

Winter Work

By Ron Wilson

Winter is a busy time of year for North Dakota Game and Fish Department personnel, maybe more so during a winter such as this one.

Thanks to a blanket of snow statewide, this is the first winter in more than a decade the Department is able to conduct an aerial deer survey across all of North Dakota.

"This is the best, but only one of several population indices we use to monitor trends in deer populations," said Bill Jensen, Department big game management biologist.

Other tools to help determine deer population trends and deer license numbers include hunter success, hunter observations during opening weekend of the deer season, deer vehicle accidents, deer depredation complaints and input from field staff.

"It takes more than one month to fly the entire state ... the large monitoring blocks range from 800 to 1,200 square miles," Jensen said. "It can take a week to complete one 1,200-square-mile block."

Jensen said the Department uses its own pilot and plane, and also contracts with five other private pilots. Each plane includes a Game and Fish Department observer who not only tallies deer, but records incidental sightings of moose, elk and other animals.

During a difficult winter when snow comes early and possibly stays late, Game and Fish Department personnel typically deal with deer feeding on stored livestock feed supplies. "We have a response plan that has been fine tuned over the years, which allows us to respond and assist landowners in these types of situations," said Randy Kreil, Department wildlife division chief. "This takes a great deal of staff time and energy. As winter intensifies and drags on, we fully expect the number and severity of deer depredation cases to increase."

In the last decade, Kreil said, the Department has dealt with deer depredation in certain parts



CRAIG BIRLE

of the state, but it's been a long time since its been a concern statewide.

Winter is also the time of year when next year's hunting seasons are set. "The moose, elk and bighorn sheep proclamation needs to be completed in February, which means we need to meet with landowners and hunters in those parts of the state where there are moose, elk and sheep hunting opportunities," Kreil said. "The challenge is that the same people who conduct these meetings are key participants in the winter aerial deer surveys."

Winter is when Department officials are starting to plan for the fall deer hunting season. "In addition to the winter aerial survey, we are also collecting and evaluating hunter harvest survey questionnaires," Kreil said. This information is critical in understanding how the previous season went for hunters, which in turn helps determine license numbers for the upcoming season.

"And this winter there is the legislative session, which can require a good deal of work in terms of providing information to Department administrators and legislators on issues related to our natural resources," Kreil said. "Winter, maybe more so this winter, is a very busy time of year for the Department."

Thanks to plenty of snow, this is the first winter in more than a decade the Game and Fish Department is able to conduct an aerial deer survey across all of North Dakota.

Ron Wilson is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.