Early Teal Season in Wisconsin
Year 1 summary of 3 year experimental season
Preface: This report was prepared as a general summary of early teal season operations, staff observations and public feedback for the first year of a 3-year experimental hunting season. It is intended to be used as a basis for internal and external communications as well as refining future operations. More formal analyses are required by the US Fish and Wildlife Service in another document to be prepared in cooperation with Iowa and Michigan where experimental early teal seasons are being conducted concurrently.

Background:

Blue-winged teal are one of the most abundant and widely distributed ducks in North America. Blue-winged teal migrate early in the fall, thus avoiding much of the shooting pressure exerted during the “regular” duck season. In the 1960s the US Fish and Wildlife Service allowed states in the Mississippi and Central flyways to experiment with an early teal season that offered additional duck hunting days outside of the regular duck season framework. Hunters were restricted to shooting only teal; blue-winged, green-winged and cinnamon teal; but the focus in the Mississippi Flyway was primarily the early migrating blue-winged teal. The Mississippi Flyway receives significant numbers of teal that migrate southward in fall from prairie nesting areas as well as northern Mississippi Flyway states.

This “experimental season” was intended to measure impacts to teal and non-target waterfowl species. Results were mixed across states that did participate and after debate among state and federal agencies involved, the decision was made that the “production” states (WI, MN, MI and IA) within the Mississippi Flyway would not be allowed an early teal season. However, when blue-winged teal seasons were high, “nonproduction” states (the other 10 states in the Mississippi Flyway) would be offered an operational early teal season. “Production” refers primarily to whether a state is a major breeding area for mallards and other ducks. September teal seasons have been conducted in non-production states of the Central and Mississippi Flyways beginning in the mid-1960s, and have provided substantial opportunities for hunters. While Wisconsin did not participate in the 1960’s experimental season, each year special seasons were allowed, some Wisconsin waterfowl hunters would complain that states to our south had more duck hunting opportunity and asked the Wisconsin DNR to pursue an early teal season.

The continental population of blue-winged teal has grown in recent years and a harvest assessment completed by state and federal biologists in 2012 concluded that teal could sustain higher harvest beyond that incurred during the regular duck season and the existing early teal seasons. In addition, most continental duck populations are high to very high compared to the last 50+ years. Following a series of meetings and recommendations among states and the USFWS, it was decided that the four production states would be offered a 3-year experimental teal season beginning in 2014. It is important to understand that this is an experimental season, and the result of this experiment will help decide whether a state is granted an operational early teal season. The USFWS requires states to observe hunter behavior in the field to observe whether
they shoot at non-teal ducks during the teal only season. If the number of attempts to shoot non-teal ducks is too high then Wisconsin would not meet the USFWS criteria for an operational early teal season.

Public input and concerns:
During 2013 and early 2014, department staff were aware there was a possibility that Wisconsin would be offered an early teal season but specific guidance from USFWS was not available due to federal regulatory processes. Staff presented information in public meetings, advisory committee meetings, special breakout sessions at the waterfowl hunter’s conference and asked questions using the department’s mail waterfowl hunter survey. We received a mixed reaction to the idea of an early September teal season. Those who were in favor of the season mentioned the additional hunting opportunity and a chance to harvest blue-winged teal before they migrate south which is often before the regular duck season opens. Those who did not favor an early teal season were concerned that hunters would not be able to correctly identify the ducks, resulting in the harvest of non-teal species. There were also concerns that an early season would disrupt the fall staging behavior of ducks and detract from the regular duck season opener and negatively impact the youth waterfowl hunt which is held in mid-September. In public meetings and advisory committees, a variety of early teal season structure suggestions were made to mitigate concerns over poor identification and negative impacts on the regular duck season such as a season no more than several days and restricted shooting hours that limit low light conditions.

By late March 2014, department staff had received additional details from USFWS, and were certain that an early teal season would be offered to Wisconsin in 2014. The outside limits of a teal season offered by the USFWS were a maximum of 16 days, 6 bird daily bag limit and shooting hours that do not start before sunrise. A state could select season parameters less than these maximums as appropriate to specific migration patterns and relationship to other duck seasons.

Based on the public input received through early May, the department proposed the following for an early teal season in Wisconsin for 2014:

- Sept. 1-7 Experimental Early Teal Season;
- Only blue-winged and green-winged teal can be harvested;
- Daily bag limit of 6 teal;
- Shooting hours on opening day begin at 9 am and close at 7 p.m.; and
- Shooting hours from Sept. 2-7 begin at sunrise and close at 7 p.m.

