

AGFC personnel conducted aerial waterfowl surveys December 8<sup>th</sup> through December 12<sup>th</sup> in the following regions: Northeast, East Central, Northwest Arkansas River Valley, Southwest, and Southeast. A storm front with heavy rains moved through the state midweek, leading to rapidly changing habitat conditions during the survey period. Cold fronts moved through the state at the beginning and end of the week with warmer weather midweek leading to daytime high temperatures that ranged from the lower 50s to upper 60s with lows in the low 30s. Sky conditions were clear or high cloud cover during the survey period resulting in good visibility but with bumpy conditions on some survey days. This survey was conducted at a similar time as last year.

Habitat conditions again varied across the state. The Arkansas River Valley remained very dry, southwest Arkansas had somewhat better habitat conditions, and east Arkansas varied from somewhat dry early in the week to extremely wet in many places by midweek. The heaviest rainfall occurred in east and southeast Arkansas, especially near the Mississippi River. Vast acreages of newly flooded fields were present following these heavy rains. Ducks responded to this new habitat and observers saw large concentrations of waterfowl in many of these areas.

The statewide total duck count of 1,014,727 is an 84% increase from last year's count of 550,905 and the highest count since 1996. This total is above the 1985–2007 December survey average of 836,727 ducks for the first time since 2001 (Figure 1). This December's mallard count of 612,587 is an 80% increase from last year's count of 338,893 and the highest mallard count since 2001 and the second highest since 1996. Like total duck numbers, this is the first time the December mallard count has exceeded the long-term average (532,654) since 2001 (Figure 2). The majority of the mallards counted during this survey were in the Northeast and East Central survey regions. At 567,485, snow goose numbers were over three times higher than last month's survey total and nearly double the December 2007 count (328,450). Counts of white-fronted geese were only a third of the number seen during the November 2008 survey, but this month's survey total of 45,715 is greater than the December 2007 estimate of 36,750 white-fronted geese. A regional listing of survey totals is found in Table 1.

December aerial waterfowl survey totals climbed above the 20-year long-term average for the first time in many years. This is good news for waterfowl hunters, particularly considering the high number of mallards observed this month. For instance, mallard counts in the east central, southeast, and southwest survey regions were more than double the December 2007 counts. Prolonged cold and snow cover (Figure 3) in states in the northern portions of the Mississippi and Central Flyways are likely the primary factor leading to the high number of birds observed. However, many bottomland hardwood areas (notably the Cache River and White River National Wildlife Refuges) remain mostly dry. This lack of available flooded timber – where ducks are extremely difficult to count – could have made ducks using agricultural fields more visible to observers leading to somewhat inflated statewide counts. Even so, several migration events have occurred in conjunction with cold fronts during the past month, even as recently as the week of the survey. Another cold front the week following the survey surely caused additional migration events. Forecasts continue to call for periods of cold weather in Arkansas and states to the north. Hunters with access to artificially flooded areas and rainfall-flooded fields are likely enjoying quality hunting. Many public-land duck hunters may have to wait for the next heavy rain event and flooding of bottomland hardwood areas before they can reap the benefit of the relatively high numbers of birds in the state.

Table 1. Number of waterfowl observed during the December 2008 Arkansas Aerial Waterfowl Survey.

<b>Species</b>	<b>Northwest</b>	<b>Southwest</b>	<b>Northeast</b>	<b>East Central</b>	<b>Southeast</b>	<b>Statewide</b>
Mallard	3885	18,937	192,500	337,785	59,480	<b>612,587</b>
Black Duck	0	0	30	0	0	<b>30</b>
Gadwall	3010	5345	27,400	72,030	32,795	<b>140,580</b>
Wigeon	645	625	40	1100	100	<b>2510</b>
G.W. Teal	3645	6380	24,100	10,000	6340	<b>50,465</b>
B.W. Teal	00	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
N. Shoveler	400	2725	10,000	17,235	3490	<b>33,850</b>
N. Pintail	450	2130	21,300	35,050	30,185	<b>89,115</b>
Wood Duck	0	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
<b>ALL DABBLERS</b>	<b>12,035</b>	<b>36,142</b>	<b>275,370</b>	<b>473,200</b>	<b>132,390</b>	<b>929,137</b>

