

# 2011 DUCK HUNTER SURVEY

## Summary of Findings

May 2012

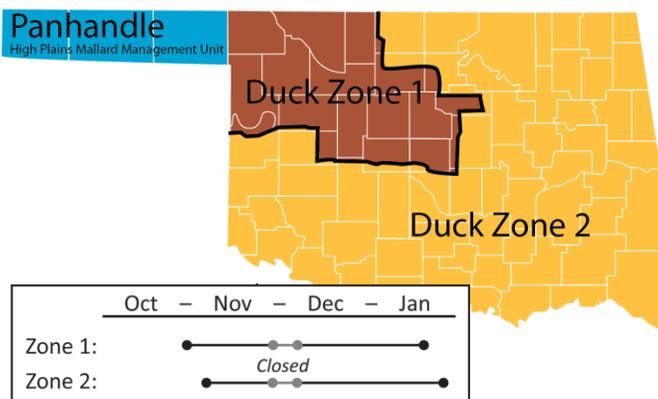


Andrea Crews  
Josh Richardson  
Oklahoma Department  
of Wildlife Conservation

State wildlife agencies are responsible for setting hunting season parameters to ensure healthy populations of wildlife. Sometimes a variety of options are biologically acceptable, allowing agencies to consider hunter preference among the range of choices. Such is the case in setting duck hunting season parameters in Oklahoma.

States share responsibility for migratory bird management with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Waterfowl populations are assessed annually at the flyway-level, and states are provided harvest packages as appropriate for current conditions. The USFWS sets the outside boundaries for state bag limits, season dates and number of hunting days, allowing states to choose more restrictive seasons if preferred, and to establish zones with varied seasons.

States in the Central Flyway have been under a "liberal" package since 1995. Oklahoma can choose a 74-day duck season from approximately 130 days (opening no earlier than the Saturday after September 24 and closing no later than January 31). Oklahoma's duck season is organized into two main zones with varied starting and ending dates, to reflect the pattern of waterfowl migration across the state from northwest to southeast. The zones also have a split season, providing a 12-day period of refuge. (The panhandle is part of a multi-state High Plains Mallard Management Unit, with season parameters set for the region.)



This duck hunter survey was focused primarily on Zones 1 and 2, to assess hunter preferences for:

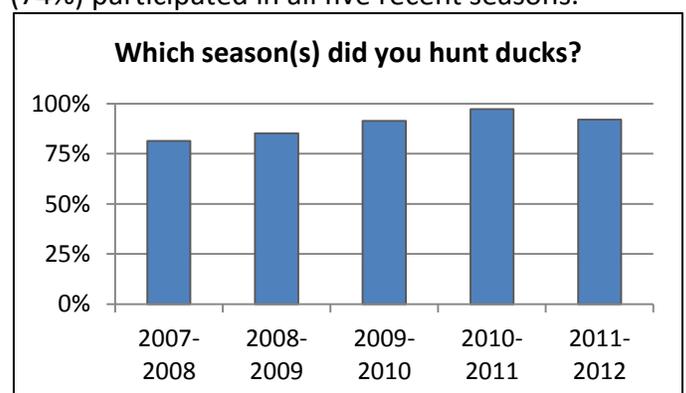
- The number of hunting zones
- The boundaries between zones
- Season dates within zones
- Existence and/or timing of the split
- An additional southeast zone

Data collected during the issuance of the Harvest Information Program (HIP) permit were used to identify survey targets. The sampling frame consisted of hunters who registered for HIP between July 1, 2011 and the date of sampling (December 13, 2011), indicated they hunted ducks the previous season, resided in Oklahoma, and had complete mailing information. A random sample of 5,000 was selected from 7,106 eligible hunters.

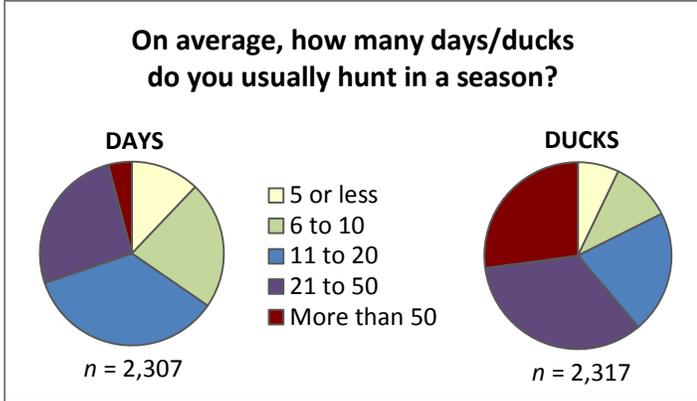
Sampled hunters were mailed a pre-survey notification postcard January 3, 2012 and the full survey January 9. Non-respondents (3,504) were mailed a second survey February 6. Completed surveys were received from 2,419 hunters, yielding a raw response rate of 48%.