This proposal considered new opportunities that excited some hunters, concerns related to this new season brought forth by other hunters, and a wide range of suggestions offered by the public over the last year.

Following development of the department’s teal season proposal, it was posted on the department’s website May 16 along with information regarding four public hearings to be held. Public input and participation was strongly encouraged. Information related to the
teal season proposals, methods to provide comments, and the public hearing information was distributed to over 20,000 individuals on our waterfowl GovDelivery email lists, to the department’s partner organizations such as Wisconsin Waterfowl Association who in turn shared it with their members and distributed a statewide press release.

Public input regarding the early season following the release of a specific proposal continued to receive similar mixed reactions. Individual comments received via the public hearings and through mail, email and phone contact were received, with 119 in support of an early teal season, 88 opposed and three still undecided. A majority of comments supported the other season parameters related to opening day, season length and shooting hours.

Based on a majority of individual and group comments supporting an experimental early teal season proposal, the department recommended adoption of the original proposal outlined above to the Natural Resources Board at their June 25, 2014 meeting. The proposal was a compromise among differing opinions, was responsive to expressed duck identification concerns through a reduction in low-light hunting hours and allowed the department to evaluate this new experimental season for the next three years as offered by the USFWS.

Following Natural Resources Board approval June 25, department staff began an information and education process to prepare hunters for this new season. A press release was distributed on June 25 announcing the season and outlining season structure. On June 26, an early teal season document was posted to the department webpage highlighting the information behind the decision to have a season as well as the season parameters. On July 1, staff posted a waterfowl identification slideshow and quiz to the department webpage, which highlighted characteristic differences between duck species that hunters would need to know during the early teal season. From the initiation of the quiz and slideshow to the last date of the early teal season, 4,303 people accessed and completed the quiz. The webpage that hosted the slideshow was viewed 37,800 times.

An article focusing on duck identification and participation in the early teal season was published in the August edition of Wisconsin Natural Resources magazine. A GovDelivery email was sent Aug. 18 to over 20,000 duck and goose topic subscribers, reminding people that the early teal season would begin Sept. 1. An Aug. 19 press release announced an interactive online chat to discuss the early teal season among other subjects. This informative chat was held Aug. 27 and 92 people participated, while 152 people viewed it at a later time. Throughout this entire summer period wildlife and customer service staff were answering questions related to this new hunting opportunity.

**Teal and hunter activity:**

Based on information gathered from a teal observation team, statewide staff, and hunter reports, both teal availability and hunter participation were variable during the early teal season. Blue-winged teal were more abundant in Wisconsin in early September than green winged teal although a few locations reported a relatively high proportion of green-
winged teal. Staff observations of teal abundance ranged from “didn't see a teal” to “large numbers of teal observed with upwards of 1000 teal” and “I have never seen so many teal in my life – 100’s upon 100’s”. For the first two days of the early teal season, teal abundance was highest in southeast Wisconsin, moderate in other eastern areas and northwest Wisconsin, and low along the Mississippi River, northern and central Wisconsin. Local movements and longer distance teal migration was evident during the 7-day teal season and into the week following the close of the teal season as teal abundance shifted around the state. Migration of blue-winged and green-winged teal out of and into Wisconsin is common throughout September.

Hunter surveys from last winter indicated that about 40% of Wisconsin’s approximately 80,000 waterfowl hunters indicated that they would be likely to participate in a teal season while 16% were unsure. Similar to teal abundance, observations of waterfowl hunter abundance during the early teal season were also quite variable.

Staff observations ranged from: “Lots of interest. More hunters for teal season this year (good water) than we had for the normal waterfowl opener last year (dry)”; to a staff person that went to three public hunting areas in that county which are normally busy during the regular duck season, but were devoid of hunters in the early teal season. The 2014 season opened on Sept. 1 (Labor Day) and closed Sunday, Sept. 7. Reports indicated that most hunter activity occurred on Sept. 1 and decreased as the week progressed.

