

Developing Waterfowl Hunting Season Regulations: 2026-2030

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Migratory birds are an international resource for which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has the highest legal jurisdiction. State wildlife agencies cooperatively manage migratory birds with the USFWS through flyway councils. The Iowa DNR is a member of the Mississippi Flyway Council. A range of regulatory frameworks including season dates, season length and daily bag limits are set at a flyway scale. State agencies select season dates and bag limits that fall within the federal frameworks specific to their respective flyway. Current federal frameworks for the Mississippi Flyway allow a 9 day Special September teal season, a 60 day duck hunting season that may be split into two segments across three zones and a daily bag limit of 6 ducks with species specific restrictions.

There are many factors to consider when developing waterfowl hunting regulations. Waterfowl are influenced by factors occurring both within and beyond Iowa's borders. The time period that waterfowl are present and migrating through Iowa is longer than the maximum length of the hunting season. This makes the selection of season dates particularly important, but also challenging. Additionally, hunters have a wide range of preferences in regards to how and when they hunt. In order to select season dates that benefit the greatest number of hunters, the Iowa DNR examines several independent datasets. We recently summarized information to evaluate the duck hunting season structure and develop a proposal on season dates and zone boundaries for 2026-2030.

Migration Chronology: the majority of the ducks harvested in Iowa are not produced in Iowa, therefore it is critical that the duck hunting seasons coincide with the migration of ducks through the state. The timing of migration varies annually based on weather conditions. The Wildlife Bureau surveys waterfowl weekly on select areas across the state from September through December. This information is summarized by region and year to document the chronology (timing) of waterfowl migration through the state (Figure 1 through Figure 3).

Harvest Surveys: the USFWS annually monitors hunter activity and harvest. This information describes hunting activity and usage of available days throughout the season. Days in October and November are more likely to be used than days in December (Figure 4).

Hunter Preference: hunters have varying preferences regarding hunting season dates. An opinion survey was sent to waterfowl hunters in 2024 asking their preferences and opinions on a wide range of topics. The results of this survey provide a representation of Iowa waterfowl hunters opinions. In all three zones, waterfowl hunters selected November as the most important time to hunt ducks. However, there are nuanced differences between zones, specifically whether they prefer to hunt ducks during October or December (Figure 5 through Figure 7).

This evaluation indicated that the season date structure utilized 2021-2025 was an appropriate balance of days between October and December across all three zones. There was no evidence to suggest changes to zone boundaries or season dates. The combination of variable weather patterns and the annual shift of calendar dates will influence the alignment of season dates and migration chronology each year.

There are three ways that hunters can provide their perspective on hunting season regulations: 1) respond to surveys received from the Iowa DNR and USFWS, 2) attend the Iowa DNR Wildlife Bureau's annual public meetings in February, or 3) contact Orrin Jones (orrin.jones@dnr.iowa.gov).

