Getting to know the local waterfowl

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
FOR THE JOURNAL

With deer season making its exit as of sunset on New Year's Day, many hunters already have or will be looking to other species to get their hunting fix.

In an area surrounded by large reservoirs and a multitude of rivers, streams, ponds and swamps, waterfowl hunting is a popular choice. While South Carolina may not get the publicity of other major duck hunting areas, there are both resident and migratory populations to be found this time of year.

The species of ducks you'll see in the state varies by the locations you intend to hunt. Coastal areas may see more widgeon, teal and shovelers, while inland freshwater areas may host more mallards, wood ducks, ring necks and mergansers.

Below are some general facts about a few of the birds you're likely to see in our state:

WOOD DUCKS

Locally known as summers or woodies, the male is a beautifully colored work of art, while both species make excellent main courses for a variety of waterfowl dishes. Woodies nest in trees and are particularly fond of acorns, which many connoisseurs credit for their taste on the dinner plate. Wood ducks are readily available throughout the state.

RING NECKS

Especially along South Carolina's central coastal plains, ring neck numbers have been up in recent years. Ring necks are diving ducks, which means they submerge under water to eat. They flock in tight groups and trade across the coastal plains in tight groups.

MALLARDS

The most widely recognized duck among southern states, most mallards seen in the Upstate are either release mallards — pen-raised birds that stir up a lot of debate among hunters and biologists — or year-round residents.

MERGANSERS

Though some hunters refer to the merganser as a "trash duck," these tree-dwelling ducks are relatively plentiful. Generally undesirable as table fare, a male hooded merganser is highly regarded for its contrasting plumage and makes a beautiful mount.

TEAL

The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) points to teal — mostly the green-wing variety, but also some blue wings — as a mainstay of South Carolina duck hunters. Typically, North Carolina's coastal marshes offer vast numbers of teal in the winter, but as weather conditions deteriorate, they move into South Carolina. Teal are smaller-than-average waterfowl known for buzzing a blind with no warning.



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With deer season coming to a close next week, many Upstate hunters will look to waterfowl hunting to get their hunting fix.

PINTAILS

Although pintail numbers may make up only a few percentage points of the total duck population, dropping a male "sprig" generally means a trip to the taxidermist is forthcoming. Pintails have been the subject of an ongoing tracking survey by the state for a number of years.

IN OTHER NEWS

The SCDNR has announced its first annual free hunting days on Jan. 4 and 5. Free hunting days allow all South Carolina residents to hunt without a state hunting license or other required permits.

For more information, visit the DNR's website at www.dnr.sc.gov.