**Hunter observations by the teal observation team:**

USFWS offered a new experimental teal season to the four northern states in the Mississippi Flyway in 2014 for a 3 year trial. Wisconsin, Iowa and Michigan accepted this season, but with different season structures. Minnesota declined participation, citing a lack of public input on whether hunters wanted an early teal season. The USFWS developed agreements with the three participating states, which approved the experimental seasons and required state agencies to conduct hunter observations. Observers recorded hunter behavior in relation to flights of different duck species as they participated in the early teal season to measure the potential impact of target and non-target harvest on various duck species. The USFWS established criteria that this group of 3 states must meet after collecting these data for 3 years in order to be approved for an operational early teal season. Requirements for hunter observations for the three new Mississippi Flyway states in 2014 were the same standards and observation protocols used for all other states that were granted teal seasons over the last 40+ years.

Based on these prior studies, USFWS predicted that the three states would need to collectively observe 180 hunting parties over the 3 year experimental season in order to gather sufficient data and meet the statistical confidence required for the observations. This breaks down to about 20 hunting parties observed per year in Wisconsin. However, the department set a goal to collect twice that many per year in Wisconsin.
In Wisconsin, a team of 28 wildlife biologists and wardens was recruited and trained to conduct hunter observations at representative locations around the state. The team used staff knowledge of teal habitat and past hunter behavior to select sites representative of opportunities throughout Wisconsin. Prior to the teal season, all observers attended a training workshop and learned the protocol established by USFWS. Observers were located in areas hunters were likely to frequent while maintaining coverage throughout the state. Parties were observed by DNR staff at hunting location by posing as another hunting party or gaining an undetected vantage point. Ducks that flew within range of the party were identified, counted, and recorded in addition to the number of shots fired and birds that were hit.

During Wisconsin’s 7 day experimental early teal season, 44 hunts were successfully observed by the observation team according to USFWS protocols. Michigan and Iowa had similar efforts at observing teal season hunters with 44 observed hunts during Michigan’s 7 day season and 72 hunts observed during Iowa’s 16 day season. Wisconsin observers recorded 267 flocks within range of hunting parties, of which 37% were teal. Other species observed within range consisted of wood ducks (32%) and mallards (25%).

After a review of observation data; 86% of observed hunting parties were in complete compliance with the species harvest regulations. These parties had opportunities to shoot at non-teal ducks within range, but never fired a shot. In some cases, these parties had several to as many as 22 opportunities to harvest non-teal flocks. It was clear that some hunters not only passed on non-teal ducks but were being very cautious and passed on teal flocks to be certain that they did not make a mistake. About 7% of the observed parties appeared to be trying to follow the regulations because they passed on non-teal flocks within range during the observed hunt but before the day’s hunting was over they shot at a non-teal duck. Finally, about 7% of the hunters appeared to be individuals that were either very careless or simply had no intention of following the regulations since they appeared to be indiscriminately shooting at birds that flew within range. These results are only the first of a 3 year experimental season so should be viewed with caution but the initial results are generally positive. Duck numbers, migration and weather can vary each year and have impacts on the results of such observations so a 3 year trial period will help account for this annual variation.

Public reaction/input:

There was no official department solicitation of input from the public during or following the early teal season. However, the department plans to conduct a scientifically designed hunter survey after 2-3 years of the experimental season. In 2014, a number of hunters offered input via phone calls, email and letters. The department welcomes these contacts and appreciates information that can lead to a good understanding of hunter experiences, addressing any observed problems and building on successes.

A total of 35 emails and letters were submitted by duck hunters during and following the teal season as well as four phone calls offering observations, opinions and suggestions to the waterfowl program. Contacts were overwhelmingly positive, with 29 of 39
communications received expressing thanks and positive experiences from the hunting season. This is rather unusual, since many unsolicited comments from individuals are often negative.

Negative comments regarding the early teal season were received primarily after the first few days of the season, sharing observations of hunters who may have shot non-teal ducks or that the writer saw mostly non-teal ducks so feared that they would be shot accidently or intentionally by others. Some also expressed concern that this early season was going to change duck behavior and have a negative impact on the regular duck season.

Positive comments were mainly received in the form of “thank you for the new season” and shared personal positive experience participating in the early teal season. Some shared photos of happy and successful teal hunters. One hunter that emailed was from Minnesota and wanted to share that he purchased an out-of-state license to hunt the early teal season because Minnesota did not have the season. Another hunter, a Wisconsin resident who had hunted the early teal season in Illinois for several years, wanted to share that he stayed in Wisconsin to hunt this year because we had provided the opportunity. The public comments confirmed staff observations that both teal presence and hunter participation was variable across the state from high to low. Positive emails included opinions for and against the scheduled shooting hours and some asked for the season to either be longer than seven days or begin a little later in September. Some noted that while hunting they did not see any hunters shoot at non-teal ducks. Several of both the positive and negative correspondence noted confusion with the proper shooting hours during the teal season with hunters shooting too early or too late.

