



DUCK HUNTING CHARTERS · TAMPA BAY, FLORIDA

# TAMPA BAY FIELD GUIDE

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Everything you need to know before you book your first — or best —  
duck hunting charter on Tampa Bay.

● SEASON GUIDE 2025-2026 ●

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CHAPTER ONE · SEASON GUIDE

# FLORIDA DUCK SEASON 2025–2026: DATES, ZONES & WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

If you're planning to hunt ducks in Florida this fall and winter, the most important thing to understand before you ever load a shotgun is this: Florida's duck season is zone-based, species-specific, and governed by both state and federal regulations that change annually. Getting it wrong isn't just a missed opportunity — it can mean serious fines and the loss of your hunting privileges.

This guide breaks down everything you need to know about Florida duck season 2025–2026: the zones, the dates, the bag limits, the licenses, and the species you can expect to encounter. Bookmark it, share it, and check it against the official Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) proclamation before you head out.



*Tampa Bay — one of Florida's most productive wintering grounds for diving ducks.*

## HOW FLORIDA'S DUCK SEASON WORKS

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Florida is divided into duck hunting zones that reflect regional bird migration patterns and habitat. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission sets season dates within frameworks established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), which manages migratory bird hunting at the federal level. That means Florida's season dates must be approved federally each year and can shift slightly from one season to the next.

For waterfowl hunters, this means you need to stay current. The dates below reflect the 2025–2026 season framework as established by FWC. **Always verify the final proclamation at [myfwc.com](https://myfwc.com) before your hunt.**

## FLORIDA DUCK HUNTING ZONES

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ZONE	COVERAGE AREA	SEASON TIMING
<b>Zone A</b> North Florida	Panhandle and much of north-central Florida	Opens earlier in fall; reflects more northerly latitude and migration timing
<b>Zone B</b> South Florida	Central and south Florida, including Tampa Bay, Lake Okeechobee, and the Everglades	Opens in November; runs later into winter to account for later-arriving migratory birds
<b>Zone C</b> Special Zones	Everglades Agricultural Area and specific water management districts	Modified seasons or special regulations — check FWC proclamation for specifics

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## 2025–2026 SEASON DATES

### ⚠ IMPORTANT

The following dates reflect the anticipated framework for the 2025–2026 season. Final dates are subject to federal approval and FWC proclamation. **Confirm at [myfwc.com](https://myfwc.com) before your hunt.**

Regulations are updated annually and acting on outdated information is not a legal defense.

SEASON	ZONE / COVERAGE	APPROX. DATES	DAYS
<b>General Duck</b> Split 1	Zone A — North Florida	Late October – Late November	<b>~30</b>
<b>General Duck</b> Split 2	Zone A — North Florida	Late November – Late January	<b>~30</b>
<b>General Duck</b> Split 1	Zone B — Tampa Bay / South FL	Opens November	<b>~30</b>
<b>General Duck</b> Split 2	Zone B — Tampa Bay / South FL	Continues through Late January	<b>~30</b>
<b>Early Teal</b>	Statewide	Brief window in September	<b>~16</b>
<b>Scaup (Bluebill)</b>	Within general season	Slightly shorter than general duck season — verify annually	<b>Verify</b>



## BAG LIMITS: WHAT YOU CAN TAKE

Florida follows the federal daily bag limit framework for migratory waterfowl. The general daily limit is **6 ducks per hunter per day**, but species-specific restrictions apply within that total. Possession limit is generally three times the daily bag limit.

#### CRITICAL FIELD NOTE

Species identification is your responsibility in the field. Being able to distinguish a Lesser Scaup from a Ring-necked Duck, or a Bufflehead hen from a Ruddy Duck, is not optional. Mistakes cost money and can result in federal violations for taking protected species.

