

BUFFALOBERRY PATCH

By Greg Freeman, Department News Editor



Spring Bighorn Sheep Survey

Western North Dakota's bighorn sheep population is in good shape, based on observations during the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual spring bighorn sheep survey.

Brett Wiedmann, Department big game biologist in Dickinson, said biologists counted 282 bighorn sheep – 93 rams, 147 ewes and 42 lambs. This year's total represents a 9 percent increase from 2007, and 33 percent higher than the five-year average.

In addition, the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park was harboring about 25 sheep.

"Following a major die-off in 1998 that decimated our population to only 130 animals, it has been our objective to once again reach and maintain a minimum of 300 bighorns in the state," Wiedmann said. "We are very encouraged to have reached our goal this year."

Each summer, typically in August, Game and Fish Department biologists count and classify all sheep. The following March biologists go back and recount lambs to determine recruitment.

"We need to check on their health after the winter," Wiedmann said while noting that first-year survival is challenging because of predators and winter conditions. "Since last fall's survey, lamb recruitment was 33 percent, about average for North Dakota. We also found there were about 63 rams per 100 ewes. We are in good shape."

The population level appears to be an indication of how many apply for the opportunity to hunt bighorn sheep in the badlands. "Just look at the numbers," Wiedmann said. "Our bighorn sheep population is larger than it has been in a number of years, and this year we had a record number of applicants (more than 10,000) who put in for the five sheep licenses. Encouragingly, we have a significant number of young rams, so once they mature a bit, we also hope to reach our goal of issuing eight licenses annually."

Pike and Walleye Eggs Plentiful

North Dakota Game and Fish Department and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fisheries personnel completed spring spawning operations with more than enough northern pike and walleye eggs to meet state needs.

Jerry Weigel, Department fisheries production and development section leader, said even though they exceeded production goals, the two seasons couldn't have been more contrasting. "We had ideal conditions during the week we were taking pike eggs, and the worst conditions for spawning walleye," he said.

In just six days, crews collected more than 20 million pike eggs from South Eckelson Lake (Barnes County), Alkali Lake (Stutsman County) and Lake Irvine (Ramsey County).

"We had nice warm weather with little or no wind, a lot of eggs and the quality was great," Weigel said. "In fact, we were able to help Montana and South Dakota by sending them some of our surplus."

Walleye spawning operations took place in less than ideal circumstances, as snow, strong winds and cold weather were the norm. "More often than not crews were running gear on days with extremely high winds," Weigel said. "There were days when conditions did keep us off the water, but you can only wait so long to pull nets once they are in place."

It took nearly three weeks to finish collecting eggs from Alkaline Lake (Kidder County), Antelope Lake (Pierce County), Lake Sakakawea and Devils Lake. But despite the conditions, the goal of 30 million walleye eggs was reached.

"It wasn't a good run," Weigel said. "Egg quality is not looking so good as a result of the brutal conditions."

Eggs were taken to federal fish hatcheries near Valley City and Riverdale, where eggs will hatch and then be put into rearing ponds as fry. Fingerlings will be distributed to state waters in June.

No-wake Zone for Bridge Construction

As work continues on a new bridge over the Missouri River between Bismarck and Mandan, a “no-wake” zone is again in force upstream and downstream of the construction area.

Buoys marking the work area were put in place in late April, and will likely remain in place throughout the summer. Boaters on this busy stretch of Missouri River are required to slow down and travel at idle speed through the work area, so there is no wake created that could rock the barges and work platforms.

Work remains on schedule for the planned traffic transfer to the new bridge in late July or early August. When that happens, work will then begin on dismantling the old bridge.



MANDY THOMAS

Boaters are urged to slow down as construction on a new bridge spanning the Missouri River continues.

Prairie Day 2008

Prairie Day 2008 will be held June 21 at Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Stutsman County.

Prairie Day is a public event designed to educate citizens about the values and beauty of native prairie. Events include an early-morning bird or wildflower walk, presentation on the 100-year history of Chase Lake NWR, and members of the North Dakota Grazing Coalition will talk about how to manage for healthy, sustainable grasslands.

Chase Lake NWR is 10 miles north and 7 miles west of Medina. Registration begins at 7:30 a.m., with field tours beginning at 8:15 a.m. Free lunch will be served at noon.

New CRP Practice Available

A new habitat practice that enrolls croplands, wetlands, existing grass or expired Conservation Reserve Program acres into CRP is available to landowners.

State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Services Agency, is a cooperative conservation effort based on locally developed conservation proposals that target species of conservation priority and their habitats.

