



ONE PINTAIL

ANSWERS TO YOUR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE 2017-18 LIMIT

Many hunters were both surprised and disappointed to hear that the pintail limit for the 2017-18 season will be reduced to one bird per day because the continental breeding population estimate was down last spring.

Pintail populations are a far cry from what they were in the 1970s, when hunters were allowed to bag seven a day, and sometimes even more “bonus” birds. Pintail

numbers bottomed out in the early 1990s and since then have not rebounded the way other species have.

But sprig remain the most abundant duck in our state each winter, and the California harvest typically represents one-fourth of the national total. Pintails matter here a LOT, which is why California Waterfowl has devoted substantial time and energy to pintail regulations over the years. We share your frustration.

Q: WHAT DRIVES CURRENT REGULATIONS?

The current Adaptive Harvest Management strategy for pintail was adopted in 2010 by all four flyway councils. The strategy reflects a tradeoff: Under the old strategy, limits could go as high as three per day, but they could also go to zero, or the pintail season could be shortened. That happened for three seasons in California starting in 2002 when the limit was one and the pintail season was 60 days long.

The states and flyway councils wanted to minimize closed seasons or seasons within seasons on pintail. A DFW survey of active California duck hunters around the time the strategy was implemented suggested support for this new approach: “Approximately 74 percent of respondents were willing to

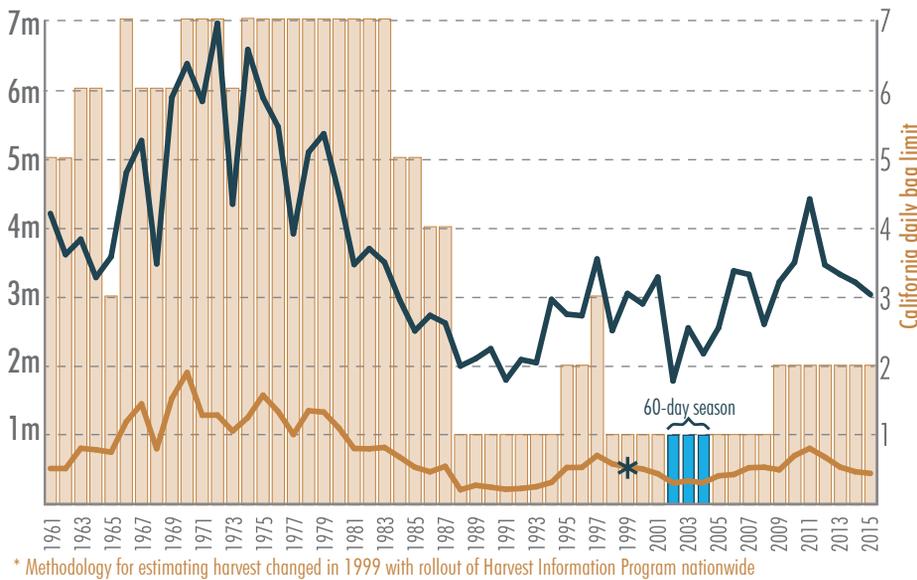
forgo the possibility of three pintails in the daily bag to have daily bag limits of two more often.” Moreover, “approximately 64 percent of respondents preferred consistent regulations with lower bag limits compared to inconsistent regulations with higher bag limits.”

Here’s what the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says about the strategy:

The (2010) strategy differs from previous harvest strategies for northern pintails in that it: (1) is based on an explicit harvest management objective, (2) eliminates the partial season and three-bird bag limit regulatory management options, (3) determines the annual regulatory choice based on a formal optimization process that finds the state-dependent

PINTAIL BREEDING POPULATION, HARVEST AND CALIFORNIA LIMITS

Vertical bars represent California pintail limits. The top line represents estimated breeding population; the bottom line estimated harvest nationwide.



* Methodology for estimating harvest changed in 1999 with rollout of Harvest Information Program nationwide

Graphic by Holly A. Heyser; data from U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and California Dept. of Fish & Wildlife

solution to best achieve the harvest management objectives, and (4) allocates harvest on a national rather than flyway-by-flyway basis, with no explicit attempt to achieve a particular allocation of harvest among flyways.

... (The current) protocol for pintails considers two state variables (breeding population and the mean latitude of the breeding population distribution) to represent pintail population and harvest dynamics. The model set species alternative hypotheses about the effect of harvest on population dynamics: one in which harvest is additive to natural mortality, and another in which harvest is compensatory to natural mortality.

And since this new strategy was adopted, we've had daily limits of two every season – until now.

Q: WHAT TRIGGERED THIS YEAR'S BAG LIMIT REDUCTION?