## Who Responded?

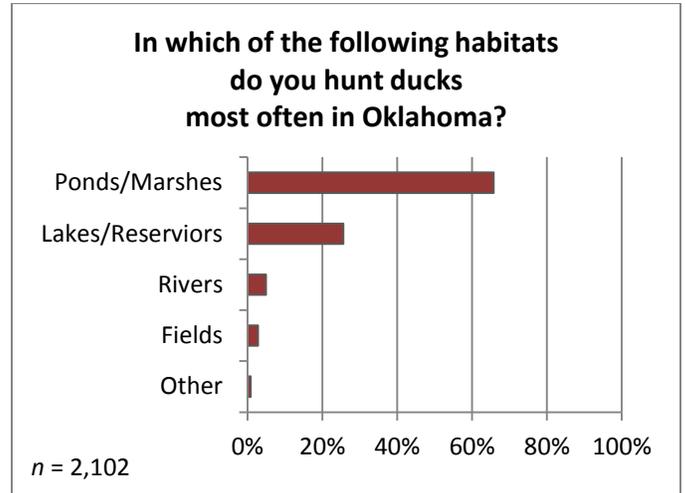
Most respondents (98%) hunted ducks at some point in Oklahoma during the past five years. Those who did not were asked no further survey questions. The majority of active duck hunters (74%) participated in all five recent seasons.



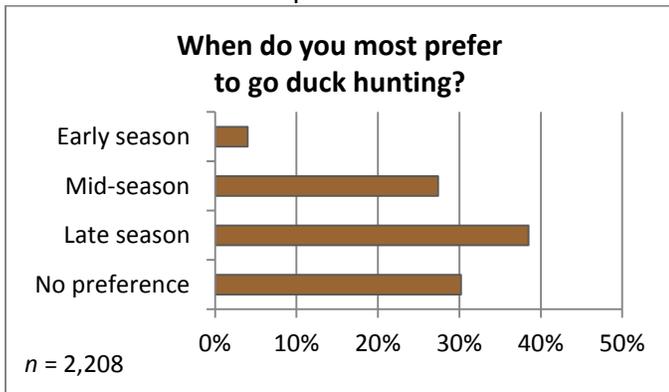
Most duck hunters surveyed were fairly “avid,” hunting more than 10 days and harvesting more than 20 ducks in an average season.



Ponds and marshes were most popular for duck hunters, followed by lakes/reservoirs.



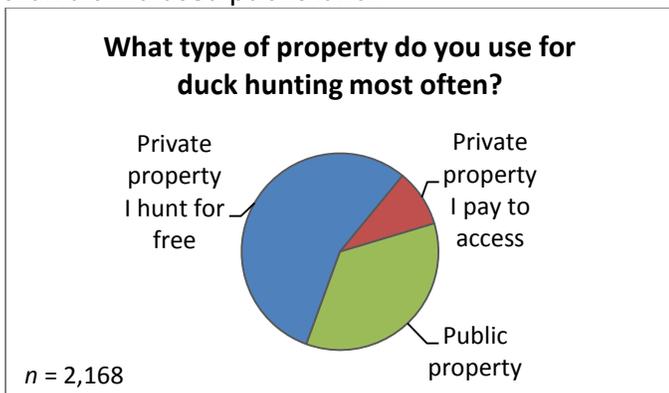
Very few duck hunters preferred to head afield during early season, although it should be noted that 30% indicated no preference at all.



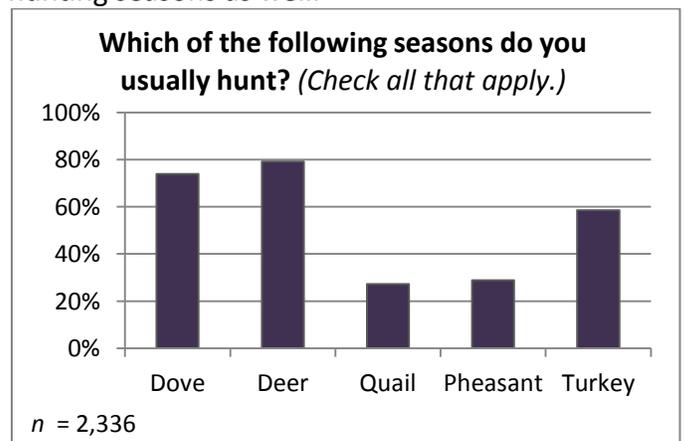
Duck hunters placed varied importance on duck hunting relative to their other hunting activities.



