

**Early Teal Season in Wisconsin
Year 3 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 third 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 1960’s 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 populations 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 2014, the department proposed the following for an early teal season in Wisconsin for a 3 year period, 2014-16:

- 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, 2014 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 approval, department staff began an information and education process to prepare hunters for this new season and have continued to provide information over the last year including; a web based duck identification tool, press releases, online chats in 2014 and 2015, public meetings, Gov-Delivery messages to 20,000 subscribers and a magazine article. From the initiation of the quiz and slideshow to the last date of the early teal season, the webpage that hosted the slideshow was viewed 27,100 times in 2015 and over the same time period in 2016 it was viewed 31,820 times.

Teal and teal hunter activity:

With 3 years of experience holding an early teal season the first week of September, it is clear that geographic, year to year and daily variation in teal numbers and hunter activity is to be expected. In 2014, 2015 and 2016, feedback from staff and participants was that the presence of teal and teal hunter effort varied across the state. There were local areas with 100's of blue-winged teal while in other areas of apparently good habitat had few to no teal. Areas that had good or poor teal numbers in 2014 and 2015 might have had the opposite experience in 2016. In all three years, certain locations and habitats had good duck numbers but they consisted mostly of mallards and wood ducks. As expected, weather is a primary factor in impacting both waterfowl and waterfowl hunter behavior. In 2014, the early teal season began with temperatures near 80 but during the season a front arrived bringing rain and cooler temperatures. In contrast, 2015 was hot and humid all week with temperatures consistently above 80 degrees and often near 90. In 2016, the temperature was pretty consistent across the 7 day season with temps in the high 70s and low 80s. This resulted in a decrease in waterfowl movement and hunter activity for both the early teal and early goose seasons.

As part of the federal Harvest Information Program, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) mailed hunter logs to a random selection of waterfowl hunters that hunted in the early teal season in Wisconsin, Iowa and Michigan. These data are based on a relatively small sample size of hunters that hunted during the teal season so year to year variation in the results is anticipated. For 2015, the USFWS preliminary estimate indicate that 11,861 blue-winged teal and 2,207 green-winged teal were harvested in Wisconsin's 7 day early teal season. It is typical that green-winged teal harvest is relatively low in early teal seasons. At the flyway level (14 states) green-winged teal make up less than 5% of the early teal season harvest. Based on studies of blue-winged teal harvest and migration, most of the blue-winged teal harvested in early September are

likely locally raised birds while about 2/3 of the blue-winged teal harvest in Wisconsin's regular duck season are from birds hatched elsewhere. During the second year of the early teal season experimental season, Michigan harvested 2,693 blue-winged teal (7 day season) and Iowa harvested 31,983 (16 day season). These harvest estimates were down in all three states compared to 2014, likely due to above average temperatures during the first half of September.

Hunter observations by the teal observation team:

USFWS offered a new experimental teal season to 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. 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 for 2014-16 were the same standards and observation protocols used for all other states that were granted teal seasons over the last 40+ years. The data collected by this team are the most objective source of hunter behavior since the hunting parties were selected from representative areas around the state but without bias toward whether the party would behave well or poorly.

Based on prior studies, the 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. Over the 3 year experiment Wisconsin has observed 115 hunting parties, nearly doubling the required sample size.

In Wisconsin, a team of 24 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 2014 teal season, all observers attended a training workshop and learned the protocol established by USFWS. In 2015, a refresher course for observers was held prior to the teal season. In 2016 all of the observers had participated in the prior 2 years of the experiment and were confident in their ability to wrap up the final year of observations. 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.

Early Teal Season Hunting Parties	2014	2015	2016
# of Observations	44	40	31

# of Parties in Complete Compliance	38	40	27
# of Parties in Violation	6	0	4

Table 1. Results from hunting group observations conducted by WIDNR staff during the 2014, 2015 and 2016 early teal seasons held September 1-7.

