

Louisiana Natural Resources News

Newsletter of the Louisiana Association of Professional Biologists
July 2006

Fall 2006 Symposium and Officer Elections Drawing Near

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Afraid to Learn the Answer. Andy Nyman, LSU.

I am often asked by my “non-wetland” friends about wetland losses in coastal Louisiana resulting from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. I've been telling them that we need to wait a year to declare the full impact of those storms, but in truth, I've been afraid to learn the answer myself. I rationalize that some areas appearing on satellite images to have become open water actually support traces of recovering emergent vegetation that will soon colonize denuded areas. However, a visit on 10 April, 2006 to coastal marshes in southwestern Louisiana revealed another reason to wait a year before declaring the extent of wetland loss. Unfortunately, the

reason is that there were thousands of acres where marsh vegetation was still present, but apparently dead. I suspect that such areas will appear



as merely dormant in images acquired during the winter when clear skies associated with northerly winds make remote sensing most efficient. It's possible that the vegetation that appeared dead was merely in an extended winter dormancy, but I currently believe they were killed by being completely covered by storm surge waters for weeks after Hurricane Rita. Perhaps even if the vegetation is dead, living vegetation will return as it did following massive dieoffs (known as brownmarsh) in 2000. Time will tell. The photographs here were taken 10 April, 2006 on Sabine National Wildlife Refuge, which is between Sabine Lake and

Calcasieu Lake in southwestern Louisiana about 300 km west of New Orleans . This area was unaffected by the storm surge of Hurricane Katrina, but was flooded by the storm surge of Hurricane Rita.

LAPB Fall Symposium scheduled for Thursday and Friday, August 17-18 at the NOAA Estuarine Habitats and Coastal Fisheries Center in Lafayette

Once again we will be convening at the NOAA center in Lafayette for what should prove to be an informative and exciting LAPB Fall Symposium, beginning with opening statements by Larry Reynolds on Thursday morning at 8:20. This year's focused session will concentrate on the impacts of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on Louisiana's natural resources. Registration will be \$20, which includes annual membership fees, and an additional \$10 will be required for the social/supper on Thursday night. There is still room on the student agenda for 4 to 5 presentations, so contact Larry Reynolds or Jimmy Anthony if you are aware of any students who would have data of interest to our membership.

Many of last years attendees suggested that a separate poster session, opposed to running concurrently with oral presentations, would allow for more engaging conversation and opportunity for students to share their results and expertise with our membership. In that light, we are pleased to announce that we will have a 2-hour time block devoted solely to poster presentations on Friday morning

from 8:00 until 10:00 a.m. We will provide material needed for mounting, and posters must fit a 4 X 4 foot space. There will be a \$50 cash prize awarded after lunch on Friday for the best poster. Poster titles can be submitted to Larry Reynolds or Jimmy Anthony.

Lastly, members should send any topics you would like to discuss at the annual business meeting to Jimmy Anthony or Larry Reynolds. See you all at the Symposium!



Although we are barely into summer, and over 3 months remain before the regular duck season opens, issues of interest to Louisiana's waterfowl managers and hunters are on radar screens across the state.

Zones and Splits

For 30 years, Louisiana has set waterfowl hunting regulations using at least 2 zones (East and West), each with an open season split into 2 segments. In 1991, a Catahoula Lake zone was created to allow a continuous open season separate from the rest of the East zone to reduce ingestion of lead-shot by ducks using this important habitat where lead-poisoning has long been a problem. However, since 1996, the East and Catahoula Lake zones have had the same split-season dates.

Every 5 years, we have the opportunity to change the configuration of zones and splits for waterfowl hunting with 2 constraints: 1) our choices are limited to those options specified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and 2) whatever changes we make must remain in effect for 5 years. We can make changes this year for the 2006/07 through the 2010/11 waterfowl seasons, and our options are 1) the current 2 zones with 2 season segments (1 split), 2) 3 zones with continuous seasons (no splits), or 3) no zones with 3 season segments (2 splits). We have no sound biological data to address the perceived advantages and

disadvantages of each option, so the choice may depend largely on hunter opinion.

In anticipation of this decision, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries began collecting hunter-opinion data after the close of the 2004/2005 waterfowl season. Dr. Craig Miller of LSU's School of Renewable Natural Resources conducted a survey titled *Hunter Attitudes Toward Duck Seasons in Louisiana* in which he asked a random sample of resident Louisiana waterfowlers which of the 3 options they favored. Of nearly 3,000 respondents, only 6% favored no zones/3 segments, while 53% favored the current system of 2 zones/2 segments and 41% favored no-zones/3 segments. During the months of May and June, 2006, that same question was asked on the LDWF website. Of the over 650 responses received to date, 44% favor the 2-zone/2-segment option while 50% favor no-zones/3-segments. At the July 6th meeting of the Louisiana



Photo by Matt Pieron

Wildlife and Fisheries Commission, those data were presented, responses received via letter or phone calls to LDWF were reported, and public comments were heard. A motion was made for Louisiana to adopt the no-zones/3-segments option, but it failed for lack of a second. So the current system of 2-zones/2-segments will be maintained for at least the next 5 years.

