



Migratory Game Bird Hunting Opportunities in Montana

Montana has a wide variety of opportunities for hunting migratory game birds, including ducks, geese, swans, coots, sandhill cranes, doves, and snipe. One needs to pay special attention to hunting regulations, including season dates and bag limits, because they may differ between flyways, with the western half of the state being in the Pacific Flyway, and the eastern part in the Central Flyway. Remember that nontoxic shot is required statewide to hunt ducks, geese, swans, and coots. On most federal areas nontoxic shot is required for all shotgun hunting. Also keep in mind that shooting hours for migratory game birds are from a half hour before sunrise to sunset, not a half hour after sunset, as they are for big game and upland game birds.

Ducks and Coots

Duck and coot seasons generally begin in late September or early October, with a two-day Youth Waterfowl Season the preceding weekend.

Because Montana is a significant duck “production state,” there are a number of species of ducks present when the season opens.

Among the more common species early in the season are mallard, gadwall, pintail, wigeon, shoveler, and in some areas along creeks and rivers, wood duck.

Blue-winged teal are also a common nesting species, but most of those have left the state by the time the season opens.

During mid-season, green-winged teal become more common, and some diving ducks including lesser scaup and redheads may be found in some areas.

Late in the season, in December and January, species that are still present are primarily mallards and common goldeneyes.

Mallards are always by far the number one species of duck in the bag.

Where to Hunt

There are places to hunt ducks throughout the state, but finding those places often requires time, effort, and scouting.

Migratory bird hunting is allowed on portions of several national wildlife refuges and on all of the Waterfowl Production Areas, both owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

There are a few state wildlife areas that offer hunting opportunities. Inquire at [FWP Regional Offices](#). Also check out [FWP's Wildlife Management Areas](#).

One significant hunting opportunity that is often overlooked is the large number of reservoirs and stock ponds scattered across much of the state, some of them on BLM land and some on private land. Many of

those are shown on BLM maps or other maps. These reservoirs and stock ponds often have good numbers of ducks and Canada geese on them early in the season and in some cases until they freeze over.

The many rivers and creeks also can provide hunting opportunities, sometimes until the end of the season if they don't freeze over and if food is available for waterfowl. Many of the [Block Management Areas](#) provide waterfowl hunting opportunities.

Geese

Goose hunting in Montana is largely for Canada goose hunting.

Snow Geese

About the only place that snow goose hunting opportunities are consistently available is at or in the vicinity of [Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area](#) near Fairfield and other important wetlands along the East Front of the Rocky Mountains. Snow goose arrival and departure at Freezout is somewhat variable, but the geese are most likely to be there in very late October and the first half of November, depending on how soon the area freezes over. In some years the snow geese are there for only a short time, arriving late and forced out by early ice-up.

Some snow geese also migrate through the northeastern corner of the state as well as a scattering through other areas (including west of the Continental Divide on occasion), but numbers don't build up, and hunting opportunities are very limited and sporadic.

White-fronted Geese

White-fronted geese also migrate through northeastern Montana but there are seldom opportunities to hunt them. If you are in

that corner of the state on an October migration day for these species, they may add to your enjoyment of the day, if not adding to your bag.

Canada Goose

Canada goose hunting opportunities, on the other hand, are available throughout just about all of the state. The season usually opens in late September or early October and runs generally through the second or third week of January. Montana has resident (nesting) Canadas in nearly all of the state, and early in the season they are widely distributed, including many reservoirs and larger stock ponds, as well as rivers and creeks.

The Canada geese that nest here and that make up most of the hunter harvest, are Western Canada geese, large birds that weigh about 9-12 pounds. The smaller 5-7-pound geese that migrate through the state nest farther north, in northern Canada, and they are generally here during the middle part of the season.

By mid-November, as wetlands freeze up, the geese are forced to areas along rivers that have open water. Open water remains in some areas into January, and good numbers of Canada geese may remain in some areas through the end of the season. However, if severe storms occur and especially if snow covers their food supply in the fields, an earlier departure of most geese will occur.

The geese feed in a variety of fields, including wheat, barley, corn, sugar beets, and alfalfa. Some over water hunting is done throughout the season, but most of the hunting, especially late in the season, is done in fields over decoys.

The same tips given for access for duck hunting also apply to Canada goose hunting. Ac-

cess is becoming more difficult in some areas as more fields are leased for goose hunting. Hunters should be aware that a portion of the Yellowstone River is closed to waterfowl hunting in Treasure and Rosebud counties from the mouth of the Bighorn River to the Rosebud-Custer County line, about 3 miles east of Hathaway.

Swans

Only a handful of states in the country offer an opportunity to hunt swans, and Montana is one of them.

Swan hunting may be done only by holders of a special permit, with 500 permits available in the Central Flyway (CF) part of the state and 500 permits available in for use in a portion of the Pacific Flyway (PF) part of the state.

It is important to carefully note the area open to swan hunting in the PF. The reason some areas are not open is to protect trumpeter swans that may be in those areas, while allowing swan hunting in the main concentration areas for tundra swans.