Over half of the duck hunters surveyed used non-fee private land most often for duck hunting. More than a third used public land.

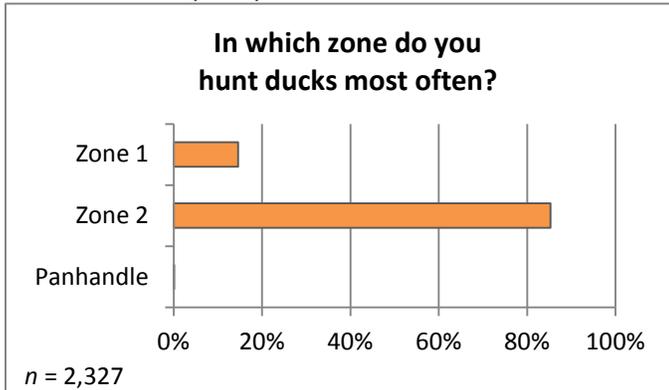


Many duck hunters participated in other Oklahoma hunting seasons as well.

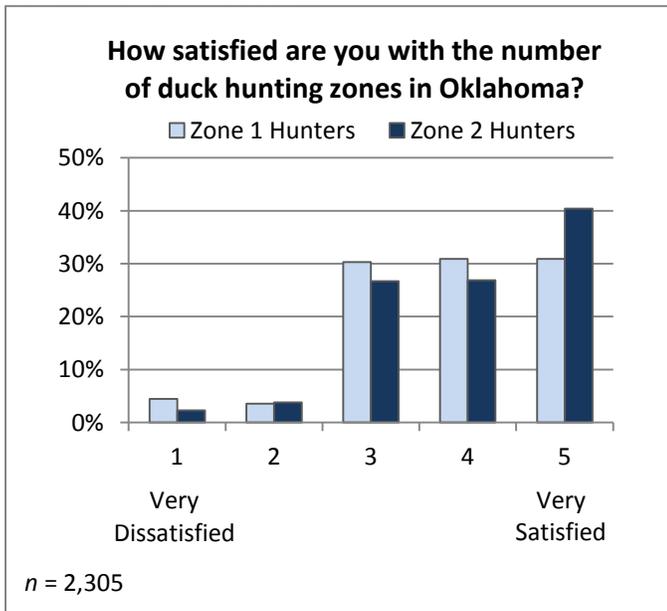


## Zones and Boundaries

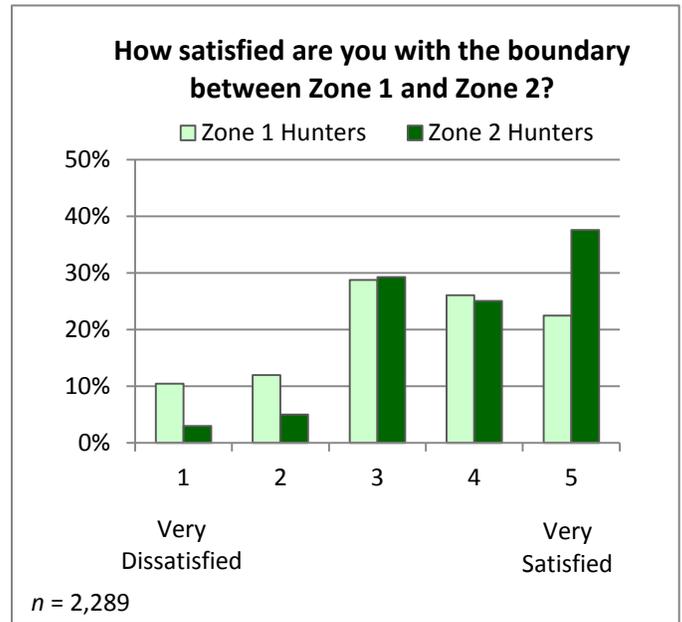
Zone 2 covers the largest area of the state, and logically is used by the majority of duck hunters. Some hunters (30%) used more than one zone.



