

A CLOSER LOOK

By Sandra Johnson



CRAIG BIRKLE

Northern Pintail

Graceful. Elegant. Sleek. Dignified. What are words that describe the Northern pintail, Alex?

While that would be my “Jeopardy” game show answer, I’d also add “tasty” to the list. Pintails are beautiful through the camera lens in spring, a handsome addition to a bag limit in fall, and awesome slow-cooked over a charcoal grill.

On paper, 2009 could go in the books as a good year for ducks. Plentiful water and a decent amount of Conservation Reserve Program acres still on the landscape bode well for waterfowl numbers. The pintail, however, is a nonconformist. While mallards, blue-winged teal, and other puddle ducks respond appropriately to prairie wet and dry cycles, the pintail just can’t seem to regain its long-term population average.

The last time pintails were hovering at their population goal was the mid-1970s. The estimated

continental abundance for pintails today is about 3.2 million birds, which is about 20 percent below the long-term average.

The cause of the decline, or perhaps the failure to increase, has puzzled biologists. What they do know is there is a lot less grass habitat on the landscape today for these upland nesters than, say, in the mid-1970s. While the biggest setback for birds remains the loss of an untold amount of native prairie acres, a newer addition to the agricultural landscape, winter wheat, is showing promise as an accommodating place for pintail hens to build a nest.

Sixty years ago, pintails were the most numerous of North Dakota’s nesting ducks, and into the 1970s they were annually the number two breeding duck, behind blue-winged teal. Today, however, they are fifth.

A longtime prize for ardent waterfowlers, pintail bag limits were

first restricted in 1944 and then again in 1965. Since, pintails harvest restrictions have been in place every fall since 1985.

Portions of pintail habitat – native prairie and wetlands – are shared by many other species in North Dakota. Of note are species in similar predicaments whose populations have declined or just don’t occur in numbers like they used to.

The pintail, along with about 40 other species, are considered a North Dakota species of conservation priority that is dependent on grassland and wetland ecosystems for survival. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department and many other conservation groups put great effort into protecting or boosting habitat for all of our prairie wildlife, tasty or not.

SANDRA JOHNSON is a Game and Fish Department nongame biologist.