

2008 REVIEW

By Roger Rostvet, Game and Fish Department Deputy Director

At first glance, 2008 looked like a rerun of 2007. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is in relatively good financial shape and hunting regulations remained basically unchanged. Fishing was good, upland game populations were similar or slightly down from last year, deer numbers were good, and waterfowl hunting wasn't up to par once again. However, there are signs that things are about to change.

Early in my career a wise old biologist told me there are two things that have a profound effect on wildlife in North Dakota: the weather and farm economy/farm bill. Starting in November during the deer season, winter returned in force with heavy snows that blanketed much of the state and refused to leave. In December, many days we were greeted with temperatures significantly below zero and more and more snow to shovel. We haven't had this kind of winter weather in some time.

In North Dakota, one of the limiting factors for many wildlife species is winter weather. One species that comes to mind that is on the northern extreme of its range is the ring-necked pheasant.

Blessed with favorable winters and quality nesting and brooding habitat provided by the conservation reserve program, pheasants have exploded in their primary range. Their range has also expanded north to areas where birds have not been seen since the 1950s and 1960s. One tough winter, however, and we could be back to having pheasants only in those areas with the best winter cover in their primary range.

When you have good nesting and brooding habitat, pheasant populations can quickly rebound. Such was the case following our last long, tough winter in 1997. Unfortunately, today we are not set up for as quick of a recovery as CRP continues to disappear from the landscape. We predicted a loss of a quarter million acres of CRP in 2008, but the fallout was closer to 400,000 acres. The big unknown is at what point does the loss of CRP statewide force wildlife population into a long-term, downward spiral.

Big game populations have reacted to weather and habitat in a phenomenal fashion. In many areas of the state we have been actively managing for reduced

deer numbers by issuing an unprecedented number of doe licenses. Under traditional conditions with this kind of harvest, we would have quickly reduced the deer population, but good winter conditions have contributed to phenomenal reproductive efforts in the state's deer herd.

A tough winter is not all bad, and heavy snows can be beneficial. The western two-thirds of the state has experienced little spring runoff and drought, which has negatively influenced a number of fisheries. Many of the state's prairie potholes are either dry or at levels that make them useless to breeding ducks or waterfowl hunters.

North Dakota has, for the most part, escaped the ravages of a national economy in recession, which is something the Department needs to be aware of in future planning. Revenue from nonresident license sales exceeded that of resident license sales, allowing the cost of resident licenses to remain constant, while expanding services such as the Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program.

Preliminary nonresident license sales for 2008 indicate some subtle changes occurring. For the first time since 1998, nonresident waterfowl license sales dropped below 20,000 (19 percent drop from 2007) and nonresident upland game licenses sales dipped slightly. The reasons could vary: \$4 gas, poor water conditions, or the national economy. Whatever the reason, it is a situation we need to monitor closely.

For the past three or four biennium's, we predicted that Department spending would exceed revenue. Yet, with increased license sales we have actually grown our reserve. This may be the first biennium where the budget we submit to lawmakers will actually draw down our reserve.

January will mark the beginning of the new legislative session. Other than our budget request, the Department has not submitted any pieces of legislation. The utilization of wildlife has been the theme of past sessions, with little emphasis on building the resource or creating habitat. This is disappointing, but not unexpected when fish and wildlife populations are high.

Let's review some of the highlights of 2008.

Deer Season

North Dakota's 2008 deer season had 149,400 licenses available to hunters, an increase of 850 from last year. Mild winters and a corresponding increase in reproductive success have maintained white-tailed deer populations above management objectives in many units in northeastern, north central, and parts of southwestern North Dakota.

The results of an aggressive approach to lowering deer numbers is evident in the northwest and southeast where many units had stable to lower license numbers. A significant decline in deer numbers in these areas is a direct result of several years of high harvest on does.

Because of high deer numbers in northeastern North Dakota, the Department established a seven-day September antlerless deer gun season in units 2C and 2D.

CDC Lead Study

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a preliminary study determining there is a link between eating wild game harvested with lead bullets and higher levels of lead in the blood. The correlation is statistical and adjusts findings for other potential sources of lead exposure.

The study tested blood collected from more than 700 North Dakotans. The lead levels ranged from none detectable to 9.82 micrograms per deciliter.

Venison Donation Program

North Dakota's Sportsmen Against Hunger program accepted only bow-killed deer during the 2008 hunting season.

Sportsmen Against Hunger is a statewide venison donation program designed to help low-income individuals meet their basic food needs. It is administered by the North Dakota Community Action Partnership, which raises funds to help pay for processing of donated deer, and also arranges distribution of the low-fat, high-protein meat to food pantries and other emergency food outlets.