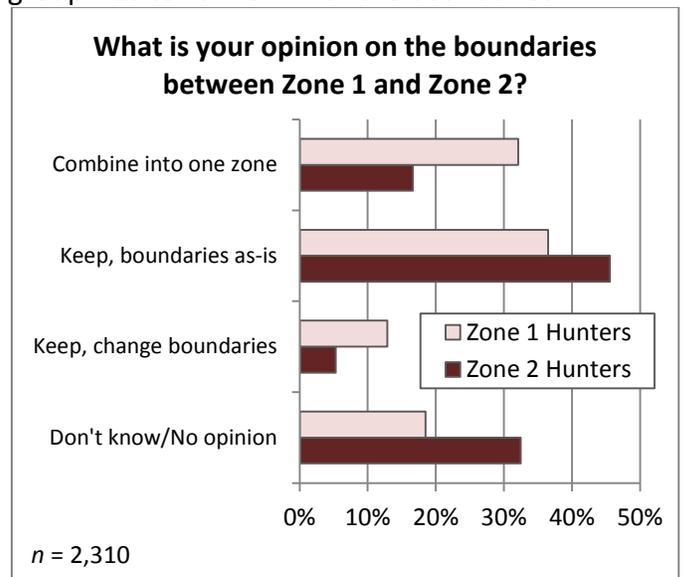
Overall, duck hunters were satisfied with the number of zones in Oklahoma (67% rated 4 or 5). However, those who hunted Zone 2 most often were more likely to be “Very Satisfied” with the number of zones, when compared to those who hunted Zone 1 most often.



Although duck hunters were again mostly satisfied when asked about the boundary between zones (61% rated 4 or 5), significant differences existed between hunters of the different zones. Zone 1 hunters were more likely to indicate dissatisfaction with the boundaries.



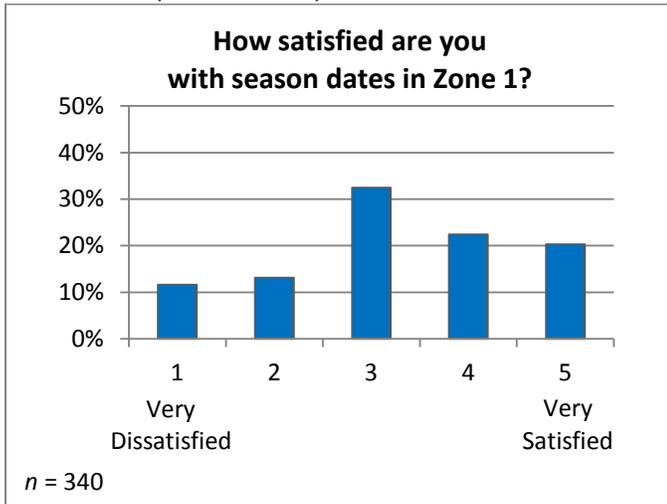
The dissatisfaction among Zone 1 hunters can be further seen when they were asked to consider changes to the boundary between zones. Zone 1 hunters were more interested in combining into one zone than were Zone 2 hunters. Zone 2 hunters were more likely than Zone 1 hunters to wish for the zones to remain unchanged, or to have no opinion. The least popular option for either group was to “tinker” with the boundaries.



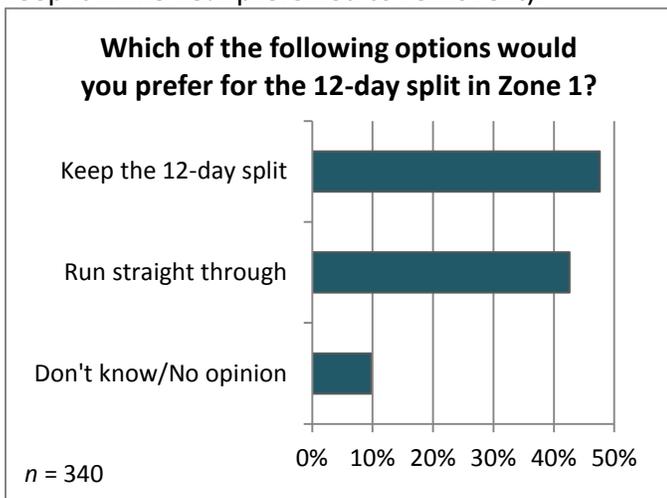
## Season Dates and Splits: Zone 1

The following analyses pertain to hunters who used Zone 1 *most often* for duck hunting.

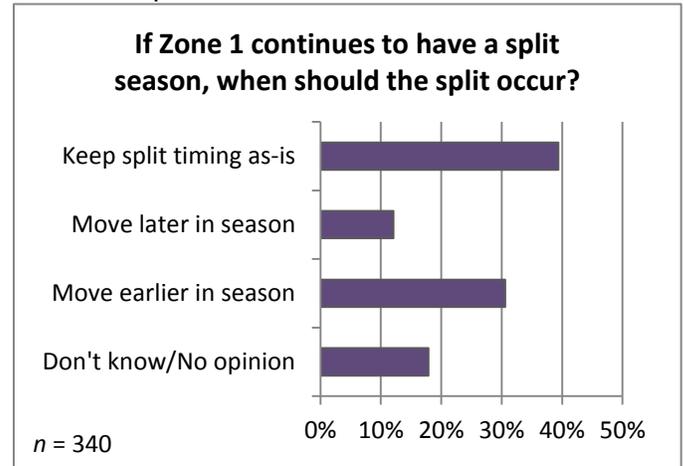
Many Zone 1 hunters were satisfied with the season dates (43% rated 4 or 5), while 25% were dissatisfied (rated 1 or 2).