The primary reason the bag limit was reduced for the 2017-18 season was due to significantly lower May pond counts – an assessment of available breeding habitat – and fewer pintail surveyed in key breeding areas, especially those at the southern end of the Prairie Pothole region in 2016. The 2016 pond estimate was 30 percent below 2015 and 11 percent below the long-term average.

Here's what the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said in its 2017 Adaptive Harvest Management Report:

For pintails, optimal regulatory strategies for the 2017 hunting season were calculated using: (1) an objective of maximizing long-term cumulative harvest, including a closed-season constraint of 1.75 million birds, (2) current pintail regulatory alternatives, and (3) current population models and their relative weights. Based on a liberal regulatory alternative with a 2-bird daily bag limit selected in 2016, the 2016 survey results of 2.62 million pintails observed at a mean latitude of 58.6 degrees, the optimal regulatory choice for the 2017 hunting season for all four flyways is the liberal regulatory alternative with a one-bird daily bag limit.

It is important to note that the limit for 2017-18 is based on 2016 data, which means even if nesting conditions are excellent this spring and the pintail flight this fall is robust, we'll still be at the limit of one. This schedule began in 2015 to comply with regulations designed to ensure adequate time for public comment between the release of breeding population reports and enactment of regulations. Under the old system, our limit would have been one in 2016-17.

Q: WHAT DRIVES PINTAIL NUMBERS?

So is habitat or hunting the primary factor driving pintail numbers, or is it some combination of both? If it is partly a hunting issue, which regulations matter most?

COMING UP: CWA PINTAIL WORKSHOP

CWA will bring together researchers, regulators and hunters this summer to discuss what research needs to be done to better understand the effect of harvest on pintails, and to discuss the potential regulatory options that would allow more hunter opportunity, including allowing three birds per day for the entire season, allowing a third drake after Dec. 1, or a third bird with a slightly reduced pintail season.

Watch for details on our Facebook page (www.facebook.com/CaliforniaWaterfowl), eNews (sign up at www.calwaterfowl.org/email-signup) and this magazine.

We know that the last 20 years of relatively restrictive regulations on pintail have not resulted in a significant boost in their populations, even in years of good to excellent habitat conditions in the prairies. At the same time, many other duck populations have risen above their long-term populations, with some approaching near record levels. Pintail are not as adaptable as other puddle duck species, such as mallards. While they can fly farther north to escape low-water conditions on their prime breeding grounds in the Prairie Pothole Region, they are less productive when they do so. Compared with mallards, pintail also have a much smaller breeding population, which makes it difficult for their total numbers to rise significantly in any given year.



A California Waterfowl technician clamps a band on a bull sprig for research. Bands help us gather data that can be used to set pintail regulations.
PHOTO BY CAROLINE BRADY

Farming practices in Canada now don't leave enough nesting cover during the pintail breeding season, which limits productivity. On the U.S. side of the border, the decline in the Conservation Reserve Program, which pays farmers to fallow their lands and in effect provide necessary nesting cover, could even further limit populations in the future, particularly when periodic drought strikes the Prairie Pothole region.

The key debate is this: Some believe harvest is additive, adding to the total number of ducks that don't survive to breed. That would mean how many we kill does affect populations from year to year. Others believe harvest is compensatory, meaning the number of ducks we kill doesn't significantly add to the number that won't make it to the next breeding season due to illness, starvation or predation. Those who see harvest as compensatory argue that habitat conditions are a far greater driver of waterfowl populations.

The current pintail harvest model incorporates both hypotheses, but the compensatory model is given less weight due mostly to data limitations.

Q: WHAT HAS CWA DONE ABOUT PINTAIL LIMITS?

CWA believes harvest is compensatory (within constraints – unlimited harvest would obviously be bad) and that the current harvest management strategy should be modified to allow three or more pintail as a regulatory option. The real challenge is finding a way to offer that option in good pintail production years without having to face a greater likelihood of severe restrictions (especially closed seasons) in years of poor production.

Having the three-bird (or more) option would not only enhance hunter opportunity in California, but may encourage more private landowners to manage their marshes or agricultural lands in a way that benefit wintering pintail.

Each year, we attend Pacific Flyway meetings and talk directly with top staff of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Migratory Bird Program about the huge importance of pintail to California hunters and many hunters' desire to raise the limit. We have pointed out that conservative regulations on pintail haven't really helped the population, and that it's highly unlikely that we will ever see the same high pintail populations that we enjoyed in the 1970s.

CWA has also invited USFWS Migratory Bird staff to participate in our annual Regulations and Traditions meetings to provide updates on pintail and answer questions from CWA members, which they have done over the last several years. We have also worked on this issue with allied groups such as Delta Waterfowl and have discussed it many times as well with DFW, which is California's representative on the Pacific Flyway Council.