Louisiana Waterfowl Study Commission

This Commission was created by legislative resolution back in 2003, but due to a variety of delays, met for the first time on May 11, 2006. Quoting from Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 64, the role of this group is "to evaluate the waterfowl situation in Louisiana in order to make and recommend solutions and future management plans for Louisiana's waterfowl." The Commission is made up of 20 members including the Secretary of LDWF, Secretary of LDNR, a LDWF waterfowl biologist, 2 members of Louisiana Ducks Unlimited, 2 members of Louisiana Delta Waterfowl, 2 members of The Louisiana Nature Conservancy, 2 members of the Louisiana Wildlife Federation, 2 university professors experienced in avian ecology, 2 members of the Louisiana Landowner's Association, a USFWS biologist experienced in avian ecology, 2 USFWS enforcement agents; 1 from the north and 1 from the south part of the Mississippi Flyway, and 2 members from any Louisiana duck-hunting clubs.

After introductions, the first meeting got quickly to issues of concern. David Richard, a past LDWF biologist and now land manager for Matilda Stream

Management, was unanimously elected Chairman, and presentations were made by LDWF biologists Robert Helm and Larry Reynolds on the process for setting waterfowl seasons, zones and splits, mottled ducks, and avian influenza sampling. There was long discussion about zones and splits because the short time before a decision must be sent to the USFWS. The Commission concluded the meeting with a list of issues they intend to address including and understaffed waterfowl section at LDWF, apparent reductions in wintering snow geese in Louisiana, declining rice acreage and Farm Bill programs, coastal restoration from a waterfowl conservation perspective, evaluation of hunting pressure, pen-reared mallard releases, and the need to publicize this Commission as representing hunter's interests and being independent of LDWF. The next meeting is scheduled for June 27, 2006, and all meetings are open to the public.

Mottled Ducks

There is growing concern for mottled duck populations, especially along the western Gulf Coast. Although the long-term (1970 – 2006) mid-winter index shows the Louisiana population to be stable or slightly increasing, the long-term trend in Texas is down. On Texas' National Wildlife Refuges, mottled duck populations have declined even more sharply. Since 1994, the Louisiana population appears to have declined also. The effects of hurricanes Katrina and Rita impacting nearly all mottled duck habitats across coastal Louisiana have added to that concern. Furthermore, the questions asked in the aftermath of those storms have exposed our lack of knowledge regarding the status of mottled duck habitat, especially breeding habitat, and recovery of those habitats to sustain mottled populations.



Photo by Matt Pieron

On April 5-6, a group of waterfowl scientists and managers met in Lafayette to review existing monitoring data for mottled ducks, evaluate the population status across its range, and prioritize habitat management and research needs. Participants from state agencies in Texas, Louisiana, and Florida, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, universities in Texas and Louisiana, Ducks Unlimited, and at least 2 consulting firms heard presentations on mottled duck population status and trends, band-recovery distributions, survival rates, harvest rates, potential sustainability of harvest, hybridization with mallards, nest success, and habitat changes. After much discussion, consensus was reached on a few issues:

- 1) Because survival rates of Texas and Louisiana-banded mottled ducks were not different, and because about 20% of the recoveries in each state were banded in the other, the Texas and Louisiana mottled ducks should be managed as one Western Gulf Coast (WGC) population.
- 2) There is a lack of high-quality monitoring information on which to base management decisions in the WGC. Better population surveys, preferably across the entire range, and reproduction data are needed.
- 3) Habitat management in the WGC should be guided by the Gulf Coast Joint Venture's (GCJV) *Mottled Duck Conservation Plan*, and the GCJV should coordinate those efforts.

No consensus was reached on the applicability of the data from Texas National Wildlife Refuges to non-refuge areas in Texas and Louisiana or the need for changes in harvest management. Although no one believes (or at least did not express) that hunter-kill has influenced population trends, declining populations may be less tolerant of harvest pressure. Consequently, hints of a desire to restrict harvest regulations in Louisiana were evident. Analysis of the waterfowl parts survey data indicated that reducing the daily bag-limit in Louisiana from 3 to 1 would yield a reduction in harvest of 20%. As the harvest-regulations setting period approaches, this issue will almost certainly be revisited.