SPECIES	DAILY BAG LIMIT	NOTES
<b>General Ducks</b>	<b>6 / day</b>	Species sub-limits apply within this total
Scaup (Bluebills)	<b>2 / day</b>	Often reduced due to population management — verify annually
Redheads	<b>2 / day</b>	
Canvasback	<b>1 / day</b>	When season is open — check annual status
Pintail	<b>1 / day</b>	When season is open — check annual status
Buffleheads	<b>3 / day</b>	
Goldeneye	<b>3 / day</b>	
Ruddy Ducks	<b>15 / day</b>	One of the most generous limits in the bag
Mergansers	<b>5 / day</b>	No more than 2 hooded mergansers
Wood Ducks	<b>3 / day</b>	
Teal (main season)	<b>4 / day</b>	
Black-bellied Whistling Ducks	<b>6 / day</b>	Separate from general duck limit — year-round Florida resident



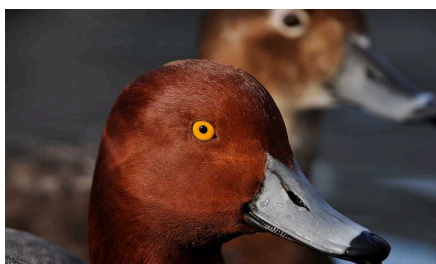
## **SPECIES YOU'LL ENCOUNTER IN TAMPA BAY**

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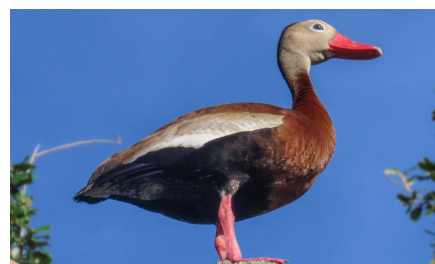
Tampa Bay and the surrounding Gulf Coast are exceptional wintering habitat for diving ducks. The birds that dominate Florida's saltwater and estuarine hunting are different from the puddle ducks most hunters picture when they imagine duck season.



*Bufflehead drake*



*Redhead drake*



*Black-bellied Whistling Duck*

SPECIES	HABITAT / BEHAVIOR	BAG LIMIT
<b>Lesser Scaup (Bluebills)</b>	The bread-and-butter duck of Tampa Bay. Fast, numerous, and willing to work a decoy spread. They winter by the thousands on the open bay.	<b>2 / day</b>
<b>Buffleheads</b>	Small, acrobatic divers with a distinctive black-and-white head pattern on the drake. Quick and challenging to shoot — and excellent table fare.	<b>3 / day</b>
<b>Redheads</b>	One of Florida's most beautiful wintering ducks. The rich brick-red head of the drake is unmistakable. Tampa Bay hosts a significant wintering population.	<b>2 / day</b>
<b>Ring-necked Ducks</b>	Found in freshwater impoundments and lakes, but also present in brackish areas. Called "Ringbills" by hunters for their distinctive bill markings.	<b>6 / day</b>
<b>Ruddy Ducks</b>	Chunky, stiff-tailed little divers that often sit tight on the water. Generous bag limits reflect a healthy population.	<b>15 / day</b>
<b>Hooded Mergansers</b>	Beautiful birds with a distinctive fan-shaped crest. Not prized for the table, but a common encounter on Florida waters.	<b>5 / day*</b>
<b>Black-bellied Whistling Ducks</b>	A year-round Florida resident. Long-legged, red-billed. Separate bag limit from general ducks — check FWC regulations.	<b>6 / day</b>
<b>Mottled Ducks</b>	Florida's resident puddle duck, often confused with female mallards. State-protected at reduced bag limits — know how to identify them.	<b>Reduced</b>

\* No more than 2 hooded mergansers within the 5-bird merganser limit.

## WHAT LICENSES AND STAMPS DO YOU NEED?

Duck hunting in Florida requires multiple authorizations stacked on top of each other. This is where hunters — especially first-timers — most often get tripped up.

# 01

## FLORIDA HUNTING LICENSE

Required for all hunters. Available through the FWC licensing portal or any authorized license agent. Residents and non-residents have different fee structures.

# 02

## FLORIDA WATERFOWL PERMIT

A state-level add-on permit specifically for waterfowl hunting. Required in addition to your base hunting license.

# 03

## FEDERAL DUCK STAMP

Required for all waterfowl hunters 16 and older. Costs \$27. Must be signed across the face before you hunt. Available at any U.S. Post Office or [duckstamp.com](http://duckstamp.com). Funds go directly to wetland conservation.

# 04

## HIP CERTIFICATION

All migratory bird hunters must be HIP-certified (Harvest Information Program). Completed when purchasing your license. It's free. Hunting without it is a federal violation.

