

1948 LONG ISLAND WATERFOWL SURVEY RESULTS

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Editor's Note—In 2022, I received a box of Christopher McKeever's field notes and bird records. Among these was a report that sheds light on a precursor of the January Waterfowl Count so familiar to NYSOA members and the broader New York State ornithological community. Publishing it here makes it available alongside the long-term waterfowl count data available in *The Kingbird*. Species names are as given in the original report, with clarifications provided in some cases in square brackets.

After a lapse of seven years, the Annual Long Island Waterfowl Survey has been started again. This Survey, the fifth one, was taken on December 11 and 12. The choice of dates was a fortunate one, as it was the weekend before the big snow storm. The weather prior to that time had been quite warm; in fact it was the warmest autumn on record and there was no killing frost recorded by the New York City Weather Bureau until November 30. The weather on the days of the Survey was fairly good and the coverage of the best areas was virtually complete. However, the Great South Bay east of Fire Island Inlet was covered from the north shore only and this was somewhat inadequate. In addition, due to a misunderstanding, the Orient Peninsula was not entirely covered, so that the figures given for the species usually most numerous, namely, scaup, black duck, scoter and the sea ducks are somewhat below the true figure.

Similar surveys at about the same time of year were made previously in the four consecutive years from 1938-1941 when the war forced a discontinuance. The waterfowl were on an up trend at that time which ended in the peak year of 1944. Thereafter their numbers decreased substantially. Unfortunately, no local survey data is available for 1942-1947.

Most of the pond ducks, other than black ducks and sporting bay ducks other than scaup, have definitely increased over their averages for the years 1938 through 1941 and it is believed that the Survey was most accurate with respect to these species. Of the above groups only the Pintail, Shoveller and Gadwall showed no increase in numbers, although neither did they show any substantial decrease.

In addition to the factor of incomplete coverage of Great South Bay and Orient Peninsula mentioned above, another important factor in the small counts of scoters and sea ducks is that the season on most ducks closed only four days prior to the Survey, and the shooting season for scoters was still open in Long Island Sound and Gardiners Bay. Consequently, many birds of the species mentioned above were resting way out beyond the reach of land based observers. Another factor in the case of black ducks is that a substantial number of them were probably still resting on the ocean or far out on the Sound in the daytime and

coming in to feed only at night. However, the black duck count is above that for the year 1941, when the survey was conducted toward the end of open season.

The following is a list, in the order of their abundance, of the species recorded in the Survey. The figures to the right of the numbers recorded on the Survey are various data from the 1938-1941 surveys which provides some basis for striking an average on the figures:

Rank	Species	Number	Data from 1938-41 counts			
			Average	High	Total	Low
1	Scaup	33,224	65,437			45,921
2	Black Duck	16,331	21,742			14,069
3	White Winged Scoter	10,733	21,882			11,657
4	Coot	3,714	201	440	804	
5	Red Br. Merganser	2,730	5,093			
6	Ruddy Duck	2,460	102	265	407	
7	Baldpate ¹	1,442	432		1,727	
8	Goldeneye	1,260	6,523			1,872
9	Old Squaw ²	1,213	4,885			2,094
10	Mallard	961	858			
11	Canada Goose	832	357	515		
12	Green Winged Teal	644	141		565	
13	Surf Scoter	581	3,645			1,531
14	Canvasback	533	107		429	
15	Pintail	500	527			
16	Bufflehead	499	189	233		
17	Mute Swan	467	212	265		
18	Ring Necked Duck	377	79		314	
19	American Scoter ³	343	769			345
20	Hooded Merganser	85	30	44		
21	Am. Merganser ⁴	62	196			76
22	Brant	30	1,528	5,180		5
23	Redhead	27	13		54	
24	Shoveller	16	22			9
25	Gadwall	9	25			7
26	European Widgeon	7	4			
27	Wood Duck	2				
28	European Teal	1				
29	King Eider	1				
	Snow Goose	5,449				
	Blue Goose	5				
	Unidentified ducks					
	over 96% scoter	13,249				
		97,785				

[¹American Wigeon; ²Long-tailed Duck; ³Black Scoter; ⁴Common Merganser.]

One is immediately struck by the great decrease in the number of scaup. The two areas not adequately covered could hardly have brought the total up to that of the lowest year prior to this. It is possible that because of the relatively warm weather prior to the Survey, the scaup had not yet come down in their normal numbers. It is also possible that many of the birds which usually come into this area were among the 25,000 killed by oil on Lake St. Peter in the St. Lawrence River when a makeshift tanker went aground and spilled its cargo earlier this fall.

The number of black duck might have been increased to some extent if the Great South Bay had been adequately covered and a few more might have been added from the Orient region. Taking that into consideration, the present count would compare favorably with those of 1940 and 1941 which were taken during the hunting season, but does not stand up so well as compared with 1938 and 1939 when the survey was conducted after the hunting season. It is obvious that the black duck, which provides most of the local shooting, lagged behind the other sporting ducks in its increase. In 1940 nine other species of sporting ducks, excluding mallard and scaup, had a population equal to nearly 8% of that of the black duck. In 1941 they equaled nearly 12%. In 1948, without considering the ruddy duck, which increased tremendously, eight species of sporting ducks formed a population about equal to one-fifth of the black duck and, if we include the ruddy duck also over one-third.