Both tundra swans and trumpeter swans may be taken in the CF and in the PF swan hunting area. Hunters there are urged to avoid shooting trumpeter swans, even though they are legal.

The PF swan season opens later and closes earlier, another measure to help target tundra swans and minimize the harvest of trumpeters.

In the PF, the tundra swan migration occurs mainly along the Rocky Mountain Front, with the biggest concentration at [Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area](#), where good numbers are usually found from about October 25 through mid-November, depending on tem-

peratures and freeze-up. Other wetlands in the area will also have some swans.

CF tundra swans migrate across a broader area of the eastern half of the state, with some of the main concentration areas in northeastern Montana. Almost any sizable wetland in the CF portion has the potential to have swans at some point during the migration. A good period to be looking for migrating swans is about October 20 through November 10. The northeastern corner of the state can experience freeze-up early in some years.

Many hunters are successful in taking a swan by pass shooting if they can get on a flight line and get the birds within 40 yards. Some prefer to shoot a swan coming to decoys, as the birds often come readily to a small number of any type of large, white decoys.

How to Apply

The application deadline for swan permits is usually in July, and a person may apply for a permit in the PF or CF, but not both. A hunter may have a permit for each part of the state by drawing a PF permit and then getting a surplus CF swan permit when they become available. Your chances of being drawn for a PF permit are usually about 50 percent or a bit less than that, but there are generally surplus CF permits left over that may be obtained even after the season is underway. Instructions for applying for permits and getting a surplus permit are on the [FWP website](#) and in the migratory game bird regulations.

Sandhill Cranes

Montana offers hunting opportunities on two sandhill crane populations.

Mid-continent Population (MCP)

The Midcontinent Population (MCP), which numbers around 400,000, nests far to the north, even in Siberia, and migrates through the eastern part of the state, generally from late September through October. While thousands of MCP cranes fly through the state, they are hard to hunt because, as was confirmed by satellite telemetry studies, they spend very little time in the state before moving south. That makes it difficult for a hunter to “pattern” the birds, so they can be a challenge. Just being out “amongst” the cranes on a migration day and hearing their rattling calls makes for a memorable day afield. You generally hear them before you see them.

Special Permit Needed

A special permit is required to hunt these cranes, and it can be picked up at no charge at the FWP Regional Offices in the eastern part of the state or requested from our Helena office. The permit provides a means to monitor hunter numbers and harvest.

Rocky Mountain Population (RMP)

The Rocky Mountain Population (RMP) of greater sandhill cranes nests right here in Montana, as well as in Idaho and Wyoming. These birds are larger (10 to 13 pounds) than the MCP cranes. Because this population numbers only about 20,000, hunting opportunities are closely regulated in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through a permit system in each state where hunting is allowed. These cranes migrate quite early, and most are gone from the state by mid-October. Most of the crane hunting is done by pass shooting or over crane decoys. A hunter may have permits for and hunt both RMP cranes and MCP cranes.

How to Apply

All sandhill crane hunting in the PF and in Wheatland, Meagher, Carbon and Golden Valley counties and that portion of Sweetgrass County north of I-90 is by special license only. Applicants may only apply for one area. The application deadline is usually in late July and is announced in news releases and on the [FWP website](#). The hunting season is in September and October.

Doves

Two species of doves are legal to hunt in Montana, the mourning dove and the Eurasian collared-dove.

Mourning Doves

Mourning doves nest throughout most of Montana but are most common in the eastern 2/3 of the state where there is a mix of crop fields and scattered trees, with a pond or other water source nearby. They are one of the most common bird species in the U. S., and their harvest exceed that of all other migratory game birds combined.

The season in Montana always opens on September 1, no matter what day of the week it happens to be, because doves migrate out of the state early, especially if there are some cool nights in late August or early September. Some hunters wish that the season opened earlier so that there would be more days of hunting before the birds leave. However, September 1 is the earliest opening permitted under the federal framework of the Migratory Bird Treaty. Mourning doves will hatch and raise more than one brood a year, and there is concern that opening much earlier would result in the harvest of adult doves that still have young in the nest.

Eurasian Collared Dove

The Eurasian collared-dove is a native of

Europe and Asia. It was accidentally introduced to the Bahamas in the 1970's when some birds in a pet store were released. The species got to Florida and rapidly spread across the U.S. They are now found throughout nearly all of Montana. They are larger than a mourning dove, with a rounded tail with white tips, and with a black ring around the back of the neck.

Since they are not native, Eurasian collared-doves are not considered a protected species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, having a status similar to a starling or house sparrow. The FWP Commission has also left them with an unprotected status in Montana, so they may be hunted year around with no license and no limit. Even though they are widely distributed in Montana, it's likely that not many will be shot by hunters because they tend to stay in towns, rather than out in the country.

Snipe

The season on common (Wilson's) snipe always opens on September 1. There are opportunities for snipe hunting, especially the first few weeks of the season in wet areas with short vegetation, such as wet pastures or the edges of wetlands.

Snipe nest in scattered areas in Montana, and some also migrate through the state, but there are no concentration areas.