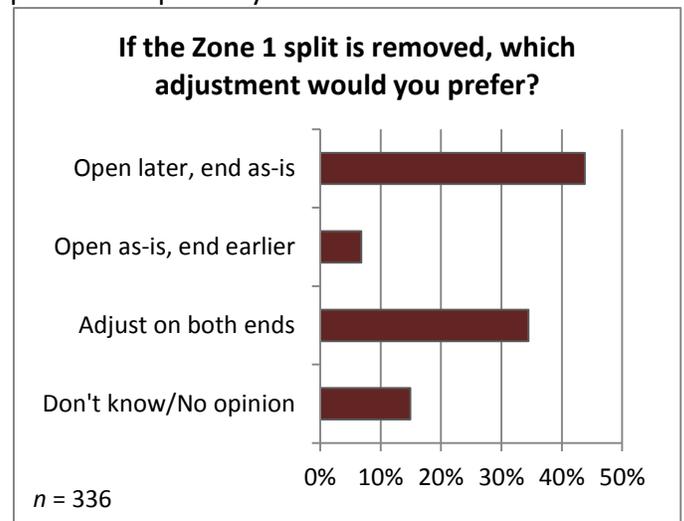
Zone 1 duck hunters were almost evenly divided in their opinion of the 12-day split (48% preferred to keep it while 43% preferred to remove it).



Under the assumption that Zone 1 would continue to have a 12-day split, hunters varied in their preference for the timing of the split. Some preferred to keep the timing of the split as-is (39%) while others preferred to move it earlier in the season (31%). The least-preferred option was to move the split to later in the season.



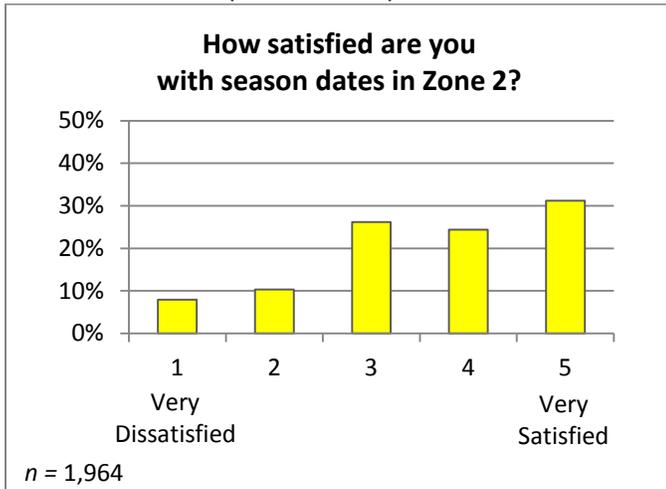
If the split was removed from Zone 1, hunters were again divided on how to adjust the season dates in order to stay within the 74-day maximum. Some preferred to adjust by opening the season later (44%), while others preferred to remove some days on either end (35%). Ending earlier was not a preferred option by most.



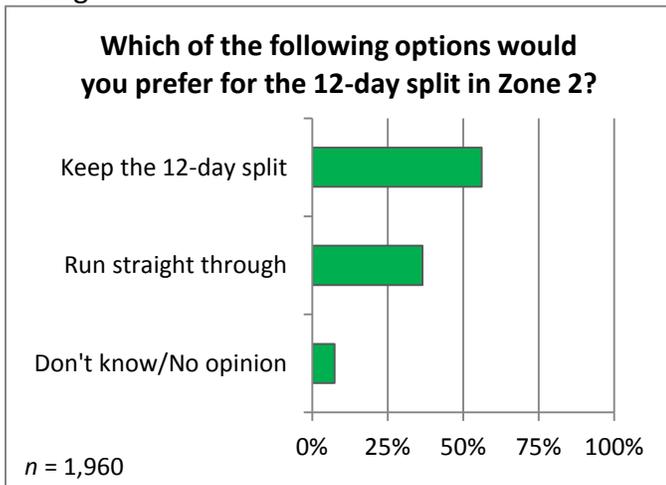
## Season Dates and Splits: Zone 2

The following analyses pertain to hunters who used Zone 2 *most often* for duck hunting.