Avian Influenza Sampling

Although the excitement over a potential global pandemic seems to have subsided, an intense sampling of wild birds and their habitats is underway in North America aimed at early detection of the highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 virus. This virus spread across Asia and Europe over the last year, and is responsible for over 130 human deaths in the last 3 years. It is feared that HPAI-H5N1 may have arrived with migratory birds that shared migration/wintering habitats with infected populations in Asia and brought it to nesting habitats in North America. If the virus shows up, it will most likely be in Alaska or along the West Coast. However, ducks, geese, and shorebirds that nest in Alaska are known to migrate down all Flyways across the United States and Canada, so an early-detection sampling program has been developed that includes all states.

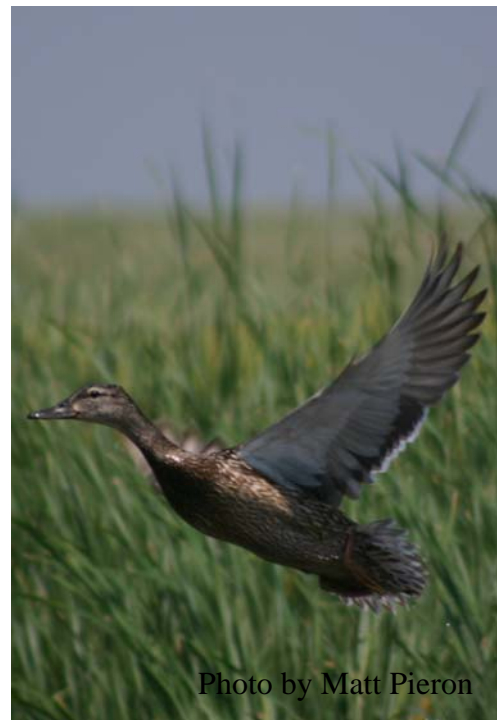


Photo by Matt Pieron

Driven largely by concern for the domestic poultry industry, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is coordinating and funding the avian influenza sampling. Each state was given a priority (*high, medium, or low*) based on the number and time spent on state habitats by bird species with a high probability of mixing with Asian populations. A list of bird species most likely to carry the virus was developed for each Flyway, and states with *high* priority, like Louisiana, are required to collect 1,000 cloacal swabs from those species with at least 200 collected per species. In addition to the state collection, USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service will be collecting an additional 1000 cloacal swabs as well as many thousand fecal and water samples to be analyzed for presence of the H5N1 virus. *Medium* and *low* priority states are required to collect 750 and 500 cloacal swabs respectively.

Our sampling effort in Louisiana will begin in late summer and extend until the end of January. The highest priority species are Pectoral sandpiper, Dunlin, Long-billed dowitcher, and Northern pintail. Most waterfowl are considered secondary species but are important if we are more likely to get 200 samples from them than higher priority species. Our plan is to collect dunlin and dowitchers on managed impoundments and/or coastal WMAs, capture pintails



prior to the opening of waterfowl hunting season, and obtain samples from white-fronted geese, mallards, and shovelers taken on LDWF managed hunts or at commercial picking operations in southwest Louisiana. In addition, any die-off exceeding 20 birds will be investigated and samples collected.

The USFWS has already said they have no intention of closing or restricting the waterfowl hunting season based on avian influenza concerns. However, it is unknown what actions will be taken should the HPAI-H5N1 virus be found in our Louisiana wetlands.

Officer Elections: It's That Time Again

Every two years we elect new officers to serve the members of the LAPB. This year there are two candidates for President-Elect, two for Secretary, an unopposed candidate for editor, and the office of treasurer will be retained by John Pitre. Below are biographies for candidates. A later e-mail will be sent out with electronic ballots to be returned to Larry Reynolds.

President Elect

Kim Marie Tolson, Ph.D.

Dr. Tolson currently serves as an Associate Professor of Biology and Coordinator of Biology Graduate Studies at The University of Louisiana at Monroe. She received her B.S. in Wildlife Conservation and Management from Louisiana Tech University in 1979 and her Ph.D. from Northeast Louisiana University in 1988. Her primary teaching responsibilities include Physiology, Mammalogy, and several wildlife management courses for upper-level biology majors. Her research interests include vertebrate physiology and the management of both game and non-game species. Dr. Tolson has participated in cooperative research projects with state, federal, and non-governmental agencies. She serves on numerous department, college, and university committees at ULM. She is a founding member of the Ark-La-Miss Wildlife Study Group and has co-hosted three symposia on regional wildlife management issues. Presently, Kim Marie is serving as President of The Association of Southeastern Biologists, the largest regional biology society in the country.