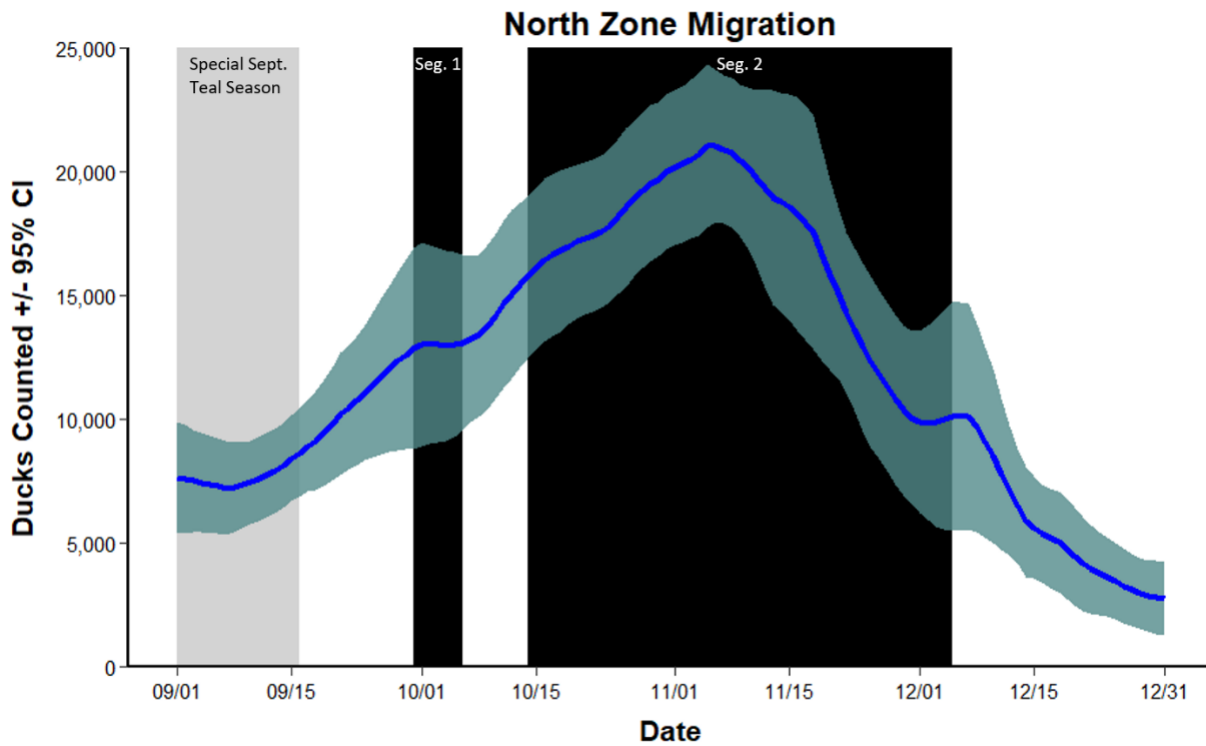


Figure 1. Average 2014-2023 duck migration activity in the North Zone. The 2023 duck hunting season dates, identified in the black background, captured 66% of the overall migration activity.