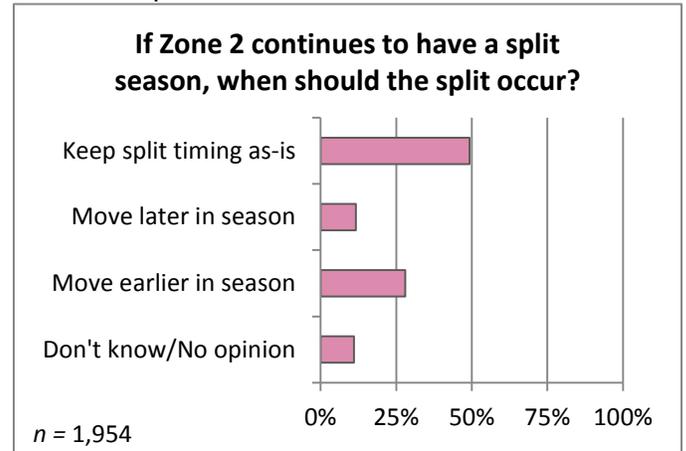
The majority of Zone 2 hunters were satisfied with the season dates (56% rated 4 or 5), while 18% were dissatisfied (rated 1 or 2).



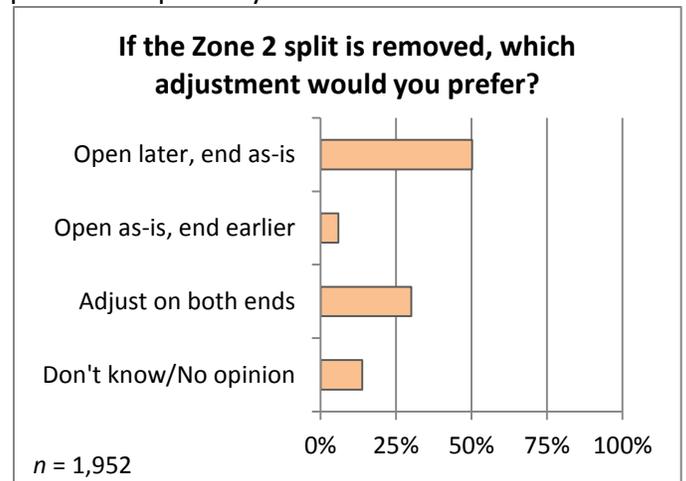
Most Zone 2 duck hunters (56%) preferred to keep the 12-day split in Zone 2, although 37% preferred to remove the split and run the season straight through.



Under the assumption that Zone 2 would continue to have a 12-day split, hunters varied in their preference for the timing of the split. Some preferred to keep the timing of the split as-is (49%) while others preferred to move it earlier in the season (28%). The least-preferred option was to move the split to later in the season.



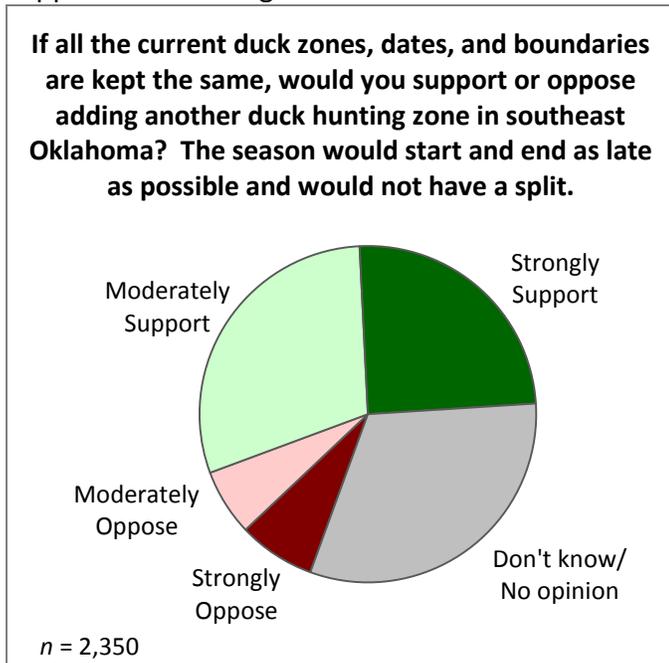
If the split was removed from Zone 2, hunters were again divided on how to adjust the season dates in order to stay within the 74-day maximum. Some preferred to adjust by opening the season later (50%), while others preferred to remove some days on either end (30%). Ending earlier was not a preferred option by most.