Mr. Mike Carloss

Mike received a B.S. in Wildlife Management in 1984 and an M.S. in Biology in 1988 from USL (now ULL). His professional career began with LDWF in 1985 where he was assigned to Marsh Island Refuge. In 1993 he transferred to Atchafalaya Delta WMA as the Supervisor of the WMA as well as Ilse Dernieres Barrier Island Refuge. In 1998 he accepted a job with the Office of State Parks as Park Manager of Lake Fausse Pointe State Park. In 2002 he accepted a position with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Lafayette working primarily with coastal restoration. In 2004 he returned to LDWF as Program Manager of the Habitat Conservation Section in B.R. Mike previously served as the LAPB Secretary in 1996.

Secretary

Mr. Mike Perrot

Mike received a BS in Wildlife in 2001 and a BSF in Ecosystems Management in 2002, both from LSU. He became a District Biologist with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries in 2001, and assumed management responsibilities for the Pearl River Wildlife Management Area in Slidell, LA and DMAP responsibilities for Lafourche, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. James, and St. John parishes. In 2002, Mike started flying the coastal aerial waterfowl surveys, where he incidentally takes no responsibility for the below average numbers. Ninety-nine percent of his time is consumed by his 14 month old son (future hunter) and wife. The rest is left for deer hunting and fishing addictions and of course trying to squeeze work in as well.

Mr. David Breithaupt

David is the newest addition to the wildlife staff in Region 4, being in the department just over two years. David manages Boeuf and Sicily Island Hills Wildlife Management Areas, coordinates DMAP activities in Catahoula and Caldwell Parishes, and coordinates the wood duck banding program in Region 4. He is a graduate of the School of Forestry at Louisiana Tech University, with a B.S. Degree in Wildlife Management. David is an avid outdoorsman who enjoys taking part in all activities associated with Louisiana's vast wildlife resources and resides with his wife Alaina in his native town of Jena, Louisiana. David believes the LAPB serves a vital role in bringing wildlife professionals together to address the issues that we are faced with daily and looks forward to the possibility of serving the LAPB in the office of secretary.

Treasurer

Retain John Pitre

Editor

Mr. Matthew Pieron

Matt is a recent transient to Louisiana who grew up in northeast Ohio where he received his B.S. in Biology from Mount Union College then his M.S. in Biology from Eastern Kentucky University. After various seasonal appointments with Ducks Unlimited and Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center in South Dakota, Nebraska, North Dakota and Saskatchewan he settled down for a few years as a private lands biological technician at Chase Lake Wetlands Management District in North Dakota where his main duties included wetland and grassland easement acquisition, wetland restoration and creation, and upland restoration. Matt is currently a Ph.D. candidate at LSU, doing waterfowl research in the prairies of North Dakota with Delta Waterfowl, and has served as the LAPB Newsletter Producer for the last year.

LDWF and NRCS Combine Efforts. John Pitre, NRCS.

On June 14 and 15, 2006, for the second year in a row, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) and USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) held a meeting to discuss their related missions and strengthen their relationship. In the original meeting (held March 2005) these two



agencies, under the leadership of LDWF Secretary Dwight Landreneau and NRCS State Conservationist Don Gohmert, met to begin coordination of efforts for the conservation of Louisiana's natural resources. Representatives of both agencies expressed the value of these meetings and agreed it should continue as an annual event.

The NRCS, formerly called the Soil Conservation Service, underwent the name change in 1994 to better reflect its actual role on the privately owned landscape. By providing technical assistance and cost-share funding through conservation programs like the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and others, NRCS has made significant contributions to wildlife habitat in Louisiana. The WRP alone has enrolled over 200,000 acres of marginal agricultural wetlands (lands that should not have been converted) and developed plans on these acres in effort to facilitate natural wetland function. The majority of these wetlands have been restored and are under the protection of perpetual easements ensuring benefits for future generations. Many game species have benefited but so have many other wildlife species such as the threatened Louisiana black bear.



Since the conservation of wildlife is a high priority for the NRCS, it is easy to see why the state agency responsible for wildlife resources is committed to develop and strengthen this relationship. Each agency brings a great deal to the table and by combining efforts and working together, everyone benefits with the big winner being Louisiana's natural resources.

At the 2006 meeting the main topics focused on the Louisiana Native Plant Initiative, the Emergency Watershed

Protection Program, and the draft Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) for southwest Louisiana. The Louisiana Native Plant Initiative is an effort to collect, develop, and make available native (local ecotype) plant species for conservation, biofuels, aesthetics, carbon sequestration, and wildlife habitat. Through this program, Louisiana producers could grow native plants in Louisiana for profit to be used in Louisiana. The Emergency Watershed Protection Program is a program which provides relief from hurricane damages in impacted watersheds. The CREP is a conservation program which may provide significant financial incentive for converting certain croplands back to grassland habitat potentially benefiting many declining species such as Northern bobwhite quail and mottled ducks.