Meeting Date: April 13, 2023 **Agenda Item No. 1**

Agenda Item: 2023-2024 Migratory Game Bird Season-setting (ACTION) **Bureau Chief Approval:** JR

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

Background:

Idaho's waterfowl seasons are set within a framework 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. Goose seasons are determined by flyway management plans for each goose population.

The USFWS and its partners were able to resume survey operations and successfully complete the Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey (WBPHS) during spring 2022 after a two-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, typical AHM protocols resumed with observations of key state variables and annual updates from monitoring programs; AHM decision frameworks were developed to inform duck hunting regulations based on the observed 2022 breeding population size and the regulatory alternatives selected for the 2022 hunting season.

Based on the liberal regulatory alternative selected for the 2022-2023 hunting season, and an observed 2022 breeding population size of 1.04 million mallards - 610,000 mallards observed in Alaska, and 430,000 predicted in the southern Pacific Flyway - the optimal choice for the 2023-2024 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.

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 will be used to guide Idaho waterfowl seasons and zone configurations for the 2020-2025 seasons and was used to develop proposals for 2023-2024 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 is 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 2023-2024 migratory game bird season proposals were available for public comment on the Department's website from March 10–22, 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 2023-2024.

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.

There is no daily bag limit for American crows.

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

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

Final recommendations on seasons and duck zone configuration will be presented at the Commission meeting.

Action Requested:

Approve 2023-2024 migratory game bird seasons.

Suggested Motions:

The Commission adopt staff recommendations for the 2023-2024 migratory game bird seasons.

Migratory Game Bird Recommendations

2023-24 Migratory Game Bird Season-setting

Recommendations for the 2023-24 seasons are found on the following pages. Changes from the 2022-23 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 240 responses and 118 specific comments on duck season proposals; 69% of respondents supported proposals as written. The most common comments were in favor of later seasons in most zones. Some comments suggested changes to the youth/veteran hunt (e.g., separate them, remove one or the other entirely, or give each one day).

The proposed season structure for ducks, snipe, and coots:



Zone 1: October 7, 2023 – January 19, 2024
Scaup: October 7, 2023 –December 31, 2023

Zone 2: October 7, 2023 – January 19, 2024
Scaup: October 26, 2023 – January 19, 2024

Zone 3: October 19, 2023 – January 31, 2024
Scaup: November 7, 2023 – January 31, 2024

Zone 4: October 7, 2023 – January 19, 2024
Scaup: October 7, 2023 –December 31, 2023

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.

Proposed daily bag limit for Wilson's snipe is 8 and the proposed daily bag limit for coots is 25.

Youth/Veteran/Military Waterfowl Season:
Proposed season structure:
Statewide: September 23-24, 2023

Proposed daily limits the same as during the regular season.

Canada geese:
Current season structures were scoped for all zones, except for Zone 6 where two options were presented: a continuous season from October 7 – January 19, or a split season from October 7–22 and November 4 – January 31. There were 241 responses and 104 specific comments on Canada goose season proposals; 78% of respondents supported proposals as written. There were 96 responses to the Zone 6 options and 75% of respondents preferred the split season option. The most common comments from respondents were to provide hunting opportunity through January. Other common themes included concurrent seasons for ducks and Canada geese and aligning seasons in zones 1 and 2 in eastern Idaho.

The proposed season structure for Canada geese is:



The proposed season structure for Canada geese is:

Zone 1: October 7, 2023 – January 19, 2024

Zone 2: October 19, 2023 – January 31, 2024

Zone 3: October 19, 2023 – January 31, 2024

Zone 4: September 1, 2023 – September 15, 2023 &
October 7, 2023 – January 4, 2024

Zone 5: October 7, 2023 – January 19, 2024

Zone 6: October 7, 2023 – October 22, 2023 &
November 4 – January 31, 2024

Proposed daily bag limit is 5 Canada geese.

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 107 specific comments on light goose season proposals; 44% of respondents supported proposals as written. The most common theme among responses was for seasons that extend beyond March 10.

