

**Meeting Date:** April 17, 2024

**Agenda Item No. 1**

**Agenda Item:** 2024-2025 Migratory Game Bird  
Season-setting (ACTION)

**Bureau Chief Approval:** SR

**Prepared by:** Jeffrey Knetter, Upland Game and Migratory Game Bird Program Coordinator

**Background:**

Idaho's waterfowl seasons are set within frameworks established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) after they consult with all state fish and wildlife agencies. Regulatory decisions are made using biological data observed the previous year. This process and schedule mean season frameworks (e.g., outside dates, season lengths, bag limits) are finalized early enough for state agencies to select and publish season dates well in advance of fall seasons. Furthermore, this process allows the Commission to set seasons for all migratory game birds at the same time.

The Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM) process determines the general duck season framework. This process was adopted by the USFWS in 1996 and is used annually to evaluate duck habitat and populations. The AHM process informs the optimal season framework for U.S. duck seasons. Special harvest strategies are used for some of the less common ducks (i.e., scaup, northern pintail). Goose seasons are determined by flyway management plans for each goose population.

The USFWS and its partners successfully completed the Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey (WBPHS) during spring 2023. Adaptive Harvest Management decision frameworks were developed based on the observed 2023 breeding population size and the regulatory alternatives selected for the 2023 hunting season to inform the 2024-2025 duck hunting regulations.

Based on the liberal regulatory alternative selected for the 2023-2024 hunting season and an observed 2023 breeding population size of 820,000 mallards - 380,000 mallards observed in Alaska and 440,000 observed in the southern Pacific Flyway - the optimal choice for the 2024-2025 hunting season in the Pacific Flyway is the liberal regulatory alternative: a 107-day season for all waterfowl, except scaup (86 days). The maximum number of hunting days and bag limits allowed by the federal framework can be taken with no long-term impacts on Idaho's waterfowl resource.

The federal framework for ducks and dark geese was expanded in 2019-2020 to January 31.

The federal framework for light geese (snow and Ross's) was expanded in 2008-2009 to March 10 for interior states within the Pacific Flyway. Idaho has implemented late-winter seasons since 2010.

In 2013, the federal framework for white-fronted geese was separated from Canada geese and expanded to March 10 within the Pacific Flyway. Idaho has implemented a late-winter season for white-fronted geese since 2014.

The federal framework for Canada geese was expanded to February 15 for the 2024-2025 season; however, Idaho Fish and Game is not recommending modifying the season structure at this time. Results from a goose hunter opinion survey – that will be conducted during 2024 – will be used to inform the season structure in future years.

Sandhill crane seasons are directed by the Pacific and Central Flyways Management Plan for the Rocky Mountain Population of greater sandhill cranes.

Dove seasons are determined by the mourning dove harvest strategy, which is based on band returns, for doves in the Western Management Unit.

American crow seasons are set by states as per the hunting regulations defined in the Federal Register (50 CFR 20.133).

In 2019 and 2020, the Department conducted mail and web-based surveys to obtain input from hunters on how to structure migratory game bird (i.e., ducks, geese, and doves) seasons and zones within the confines of the federal framework. This information was to be used to guide Idaho waterfowl seasons and zone configurations for the 2020-2025 seasons and was used to develop proposals for 2024-2025 migratory game bird seasons and 2022-2025 duck zone configurations.

**Statutory Authority and/or Policy Issues:**

Idaho Code 36-104(2) grants authority to the Commission to determine when an open season may be declared for the taking of wildlife. IDAPA 13.01.09.301 establishes rules regarding the take of migratory game birds.

Idaho's migratory game bird seasons are set within a framework established by the USFWS after meeting with all state fish and wildlife agencies.

**Public Involvement Process:**

In 2019 and 2020, the Department conducted mail and web-based surveys to obtain input from hunters on how to structure the migratory game bird (i.e., ducks, geese, and doves) seasons and zones, within the confines of the federal framework, which includes flexibility in the start and end dates. This information was intended to guide Idaho waterfowl seasons for the 2020-2025 seasons, rather than re-defining seasons each year. There were over 4,100 respondents to the 2019 goose hunter opinion survey and over 6,300 respondents to the 2020 duck and dove survey.

The 2024-2025 migratory game bird season proposals were available for public comment on the Department's website from March 11–24, and regional open houses were held statewide. Staff will provide a summary of public response to the Commission at the meeting.

**Justification:**

Commission action is required to set the migratory game bird seasons for 2024-2025.