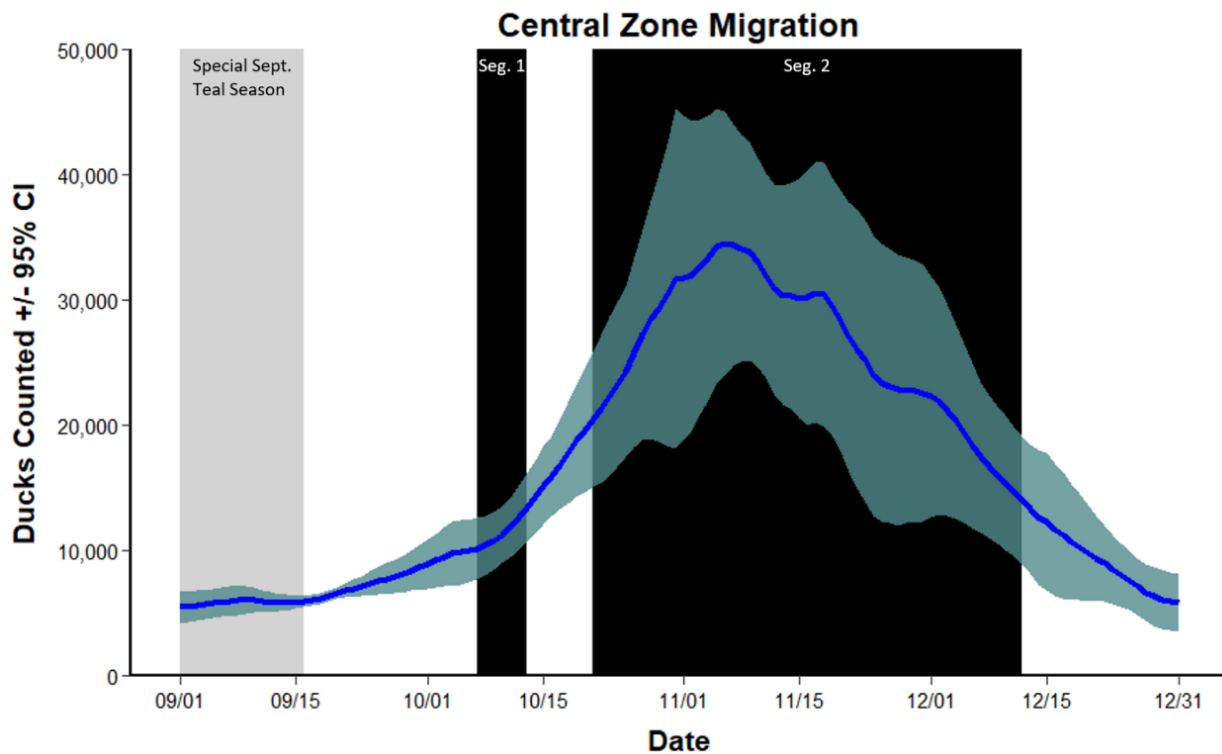


Figure 2. Average 2014-2023 duck migration activity in the Central Zone. The 2023 duck hunting season dates, identified in the black background, captured 72% of the overall migration activity.

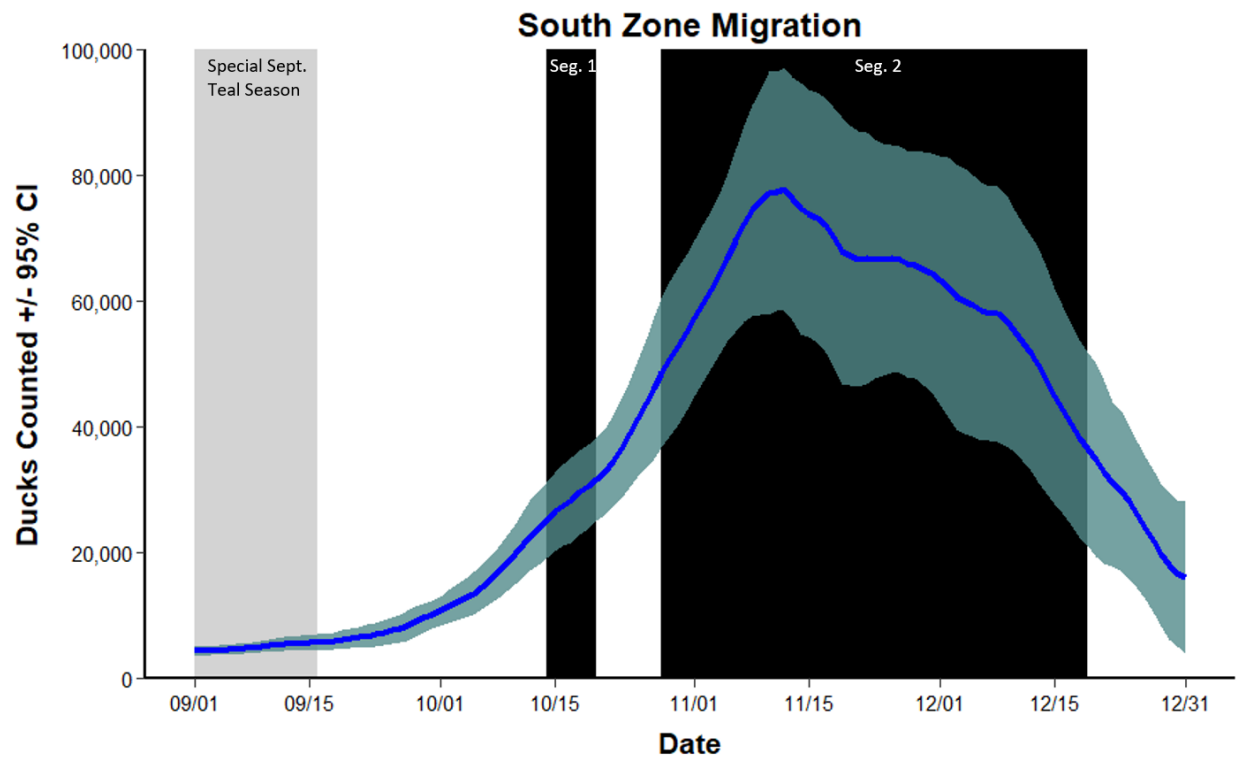


Figure 3. Average 2014-2023 duck migration activity in the South Zone. The 2023 duck hunting season dates, identified in the black background, captured 78% of the overall migration activity.