The proposed season structure for white geese is:



Zone 1: October 7, 2023 – January 19, 2024

Zone 2: October 7, 2023 – December 13, 2023 &
February 3, 2024 – March 10, 2024

Zone 3: November 27, 2023 – March 10, 2024

Zone 4: October 19, 2023 – January 31, 2024

Zone 5: October 7, 2023 – January 19, 2024

Zone 6: October 7, 2023 – January 19, 2024

Zone 7: October 7, 2023 – January 19, 2024

Proposed daily bag limit is 20 white geese.

White-fronted Geese:
Current season structures were scoped for all zones. There were 93 responses and 63 specific comments on white-fronted goose season proposals; 45% of respondents supported proposals as written. The most common theme among responses was for seasons to run later or be concurrent with light geese through March 10.

The proposed season structure for white-fronted geese is:

Zone 1: October 7, 2023 – January 19, 2024

Zone 2: October 7, 2023 – January 19, 2024

Zone 3: October 19, 2023 – January 31, 2024

Zone 4: November 6, 2023 – February 18, 2024

Zone 5: October 7, 2023 – January 19, 2024

Zone 6: October 7, 2023 – January 19, 2024

Proposed daily bag limit is 10 white-fronted geese.



Swans:

Current season structure was scoped. There were 74 responses and 46 specific comments on the swan season proposal; 62% of respondents supported proposals as written. Comments included expanding the hunt statewide and general opposition to swan hunting.

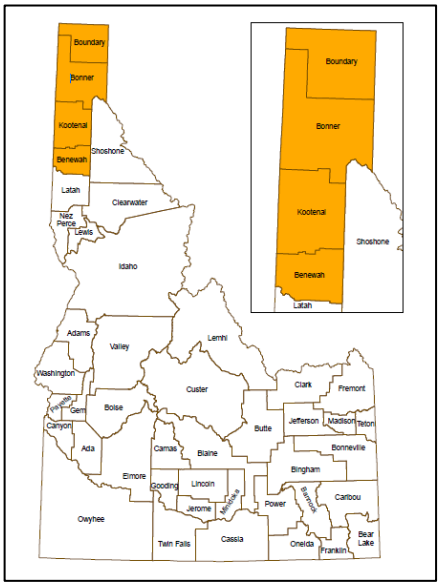
The proposed season structure for swans is:

Benewah, Bonner, Boundary, and Kootenai counties:

October 7, 2023 – December 1, 2023

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 79 responses and 19 specific comments on the dove season proposal; 87% 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.

The proposed statewide *firearm* season structure for doves is:

September 1, 2023 – October 30, 2023

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

The proposed statewide *extended falconry* season for doves is:

January 24, 2024 – March 10, 2024

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

There were 12 specific comments on the dove season proposals. There were some comments about the desire for seasons to start earlier, and split seasons.

American Crow:

Current season structure was scoped. There were 36 responses and 12 specific comments on the crow season proposal; 81% of respondents supported the proposal as written. There were some comments requesting year-round seasons or seasons that start September 1.

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.

The proposed season structure for American crows is:

Statewide: October 27, 2022 – February 28, 2023

Proposed daily bag limit: no limit.

Sandhill Cranes:
Current season structures were scoped. There were 47 responses and 22 specific comments on crane season proposals; 72% of respondents supported proposals as written. Common themes included expansion of hunting to other areas of the state and general opposition to crane hunting.

The Pacific and Central flyways management plan for the Rocky Mountain Population of greater sandhill cranes allows for 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, 2,546 sandhill cranes may be harvested during the 2023 hunting season.

Idaho's 2023 crane harvest allocation is 267 cranes, down from 290 in 2022.

The Department proposes the following actions:

All tags (636) will be offered on a first-come first-served basis at any vendor as per the allocation below.

Hunt Area	**Season**	**Tags**
1 - Bear Lake	9/1-9/30	~~330~~ 304
2 - Teton	9/1-9/15	50
3 - Fremont	9/1-9/15	~~48~~ 42
3 - Fremont	9/16-9/30	~~48~~ 42
4 - Jefferson	9/1-9/15	~~30~~ 28
4 - Jefferson	9/16-9/30	~~30~~ 28
5 - Swan Lake	9/1-9/30	~~50~~ 46
6 - Malad	9/1-9/30	~~50~~ 46

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

The Department proposed slight tag decreases in all sandhill crane hunts, except the Teton hunt.