

Habitat is the Key

North Dakota's 2008-09 winter was the worst the state has seen for more than a decade.

Pheasant, grouse and white-tailed deer numbers all declined to some extent, but not as much as many biologists at the North Dakota Game and Fish Department had feared. As such, hunting expectations for resident species for this fall may be a bit less than last year, but still pretty good.

On the other hand, waterfowl hunting should be improved, as many wetlands that were dry the past few years now have water, providing habitat for duck reproduction and more places for hunters to hunt.

For resident species during difficult winters, losses are often the greatest in areas that lack good winter habitat. However, for the past several years, hunters have found game birds, especially pheasants, in areas without what would be considered "good" winter habitat, because mild winters have allowed birds to survive without adequate cover.

Given a long enough string of mild winters, resident game populations can basically fill up

their prime habitats, and then start expanding into secondary and even tertiary habitats.

The winter of 2008-2009 may have, at least temporarily, curtailed that expansion. Hunters may have to remember where they hunted after the last difficult winter – 1996-1997. The same areas that held good wildlife populations then will probably be where the good winter habitat is. In addition, since then many landowners and wildlife groups and agencies have worked hard to create pockets of winter habitat across the state, creating the potential for game populations in areas where they may not have existed after the winter of 1996-1997.

In short, don't expect to see quite the numbers of pheasants, deer or other resident species across North Dakota as in the past few seasons. Have a good pair of boots, and pay attention to what you know about the winter habitat required to help the animal survive that you are after.

If you find what looks to be good winter habitat, odds are that wildlife won't be too far away.

Hunter Behavior Can Influence PLOTS Retention

If you have this guide in your hands, you are probably looking for a place to hunt, such as public land, or private land enrolled in the Game and Fish Department's PLOTS program.

It's important to remember that PLOTS is a voluntary program, and at the end of each year many landowners will consider whether to renew expiring short- and long-term contracts.

In the past, Game and Fish has lost contracts, and therefore opportunities for hunters, because of poor treatment of a PLOTS tract.

If you are hunting a PLOTS tract, or any public land for that matter, leave it in better shape than you found it. Pack out any litter you pack in, and if you find litter somebody else left behind, pack that out, too.

It goes without saying that shooting PLOTS signs is vandalism and costs the Game and Fish Department money that is better used to enroll more acres.

Find a place to park that does not block a roadway, and clean birds in an area that is out of sight from passing vehicles.

There's no prize or reward for picking up your own or someone else's garbage, just the satisfaction that you and your hunting partners may be able to hunt the tract the next year because the landowner was satisfied with the way "hunters" treated their land.