

Historical Census Of Ducks In Arkansas

The table illustrated below is based upon information received as to the peak number of ducks counted at these federal grained refuges in Arkansas in December, and compared with the December census by the Duck Biologist employed by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

Year	Dixie	¹ Plunkett	Bald Knob	Sanctuary Total	State (Dec. census)	% Ducks in Sanctuaries
1993	100,000	inc. w/Dixie	----	100,000	1,539,431	7%
1994	300,000	inc. w/Dixie	----	300,000	922,305	33%
1995	70,000	inc. w/Dixie	100,000	170,000	789,341	22%
1996	250,000	inc. w/Dixie	² 300,000	550,000	1,300,308	³ 42%
1997	60,000	30,000	110,000	200,000	648,243	31%
1998	150,000	50,000	300,000	500,000	621,934	80%
1999	100,000	50,000	400,000	550,000	466,550	118%
2000	50,000	50,000	600,000	700,000	668,132	105%
2001	50,000	25,000	650,000	725,000	971,241	75%
2002	100,000	not available	⁴ 300,000	400,000	815,736	⁵ 49%
2003	110,876	54,603	606,765	772,224	⁶ 978,535	79%

1 The Plunkett sanctuary consists of 700-800 acres, not all of which is farmed, off the Cache River north of I-40.

2 Different monthly reports from Dec. 1996 reflect 500,000 ducks at Bald Knob, and the annual report states that the 300,000 figure used above is very conservative. I used the 300,000 figure for this chart, but if the 500,000 figure is correct, the % of ducks in the sanctuaries would increase to 57.7% for 1996.

3 These numbers do not include Plunkett which were not available and would presumably have increased the # and % on the sanctuaries.

4 Andrew James, the Waterfowl Biologist for the Game & Fish Commission thinks his figures will include Bald Knob and Little Dixie. I do not see how they possibly can for several reasons. First, the discrepancy in numbers is so great that I think it would be impossible that his numbers include these federal sanctuaries. Second, out of the Game & Fish's 132 census areas, there is not one that I can identify with the Bald Knob National Wildlife Refuge, and the only one that might possibly include Little Dixie and Plunkett do not have anywhere close to enough numbers to have possibly included them. (This is an area from the south end of Black Swamp to I-40, Census Station No. 23, and their figures for November are 0 ducks, 0 ducks again for December, and 4200 ducks for January. This is to be compared with the federal counts in the closest corresponding periods to 20,110 ducks for November, 165,479 ducks for December, and 117,089 ducks for January.)

I should note that the state figures are from the AGFC December census which may or may not correspond to the actual peaks of the ducks in the refuges even though the ducks did in fact peak in the refuges during the month of December in all these years I believe. On the other hand these refuges have been upgraded over the years in their flooding capabilities through additions of control structures and relifts. I felt like this statewide number is a useful yard stick or base line and has the closest time correlation of any other figure I could find.

Below, you will find various comments made in several of these reports, which I think are critical:

“....Waterfowl sanctuaries became a major topic of discussion during years of poor duck hunting as has existed in the White and Cache River basins for the past five year period. This is especially true this year....”
Jan. 7, 2003, News Release.

“....After duck season closed, the ducks began spreading out in areas off the refuge.” Bald Knob Monthly Report, January, 1999.

“....On January 20 [next to last day of duck season] the number

of ducks utilizing the refuge was down to 200,000 and gradually diminished to approximately 8,000 when severe cold weather moved in the state on January 20. [96% of the ducks moved out of there between the end of duck season and the cold front which occurred five days later.]” Bald Knob Monthly Report, January, 2000.

“Waterfowl use remained relatively steady during the month until the White River flooded. Ducks then began utilizing newly flooded ground along the White and Cache River bottoms. Surprisingly though, most of ducks stayed on the sanctuary despite the abundance of habitat elsewhere. Ducks on the refuge simply moved to higher fields to feed where the flood water provided ideal conditions. Approximately 500,000 ducks and 220,000 geese were using the refuge in early December. Temperatures were very warm for this time of the year and the ducks didn’t fly in and out of the sanctuary as much as expected. Numbers climbed and peaked around December 14 and over 600,000 ducks, mostly mallards and pintails....” Bald Knob Monthly Report, January 2001.