SAFE allocates 500,000 acres nationwide, with 27,000 available to North Dakota. There are three SAFE priority focus areas within the state where land may be eligible:

- 1,000 acres allocated to the Southwest North Dakota Sagebrush Restoration SAFE project for sage grouse and other species that depend on shortgrass sagebrush prairie.

- 20,000 acres allocated to the Coteau-Drift Prairie Waterbank SAFE project in the central portion of the state, commonly known as the Missouri Coteau and Drift Prairie, for waterfowl, shorebirds and other birds.

- 6,000 acres allocated for the Eastern North Dakota Tallgrass Prairie Restoration SAFE project, which consists of two areas in the eastern edge of the state for greater prairie chickens and other grassland nesting birds.

Croplands, wetlands or existing grass within the focus areas may be enrolled in SAFE practice CP38 on a continuous basis until the 27,000 acre allocation is reached.

Landowners should contact their county FSA office to determine if their land is eligible. CRP contracts can be

for a period of 10-15 years. Landowners will receive annual rental payments for the term of their CRP contract, as well as cost-share assistance, and in some cases practice and signup incentive payments from USDA.

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department will also provide up to 50 percent of the cost of grass seed, as well as additional incentives for landowners who allow public access on CRP through the Department's Private Land Open To Sportsman program. Other partners, such as Ducks Unlimited and the North Dakota Natural Resources Trust, will provide incentives to landowners who perform wetland restorations on land they enroll into SAFE.

Interested landowners should contact their county FSA office or the North Dakota Game and Fish Department for more information.

Another Swift Fox Found

In mid-April, a radio-collared swift fox hit by a vehicle was found along U.S. Highway 85 in Bowman County. The radio-collar indicated the fox originated from the Bad River Ranches near Pierre, South Dakota.

An article in the May 2008 issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS* looked at the diminutive animal's slow return to North Dakota.

The fox was a young male born last year to swift foxes that were reintroduced at the Bad River Ranches. The Bad River Ranches began reintroducing swift foxes into South Dakota in 2002, funded by the Turner Endangered Species Fund.

The fox found in Bowman County is said to be farthest known dispersal of any wild-born swift fox on record.



DENIA MASON

This summer will mark the 14th year of Becoming an Outdoors-Woman Workshop in North Dakota.

BOW in August

Women at least 18 years old who want to learn more about outdoor activities are encouraged to participate in the Becoming an Outdoors-Woman Workshop August 8-10 at Lake Metigoshe State Park, Bottineau.

Applications are being accepted and enrollment is limited to 100 participants. The cost is \$135 with an August 1 registration deadline.

The workshop, sponsored by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, offers 26 different seminars, each of which lasts more than three hours.

Classes are held outdoors, and each session contains 45 minutes of lecture with the remainder dedicated to hands-on instruction. Each session has room for 12 women. Participants are limited to four sessions.

Women will learn the basics of hunting and fishing, shooting, navigation, and plants and animals. New classes offered this year

include basic boating skills, field dressing big game, and tracking and trapping. Other classes include archery, wild back yards, basic birding, canoeing, fly-fishing, kayaking, plant identification and predator calling.

BOW participants will stay in dorms and must provide their own bedding and towels. All camp facilities are handicap accessible. Equipment will be provided unless noted in the course description.

The University of North Dakota Professional Development for Educators has approved the workshop for one continuing education college credit upon completion, submission of an essay and the fee for credit.

To receive a brochure and enrollment form, contact Nancy Boldt, North Dakota Game and Fish Department, at 701-328-6312; ndgf@nd.gov; or visit the Game and Fish website at gf.nd.gov.

Valley City Youth Honored

A colored pencil drawing of a bufflehead duck, titled "Single at Last," was chosen the 2008 Best of Show in the North Dakota Junior Duck Stamp Contest.

Ashley Berg, 17-year-old high school student from Valley City, was selected from 819 entries received from across North Dakota, the most participants the conservation and design contest has seen.



Drawing by Ashley Berg.

Berg's artwork will represent North Dakota at the National Junior Duck Stamp Contest. First place winners at the national competition receive a trip to Washington D.C., \$5,000 cash award, and their entry made into a stamp.

Other first place winners in the four age categories were Timothy Kietzman, Edgeley; Zach Christenson, Maxbass; Tate Wynmann, Paige

Stratton and Maddy Lodoen, Westhope; Brennen Stotts, Lisbon; Matt Guertin, Josh Hoover and Tanner Morehouse, Valley City; Emily Marboe, Dickinson; and Sarah Monette, Devils Lake.