**Staff Recommendation:**

The Department recommends taking the maximum allowed number of hunting days and bag limits allowed by federal framework. The proposed daily duck bag limit is 7 ducks and mergansers, but not more than 2 female mallards, 2 scaup, 2 redheads, 1 pintail, and 2 canvasbacks. The proposed daily bag limit for Wilson's snipe is 8 and the proposed daily bag limit for coots is 25. The proposed daily bag limit for Canada geese is 5, the proposed daily bag limit for white-fronted geese is 10, and the proposed daily bag limit for snow and Ross's geese is 20. The proposed possession limit is three times the daily bag limit.

The proposed daily and season limit for swans is 1 swan.

The proposed daily bag limit for doves is 15 mourning and white-winged doves in the aggregate. The proposed possession limit is three times the daily bag limit.

There is no daily bag limit for American crows.

The proposed daily and season limit for sandhill cranes is 2 cranes.

Staff recommendations on season dates, zone configurations, and tag numbers are presented in the following pages and will be presented at the Commission meeting.

**Action Requested:**

Approve 2024-2025 migratory game bird seasons as presented by staff.

Suggested Motions:

I move the Commission adopt staff recommendations for the 2024-2025 migratory game bird seasons.

## Migratory Game Bird Recommendations

### 2024-25 Migratory Game Bird Season-setting

Recommendations for the 2024-25 seasons are found on the following pages. Changes from the 2023-24 seasons are highlighted. Comments are summarized by proposal.

#### **Ducks and mergansers, Wilson's snipe, and coots:**

Current season structures were scoped for all zones. There were 270 responses and 121 specific comments on duck season proposals; 73% of respondents supported proposals as written. The most common comments were in favor of later seasons in most zones.

Proposed season structure:

Zone 1: October 5, 2024 – January 17, 2025;  
Scaup: October 5, 2024 – December 29, 2024

Zone 2: October 5, 2024 – January 17, 2025;  
Scaup: October 24, 2024 – January 17, 2025

Zone 3: October 19, 2024 – January 31, 2025;  
Scaup: November 7, 2024 – January 31, 2025

Zone 4: October 5, 2024 – January 17, 2025;  
Scaup: October 5, 2024 – December 29, 2024

Proposed daily bag limit is 7 ducks and mergansers, but not more than 2 female mallards, 2 redhead, 2 scaup, 1 pintail or 2 canvasback; 8 snipe; and 25 coots.

Possession limit: three times the daily bag limit.



#### **Youth/Veteran/Military Waterfowl Season:**

There were two options scoped for the Youth/Veteran/Military waterfowl season – September 21-22, 2024 and September 28-29, 2024. There were 238 responses on the youth/veteran waterfowl season proposals; 55% of respondents supported the later dates. Some comments suggested changes to the youth/veteran hunt (separate them, remove one or the other entirely, or give each one day).

Proposed season structure:

Statewide: **September 28-29, 2024**

Proposed daily and possession limits are the same as during the regular season.



It is important to note Federal frameworks do not allow light or white-fronted goose seasons to extend beyond March 10. Furthermore, when goose hunters were asked about season preferences for light and white-fronted goose seasons in the 2019 goose hunter opinion survey, there was not a strong preference among either group to modify the current season structure. Of the 982 survey respondents to the light goose questions, 526 (53.6%) preferred hunting light geese with e-calls and unplugged shotguns. Of the 647 survey respondents to the white-fronted goose questions, 345 (53.3%) preferred extending the white-fronted goose season to March 10, allowing hunters to pursue both species, but without e-calls and unplugged shotguns.

### Light Geese (Snow and Ross's Geese):

Current season structures were scoped for all zones. There were 132 responses and 87 specific comments on light goose season proposals; 46% of respondents supported proposals as written. The most common theme among responses was for seasons to extend beyond March 10.

Proposed season structure:

Zone 1: October 5, 2024 – January 17, 2025

Zone 2: October 5, 2024 – December 10, 2024 & February 1, 2025 – March 10, 2025

Zone 3: November 26, 2024 – March 10, 2025

Zone 4: October 19, 2024 – January 31, 2025

Zone 5: October 5, 2024 – January 17, 2025

Zone 6: October 5, 2024 – January 17, 2025

Zone 7: October 5, 2024 – January 17, 2025

Proposed daily bag limit is 20 white geese.

Possession limit: three times the daily bag limit.



## White-fronted Geese:

Current season structures were scoped for all zones. There were 120 responses and 82 specific comments on white-fronted goose season proposals; 37% of respondents supported proposals as written. The most common themes among responses were for seasons to run later or be concurrent with light geese through March 10.

