1/29/2009 The graduate student from Auburn has arrived on study site. Thus, we have two ground crews tracking from trucks each day and one airplane used to locate birds in inaccessible areas and that are missing once a week. One crew in located at Corbett WMA and the other is now located in Clewiston. Nine birds have died and one we have not heard since early October, so we are actively tracking 37 birds.

The longest movement from capture site to current location is 165 km (from Palm Beach County to southern Osceola County). All of our birds have moved out of the EAA proper, but only two have used urban areas and one of those birds has now moved back into a rural area. If this pattern of habitat use continues we should be able to make a good comparison of project parameters between birds that use predominantly rural and those that use mostly urban habitats.

During the first month, our birds appeared to take advantage of the abundant surface water available after a very wet fall by frequently using flooded rice fields, flooded fallow agricultural fields, Storm Water Treatment Area impoundments, and natural ponds associated with pastures. More recently, as the dry season has caused surface waters to recede, use of these habitats has continued, but more birds are spending more time on permanent wetlands such as agricultural reservoirs, marsh associated with Lake Okeechobee, and Everglades marsh areas. The most recent locations of our birds are depicted in Figure 1. Now that our birds have dispersed far and wide, it will be interesting to see if habitat use patterns change as we approach the breeding season.

Of the original 47 birds we radio-marked nine have died. One of the birds died within a week of being released, so we consider this bird as never being in the study. Two birds died during molt and six have died since the waterfowl hunting season opened. All of the birds that died during the molting period where confirmed still to be molting based on wing feathers found at the mortality site. Of the birds that died during the hunting season, three of these mortalities are known to have been due to hunter harvest. Of the remaining birds, 2 are suspected wounded birds that ultimately died, and one died of unknown causes. The "wounded" determination was made based on several factors. First, the birds had been using areas that were heavily hunted. Second, the birds abruptly changed their use areas once the hunting season opened. Lastly, the birds were found dead within a couple of days of this change in use area. It will be interesting to compare season-specific survival rates once we have a full annual cycle worth of data.

Before this study, it was our belief that mottled ducks finished remigeal molt by mid- to late October at the latest. The first of our birds started moving off the two capture/molting sites in late-September as they regained flight capabilities and most had left these areas by mid-October as expected, however, two birds remained into mid-November. This is the latest into the fall that molting mottled ducks have been observed in Florida. Once off their molting areas, the birds distributed themselves over a relatively broad area of south and central Florida. All but two of the birds have used exclusively what we define as "rural" habitats. One of the two birds that moved into urban areas has been using a subdivision of homes in Wellington, FL. This area is only a few miles from her molting site. The other bird moved south to the Ft. Lauderdale, FL area, but now has moved even further south and into the Everglades west of Miami. Storm Water Treatment Area impoundments and pasture ponds have been the most used habitats. All together our birds have been located on habitats ranging from suburban ponds to Lake Okeechobee marsh, to Everglades marsh, to agricultural reservoirs. Most notable thus far is the fact that the birds have not used EAA ditch habitat and have been using Everglades marsh habitat. Prior to this study we knew little about the extent to which mottled ducks use Everglades habitat. It will be interesting to learn more about how much mottled ducks depend on this type and well as all the other types of habitats available to them in south and central Florida.

All mottled ducks latest locations as of 1/25/09

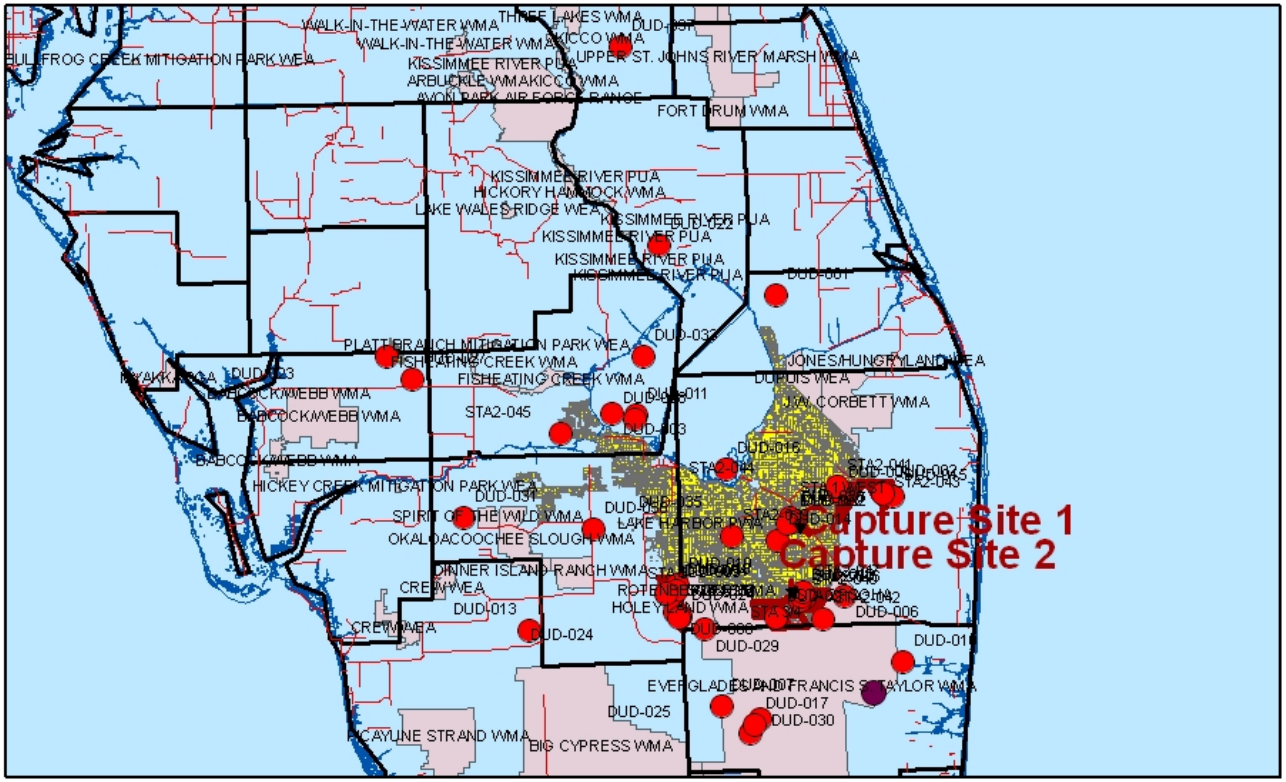

Figure 1