CRAIG BIRHLE



CRAIG BIRHLE

SAH reached out to bowhunters in 2008 because of the possibility that venison donated by gun hunters could contain lead particles from bullets that are not removed during processing. Because of the discovery of lead particles in donated venison last spring, about 4,000 pounds of meat had to be discarded.

While SAH was planning to change its guidelines for accepting and processing deer taken with rifles,

NDCAP executive director Ann Pollert said results of recent studies indicate that even with new guidelines, the risk of lead particles showing up in donated venison was still too high.

The mule deer population in western North Dakota was in good shape in 2008.



CRAIG BIRLIE

North Dakota's pronghorn population, while strong in 2008, declined by 7 percent statewide compared to 2007.

Pronghorn Season

North Dakota's pronghorn hunting season had 4,630 licenses available for 2008, a decrease of 2,285 from a record number in 2007.

An aggressive harvest strategy in 2007 was employed because the pronghorn population was well above management objectives. The anticipated result was a reduction in the population, which happened, thus license numbers for 2008 were lower.

Nearly 15,000 square miles, 90 percent of the primary range for pronghorn in the state, were surveyed in late June and early July. Statistics indicate the statewide population decreased 7 percent from 2007, from an estimate of 15,000 pronghorn to 14,000 in 2008.

Elk Management in TR Park

A draft environmental impact statement was released in mid-December with options for public input. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is not in favor of any of them, and is disappointed there will be no public input on its favored option, which would have been allowing certified volunteers to harvest elk and keep at least a portion of the meat.

Mountain Lion Season

North Dakota's mountain lion season opened in August with a quota of eight animals established in Zone 1, the badland's unit. As of late December, seven cats had been taken in Zone 1. The remainder of the state is open through March 31, where no mountain lions have been taken.



CRAIG BIRLIE

Debate on how to trim a growing elk herd in the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park continued in 2008.

Early Canada Goose Season

An early hunting season intended to reduce local Canada goose numbers in North Dakota opened statewide August 15, two weeks earlier than past years.

The earlier opener was permitted under the framework provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which allows states to open what is considered a “management take” season on Canada geese as early as August 1. Game and Fish Department officials decided to open in mid-August as a first step in this new opportunity.



GREG GULLICKSON

The state's early Canada goose season opened earlier than typical in 2008.

Sage Grouse Season Closed

The sage grouse season was closed in 2008. Spring population surveys indicated the population had been reduced below objective levels.

Agencies Prohibit Hunting Over Bait

The U.S. Forest Service was the latest land management agency in North Dakota to prohibit hunting big game and other wildlife over bait. Dave Pieper, Grasslands supervisor, signed an order in September prohibiting hunting over bait on the Dakota Prairie Grasslands.

Along with the U.S. Forest Service's national grasslands, hunting over bait is also not allowed on all North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife management areas, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service national wildlife refuges and waterfowl production areas, and all North Dakota state school, park and forest service lands.

Hunting over bait is defined as the placement and/or use of baits for attracting big game and other wildlife to a specific location for the purpose of hunting.

Baits include but are not limited to grains, minerals, salts, fruits, vegetables, hay or any other natural or manufactured foods. It does not apply to the use of scents and lures, water, food plots, standing crops, or livestock feeds being used in standard practices.

Pheasant Broods

North Dakota's roadside pheasant survey conducted in late July and August revealed lower bird numbers than 2007. Total pheasants and brood



CRAIG BIRKLE

Pheasant numbers were down in North Dakota in 2008, but many hunters still experienced good success. That may change, however, as CRP acres continue to decline.

observations were down 31 percent statewide, while average brood size was down 13 percent.

Pheasant observations in the northwest, southwest and southeast portions of the state were all down approximately 25-30 percent from 2007, while the northeast region, which doesn't hold much of a pheasant population, was down 63 percent.

Biologists didn't believe poor production in summer 2008 was a direct result of loss of Conservation Reserve Program acres, at least not yet. Cool, rainy days the first part of June caused problems with newly-hatched chicks, and the warm, dry days in July and August may have affected insect production.

Average brood size was down in all four districts, possibly due to hatching of partial clutches on first nest attempts, but it may also indicate a good amount of reneesting by hens.