Additional staff input:
Information from wildlife managers and wardens from around the state was received regarding activity and observations during the teal season. From a hunting and public property management perspective the season was implemented smoothly. Considerable statewide communication efforts seemed successful in minimizing calls to local wildlife staff with questions related to the season. The high density use issues that occur on some properties during the regular duck season were not evident in the early teal season.

In addition to the wardens who were a part of the teal season observation team, DNR staff around the state worked the early teal season and responded to concerns and violations. Statewide, citizens made a total of 30 law enforcement hotline calls reporting observations of violations during the early teal season with most reports relating to shooting early or late and shooting at non-teal ducks.

Wardens received additional in-field complaints. The majority of non-target species that were shot at were mallards and wood ducks, which corresponds to their relative abundance in early September since they are local breeders in Wisconsin. Wardens responded to calls and issued warnings or citations as appropriate - a preliminary citation summary is provided in the table below. The take/”attempt to take” game birds out of season represents situations where a hunter shot or shot at a non-teal duck and the “hunt
“before or after hours” relates to the confusion regarding restricted shooting hours for the teal season. In several cases, 2-3 citations were issued to one individual or one hunting party/event. Types of citations listed below are the same types of violations seen during the regular duck season.

**Preliminary Violations Summary (early teal season citations only):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIOLATION</th>
<th># of Citations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Take/ attempt to take migratory game birds during the closed season or take protected birds</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunt before or after hours</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unplugged firearm</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead Shot</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunt w/o license or stamp</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Water Hunting</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fail to retrieve game</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunt from a motorboat/ rallying</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possess or transport loaded gun in a motorboat</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other misc.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusions and adjustments after year 1:**

Various sources of information on the early teal season indicate that the first year of this experimental season was successful in providing additional hunting opportunity for Wisconsin’s waterfowl hunters. Most of those who participated were highly motivated and looking forward to future early teal opportunities, regardless of success in 2014. Waterfowl hunters had some unique opportunities including family based and youth hunting experiences which are likely related to warmer weather conditions. The overall availability of teal and hunter activity was quite variable across the state. Most hunting occurred on the first day of the season and declined during the next seven days, although some hunters reported new teal migrating into the state during these seven days and just following the season’s close. Some hunters who enjoyed the season would like to see the season extended to include more days and/or less restricted shooting hours.

There are many other Wisconsin outdoor recreationists out in early September from wild rice harvesters to water skiers, but no conflicts were reported between these users and early teal season duck hunters.

Most waterfowl hunters observed in the special observation project did not shoot at the wrong duck species, showing restraint or correctly identifying the ducks. The monitoring
and analysis of observations of early teal season hunters is being coordinated with the states of Michigan and Iowa. These will be reported to the Mississippi Flyway Council and the USFWS at the conclusion of the 3 year experimental period for final conclusions.

Citizens, wardens and teal season observers reported a scattering of different violations by teal hunters around the state. The two most common complaints were shooting early or late and shooting at the wrong duck species. Some hunters remain concerned that the early teal season will impact duck behavior for the later waterfowl seasons (youth and regular), although wildlife staff did not see any clear evidence of this around the state. Since teal and other ducks regularly migrate as well as make short distance movements in the month of September, clear evidence of any impact is unlikely.

With regard to the hunters shooting at the wrong species, it did not appear that a large number of responsible hunters were making mistakes in identification. Hunters attempting to follow the early teal season regulations were mostly successful. However, there were hunters out during the early teal season appeared to show little regard for the regulations so an enforcement presence in the future will be important. This is a work load challenge, since the early teal season is scheduled in early September when DNR wardens are active monitoring many other outdoor activities. The issue of shooting before or after legal shooting hours appeared to be at least in part because of confusing regulations and the lack of a special regulation brochure for the early seasons. To address this issue, the department is working on a plan for an early season brochure where the early goose, early teal and mourning dove hunting seasons can be addressed in one document that clearly spells out the different regulations for these concurrent seasons. Finally, the department will continue to work with our partners to offer resources for improved duck identification to minimize errors in duck identification.