The observation team completed a fewer number of successful observations in 2015 however, that was directly related to fewer number of total hunts observed. The percentage of hunting parties that were in compliance fell within the range we have observed throughout the experiment (Table 1). In addition to Wisconsin’s 2016 observations of 31 hunting parties, Michigan completed 37 observed hunts in their 7 day season and Iowa observed 44 hunts observed during their 16 day season. Wisconsin observers recorded 119 flocks within shooting range of hunting parties, of which 25% were teal. Other species observed within range consisted of wood ducks (31%) and mallards (31%). While more flocks (267) were observed within range in 2014, and in 2015 (132) the percent of the 3 major duck species remained fairly similar with the exception being teal in 2016 which was lower than in 2014 and 2015. The critical measure collected from these surveys is the number of non-teal ducks that fly within range of a hunting party and whether hunters attempt to harvest them. In 2014, 86% of the non-teal duck flocks that flew past observed hunting parties were not shot at; during 2015, 100% of the non-teal duck flocks that flew past hunting parties were not shot at and in 2016, 97% of the non-teal duck flocks that flew past hunting parties were not shot at. This result is very impressive and shows a combination of restraint and proper duck identification by the observed hunting parties. The improved behavior between the 1st and 2nd years followed up by a quality 3rd year could be a result of improved duck identification and/or restraint; we still feel that education is going to be important moving forward.

Public reaction/input:

There was no official department solicitation of input from the public during or following the early teal season, however in 2014 we received 39 communications, in 2015 we received 4, and in 2016 we only received 1. In 2014, 29 of the 39 contacts were positive in relation to the new early teal season. By 2015 and 2016, it appears that hunters may have accepted this new season as part of their experience and did not feel a need to comment. Field staff in contact with teal hunters and other waterfowl hunters report a mixed review of the season similar to when the season was originally proposed. The department welcomes all feedback and input and appreciates information that can lead to a good understanding of hunter experiences, addressing any observed problems and building on successes.

Additional staff input:

Information from wildlife managers and wardens from around the state was received regarding activity and observations during the 2014-16 teal seasons. 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 26 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 may represent situations where a hunter shot or shot at a non-teal duck but it could also be related to hunters attempting to harvest other migratory birds not in season, snipe or woodcock for example. In several cases, multiple 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. Overall there has been a reduction in the number of citations each year throughout the early teal season experiment.

Preliminary Violations Summary (early teal season citations only):

	2014	2015	2016
VIOLATION	# of Citations	# of Citations	# of Citations
Take/ attempt to take migratory game birds during the closed season or take protected birds	29	22 (one issued by Fed. Refuge Officer)	21
Hunt before or after hours	13	12	8
Unplugged firearm	4	4	11
Lead Shot	6	2	4
Hunt w/o license or stamp	5	5	5
Open Water Hunting	2	2	0
Fail to retrieve game	1	0	0
Hunt from a motorboat/ rallying	1	0	0
Possess or transport loaded gun in a motorboat	3	0	0
Other misc.	2	4	1
Total	66	51	50

Conclusions and adjustments after year 3:

Various sources of information on the early teal season indicate that the third year of this experimental season was successful in providing additional hunting opportunity for Wisconsin's waterfowl hunters. Hunter activity did appear to decrease during the 2016 season. The availability of teal and hunter activity were quite variable across the state. Overall, duck hunting parties observed during the early season were in almost all cases successful in not harvesting ducks other than teal and it appears that hunters may be learning and adjusting to this new opportunity. Early on in the experimental season we noted confusion over the difference in shooting hours between the early teal and early goose seasons likely generated some violations. In response we created a special brochure containing all 3 seasons (dove, early goose and early teal) that begin on September 1. With the change in the US Fish and Wildlife regulatory timeline we now know the seasons in the spring and have the ability to include all of the migratory bird seasons (early/late) into one regulation pamphlet. This should assist in clearing up most areas of confusion however; we will continue to take additional steps to improve these types of communications to reduce confusion over shooting hours.

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.