

The South Carolina Waterfowl Association's Mallard Release Program (MRP) has become an important tool in the southern waterfowl manager's toolbox. The mission of the program is to restore wintering mallard populations and to preserve our mallard hunting heritage in South Carolina.

The MRP also encourages the creation of waterfowl habitat. The MRP is designed to complement and enhance other waterfowl conservation programs. The Mallard Release Program's mission is accomplished by partnering with private landowners across the state. These landowners fund the annual release of mallards into well-managed waterfowl habitat. All mallards released in the program are of excellent genetic quality and are health certified according to USDA guidelines. Funding from each project cooperator enables SCWA to provide a waterfowl management plan for each project.

The SCWA Mallard Project Coordinator, Stuart Cochran provides expert technical services for each project. Stuart provides continued assistance throughout the year to help project cooperators with the creation and management of waterfowl habitat along with ensuring a successful release of mallards.

Stuart also works with project cooperators to provide them with up to date technical information on waterfowl management techniques and equipment. Each year he coordinates a MRP seminar for project cooperators and members who are interested in the program.

SCWA also conducts periodic surveys of project cooperators to determine the impact of the program on habitat development, hunter opportunity and rural economic impact. Annual project reports are shared with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Mallard Release Program has become an essential component of waterfowl management in South Carolina. Its importance is based on the fact that wintering mallard populations in South Carolina have declined drastically over the past 25 years.

For example, the Santee National Wildlife Refuge wintering mallard counts have declined from over 100,000 in the late 1970's to less than 5,000 mallards over the last several years. The primary reason for this decline at Santee and across South Carolina has been a change in mallard behavior over the past 25 years. Mallards have adapted to wintering farther north while utilizing available open water habitats and abundant grain supplies in flooded and dry grain fields. This change in migratory patterns is similar to that experienced with South Carolina's once abundant wintering Canada goose populations that now winter farther north.

Habitat degradation has also played a role in reducing wintering mallard numbers. Improvement of habitat should increase wintering numbers during cold winters, however, it is doubtful that we will ever reach historic population levels. SCWA is focusing its habitat efforts on enhancing the Santee National Wildlife Refuge, increasing the amount of flooded grain available for mallards across the state and promoting the restoration and development of bottomland hardwood habitats that have been severely degraded over the past two decades.

In the coming year, SCWA looks forward to working with over 100 project cooperators who will fund the release of more than 55,000 mallards across South Carolina. These mallards will provide hunting opportunity for all South Carolina duck hunters. Banding data from over 300,000 released mallards shows that 50% of the released mallard harvest comes from hunters on public and private habitats not associated with mallard program cooperator sites.

If you are interested in learning more about the program please review the other information in the mallard section of the web site. The web site contains numerous articles and reports that will answer any questions you may have about the program.

For more information on becoming a mallard project partner or if you have further questions about the program contact Stuart Cochran at 803-452-6001.

In 2009-10, we look forward to a successful program that will provide increased hunting opportunity for all duck hunters while also improving waterfowl habitat across South Carolina.