



Patuxent Wildlife Research Center

CHESAPEAKE BAY LIVING RESOURCES -- Black Ducks

The American Black Duck is a species of concern both in the Chesapeake Bay and throughout the Eastern United States and Canada because of a long term decline in population numbers. The Chesapeake Bay is an important area to Black Ducks because they breed, migrate through, and winter there. A cause for the reduction in numbers of Black Ducks produced on the Bay is habitat change through erosion, development, and poor water quality.

LIFE HISTORY IN THE CHESAPEAKE BAY REGION

Breeding

- Breeds throughout the Chesapeake Bay area with greatest densities along the Eastern Shore
- Courtship begins in early September, and most pair-bonds are formed by December
- Nesting season from mid-March to early August
- Clutch size of 6 to 12 eggs

Migration

- Migration begins in late September and peaks in October-November
- Some Black Ducks are year-round residents that breed and winter in the Bay area
- Most of the Bay's winter migrant Black Ducks originate in Quebec and Labrador, Canada
- During winter 200,000 Black Ducks used the Bay in the 1950's compared to 65,000 in 1999



HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

- Nests in marshes are often near shrubs but also in sedges, rushes, or grasses
- Upland nests are near trees within thick stands of poison ivy, honeysuckle, brush, or grasses
- Brood-rearing marshes are usually saltmeadow cordgrass with needle rush and olney bulrush
- Flooding causes some nest loss, especially in early spring on islands and along shorelines
- Foods in saltmarshes include small fish, snails, mussels, grass seeds, stems, roots, and leaves
- Foods in estuarine river marshes are mostly plant seeds such as wild rice, burreed, pickerelweed

SPECIAL PROBLEMS

- Declining food resources leads to declines in local black duck populations
- Human disturbance affects habitat selection and use
- Habitat change affects availability of nest sites and food resources
- Winter feeding of corn could influence winter distribution, survival rates, and exposure to disease
- Water quality influences habitat and food base, especially underwater plants



Scientific information is needed to better understand how Black Ducks are affected by changes in the Bay. The population of Black Ducks on the Chesapeake Bay can be improved by active habitat management to increase the abundance of wetland plants, to protect breeding and sanctuary wetlands, and to continue conservative hunting regulations.