



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: Apr. 17, 2024

Agenda Item: 2024–2025 Migratory Bird Regulations

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 Minutes

Background: Migratory bird hunting regulations pertain to cranes, snipe, doves, ducks, geese, swans, and coots, which are managed on a flyway basis. Two flyways occur within Montana, with roughly the eastern half of the state in the Central Flyway and the western half in the Pacific Flyway. Federal season and bag limit frameworks are established by the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), but the Fish and Wildlife Commission retains the authority to establish seasons and bag limits for migratory birds within those frameworks. Other than normal calendar rotation, most aspects of the previous season are recommended to remain in place, with the exception of an amendment to sandhill crane hunting opportunities in a small portion in southern Montana to affect Sweetgrass, Stillwater, Wheatland, Golden Valley, and Meagher counties in southern Montana.

Public Involvement Process and Results: Public comment will be solicited for a four-week period following the Feb. 16, 2024, commission meeting. Public comments will be posted online and provided to commissioners at least two weeks prior to the April commission meeting.

Analysis and Alternatives: Migratory bird seasons are recommended to occur primarily unchanged from last year with two notable differences.

First, a restriction on waterfowl hunting was established in 1958 on an approximately 87-mile portion of the Yellowstone River between the confluence of the Bighorn and Yellowstone rivers to the Rosebud-Custer county line. Hunter surveys and public meetings indicated support for opening this stretch of river to waterfowl hunting during the season. The department is recommending elimination of this closure.

Second, sandhill crane seasons in Stillwater County are proposed for a minor adjustment to increase hunting opportunities. Biologists believe northern Stillwater County comprises the same migration route for Rocky Mountain Population (RMP) sandhill cranes rather than the slightly later migration seen by the Mid-continent Population sandhill cranes, which would benefit from the same season structure described for license-permit type (LPT) 586-01. Hunters have indicated that sandhill cranes in northern Stillwater County have migrated through the area by the later opener for the over-the-counter season currently in place, and a season structure that would allow harvest opportunities in September, prior to migration, would be preferable. Crane hunting in northern Stillwater County will be slightly more restrictive (limited permit vs. over the counter) and will have a reduced bag limit (two licenses vs. the prior bag limit of three), but the change moves the opening date to Sept. 1 when cranes are more likely to be present. This change would provide slightly more hunting opportunity for RMP sandhill cranes in Montana, but overall harvest is expected to remain well within the state allocation of RMP sandhill cranes; anticipated harvest from the hunt area modification is expected to be negligible. RMP sandhill crane numbers appear to be stable or growing in the proposed hunting district, as reflected by the annual September RMP sandhill crane flight. This boundary change has been approved by the Pacific and Central Flyway Councils and the USFWS.

Alternative A: The commission may approve the 2024–2025 migratory game bird seasons as presented, including the change in open areas along the Yellowstone River for waterfowl hunting and for sandhill crane hunting associated with LPT 586-01.

Alternative B: The commission may amend the proposed 2024–2025 migratory game bird seasons.

Agency Recommendation and Rationale:

Proposed season dates for ducks, mergansers, coots, geese and swans for 2024–2025:

- Pacific Flyway (PF) – ducks, mergansers, coots, and, geese: Sept. 28, 2024 – Jan. 10, 2025 (except scaup season closing Dec. 22); Falconry – ducks, mergansers, coots and geese: Sept. 28 – Jan. 10; swans: Oct. 5 – Nov. 29, 2024
- Central Flyway (CF) – ducks, mergansers, and coots: Zone 1 – Sept. 28, 2024 – Jan. 2, 2025; Zone 2 – Sept. 28 – Oct. 6, 2024, and Oct. 19, 2024 – Jan. 14, 2025 (closed 12 days, Oct. 7–18). A bonus teal season for the first nine days of the season, Sept. 28 – Oct. 6, 2024, in the CF will allow hunters to take two additional blue-winged teal. Falconry – ducks, mergansers, coots: Zone 1 – Sept. 18, 2024 – Jan. 2, 2025; Zone 2 – Sept. 18, 2024 – Oct. 6, 2024, and Oct. 19, 2024 – Jan. 14, 2025
- CF - geese: Zone 1 – Sept. 28, 2024 – Jan. 10, 2025; Zone 2 – Sept. 28 – Oct. 6, 2024, and Oct. 19, 2024 – Jan. 22, 2025 (closed 12 days, Oct. 7–18); CF swans: Sept. 28, 2024 – Jan. 2, 2025 (both zones, no split season). Falconry – geese: Zone 1 – Sept. 28, 2024 – Jan. 10, 2025; Zone 2 – Sept. 28 – Oct. 6, 2024, and Oct. 19, 2024 – Jan. 22, 2025 (closed 12 days, Oct. 7 – 18, 2024)
- Duck, merganser, coot, and goose daily and possession limits for both flyways are proposed to be the same as in 2023–2024. The special two-day Youth Waterfowl Season will be Sept. 21-22, 2024, in both flyways (PF and CF).
- CF spring light goose season: March 1 – May 15, 2025, no bag limit.

Proposed season dates for “webless” migratory birds for 2024–2025:

- Mourning doves: Sept. 1 – Oct. 30, 2024. Common snipe: Sept. 1 – Dec. 16, 2024
- Rocky Mountain Population sandhill cranes (all special drawing licenses): Sept. 1 – Oct. 30, 2024
- Mid-continent sandhill cranes in CF (over-the-counter license): Sept. 28 – Nov. 24, 2024

Proposed Motion: I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the 2024–2025 migratory game bird seasons as presented by the department, including lifting the closure on the Yellowstone River within Region 7 and the amendment to open areas for sandhill crane LPT 586-01, with all other aspects regarding prior seasons adopted, except for those influenced by routine calendar rotations.

Edits to Statewide Closures on Page 59 of 2023 Migratory Bird Regulations:

~~Region 7: Treasure & Rosebud counties: Beginning at the junction of the Bighorn and Yellowstone rivers, then east down the Yellowstone River to the Rosebud-Custer County line, east of Hathaway, Montana (as posted). This closure shall be within the confines of the normal stream flow and shall include all islands, backwaters and sandbars.~~

Edits to Sandhill Crane Special Drawing License description on Page 6 of 2023 Migratory Bird Regulations:

All sandhill crane hunting in the Pacific Flyway and in Wheatland, Meagher, Carbon, and Golden Valley counties and ~~that~~ those portions of Sweetgrass ~~County~~ and Stillwater counties north of I-90 is by special license only. Applicants must possess a current year Conservation and Base Hunting License. Hunters may apply for a crane special license online at ols.fwp.mt.gov or over the counter at any FWP regional or area office no later than July ~~19 20, 2024 2023~~. Applicants may apply for only one area and must specify the hunting area for which they are applying.

Edits to Additional information for LPT 586-01 on Page 6 of 2023 Migratory Bird Regulations:

Only valid in Golden Valley, Wheatland, and Meagher counties and ~~that~~ those portions of Sweetgrass ~~County~~ and Stillwater counties north of I-90. Successful applicants will receive two 586-01 Sandhill Crane licenses.

Edits to Sandhill Crane Over-the-Counter Permit on Page 6 of 2023 Migratory Bird Regulations:

Exception 2: Hunting in Golden Valley, Wheatland, and Meagher counties and ~~that those portion~~ portions of Sweetgrass ~~County~~ and Stillwater counties north of I-90 can only be done with a 586-01 license.