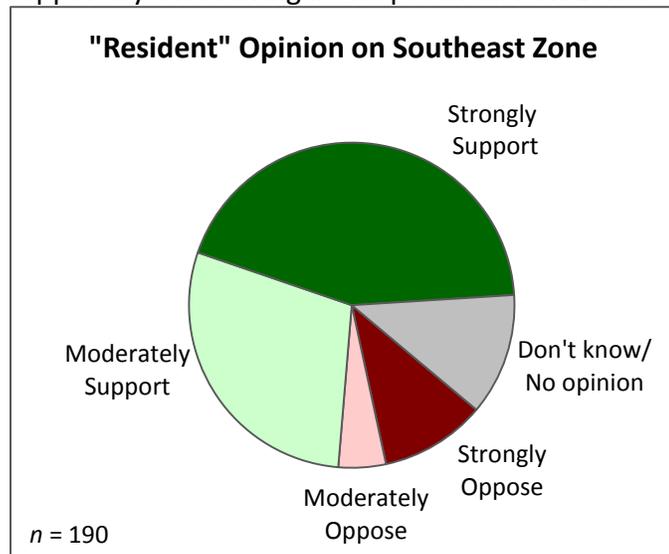
## Southeast Zone

Migrating ducks often arrive in the southeast portion of the state later than in the north and west. Some have suggested a new zone be established in the southeast, opening and ending as late as possible, with no 12-day split.

With all duck hunters combined, most (55%) were supportive of adding a southeast zone.



However, a significant number of duck hunters did not have an opinion, possibly because it would not impact them directly. Using zip codes, an approximate southeast zone was defined and potential residents of the new zone identified. Analysis of this hunter sub-group showed stronger support by those living in the potential new zone.



## Extended Season

A common thread in the comments provided by duck hunters was a desire to continue the season into February. Hunters cited drought and changing weather patterns as impacting migratory patterns, bringing ducks to southern parts of the flyway later than anticipated.

From a biological standpoint, it is important to protect migrating ducks in late winter. By February, mating pair-bonds have formed and ducks are replenishing fat reserves for the spring migration north. Additional hunting pressure could threaten the success of the spring breeding season.

At this time, the USFWS has set the outside closing date for the Central Flyway as January 31. At no time since when collaborative management of the central flyway began (1918) has February duck hunting been allowed. As recently as 1991, the outside closing date for the flyway was in early January, and in 1961 the season closed December 30. Comparatively, January 31 is a liberal ending date and is in keeping with sound wildlife management practices.

## Summary

Overall, the results of this survey paint a picture of Oklahoma duck hunters who are relatively satisfied. The boundary between zones is more problematic for Zone 1 hunters than Zone 2 hunters, although most of those who are dissatisfied would rather combine the state into one zone rather than adjust the boundary. Hunters in both zones are divided in their opinion on the 12-day split. If changes are made (i.e., removal of the split or adjustment to the timing), hunters do not wish to lose late-season days in either zone. The idea of an additional southeast zone with the latest possible closing date and no split was supported by duck hunters statewide and local resident hunters. No changes to the number of zones or zone boundaries can be made until the spring of 2016, as federal regulations only allow changes on a set 5-year schedule. In the interim, the efficacy and potential location of a southeast zone will be further considered by ODWC.



# 2011 Duck Hunter Survey

## Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation



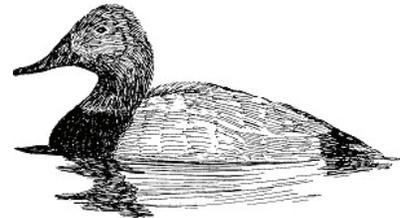
Please help the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation by participating in this study, even if you did not hunt ducks this season!

The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation is conducting a statewide survey of duck hunters. We are interested in learning about your experiences and preferences for duck hunting in Oklahoma. You are one of a select few hunting license holders we have contacted, and we need your help. Your answers will help us improve wildlife conservation for the future.

Please complete the enclosed survey and return it in the postage-paid envelope provided. Your answers and contact information will be kept confidential. If you have any questions or would like a copy of the final report of this study, please contact Josh Richardson at (405) 396-2503 or [jrichardson@zoo.odwc.state.ok.us](mailto:jrichardson@zoo.odwc.state.ok.us). Your help in this project is greatly appreciated and we look forward to learning about your duck hunting experiences!

Sincerely,

  
Josh Richardson  
Migratory Game Bird Biologist



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### ***BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON DUCK SEASON REGULATIONS***

Oklahoma's duck season regulations are set by two groups, the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Some things can be changed by ODWC and some cannot.

