

[From Winter 1995-96]

Moist Soil Management Program Promotes Waterfowl Population

Chincoteague Refuge has 14 freshwater impoundments which are managed to provide quality habitat for migrating waterfowl and shorebirds. Water levels are manipulated to produce vegetation important to wintering waterfowl. This moist soil management technique requires the draw down of impoundment water levels in the spring to allow for plant growth throughout the summer months. Most impoundments were scheduled to be reflooded beginning in September. However, adequate rainfall is required to refill the impoundments, and in some years rainfall is very limited. This year, the refuge was fortunate to have over seven inches of rain in September which quickly raised them to their prescribed levels in preparation for the migration. Proper water levels ensure that the vegetation within the impoundments can be utilized by waterfowl.

Waterfowl numbers at Chincoteague Refuge increased drastically over the past few months as migration got into full swing. Peak populations rose from about 6,700 in September to 24,000 in October. November waterfowl numbers increased to almost 36,000. Snow geese made up about 40% of the total with 14,300 birds. All species of ducks, except black ducks and mallards, showed an increase in population from 1994. The total duck population increased 233% from this time last year. This increase may be due to improved impoundment conditions this year. Some of the most abundant species were pintail, green-wing teal, black duck, gadwall, shoveler, widgeon, and mallard.

Another species, sometimes confused with the ducks, is the American coot. Record numbers of coots have been observed in B-pool south, the impoundment inside the Wildlife Loop. Rafts of 800 or more birds have been observed since October. In previous years, numbers seldom exceeded 100 birds. Coots are distinguishable from ducks by their small, white, chicken-like bills.

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