<b>Species</b>	<b>Northwest</b>	<b>Southwest</b>	<b>Northeast</b>	<b>East Central</b>	<b>Southeast</b>	<b>Statewide</b>
Ruddy	0	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
Redhead	0	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
Canvasback	0	0	950	0	0	<b>950</b>
Scaup	0	0	0	290	600	<b>950</b>
Ring-necked	0	0	2520	8550	3050	<b>14,120</b>
Bufflehead	220	10	50	0	0	<b>280</b>
Mergansers	0	0	20	0	0	<b>20</b>
<b>ALL DIVERS</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>3540</b>	<b>8840</b>	<b>3650</b>	<b>16,260</b>

<b>Species</b>	<b>Northwest</b>	<b>Southwest</b>	<b>Northeast</b>	<b>East Central</b>	<b>Southeast</b>	<b>Statewide</b>
Snow/Ross' Geese	0	1950	79,000	375,235	111,300	<b>567,485</b>
White-fronted Geese	0	425	7920	25,420	11,950	<b>45,715</b>
Canada Geese	240	50	160	254	35	<b>739</b>
<b>ALL GEESE</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>2425</b>	<b>87,080</b>	<b>400,909</b>	<b>123,285</b>	<b>613,939</b>

Figure 1. Aerial Waterfowl Survey Statewide Totals for All Ducks, 1985-2008.

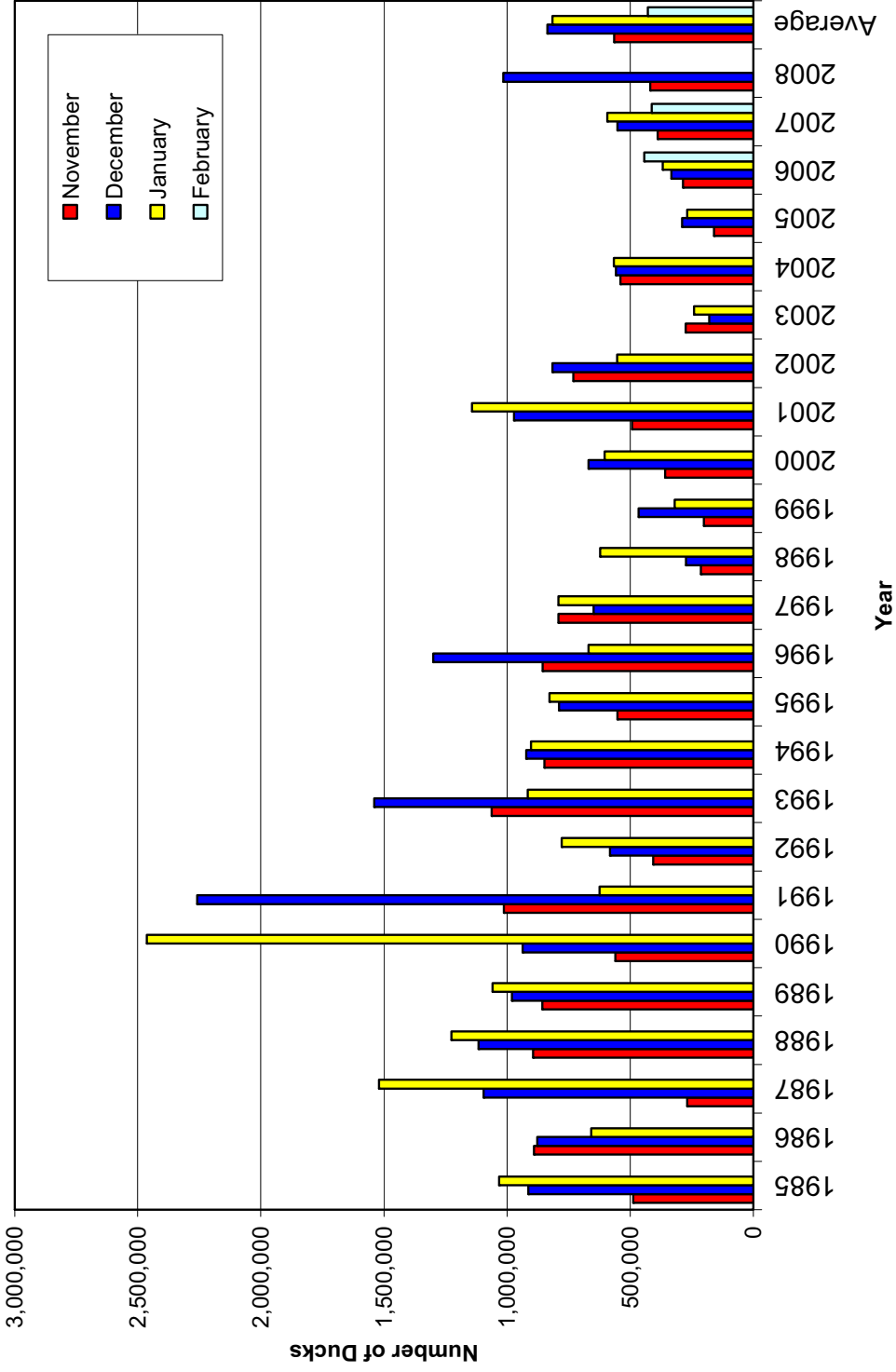


Figure 2. Aerial Waterfowl Survey Statewide Totals for Mallards, 1987-2008.