Spring Mule Deer Numbers

North Dakota Game and Fish Department big game biologists completed the annual spring mule deer survey in April. Based on observations, the population index in the badlands remains higher than the long-term average.

Bruce Stillings, Department big game biologist in Dickinson, said biologists counted 2,649 mule deer in 291 square miles. Mule deer density per square mile was 9.1, a slight decrease from 9.6 in 2007, but significantly higher than the long-term average of 6.6 mule deer per square mile.

Biologists have completed aerial surveys of the same 24 study areas since the 1950s. The survey assists the Department in obtaining solid mule deer population data for the badlands, such as demographic trends and production ratios (buck-to-doe and fawn-to-doe).

Mild winters, good production and a conservative and responsible harvest strategy have all contributed to the current mule deer density in the badlands.



RON WILSON

Fall Turkey Apps in June

North Dakota turkey hunters can look for this fall's applications in early June.

Resident hunters can apply, or print out an application for mailing, on the state Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov.

Lottery applications will be available from Game and Fish Department offices, county auditors and license vendors. Gratis applications are available only at Game and Fish and county auditor offices.

Applications are also accepted at the Game and Fish Department's toll-free licensing line, 800-406-6409. A service fee is added for license applications made over the phone.

Applications for the fall season must be postmarked no later than July 2. Only North Dakota residents are eligible to apply in the first lottery. Nonresidents can apply for fall turkey licenses that are still available following the first lottery.

Darkhouse Spearfishing Stats

The 2007-08 North Dakota darkhouse spearfishing season saw five-year highs in both participation and the number of northern pike harvested.

Nearly 800 participants speared more than 6,300 pike last winter, according to state Game and Fish Department spearfishing data.

The state opened some of its waters to darkhouse spearfishing for the first time in 2001. The 2002-03 season attracted the most participants (979) and saw the most pike harvested (6,770).

Improved water clarity on a number of lakes played a key role in participation and success last winter, Department fisheries officials said. Morrison Lake is a good example of improved clarity conditions, as this Ramsey County fishery topped the list in terms of the number of pike speared in 2007-08. The prior two winters, pike harvest at Morrison Lake was inconsequential due to turbid conditions.

Other top lakes for darkhouse spearfishing this past winter were Devils Lake, Grass Lake (Richland County), Buffalo Lodge Lake (McHenry County), Lake Sakakawea and Island Lake (Rolette County).

These top six lakes accounted for 76 percent of the spearing harvest in the state.



Stephen Stensgard

“Even though this is new, the template has been a proven success in many other Midwestern states,” Kading said.

Partnership Will Benefit Landowners and Wildlife

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has entered into a partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and Pheasants Forever to create and fund a farm bill biologist position in Jamestown.

Stephen Stensgard, a native of Fergus Falls, Minnesota has been hired for the position. He is an employee of PF, and will assist NRCS with promotion, planning and implementation of farm bill programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program, Continuous CRP, Wetland Reserve Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program and others.

Kevin Kading, private lands coordinator for the Game and Fish

Department, said Stensgard will function as the person private landowners should call for creating or enhancing wildlife habitat on their land. “Even though this is new, the template has been a proven success in many other Midwestern states,” Kading said.

“This position is available to assist private landowners with farm bill programs from start to finish. Landowners can work with Stensgard to help develop plans and enroll their land in programs that will benefit their operation and wildlife habitat. The Department is very excited about this opportunity with NRCS and PF.”

Farm bill biologists have been employed with PF since 2005. Currently, 33 are working in seven states – Ohio, South Dakota, Nebraska, Minnesota, Missouri, Wisconsin and now North Dakota. Last year, farm bill biologists contacted and consulted 5,400 landowners, resulting in the improvement of 310,000 acres of land for wildlife.

Jim Inglis, PF’s farm bill biologist coordinator, said in a PF press release that North Dakotans have another resource for conservation information. “Our farm bill biologists possess knowledge of federal, state and local programs that will assist landowners in finding the right program to meet their personal habitat and land use goals,” Inglis said.

Michael Collins, assistant state conservationist for field operations with NRCS in Jamestown, said in a recent statement that it is a pleasure to have a farm bill biologist in the area to promote wildlife and spark a planning interest on private lands by using a variety of farm bill programs. “This is a great example of a cooperative effort with Pheasants Forever, North Dakota Game and Fish and USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service and we look forward to good things to come,” Collins said.

Stensgard, who is located in the Jamestown NRCS area office, has a degree in fisheries and wildlife biology from the University of North Dakota. He has worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Fergus Falls Wetland Management District in western Minnesota, and as a wildlife biologist technician with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. He can be reached by calling 701-252-2521 ext. 129.

