

Waterfowl Advisory Committee Quarterly Meeting Summary

Date: March 12, 2026

Time: 9:30 AM

Location: DNR Headquarters, Botany Bay Conference Room, West Columbia, SC

Attendance

- **Committee Members Present:**
 - John Hilton (Chair) via phone, Ernie Wiggers (Vice Chair), Dr. Mark Hartley, Bob Perry and Stuart Cochran. Bill Mace was absent.
- **Staff Present:**
 - Billy Dukes (Chief of Wildlife), Jay Cantrell (Assistant Chief), Willie Simmons (Assistant Chief Regions 1 and 3), Will Dillman (Deputy Director, WFF), Ken Prosser (Assistant Deputy Director, WFF), Molly Kneece (State Waterfowl Biologist), Alicia Farrell (Region 4 Coordinator), Barry Kesler (Region 3 Coordinator), Jeff Dennis (Assistant Public Information Coordinator), and Patty Castine (Administrative Coordinator)
- **Guests:**
 - Scott Vance (Delta Waterfowl Foundation)
- **Constituents:**
 - Buford Mabry, Marc Johnson

Main Topics Discussed

1. Meeting Opening, Call to Order and Housekeeping

- Chairman Hilton and Chief Dukes welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Introductions – Committee, Staff, and Guests

- All present introduced themselves.

3. Constituent Comments

- Bob Perry introduced Scott Vance with Delta Waterfowl, who gave a brief overview of his organization.
- Bob Perry thanked Dr. Hartley for his work on the protection of Clarendon Farms—largest land deal yet for DU in SC. Partnerships between state, NGOs, National Land Trust Alliance, and Governor McMaster's administration cited as critical. Matt Williams hired as President & CEO of Lowcountry Land Trust (former kin of Ducks Unlimited legacy member). Kate Schaefer (from Open Land Trust in Beaufort) joins as Chief Conservation Officer. "It Can't Wait" campaign focuses on continuing to protect waterfowl habitat along the SC coast.

4. Consideration and Approval of Past Minutes

- Correction made to previous minutes:
 - Requests concerning Santee Cooper winter water levels were not formally followed up by DNR or Santee Cooper.
 - Deletion in minutes: remove inaccurate data/citation about lake levels.
 - Clarification of correct winter target (approx. 72', not 74.5') and issue of management above guide curve.
- Bob Perry made a motion to approve the minutes as amended, Stuart Cochran seconded, and the motion passed with unanimous approval by the Committee.

5. Comments From DNR Leadership

Deputy Director Dillman and Chief Dukes welcomed everyone to the meeting.

6. Comments from the Chair

Chairman Hilton welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained why he could not appear in person.

7. 2025-2026 Waterfowl Season Summary and Cat I Harvest Results

- **2025–26 Season Observations – Molly Kneece:**
 - Extremely successful season across public lottery hunt properties.
 - Record participation and >10% increase in duck-per-hunter harvest.
 - Infrastructure and logistics for hunt dispatch described as "well-oiled," with positive peer feedback, especially for Cedar Island and Murphy Island.
- **Ground and Aerial Counts:**
 - Significant increases in both count methods:
 - 104% increase in ground counts (compared to last year).

- ~54% increase in aerial survey counts (approx. 54,000 ducks over key managed properties).
- Observed correlation between ground and aerial counts—ground tends to be higher.
- Weather notes:
 - Successful early front in November/December brought in ducks, but fog and weather challenged operations.
 - Ice and snowstorms in late season led to redistribution of birds.
- **Harvest Trends & Highlights:**
 - Long-term average (six-bird bag, 28 years): 3.14 ducks/hunter. This year: 3.16.
 - Nearly all properties up from previous year; strong showings at sites like Coosawhatchie (new property) and Santee Delta (reopened both East/West).
 - Donnelly and Delta East had highest or near-highest recorded averages (Donnelly: 3.86; Delta East: 4.3; Santee Coastal overall: 4.9/hunter).
 - Notably good wigeon and pintail years; pintail bag increase (to 3) resulted in 60% higher pintail harvest at Santee Coastal.
 - Broad River: mallards comprised 30% of harvest—above 10-year average.
 - Samworth: increasing utilization; strong feedback from field reports from private and public hunters alike.
 - Bear Island: Notable 50% drop in duck numbers and ongoing questions (habitat shifted from salty/dry to consistently fresh; possible link to declining blue-winged teal and gadwall populations).
 - Committee and staff handling complex sanctuary versus hunter pressure dynamics, especially at Bear Island and surrounding ACE Basin properties.
- **Notes on Management Strategies and Adjustments:**
 - Questions debated about efficacy of sanctuary areas at Bear Island: sanctuaries holding birds Did hunt sanctuary pond at Bear Island at end of season.
 - Continuing evaluation of water management, habitat regimes, and adaptability on all WMA properties.

