

Ducks and Geese: habitat basics

Head and shoulders
Photo of DC or
Soil Conservationist
here

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Most people know ducks and geese need water and wetland habitats to survive. That need was well illustrated in the 1980s, when a prolonged drought in the prairie pothole region cut duck populations by half.

Fewer people think about the undisturbed grassland habitats ducks and geese need for nesting. Nevertheless, those upland grasslands in close proximity to wetlands are critical for waterfowl as well.

Much of the wetland habitat was destroyed in the last century with the draining of most of America's wetlands. In the past 15 years, though, with assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other programs, landowners have restored thousands of acres of wetlands and waterfowl populations have responded. Individual species have specific food and cover preferences, but included here is some general guidance on their habitat needs.

Food preferences. Ducks, geese, swans and other waterfowl eat plants--mostly aquatic--and seeds and insects. Crop fields can draw thousands of waterfowl in the fall, to eat corn, soybeans, wheat, rice, barley and other cereal grains. A wide variety of aquatic plants and seeds eaten includes pondweed, smartweed, sedges, bulrushes, and wild millet.



Most ducks and geese need a combination of wetland habitat and upland grasses to breed, nest and raise young.

Ducks can be grouped into two feeding types: dabbling and diving ducks. Dabbling ducks, including mallards, wood ducks and blue-winged teal, usually feed in shallow water by tipping up on the surface. Divers, including redheads and canvasbacks, feed by diving to the bottom of ponds and lakes to get submerged plants.

In early spring, hens eat insects for protein needed to produce eggs; their young also eat mostly insects and other small animals in their first three weeks of life.

Cover needs. Wetland types include prairie potholes, tundra wetlands, river backwaters, bays in large lakes, coastal wetlands, mountain wetlands and forest wetlands. Wetlands with about half their surface area covered by wetland plants are ideal for waterfowl broods. Idle grasslands, deferred pastures and haylands not mowed until after nesting, in July, are the upland habitat many waterfowl use to nest. Many species migrate southward, but some stay in winter if food and open water are available.

For more information, stop at our office at (Number) (Street) in (city), or visit the NRCS website at www.nrcs.usda.gov. Or, visit the NRCS Wildlife Habitat Management Institute at www.whmi.nrcs.usda.gov

Wildlife Ways Did you know....



Migrating
ducks normally fly at high altitudes; some have been spotted at 20,000 feet. Most fly at night, at speeds of 40 to 60 miles an hour. Most people think of migration as a north-south phenomenon, but there is nearly as much east-west movement.