## NON-TOXIC SHOT — FEDERAL LAW

Lead shot is prohibited for waterfowl hunting under federal law. Use steel, bismuth, tungsten, or other approved non-toxic shot. If you arrive with lead shells, your guide will send you home. This is not negotiable.

## FLORIDA SHOOTING HOURS

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Legal shooting time for ducks in Florida is **one-half hour before sunrise to sunset**. This varies slightly by date as sunrise shifts throughout the season. Build in time to be in position before legal shooting hours begin — that's when birds move most actively.

## PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE HUNTING AREAS

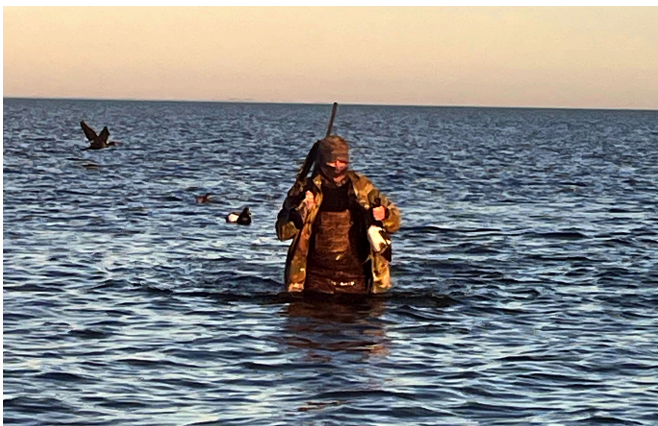
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Florida offers waterfowl hunting on numerous Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) managed by FWC, as well as National Wildlife Refuges with managed hunts. Some require advance

reservation through FWC's quota hunt system, which fills fast. Apply early if you plan to hunt public land.

Private access to productive bay and coastal areas is a significant advantage — and one of the key benefits of booking a charter. A guide with established access and years of scouting on a productive body of water eliminates the learning curve entirely.

“A guide with established access and years of scouting on a productive body of water eliminates the learning curve entirely — and puts you on birds from day one.”



#### REGULATORY DISCLAIMER

Regulations cited in this guide are based on anticipated 2025–2026 frameworks and historical FWC proclamations. Always verify current season dates, bag limits, and license requirements at [myfwc.com](https://myfwc.com) before hunting.



CHAPTER TWO - HOW-TO GUIDE

## BOAT DUCK HUNTING 101: WHAT TO EXPECT ON A TAMPA BAY WATERFOWL CHARTER

The alarm goes off at 4:00 a.m. It's still dark. You're pulling on waders you've never worn before, packing a bag for a hunt you've never done quite like this — from a boat, on open water, in Tampa Bay. Boat-based duck hunting is its own world, and first-timers often have a hundred questions before they ever leave the dock. This is your pre-hunt briefing.

### WHY HUNT DUCKS FROM A BOAT IN TAMPA BAY?

Most people picture duck hunting as standing in a flooded corn field somewhere in the Midwest. But Tampa Bay offers something completely different — and in many ways, more exciting. Florida's Gulf Coast serves as a major wintering ground for diving ducks like Buffleheads, Scaup (Bluebills), Redheads, Ring-necks, and Ruddy Ducks. These birds live on open water, and the best way to reach them is by boat.

Hunting from a platform boat or shallow-draft vessel gives you access to flats, bay points, and open-water feeding areas that you simply can't reach on foot. Your guide knows the tides, the bird movement, and the productive zones that change from week to week throughout the season (typically November through January in Florida). That local intelligence is exactly what a charter gives you.



*Pre-dawn launch on Tampa Bay — the hunt begins before sunrise.*

## **THE PRE-DAWN LAUNCH**

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Plan to meet your captain at the boat ramp well before first light — typically **5:00 to 5:30 a.m.**, depending on travel time to the hunting area. Arrive on time. Duck hunting is regulated by legal shooting time, which begins at sunrise. If you're late, you miss the first and often best flight of the morning.

The boat ride out in the dark is part of the experience. The bay at 5 a.m. is quiet and black, with lights from the causeway reflecting off the water. You'll run out to the spot your guide has been scouting, often in open water or near a grass flat where birds have been congregating.