8. 2025-2026 Waterfowl Season Observations from WAC Members

- Overall, private properties had below-average big duck years (ringnecks, wigeon, gadwall, shovelers), but green-wing teal and wood ducks represented the majority in some areas.
- Consistency in difficulties getting ringnecks early.

9. Cat I Waterfowl Area Projects and Plans for 2026 – Willie Simmons/Alicia Farrell

- Continued infrastructure investments, habitat expansions, and improvements detailed for WMAs including:
 - Beaverdam & Clemson (erosion control, sediment issues, use of pumps, moist soil management, upgrades to dikes/roads).
 - Love Farm, Wateree Heritage Preserve: major expansion of floodable area, installation of deer/hog fencing, green tree reservoir project moving forward (pending federal/DU paperwork, will make 60-70 acres new GTR habitat), coordination with law enforcement to limit disturbance.
 - Samworth: increased duck use, ongoing management of invasive plant species, water control, burning to manage habitats.
 - Bear Island: Emphasis on open water/invasive control, new Marshmaster, ongoing permit challenges around black rail restrictions.
 - Bonneau Ferry: pump failures/floating mats of vegetation impeding management; vegetation removal project planned.
 - Discussion around Hickory Top (Cat 2):
 - Survey results (out of 47 responses): general satisfaction with open/quantity-oriented access; most did not desire restrictions nor a shift to Cat 1 lottery draw.
 - Noted younger and repeat hunter demographic; some safety concerns noted, but DNR reports that accidents are rare and have been party-based.
 - Committee requests better survey data—potential for QR code and digital survey in 2026.
 - DNR committed to continually evaluating Cat 2 access, balancing opportunity and safety.
 - Survey Data: Need for more robust, digital reporting, especially for younger hunters.

10. Proposed Migratory Bird Season & Bag Limits, 2026–27

- Minimal changes for next season, except for increase in black-bellied whistling duck bag limit to 5 (matching federal framework).
- Pintail bag remains at 3; general season dates and youth/veteran days unchanged.
- No Canada geese harvested on WMAs despite liberal season.
- Bob Perry made a motion to approve the proposed seasons/bag limits, Dr. Hartley seconded and the motion was passed with unanimous approval from the Committee.

11. SC Duck Summit

- Chief Dukes announced the SC Duck Summit will take place Monday, April 27, 2026, at SC Waterfowl Association Education Center, Rimini, SC.
- Hosted by DNR, SCWA, DU, and Kennedy Waterfowl/Wetland Center.
- Focus: High-level issues, bringing together agency, coastal/inland managers, hunters, academia, NGOs, and federal refuge staff.

- Event includes lunch; formal invitations to follow.

12. Consideration of FY27 Upstate Budget Request & Wood Duck Box Program

- Total request just under \$1.3M (about \$1.4M in fund); breakouts for outreach, research, management, and infrastructure.
- \$100,000 for Wood Duck Box Program (pending proposal to charge \$50/per box as a cost-share, including predator shield; full details/refinement to be drafted and implemented as soon as possible).
- **Major Discussion:**
 - Debate on continued efficacy of the Allotment for Wood Duck Boxes given declining reporting and uncertain outcomes. Concern that data since 2006 is insufficient for meaningful assessment.
 - Alternative proposal by Bob Perry to redirect funding toward genetic research on Atlantic Flyway Mallards (concern with hybridization).
 - Marc Johnson, and others present; \$400,000 already raised privately for research, with request for further support from DNR and discussion of federal/legislative regulatory barriers for further action.
 - Delta Waterfowl supporting further study; SCWA and other mallard breeders are now supportive of research.
 - Outcome: Bob Perry made a motion to approve budget with caveat:
 - Department will charge \$50/unit for Wood Duck Boxes.
 - Any resulting cost-savings to be redirected to waterfowl research, with mallard genetics research to receive high priority if a quality proposal is presented.
 - Staff authorized to evaluate and allocate funds based on established research criteria.
 - Stuart Cochran seconded and the motion was approved unanimously by the Committee.