Proposed season structure:

Zone 1: October 5, 2024 – January 17, 2025

Zone 2: October 5, 2024 – January 17, 2025

Zone 3: October 19, 2024 – January 31, 2025

Zone 4: November 4, 2024 – February 16, 2025

Zone 5: October 5, 2024 – January 17, 2025

Zone 6: October 5, 2024 – January 17, 2025

Proposed daily bag limit is 10 white-fronted geese.

Possession limit: three times the daily bag limit.



## Swans:

Current season structure was scoped. There were 89 responses and 48 specific comments on the swan season proposal; 64% of respondents supported proposals as written. Comments included expanding the hunt statewide and general opposition to swan hunting.

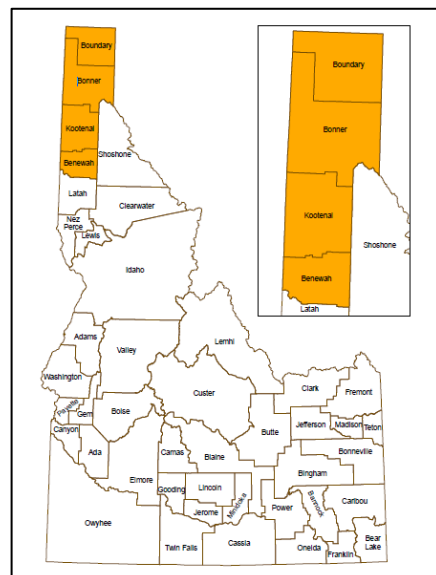
Proposed season structure:

Benewah, Bonner, Boundary, and Kootenai counties:

October 5, 2024 – December 1, 2024

All tags (50) would be offered through a Controlled Hunt application process.

Proposed daily/season bag limit is 1 swan.



**Doves:**

Current season structure was scoped. There were 75 responses and 14 specific comments on the dove season proposal; 84% of respondents supported proposals as written. Comments included a desire for seasons to start earlier and split seasons to allow for hunting in December or January.

Proposed statewide firearm season structure:

September 1 – October 30

Proposed daily bag limit: 15 mourning and white-winged doves in the aggregate.

Proposed statewide extended falconry season:

January 23, 2025 – March 10, 2025

Proposed daily bag limit would be 3 mourning and white-winged doves in the aggregate.

Possession limit: three times the daily bag limit.

**American Crow:**

Current season structure was scoped. There were 35 responses and 6 specific comments on the crow season proposal; 89% of respondents supported the proposal as written. Common themes included expanded or year-round seasons, and general opposition to crow hunting.

American crow seasons are set by states following guidance provided for in the Federal Register (i.e., 50 CFR 20.133). The season shall not exceed 124 days during a calendar year and shall not be permitted during the peak crow nesting period within a State.

Proposed statewide season structure:

October 27, 2024 – February 28, 2025

Proposed daily bag limit: no limit.



**Sandhill Cranes:**

Current season structures were scoped. There were 69 responses and 34 specific comments on crane season proposals; 76% of respondents supported proposals as written. Common themes included expansion of hunting to other areas of the state, allocating tags through controlled hunts, and general opposition to crane hunting.

The Pacific and Central Flyway Management Plan for the Rocky Mountain Population (RMP) of sandhill cranes allows for the regulated harvest of cranes when the population exceeds 15,000, as estimated by the average of the three most recent reliable surveys. Based on the allowable harvest for this population, 3,006 sandhill cranes may be harvested from the RMP during the 2024 hunting season.

Idaho’s 2024 crane harvest allocation, as provided by the Flyway Management Plan, is 298 cranes, up from 267 in 2023. Staff reference harvest rates observed in previous year to determine the number of tags available for each hunt area.

The Department proposes the following actions:

All tags (586 656) will be offered on a first-come first-served basis at any vendor as per the allocation below. This is a 70-tag increase from 2023.

Hunt Area	Season	Tags
1 – Bear Lake	9/1-9/30	304 340
2 - Teton	9/1-9/15	50 56
3 - Fremont	9/1-9/15	42 47
3 - Fremont	9/16-9/30	42 47
4 - Jefferson	9/1-9/15	28 31
4 - Jefferson	9/16-9/30	28 31
5 - Swan Lake	9/1-9/30	46 52
6 - Malad	9/1-9/30	46 52

The daily limit is 2 cranes for all hunts. The season limit is 2 cranes.