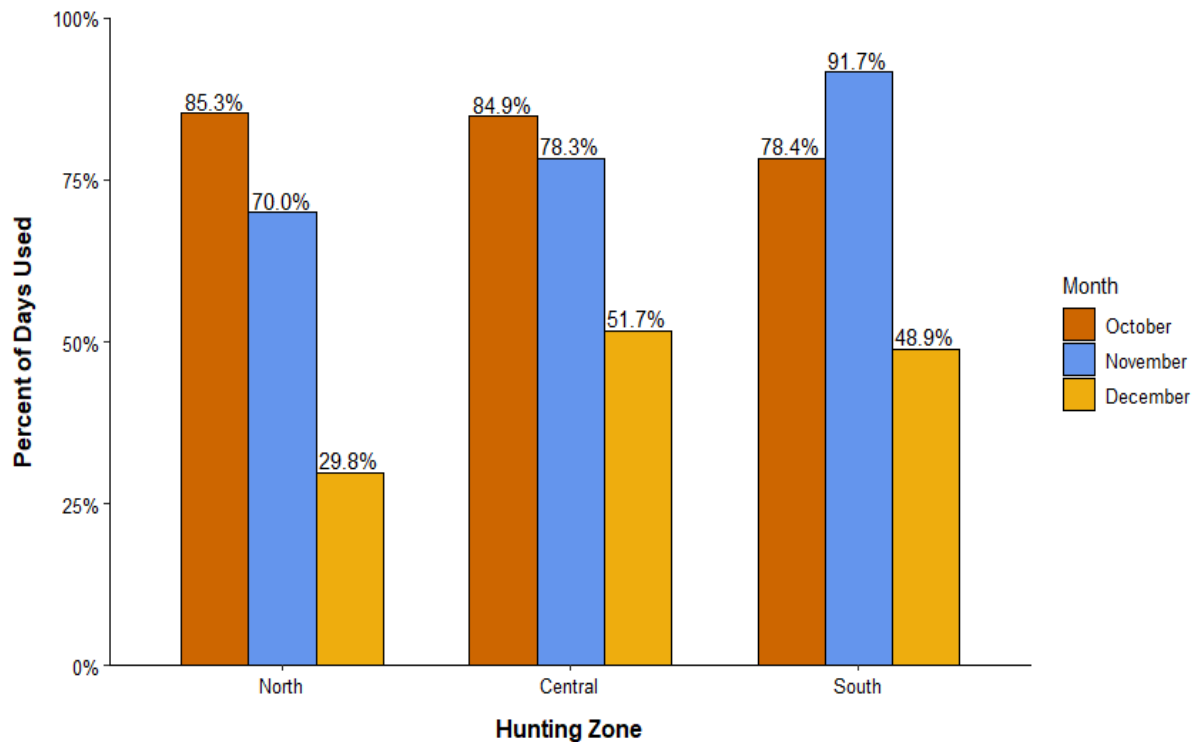


Figure 4. Average utilization of days available for duck hunting during the 2021-2022 duck hunting seasons in Iowa. Days in October and November are utilized at a higher rate than those in December.