13. Other Business & Announcements

- Two Ponds property update:
 - DNR interested; currently split between SCWA (Phillips Pond segment) and state.
 - Deal has stalled over appraisal values.
 - Committee/guests reaffirmed strategic importance of such upland impoundment acquisitions for the future of SC waterfowl opportunity.
 - DNR committed to increasing inland/Cat 1 opportunities but faces landscape and funding constraints.

14. Next Meeting – Determine Date and Site

- **Date:** Tuesday, May 12, 2026
- **Location:** Santee Coastal Reserve
- **Focus:** On-ground evaluation of renovation and restoration work and continued cross-stakeholder collaboration

15. Meeting Adjournment

The Chair concluded with a prayer and thanks to all committee members, staff, and partners for their continued efforts and collaboration, especially in managing substantial improvements and adapting to new challenges in waterfowl management and habitat protection across South Carolina and the meeting adjourned at 12:35 pm.

Action Items

- 1. Delta Waterfowl/South Carolina Partnership Expansion:**
 - Continued outreach and chapter development; partnership with DNR on new initiatives.
- 2. Land Trust & Conservation Coordination:**
 - Ongoing strategic meetings and partnership evaluation to protect key coastal and inland waterfowl habitats.
- 3. Bear Island Habitat/Harvest Decline:**
 - Continued analysis and adaptive management to determine cause(s) of declining numbers; reevaluation of sanctuary/hunting balance and habitat enhancement needs; monitor private land trends in ACE Basin.
- 4. Sanctuary Effectiveness and Harvest Distribution:**
 - Continue evaluating sanctuaries' impacts, particularly Bear Island and Samworth, with pattern-adjusted hunting days/areas.
- 5. Survey and Data Collection:**
 - Implement digital/QR-based hunter surveys at Hickory Top and other Cat 2 properties for 2026.
 - Require/report more robust data for youth, Cat 2, and Wood Duck Boxes.

6. **Wood Duck Box Program Overhaul:**
 - Draft and implement cost-share (\$50/unit) and reporting requirements for all Wood Duck Box recipients.
 - Prepare clear purchase/placement/maintenance instructions and digital compliance interface.
 - Evaluate and report program effectiveness on an annual basis.
 7. **Wood Duck Box Savings to Mallard Genetics Research:**
 - Evaluate proposals for Mallard genetic research using funds saved from new Wood Duck Box policy; prioritize high-quality proposals vetted by department research standards.
 - Facilitate external collaboration with relevant academic experts and partners (i.e., Dr. Lavretsky/Clemson).
 8. **FY27 Budget/Major Purchases:**
 - Move forward with major equipment, infrastructure, and planting initiatives as outlined.
 9. **Organize and Publicize Statewide Duck Summit:**
 - Finalize invite list, agenda, lunch, and logistics; circulate invitations to all committee, partners, and key federal players.
 10. **Next Meeting – Planning and Site Visit:**
 - Coordinate for May 12, 2026, at Santee Coastal, to include a field tour of current projects.
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Follow-Up Points and Outstanding Issues

- **Wood Duck Box Program:**
 - Written proposal for new policy (charges/reporting) required for June board meeting.
 - New reporting/compliance protocol to be piloted as soon as feasible.
- **Mallard Genetic Dilution:**
 - Await targeted research proposals; committee to revisit support allocation upon receipt.
- **Hickory Top Survey Enhancement:**
 - New digital platforms to be tested in 2026.
 - Category 1 (lottery) transition remains under evaluation; more/better constituent feedback essential.
- **Two Ponds Acquisition:**
 - Monitor negotiations; committee to be updated as developments occur.
- **Bear Island Management:**
 - Continue adaptive management/response to declining harvest, with habitat and sanctuary effectiveness under ongoing review.
 - Review waterfowl species composition trends vs. continental/national breeding surveys.