We asked the Service that the harvest strategy for pintail be revisited and then ultimately revised to allow for more hunter opportunity. USFWS has agreed to make adaptive harvest management revision work for pintail a priority, as noted in their own planning documents, but other priorities and limited funding and staff have been major, ongoing problems. Other hang-ups include resistance from states that support the current pintail harvest strategy.

It should also be noted that CWA and DFW have banded over 26,000 pintail immediately before and after hunting seasons since 2006 to facilitate data gathering to support our efforts. That work is ongoing.

HOW TO SUPPORT CWA PINTAIL EFFORTS:

Every fundraising dinner features a Partnering for Pintail print among auction items. Proceeds from those sales support CWA's pintail efforts. You can also contribute to the California Waterfowl Legislative Action Fund, which supports CWA's advocacy efforts with lawmakers and regulators – information is at www.calwaterfowlactionfund.org.

NEW GUN LAWS AFFECTING HUNTERS

Between a host of gun and ammunition restrictions passed by the Legislature last summer and Proposition 63, an initiative passed by voters in November, there are a lot of new laws for hunters to be aware of and a lot of confusion about what happens when.

We fully expect some laws to be challenged in the courts. And the state Department of Justice has yet to sort out all the discrepancies between laws passed last summer and Prop. 63, or formulate detailed regulations. But here's what we know so far about the laws likely to affect hunters:

In effect now

Reporting loss/theft: Falsely reporting a firearm loss or theft is a misdemeanor under AB 1695; if convicted, the penalty includes a 10-year ban on owning firearms.

Lending firearms: There are tighter restrictions on lending a firearm without a background check under AB 1511, though the state still allows licensed hunters to borrow a firearm during a hunting season without a background check.

July 1, 2017

Reporting loss/theft: Firearm theft or loss must be reported to law enforcement within five days of when the owner discovers or reasonably should have discovered the loss under Prop. 63.

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Q: WHAT NEXT?

CWA will continue to look for ways to help the Service secure both the public and private resources it needs for data gathering, scientific analysis and other necessary work to revise the pintail harvest strategy in a way that promotes hunter opportunity. Most notably, this includes working with the Trump administration and members of Congress to provide more funding to the Migratory Bird Program. CWA and its Central Valley Joint Venture partners are traveling to Washington D.C. in early March, and this issue will be a top priority for discussion.

Although California winters more pintail than any other state by far, it is still a resource that is shared with other flyways and states, so securing any regulatory change for pintail will require the cooperation of other states. More emphasis needs to be placed on educating other states about the high value of pintail to California hunters. CWA will be doing additional outreach to other states at the various Flyway meetings this year.

Jan. 1, 2018

Ammunition transactions: Ammo transactions must be processed through ammunition vendors that are licensed by the state under SB 1235. There are exceptions for transactions involving 50 rounds or less in a month between licensed hunters while they are hunting, or immediate family members.

Online ammo purchases: You can no longer have ammunition shipped directly to you; all transactions must be processed through a licensed California ammunition vendor.

July 1, 2019

Ammunition background checks: Ammunition buyers must undergo background checks for every purchase, and ammunition vendors can charge \$1 per transaction – an amount that will increase with inflation – under SB 1235. The vendor will send information about you and the type of ammunition you purchased to the state, which will keep it in a database for two years.

Anyone who has purchased a long gun since 2014 or who owns a handgun will be in the background check system, and it is expected that the check will involve simply swiping the buyer's driver's license, though the system has not been created. Those who are not in the system can get into it by filing a Firearm Ownership Report with the Dept. of Justice and paying the one-time \$19 fee. (The application is available online.)

Ammunition import: California residents will be prohibited from bringing any ammunition from out of state into California without going through a licensed ammunition vendor under SB 1235, and the vendor can charge up to \$10 for processing the import. However, hunters can bring in 50 rounds of ammunition without importing it through a licensed vendor provided it was the type of ammunition used on the out-of-state hunting trip for which it was purchased.

We are also planning a day-long "Pintail Workshop" this summer in Sacramento to bring scientists from throughout North America who have studied pintail and harvest management to discuss what additional data gathering, modeling analysis and other work needs to be done. We'll also discuss the potential regulatory options for facilitating more hunter opportunity including, but not limited to, allowing three birds per day for the entire season, allowing a third drake after Dec. 1, or a third bird with a slightly reduced pintail season, such as 86 days, which is the current season length for scaup.

The meeting will be open to CWA members and will be well advertised in the weeks leading up to it. We strongly encourage our members to attend to not only learn more about pintail status, ecology and harvest management, but to offer their own input as to how we move forward with increasing hunter opportunity for this highly sought-after species. 🦆