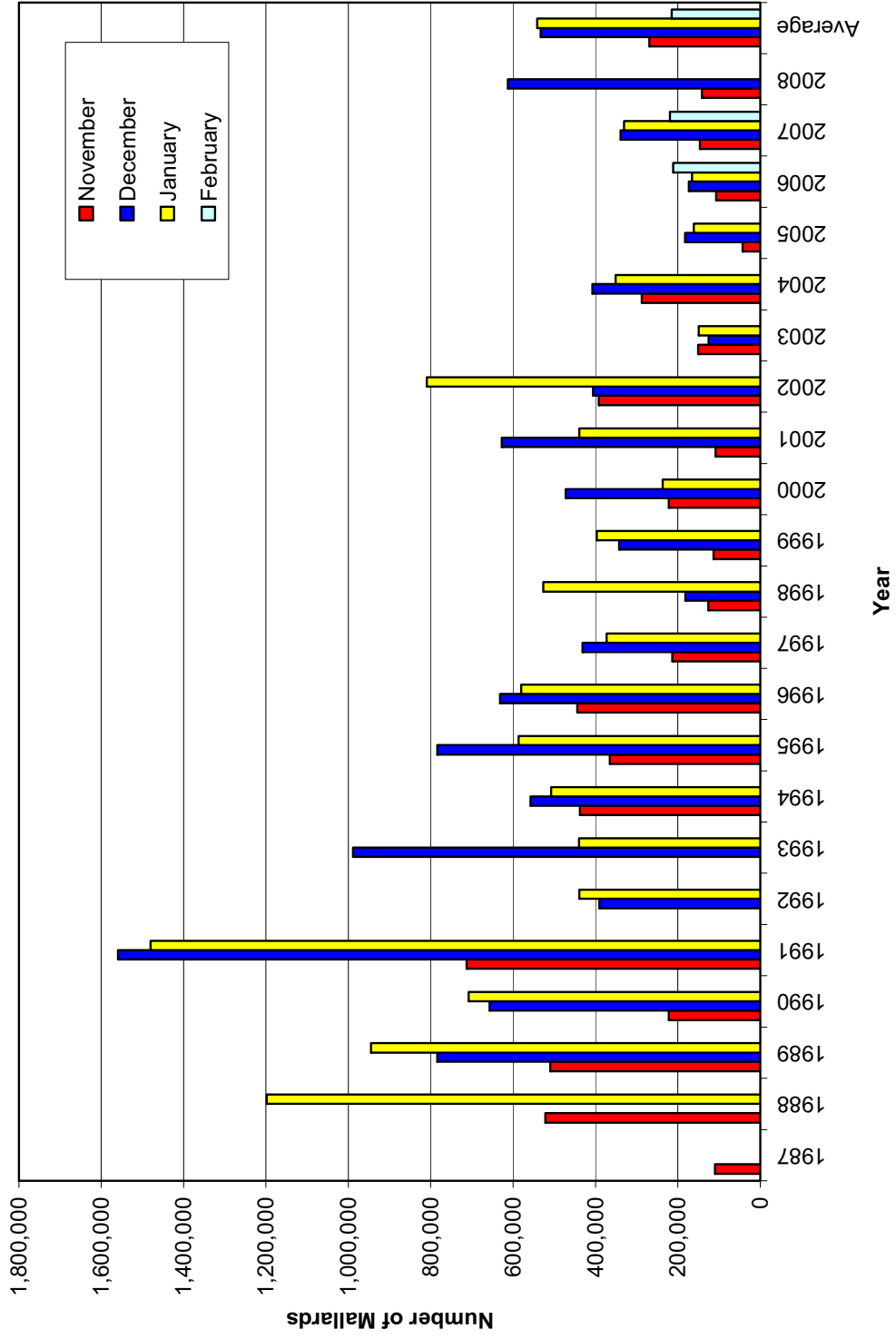


Figure 3. United States Snow Cover as of December 13, 2008. Source <http://www.noahrc.noaa.gov/nsa/>