It should be pointed out that the increases noted above are over pre-1941 figures and we have no comparable figures for 1944 which was the high point of waterfowl population in recent years.

The current Survey revealed two rather extraordinary conditions. The more interesting of these, from the standpoint of the bird watcher, is the fact that those observers on the south shore who chose the 12th to be out in the field witnessed the greatest flight of Snow Geese ever in this area. Those observers on the north shore on the same day did not see a single bird of this species. The Snow Geese and the few Blue Geese accompanying them obviously cannot be included in the Survey figures but, if they were, the Snow Geese would be in the remarkable position of being the fourth most abundant of our local waterfowl. Most of these birds were seen over the western half of the south shore. It is probable, although this has not as yet been checked with the Weather Bureau, that the steady southwest wind which was blowing all that day had pushed the birds off their usual direct course from a point slightly east of Quebec south to Delaware Bay. In addition, it seemed to have tired the birds, as nearly all of the observers noticed that they were quite ready to alight and were deterred from doing so only by their unfamiliarity with the area. Many of the flocks at the west end were seen to mill around quite aimlessly for awhile and finally to head straight across the ocean toward the Jersey coast.

The second extraordinary feature of this Survey was the unusually high counts of Ruddy Duck and Coot. At no time prior to this Survey did the Coot ever rank higher than the 13th most abundant species nor did the Ruddy Duck ever rank higher than the 14th most abundant species, yet this year the Coot was the 4th most

abundant species and the Ruddy Duck the 6th. Concurrently, more than four times as many Coot were recorded on this Survey as were seen on all the four previous surveys and more than six times the number of Ruddy Ducks recorded on the previous surveys were seen during this Survey.

Obviously something more than mere improvement of status due to a good breeding season is here involved and the explanation of the phenomenon can probably only be found by analyzing data from all over the country. It hardly seems possible that these two species had so extraordinarily good a breeding season and that their total numbers increased to that extent while all the other species merely had a fairly good breeding season. Both species appeared in numbers in the area prior to the first half of the open season and increased in numbers during the intermediate closing season. Apparently, they survived the hunting in this area quite well.

It is interesting to note the steady deterioration of the feeding grounds in this area favorable to the better sporting ducks by referring to a couple of comparable surveys taken, one this year and the other back in 1924. This deterioration is most marked at the present time in Moriches and Shinnecock Bays, since both of them now have permanent outlets to the ocean.

The same thing has happened, on a much smaller and more easily recorded scale, at Lake Montauk where a misguided real estate developer put a permanent outlet through to Gardiners Bay, thereby rapidly and permanently salting a nearly fresh water pond, the largest in Long Island.

On Lake Montauk, in December 4, 1924, there were observed the following species in the following numbers:

Canada Goose – 30, Brant – 20, Mallard – 11, Black Duck – 50, Green-winged teal – 1, Baldpate – 100, European Widgeon – 2, Pintail – 5, Canvasback – 1000, Redhead – 500, Scaup – 50, Ring-necked duck – 4, Goldeneye – 50, Bufflehead – 7, Old Squaw – 12, American Merganser – 12, Red-breasted Merganser – 100, Hooded Merganser – 9.

18 species, nearly 2000 individuals, also another 2000 Coot.

On the same pond on this Survey, December 11, 1948, the following species were seen in the following numbers:

Scaup – 850, Old Squaw – 22, Scoter – 124.

3 species, 996 individuals.

The above sets of figures speak for themselves and it is not to be wondered that the shooting in those areas is much poorer than it formerly was.

Thirty-two observers participated in this Survey, of whom nineteen were assigned territories. The other thirteen cooperated with one or the other of the above observers but, unfortunately, most of the latter were on the western end of the Island. Below is set forth a list of the observers responsible for territories, followed by those who assisted them:

Assigned Observers—Richard Adelson, New York City; Robert Arbib, Jr., Freeport, L.I.; Daniel Berolzheimer, Massapequa, L.I.; Herman Bohn, Flushing, L.I.; John L. Bull, Jr., Far Rockaway, L.I.; John Elliott, Seaford, L.I.; John W. Flavin, Jr., Floral Park, L.I.; John L. and Dr. Wm. T. Helmuth III, East Hampton, L.I.; John Mayer, Ozone Park L.I.; C. K. McKeever, Brooklyn, N.Y.; Dr. Robert C. Murphy, American Museum of Natural History, New York City; Theodore Pettit, Inwood, L.I.; Gilbert Raynor, Manorville, L.I.; George Rose, Mineola, L.I.; Peter Scott, East Hampton, L.I.; Walter Sedwitz, New York City; LeRoy Wilcox, Speonk, L.I.; Rawson Wood, Flower Hill, L.I.

Cooperating Observers—Irwin Alperin, Brooklyn, N.Y.; Gilbert Banner, Forest Hills, L.I.; Ben Berliner, Hewlett, L.I.; Harry Darrow, Mt. Vernon, N.Y.; Herman Goebel and Dr. Malcolm Jacobson of Brooklyn, N.Y.; George Komorowski and David Roche of The Bronx, N.Y.; Don Ross, Port Washington, L.I.; George D. and Thomas K. Scott, East Hampton, L.I.; David Slade and Jack Wells of Kew Gardens, L.I.