

JEFF LANDRY  
GOVERNOR



MADISON D. SHEAHAN  
SECRETARY

PO BOX 98000 | BATON ROUGE LA | 70898

August 19, 2024

Martha Williams, Director  
US Fish and Wildlife Service  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Director Williams:

Secretary Madison Sheahan, at the direction of Governor Jeff Landry, respectfully requests the United States Fish and Wildlife Service to consider expanding harvest opportunities for black-bellied whistling ducks (BBWD) for the sportsmen of Louisiana. The increasing presence of BBWDs throughout the Sportsman's Paradise presents a variety of agricultural, nuisance, health, and management challenges that we firmly believe additional harvest opportunities could solve.

Our opinion is that expanded harvest opportunities would be most desirable and effective if done in conjunction with the long-established September teal season. We understand the inclusion of additional species in the daily bag limit during teal seasons authorized in other states were approved contingent upon a reduced season length. There may be a propensity to shave a number of days off the teal season; however, Louisiana is not interested in this. Our desire is to manage the BBWD population to the benefit of the citizens of Louisiana through pursuing alternative measures rather than reducing the number of available hunting days during September teal seasons. We are prepared to collect human dimensions data on hunter preference for season structure and performance when an experimental, and then operational, season moves forward.

Local populations of BBWDs have grown exponentially in the last two decades, both in Louisiana and throughout the southeast. Agricultural losses to BBWD, especially of newly planted rice fields in southwest Louisiana, are longstanding and becoming a growing problem for already stressed producers of an important, but declining, commodity in a critical geography used by millions of migratory and wintering birds. Further, the economic impact of this species stretches the Mississippi River corridor with losses between \$500,000 - \$1 million annually for each grain elevator along the river.

The effects of this species is not limited to the agricultural sector. The expanded range and population of BBWDs have led to their large concentrations in residential neighborhoods,

boulevard medians, in and around the metropolitan centers of New Orleans and Baton Rouge, and city parks and zoos causing increasing health concerns and nuisance issues for the public. Nuisance BBWDs found in residential areas are generally poorly handled by deterrence efforts and are oftentimes beyond the management capabilities of USDA-Wildlife Services.

In terms of management, surveying BBWDs through the usual aerial census approach is challenging due to their tolerance of human activity and attraction to modified habitats. As a result, the vast majority of the BBWDs in Louisiana are not included in annual estimates of waterfowl abundance. The only statewide estimate of BBWDs in Louisiana available at this time is the annual mid-winter waterfowl inventory conducted by LDWF. The most recent 5-year (2020-2024) average mid-winter survey estimate for BBWDs is 140,275 which represents more than a 4,000% increase from the previous 5-year average (2015-2019) of 3,005 and is certainly an undoubtable underestimate of the true number of the birds present in the state.

Additionally, harvest of BBWDs has also increased 208% from 2012-2016 (1,592 avg. per year) to 2017-2021 (4,902 apy), but occurs only within the existing federal framework selected by the state for the general duck season. Considering BBWDs are a tropical-originating species, we believe the largest potential for increasing harvest exists earlier in the year before a currently unknown proportion of the population migrates to more southern locations.

The state of Louisiana and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries are resolved to working with U.S. Fish and Wildlife through collaborative conservation efforts and a scientifically informed strategy to manage the growing population of BBWDs to mutually benefit our residents, industry, economy, and sportsmen of the state. We respectfully request consideration to allow BBWDs harvest during the September teal season and look forward to exploring these options with U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

Sincerely,



Madison D. Sheahan, Secretary  
Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries



Jeff Landry, Governor  
Governor of Louisiana