#### ***WHAT PART DOES THE USFWS SET? (Things we can not change)***

- **Panhandle**: Regulations in the panhandle counties (Cimarron, Texas and Beaver) are set for a broader region (the High Plains Mallard Management Unit) and cannot be changed by ODWC.
- **Maximum season length**: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sets the maximum number of duck hunting days each state may have, based on many types of research including breeding surveys. Oklahoma has been under a "liberal" package for sixteen years, allowing 74 days of duck hunting. If the duck population declined, the "moderate" package would allow 60 days and the "restrictive" package would allow 39 days.
- **Earliest starting date, latest ending date**: For our region of the country (the Central Flyway), the earliest duck season can open is the Saturday following September 24, and the latest it can close is the last Sunday in January. **Duck hunting in February is not allowed.**
- **Maximum daily bag limit**: The bag limit is set by the USFWS and corresponds to the "package" assigned for the flyway (liberal, moderate or restrictive), depending on the duck population status.

**WHAT PART DOES ODWC SET?** (Things we can change)

- Dates: States determine when to offer duck hunting within the allowed starting and ending dates.
- Split: States can chose to have a split season or run the 74 day season straight through.
- Zones: States can set up a limited number of duck hunting zones with different dates and splits.

**WHY DOES OKLAHOMA HAVE ZONES WITH DIFFERENT DATES?**

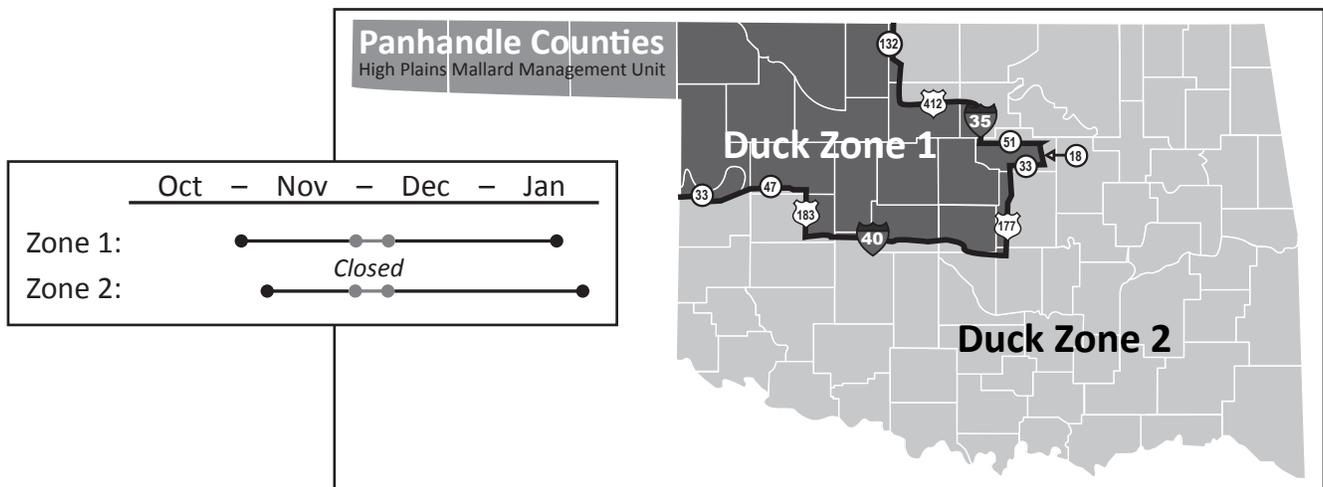
As ducks migrate from the north, they arrive in different parts of Oklahoma at different times. In the northwest, ducks generally begin arriving earlier and the freeze-up occurs earlier than most of the rest of the state. Therefore, Zone 1 season dates are set earlier to provide as much hunting opportunity as possible. In the eastern and southern parts of Oklahoma, ducks begin arriving a few weeks later. The opening date for Zone 2 is set as late as possible while still allowing 74 days of hunting.

**HOW ARE THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN ZONES SET?**

The general boundaries of Zones 1 and 2 are set according to historical migration patterns and water conditions, in order to time duck hunting opportunities with the presence of ducks and availability of habitat. The boundaries between Zone 1 and 2 are set along highways instead of county lines because roads serve as better reference points for hunters. People may not know which county they are in, but they usually know where they are in reference to a road.

**WHY DOES OKLAHOMA HAVE SPLIT SEASONS?**

Zones 1 and 2 are closed at the same time (12 day split) for several reasons. The split season provides migrating ducks a period of refuge (no waterfowl hunters are afield during the split, allowing a resting time period). It also enables ODWC to spread the season out within the wider range of dates allowed by the USFWS, providing both early and late season opportunities. The timing of the split is set to allow duck hunting over the Thanksgiving holidays, but then close to let wintering duck populations build up. The split also offers duck hunters a second “opening day” experience. Having both Zone splits at the same time simplifies regulations for hunters and law enforcement.



This survey offers Oklahoma duck hunters an opportunity for feedback on aspects of the duck season within ODWC’s authority to change: season dates, splits, and zones.