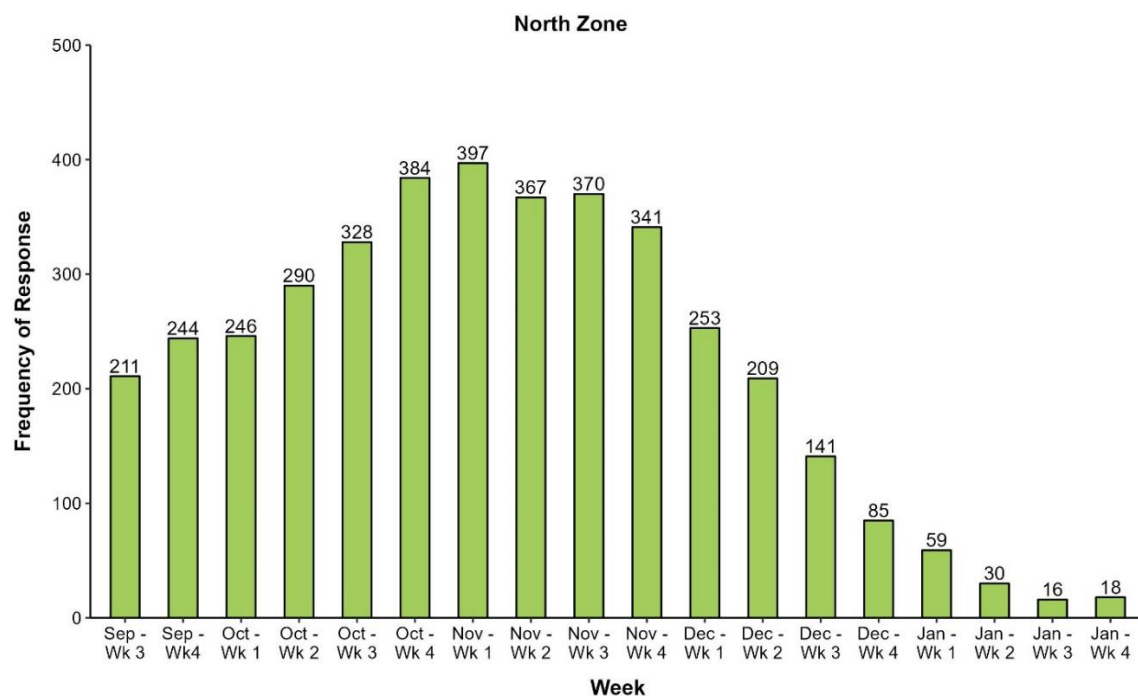


Figure 5. Weeks selected as most important for duck hunting in the North Zone in the 2024 Iowa Waterfowl Hunter Opinion Survey.

