

# Waterfowl Season Setting: Preferences of Idaho Waterfowl Hunters

**The Idaho Department of Fish and Game sets the waterfowl hunting season each year, under the authority of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.**

To help guide the waterfowl season-setting process for the next five-year period, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) conducted a survey to determine the preferences of Idaho waterfowl hunters. Hunters were asked to comment on how they prefer waterfowl seasons to be structured in Idaho, within the confines of the Federal Framework. Setting waterfowl seasons is a cooperative effort among state and federal agencies. The United States and Canada are divided into four flyways: the Atlantic, Mississippi, Central, and Pacific. Idaho is in the Pacific Flyway. For each flyway, a framework is set for each hunting season and is the same for each state in the Flyway. The framework establishes the maximum length of duck hunting seasons between the Saturday nearest September 24 and the last Sunday in January. Since 1997, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has allowed LIBERAL (107 days; 7-bird bag) duck seasons, and the IDFG Commission has adopted a 105-day season with a 2-day youth hunt. Goose season frameworks are determined by flyway management plans for each goose population.

The IDFG has devoted a considerable amount of time and effort in an attempt to gauge hunter opinions on how best to structure seasons within the above guidelines. Hunter opinion surveys were conducted in 2012 and 2016. Hunters were selected at random from the pool of individuals who purchased Migratory Bird Permits; online responses were also solicited during 2016.

In 2016, we particularly wanted to know, “Do waterfowl hunters prefer a continuous or a split season?” and, “Do they prefer an earlier or a later season where they hunt?” A continuous season is defined as 105 straight days of waterfowl hunting for ducks and Canada geese. A split season has a break of some closed days within the season, but still has 105 total days of hunting.

The survey questionnaire was mailed to over 4,000 randomly sampled hunters who live in each Idaho county and who purchased Migratory Bird permits for the 2015-2016 season. If hunters did not send back the mail-in questionnaire, IDFG survey staff attempted to contact them up to three times by telephone. We received complete surveys from 1,574 hunters. The survey questionnaire was also available on the IDFG website, and we received 315 completed surveys via that means. The following is a summary of the results from this survey.

## HUNTING PARTICIPATION

- 82% of hunters surveyed said they hunted waterfowl in Idaho in the previous five years. The survey targeted hunters who purchased a Migratory Bird Permit in 2015 or 2016 (some of these only hunted doves).

### Q1. Have you hunted waterfowl in Idaho in the last five years? (Yes, No)

Survey	Total	Yes	No	% Yes
Mail	1,574	1,247	327	79%
Online	315	305	10	97%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,889</b>	<b>1,552</b>	<b>337</b>	<b>73%</b>

**Q2. How many days did you hunt waterfowl in Idaho during the 2015-2016 season?**

- 71% of waterfowl hunters said they hunted waterfowl in Idaho during the 2015-2016 season.

Days Hunted During 2011-2012 Season					
Zone	Total	0 (%)	1-5 (%)	6-10 (%)	10+ (%)
Mail	1,547	521 (33)	474 (30)	252 (16)	300 (19)
Online	315	25 (8)	40 (13)	57 (18)	193 (61)
TOTAL	1,862	546 (29)	514 (28)	309 (17)	493 (26)

**SEASON PREFERENCE FOR WATERFOWL HUNTING**

- Most Idaho waterfowl hunters (79%) said they prefer continuous seasons over split seasons.

**Q5. Do you prefer a ‘continuous’ or a ‘split’ season structure for the Idaho waterfowl season in the zone you primarily hunt?**

Zone	Continuous	Split	Total	% Continuous
Mail	1,188	285	1,473	81%
Online	210	76	286	73%
TOTAL	1,398	361	1,759	79%

**TIMING OF THE WATERFOWL SEASON**

- Most Idaho waterfowl hunters (69%) said they prefer to start and end the waterfowl season later to allow for hunting opportunities as close as possible to the end of the Federal Framework (as late in January as possible.)

**Q6. For a ‘continuous’ season: Is it more important to you to have an early opening date or a later closing date?**

☐ Open the season on the first Saturday in October and close in mid-January.

**OR**

☐ Open the season on a Saturday in October that allows the season to close as late as possible in January.

Zone	Total	First Saturday	Later Saturday	% Later
Mail	1,365	448	917	67%
Online	294	64	230	78%
TOTAL	1,659	512	1,147	69%

In recent years, Idaho has had three duck hunting zones (Figure 1). Seasons in Zone 1 cannot be split. The season in Zone 1 opens on the first Saturday in October, runs continuously for 105 days, and ends on the second or third Friday in January. **We are not able to modify this season structure.**

The season in Zone 3 has often opened one week later than in zones 1 and 2. However, during 2012-2015, both zones 2 and 3 had seasons that opened on the Saturday in October that allowed the season to close as late as possible in January. This was based on input the Department received through the 2012 hunter opinion survey.

Beginning with the 2016-17 hunting seasons, a new process and schedule were used for setting annual migratory bird hunting regulations. The Pacific Flyway Council approved recommendations for the 2016-2017 seasons during September 2015, and the Service Regulations Committee subsequently approved them during October 2015. Migratory game bird seasons are now set a year in advance.



Figure 1. Idaho Duck Zones, 2012-2016.

Coinciding with this change to the season-setting process was an opportunity to amend duck zone boundaries in Idaho; duck zones can only be modified once every five years. The IDFG used results from the 2016 hunter opinion survey with the intent to guide season frameworks for 2017-2020, and amend zone boundaries if warranted. Responses to the survey were analyzed on a county basis, and suggested fairly significant changes to zone boundaries (Figure 2).

As mentioned previously, the seasons in Zone 1 cannot be modified and will continue to open on the first Saturday in October and end on the second or third Friday in January. The remaining zones were configured to address hunter preferences from the survey:

- hunters in Zone 2 preferred seasons that start on the first Saturday in October;
- hunters in Zone 3 preferred seasons that open on the Saturday in October that allow the season to close as late as possible in January;
- hunters in Zone 4 preferred seasons that start on the first Saturday in October.

When formulating proposals for the Commission to consider for the 2016 season, the Department used data collected from the 2016 survey and weighted it by the number of waterfowl hunters, by county, to inform season-setting within existing waterfowl zones. Because the new zone configurations could not be implemented until 2017, seasons in Zone 2 (Figure 1; north and east Idaho) opened earlier in October 2016 than they did during the 2012-2015 seasons.

Beginning with the 2017 season, the Department proposed seasons in Zone 3 (Figure 2) that start on the Saturday in October which will allow the duck season to end as late in January as allowed by Federal Framework.

We asked other questions about the structure for a split season, but have not presented these results because split seasons were not favored in the survey.



Figure 2. Idaho Duck Zones, 2017-2020.