

A CLOSER LOOK

By Ron Wilson



JOE FLADELAND

Lesser scaup

Radio-marked for Research

There is no dallying in the life of lesser scaup.

Newly-hatched ducklings hit the pond swimming, skillfully diving below the water's surface and feeding themselves immediately. Mature birds bent on out-flying the weather to reach faraway wintering grounds, do so in surprisingly short order.

Cases in point: Two female scaup left North Dakota in mid-November on different days, yet both landed in Cuba roughly three days after their departures. If you do the math, and some scientists have, the birds averaged 25-27 miles per hour on their 2,000-plus mile migration.

We know this about these birds because both have implanted satellite transmitters as part of a five-year study to determine, among other things, migratory movements and habitats used by female lesser scaup. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is helping fund the work done by Dr. Alan D. Afton at Louisiana State University.

There's good reason waterfowl biologists are looking so intently into the lives of scaup. Since 1978, the continental scaup population, made up of lesser and greater scaup, has declined significantly. The annual population estimate has been below the goal of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan for years and reached an all-time low in 2006. The cause of the scaup decline, waterfowl biologists acknowledge, remains a mystery.

Birds for the study were trapped on the Mississippi River in Iowa and fitted with satellite transmitters in 2008 during spring migration. Initially, 26 female scaup were radio-marked. Earlier this winter, 17 were still active.

The satellite transmitters are proving to be wonderful tools to track the birds. We know, for example, the exact pond scaup No. 80891 rested on in Pierce County, North Dakota before lifting off for her 2,043-mile flight to Cuba. Plus, there is record of where she stopped, rested and refueled along the way.

While female lesser scaup are the only birds radio-marked for this research project, it's the male birds that are the most recognizable. Male scaup sport a pale blue bill with a dark nail, or projection, at the tip. Its head, neck and rump are dark, while its breast reveals a purple sheen. The bird's back and sides are a barred gray.

It's said that the voice of lesser scaup – sharp whistles and scolding notes – is seldom heard. What is loud and clear, however, is the scaup population's marked decline over the last three decades.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.