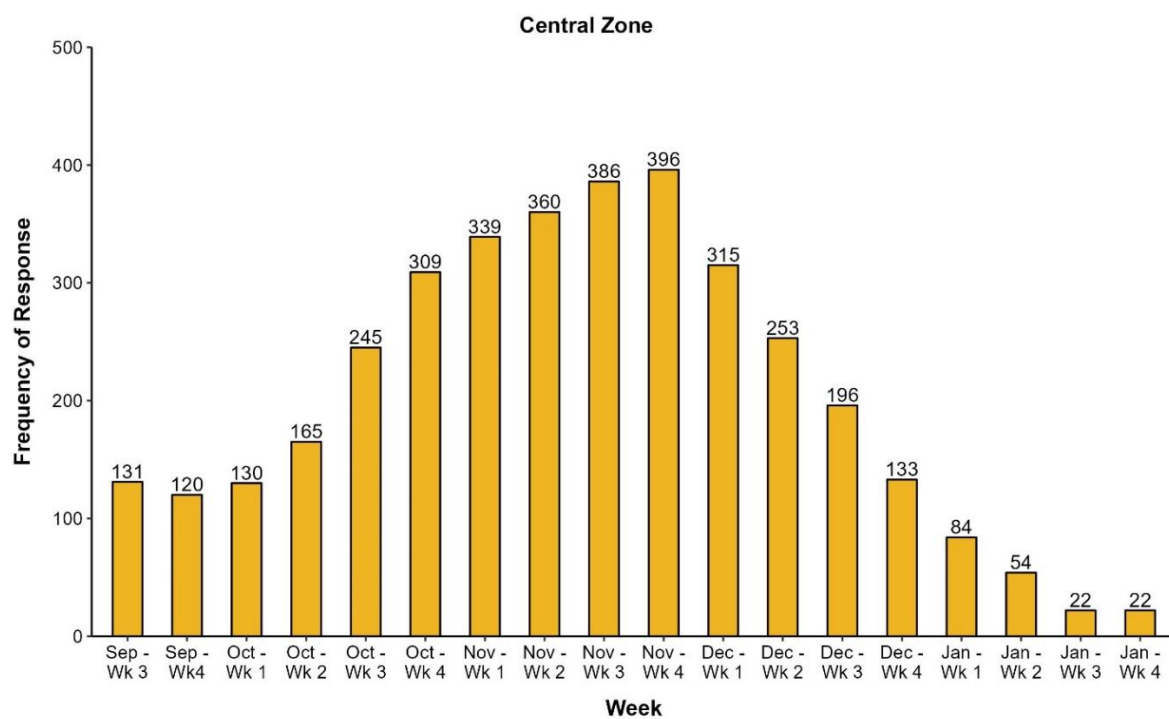


Figure 6. Weeks selected as most important for duck hunting in the Central Zone in the 2024 Iowa Waterfowl Hunter Opinion Survey.

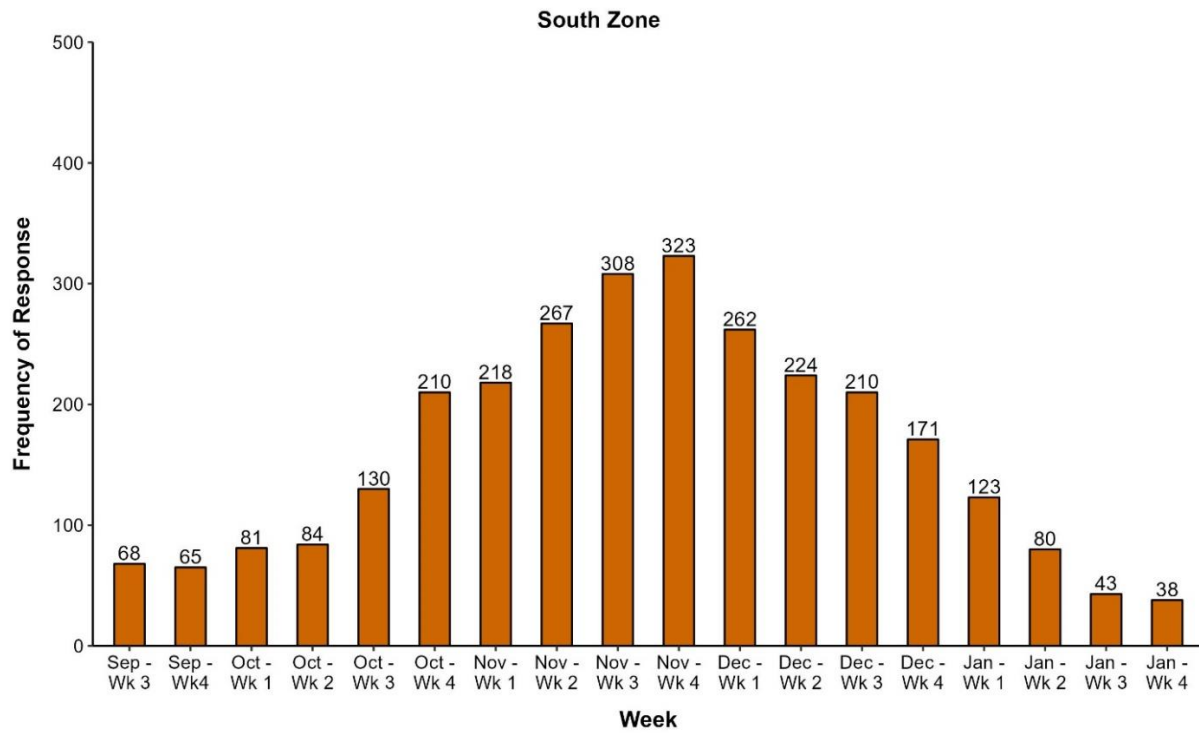


Figure 7. Weeks selected as most important for duck hunting in the South Zone in the 2024 Iowa Waterfowl Hunter Opinion Survey.