

Maryland Wildlife & Heritage Association

March 10, 2026

Education, Energy and Environment

Senate Bill 643 – Natural Resources – Sunday Hunting – Migratory Game Birds

Position: Support with Amendment to Remove Authorization for Sunday Hunting of Migratory Game Birds

Chair and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Bill 643. I respectfully offer support with an amendment to remove the provision authorizing Sunday hunting of migratory game birds, including Canada geese and ducks. This amendment prioritizes migratory game bird conservation, putting the resource first, rather than favoring hunter preference for additional opportunity with potentially detrimental impacts on the regulated species.

As drafted, SB 643 **removes the prohibition on Sunday migratory bird hunting entirely**. It requires the Department of Natural Resources to allow youth, seniors, and students to hunt Canada geese on Sundays. However, once the statutory prohibition is removed, the Department has the **authority to allow Sunday hunting for any hunter and for all migratory game bird species**. This would be allowed through a regulatory process which takes the authority partially away from the representative legislature.

Maryland is unique within the Atlantic Flyway and the country. The Eastern Shore of Maryland is known as the “Canada Goose Capital of the World” and hosts a disproportionately large share of wintering Atlantic Population (AP) Canada geese and other migratory waterfowl. Maryland is also one of the most heavily hunted states for Canada geese in the country. **Maryland ranks 4th in the nation for Canada goose harvest**, with a ten-year average of approximately 24,440 goose hunters per year harvesting about seven geese per five days afield. This further demonstrates the high harvest levels as many of these years had a one bird per day limit. Comparisons to surrounding states that allow Sunday waterfowl hunting are not appropriate. Virginia ranks 20th, Pennsylvania 10th, and Delaware 32nd in harvest, all with substantially lower hunting pressure. The ecological and harvest realities in Maryland are fundamentally different and warrant a more precautionary approach.

The AP Canada goose population has experienced significant volatility in recent years. Breeding pair estimates have declined from 167,629 in 2016 to 88,890 in 2024, while the Flyway maintenance goal is 60,000 breeding pairs. Over this same period, seasons with more liberal frameworks (45 days and a two-bird daily limit) have often been followed by reduced breeding pair counts and subsequent returns to more restrictive packages (one bird for 30 days). These fluctuations demonstrate that the population remains sensitive to harvest pressure and

Maryland Wildlife & Heritage Association

environmental conditions. The population already faces numerous pressures, habitat variability, weather conditions on the breeding grounds, and changing migration patterns, without the addition of increased hunting pressure on Sundays.

Maryland's history underscores this risk. Sustained high hunting pressure in the 1990s, combined with poor hatching conditions, resulted in a moratorium on Canada goose hunting from 1995 through 2001. Given the recent volatility in breeding pair numbers, another moratorium is not outside the realm of possibility. The consequences of such a closure would be severe for hunters, local economies, and conservation funding tied to license revenue and equipment purchases.

Evidence from other states suggests that adding Sunday hunting does not meaningfully increase hunter participation. Hunting quality and reliability are more important drivers of participation than simply adding more days. After Virginia authorized Sunday hunting in 2014, the state experienced approximately a 13% decline in hunting license sales from 2014 to 2024, according to state licensing data from the Virginia Department of Resource Conservation. Over the same period, Maryland, without Sunday waterfowl hunting, experienced a smaller decline of roughly 8%. This indicates that adding Sunday opportunities does not necessarily translate into sustained recruitment or retention of hunters.

Sundays currently provide a predictable day of rest for migratory waterfowl, allowing birds to feed and move with less disturbance. Removing that respite would likely alter flight patterns and feeding behavior, increase disturbance, and ultimately reduce overall hunt quality. Lower quality hunting experiences can diminish long-term participation more than the inability to hunt seven days a week.

Importantly, the bill does not actually increase opportunity for many hunters. If Sundays are reserved for youth, seniors, and students, all other hunters would lose between four and ten potential hunting days, depending on season length, because the federal migratory framework limits total days afield. In addition, if the bill applies only to private land and certain public lands, meaning hunters who rely on public land access would automatically lose between four and ten hunting days per goose or duck season with no offsetting opportunity.

Expanding hunting opportunities can be appropriate for overabundant species such as deer that cause significant agricultural and property damage. Waterfowl management presents a very different context. There is no overpopulation problem for migratory geese and ducks in Maryland that warrants additional harvest pressure. The argument that adding a weekend day for hunting would not increase harvest is disingenuous. Saturdays are currently the most hunted day of the week so logic tells us the harvest would increase by approximately the same number as harvested on Saturday. Those that cannot hunt on a Saturday would then hunt Sunday. Increased harvest is the only logical conclusion. How can one argue for Sunday deer hunting in order to harvest more deer and then argue adding Sunday hunting for migratory birds will not also increase harvest?

Maryland Wildlife & Heritage Association

Conservation of the resource and long-term population stability should take precedence meaningfully over short-term preferences for additional hunting days.

Finally, this is not an issue Maryland can afford to “try and see.” One year of elevated harvest combined with poor weather conditions on the northern breeding grounds could push the entire Atlantic Flyway into a restrictive regulatory package. A renewed moratorium, required to last multiple years if implemented, would severely damage the State’s hunting economy and risk losing an entire generation of waterfowl hunters.

For these reasons, I respectfully request that Senate Bill 643 be amended to remove the authorization for Sunday hunting of migratory game birds while allowing the remainder of the bill to proceed if the Committee deems appropriate.

Thank you for your consideration and for your continued commitment to science-based wildlife management and the long-term sustainability of Maryland’s migratory waterfowl resources.

Jared W. Thompson

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