Come fueled up. Bring coffee in a thermos, something to eat, and a positive attitude. It's early, it's sometimes cold, and the hunting is worth every bit of it.

## **SETTING UP THE DECOY SPREAD**

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Once you reach the hunting area, your guide will deploy the decoy spread. This is one of the most important parts of boat-based duck hunting, and it looks different from land-based setups.

On the water, decoys are typically rigged with long lines and anchors to keep them in position against current and wind. Your captain will set a J-hook or U-shaped spread that creates a natural-looking landing zone — a gap in the decoys where birds want to commit and cup their wings to land. The boat itself often becomes part of the blind, draped in camo netting and tucked against a shoreline or grass edge.



If you hear whistling wings overhead before it's even light, you'll understand why hunters drive hours to be here every winter weekend.

Expect to spend 20–30 minutes on setup. Use this time to get your bearings, check your shotgun is unloaded and ready, and listen for birds already moving in the pre-dawn darkness.



## READING THE TIDES AND WIND

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Here's what sets experienced Florida duck guides apart: they understand how water and weather interact with bird behavior. Tampa Bay is a tidal estuary, and tides affect where birds feed and loaf throughout the day.

Wind direction matters enormously. Ducks always want to land into the wind, so your guide will position the blind so that birds approach your spread from downwind — giving you the best shots. A northwest wind in Florida often pushes good numbers of divers into sheltered bays and coves. A calm, sunny day after a cold front can be slower, as birds tend to sit tight on the open water.

Your guide will have been watching the forecast and scouting all week. Trust their judgment on location. If they move spots mid-morning, there's a reason.



## WHAT TO WEAR

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Dressing for a Tampa Bay duck hunt is all about layering and staying dry. Even in Florida, 5 a.m. on the water can feel surprisingly cold with wind chill at 15 mph on an open bay.

### BASE LAYER

A moisture-wicking long-sleeve top. Keeps you dry whether you're sweating on the run out or cooling down during the wait.

### MID LAYER

A fleece or insulated hoodie. You can always peel this off as the sun climbs and the morning warms up.

### OUTER LAYER

A waterproof or water-resistant shell. You *will* get splashed. The boat runs fast and spray happens.

### WADERS

Many boat hunts involve wading out to set decoys or retrieve birds. Chest waders are ideal. At minimum, knee-high rubber boots.

**Don't wear sneakers — you will regret it.**

### CAMO

You don't need to be head-to-toe Mossy Oak, but avoid bright colors. Earth tones work great. Your face and hands are what birds see most, so a buff or face mask and gloves round out the setup.

### HEADWEAR

A warm beanie under a camo ball cap covers all the bases. Sun protection matters on clear days once the hunt winds down.

## WHAT TO BRING & WHAT TO LEAVE AT HOME

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## ✓ BRING THESE

✓ Valid Florida hunting license & Federal Duck Stamp — required, non-negotiable
✓ Steel or non-toxic shotgun shells (lead is federally illegal for waterfowl)
✓ A shotgun — many charters can provide one if you don't own one
✓ Face mask or buff and gloves
✓ Sunglasses — early glare and eye protection
✓ Snacks, water, and coffee in a thermos
✓ Sunscreen for after the hunt
✓ Valid ID
✓ A good attitude and patience

## ✗ LEAVE AT HOME

✗ Lead shot shells — illegal, your guide will turn you away
✗ Excessive gear — the boat has limited space
✗ Alcohol before the hunt — firearm safety, full stop
✗ The expectation that it will look exactly like a YouTube video

## ON THE HUNT: WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS

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Once legal shooting time arrives, the hunt begins. Your guide will call the shots — literally. When birds are working the decoys, they'll tell you to stay still, keep your face down, and wait. The temptation to watch incoming ducks is real, but movement busts birds. When the captain says "take 'em," you stand, mount your shotgun, and shoot.

Diving ducks on Tampa Bay tend to come in fast and low. They don't float down from the sky the way mallards do in a marsh. They rocket in, sometimes skimming the surface, and you have a short window. Your guide will coach you on lead — how far in front of a flying bird you need to swing to connect.

