or two of the count date. If you would like to receive data in this fashion please send me your address to [sz@world.std.com](mailto:sz@world.std.com).

TASL (Take a Second Look) is organized and staffed entirely by volunteers. TASL data is compiled by Maury Hall. This newsletter is produced by Soheil Zende.

### Disappearing (from page 1)

Venture (BDJV), of which Heusmann is a member, suggested black duck "harvest" goals for Canadian and U. S. hunters in the early 1980s. Quotas based on these suggestions were set by Canadian provinces and U.S. states starting in 1984. "The data," states Heusmann, "suggests that Canada was not successful in reducing the harvest rate in black ducks until after 1989, due largely to increased harvest rates in Quebec. Most of the burden of reducing the harvest...fell on the U. S. during the first period of harvest restrictions." By increasing its harvest rate during 1984-88, Quebec overshadowed the reduction of harvest rate by the rest of Canada and affected the black duck population all along the Atlantic seaboard during that period.

Heusmann comes down strongly on the side of reducing and regulating the bag limit strictly because he believes "that hunting does influence the black duck population and that effective harvest restrictions have been too recent and too modest to reverse the black duck population trend." He recommends a 50% reduction in black duck bag limits in the U. S. and Canada for three years

"Quebec modified regulations in 1990," tightening the bag limit on black duck, and within two years Heusmann expected to



see a rise in the Atlantic Flyway population. He claims there is little "hard evidence" of such an increase, but cites several anecdotal reports showing that hunters think black duck numbers in Cape Cod and the Newburyport area have shown moderate increases in the last year or two. But, whereas the North American Waterfowl Management Plan's goal for American Black Ducks is 260,000 in the Atlantic Flyway, the actual tally for 1995 was 215,682, a 17% shortfall.

### Conclusion

Somehow, in spite of impediments, state and federal wildlife experts come up with population estimates for the wildlife in their charge. The range of species included in waterfowl censusing and management is small, and the data is not consistently accurate, but there is a large body of knowledge available, and it is mostly underwritten by Duck Stamp dollars.

The waterfowl folks have shown that American Black Duck numbers crashed in the late 1950s through the 1970s. Whether swamped by Mallards, shot down by hunters, or decimated by habitat loss, black duck populations in the 1980s were roughly half of what they had been in the '50s. The recommendation to halve the current harvest rate seems to be the only way that wildlife managers can help bring back the numbers.

Soheil Zende