“....Despite numerous ducks and geese on the sanctuary, few birds utilized the hunting area until late in the evenings [after shooting hours?].... The refuge held thousands of ducks but the ducks didn’t leave the sanctuary. It was always thought when the Cache and White Rivers reached flood stage, the ducks would leave Bald Knob refuge [sic] for the newly flooded areas. This didn’t occur this year. Ducks utilized the refuge until they were forced away from icy conditions. Many people surmise that the ducks hadn’t come down from the north because of the warm conditions experienced through most of December.” Bald Knob Monthly Report, January, 2001.

“....After January 20 [last day of duck season], most of the ducks ventured to adjacent flooded areas and to additional habitats along the White and Cache Rivers.” Bald Knob Monthly Report, February, 2001.

“....The Cache River reached flood stage early in the month and remained above flood stage for the remainder of the month. Most of the ducks and geese that utilized the refuge left for the newly flooded created habitat and food resources along the Cache River.” (I personally toured the length of the Cache from Grubbs to Little Dixie during this period of time and talked to hunters at every put in place, and only saw one duck in the air and did not find any hunters that had anywhere close to a limit. All of them reported seeing very few ducks. Black River and White River were flooded also then and had few ducks. It should be noted that Louisiana gained 700,000 ducks between the December and January censuses.) Bald Knob Monthly Report, December, 2002.

“Waterfowl use peaked on December 13 with nearly 300,000

ducks and 120,000 geese. Most of the ducks included mallards and pintails.... Nearly 100,000 pintails were observed on the 13th feeding in the Houseplace fields.... Other areas in the sanctuary [emphasis added] that received high use was the 180 and the Eagles Nest fields. These fields provided approximately 420 acres of unharvested rice....” Bald Knob Monthly Report, December, 1998.

“1/18 Only one day after relift pumping began, approximately 100,000 ducks and 50,000 geese were observed using pumped up fields on Bald Knob NWR. The number of ducks and geese observed the day prior to pumping was 1,000 and 500, respectively.” Cache River Refuge Monthly Report, January, 1996.

“12/4 - 500,000 ducks and 150,000 snow geese at Bald Knob.” Cache River Refuge Monthly Report, December, 1996.

“....500,000 ducks and 150,000 geese on Bald Knob NWR during the first week of the month.” Monthly Activities Report, Cache River NWR, December, 1996.

I think these numbers and these quotes illustrate the problem that we have been complaining about. I would note that in most years ice drove the ducks off of these refuges, and during these same years, the ice times were the only times we were killing ducks on lower Black River when we normally do not do well when everything is iced up. On the years where there was no ice, it appears the ducks left these refuges immediately on the end of hunting season.

I would also note that if you looked at the difference in Louisiana figures between the December and January censuses, any drop in population of these refuges probably signifies ducks that have gone to Louisiana rather than ducks who have left these sanctuaries to move elsewhere in Arkansas in significant numbers.

I don't know about the rest of you, but I figure that 5 to 20% of these ducks would probably normally be on lower Black River even without a flood. You can make your own guesstimates for your areas, but this seems to me to have an extremely substantial impact on our hunting, and the closer you are to these sanctuaries, the more severe the impact. Unfortunately, I believe this affects the whole state, but the circle of severe impact is widening each year. At least that is the case from my experience as our hunting has progressively been getting worse over a 5 or 6 year period.

EVEN MORE IMPORTANTLY THESE FIGURES ONLY SHOW THE POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF THESE GRAINED SANCTUARIES IN ARK. THEY DO NOT ILLUSTRATE THE EFFECT OF ANY GRAINED SANCTUARIES NORTH OF ARKANSAS WHICH MAY BE HOLDING DUCKS.

Respectfully Submitted,

Blair Arnold