After the shot, birds that fall on open water are retrieved — sometimes by the guide wading out, sometimes with a net or by boat. If you're hunting with a retriever, watch the dog work. Few things in the outdoors are as satisfying.



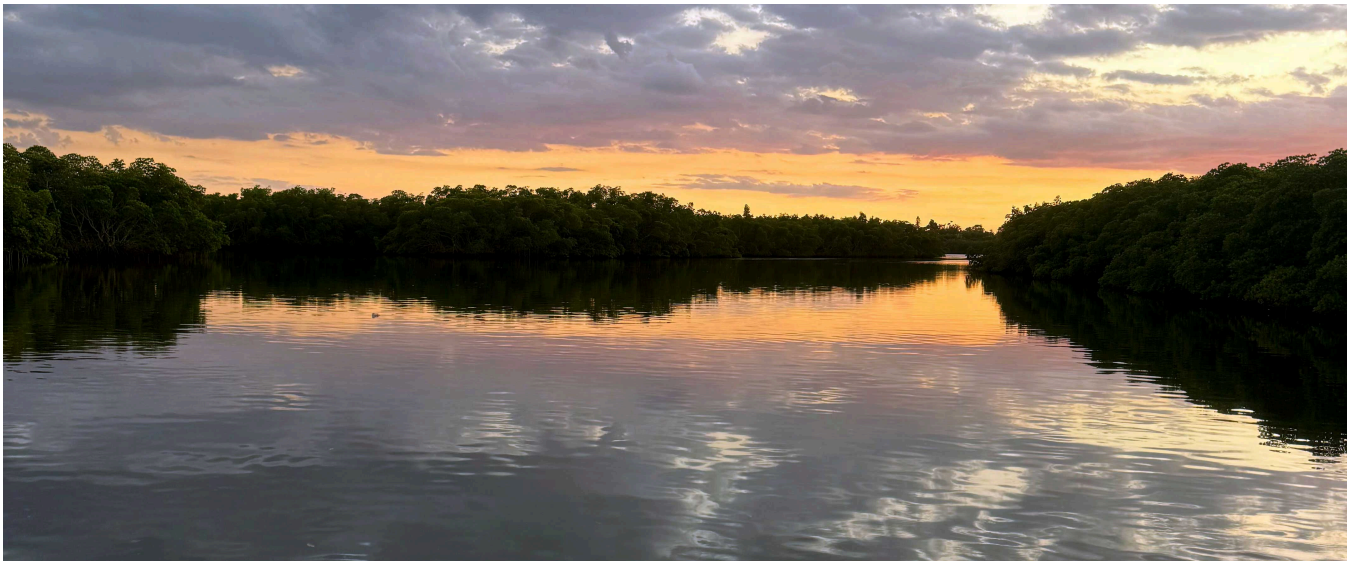
*Tampa Bay clients with their morning harvest — the reward for an early alarm clock.*

## **AFTER THE HUNT**

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Most charters wrap up mid-morning, once the bird activity slows or the limit is reached. Your guide will help you clean up, pull decoys, and head back to the ramp.

You'll leave with your birds, memories of watching the sun rise over Tampa Bay, and a much clearer picture of why people drive hours to do this every winter weekend. Boat duck hunting in Florida isn't like hunting anywhere else in the country. It's fast, it's visual, it's technical — and it's completely addictive.



## CAPTAIN PHIL SAYS

We keep groups small so every hunter gets proper coaching and the best chance at birds. Whether it's your first time or your fiftieth, we'll put you in the right spot, set a spread that works, and call birds until the action heats up.



READY TO GET ON THE WATER?

## BOOK YOUR TAMPA BAY DUCK HUNTING CHARTER

DUCK HUNTING CHARTERS · TAMPA BAY, FLORIDA

# WINGS OVER WATER. THE SHOT YOU'LL NEVER FORGET.

Duck Hunting Charters operates out of Tampa Bay, running morning and afternoon trips throughout Florida's fall and winter waterfowl season. We keep groups small, provide shotguns if needed, and bring the local knowledge that puts you in front of birds. All you need is your license, your shells, and your enthusiasm.

PHONE

813-416-6296

WEBSITE

[duckhuntingcharters.com](http://duckhuntingcharters.com)

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