

Hunters attempt to discover where ducks are

Panel discusses theories as to why ducks haven't been plentiful for the past three years.

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NEW IBERIA — The single-most asked question this year amongst Louisiana duck hunters was "Where were the ducks?"

Duck hunting isn't a sport in Louisiana, but rather a passion, almost a religion.

After a third sub-par season, hunters, who have historically killed more ducks than anywhere in the country, are hell bent on finding answers to their questions.

A panel, convened by the Louisiana Wildlife Federation at its 65th annual convention, did its best to answer some of those questions to an overflow crowd at the Holiday Inn Saturday afternoon.

But after almost three hours, the issue was far from decided.

"It is not so cut and dry as people would think," said David Boudreaux of Crowley. "I don't think there is any conspiracy as many would charge, nor is there a simple solution to the problem. This is a complex issue that isn't going to be solved overnight.

"I believe today was a good start. A lot of good things were brought out," said Boudreaux. "Hunters in this state have grown complacent and we need to get them fired up again, like we did in the mid-80s, when duck numbers were so alarmingly low."

While the panel couldn't fully answer the question, they were able to **identify a number of factors — a continuing decline in duck numbers, a continued loss of habitat, a redistribution of the ducks, weather changes, economic influences and a tremendous jump in hunting pressure.**

"Large populations do not equate to hunter's success, especially when you are talking about these kind of numbers," Chad Manlove said. "We don't have the ultimate answers, but we have a lot of factors coming into play which dictates the success or failure of your hunting season. **Among those factors is weather, loss of habitat, a drop in the**

breeding population, and hunting pressure."

Louisiana waterfowl study leader Robert Helm told the group, "More hunters equate to more ducks being taken," he said. "Look at the number of hunters down here in the south (385,000 Arkansas, Texas, Mississippi and Louisiana).

What this means is there are more commercial hunting outfits, more blinds, more leased lands and more hunters spending time hunting these birds.

"As the pressure increases, the birds go nocturnal. They shy away from the pressure and become harder and harder to attract," he said.

Bob Strader of the US Fish and Wildlife Service told the gathering **agricultural practices have dramatically changed as well.**

"Mallards, unlike other ducks, are not hot to travel when they have plenty of food and water. And there is a lot more agriculture in the northern to mid-tier states. With significant amounts of foods, they are happy to stay put until a major weather system comes along to push them south."

"The distribution of the birds have also changed," said Helm, whose crews flew three statewide aerial surveys this year. "They are spreading out more and more to escape the pressure."

Art Brazda, a North Dakota transplant and a 33-year veteran of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, told the group it was all right to get upset and to ask question, but if they were serious about continuing to duck hunt they had to support conservation groups.

"Get mad sure, but if the habitat is there we are going to have ducks, maybe not as many as we like, but we will have ducks. When we lose that habitat, we lose the ducks. Get mad, but don't ever stop supporting conservation efforts," he said.