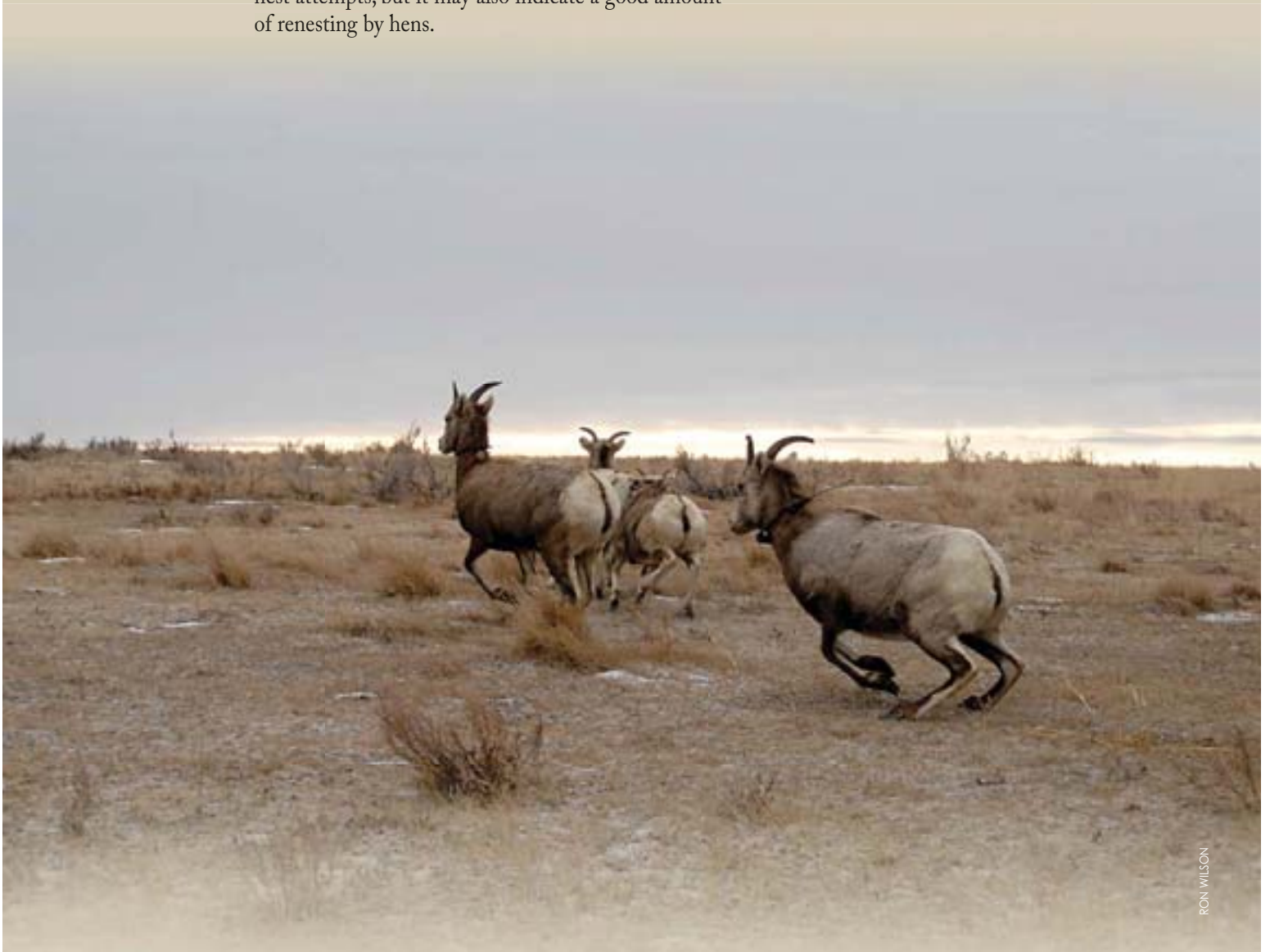
Bighorn Sheep

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

Biologists counted 282 bighorn sheep – 93 rams, 147 ewes and 42 lambs. The 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 holding approximately 25 sheep.

Following a major die-off in 1998 that decimated the population to only 130 animals, it has been our objective to once again reach and maintain a minimum of 300 bighorns in the state.



RON WILSON

Bighorn sheep transplanted from the Missouri River Breaks in Montana have bolstered North Dakota's sheep population.

Fall Reproduction Sampling

Devils Lake and the Missouri River from Garrison Dam to Lake Oahe had exceptional natural walleye reproduction in 2008.

Based on the annual fall reproduction survey, the catch of young-of-the-year walleye in Devils Lake was the third highest on record. This is significant because only a small number of fish were stocked in Devils Lake.

The stretch from Garrison to the headwaters of Lake Oahe was just as significant, because walleye production in the river is all natural as it is not stocked.

On a statewide basis, natural reproduction and stocking success for walleye and yellow perch wasn't very good, but that was not surprising given the conditions of the cool, late summer.

While natural reproduction of game fish was hit-and-miss, there wasn't a whole lot of good news for forage fish. In the large water bodies in southwestern North Dakota and in Lake Oahe, there was fairly decent gizzard shad production, and in Lake Audubon anglers saw dramatic improvements to walleye size structure, which is directly attributed to cisco.

Reproduction of forage and primary game fish like walleye, pike and yellow perch wasn't very good in Lake Sakakawea. But biologists did see fair numbers of crappies, and smallmouth and white bass, which provided forage for a lot of fish.

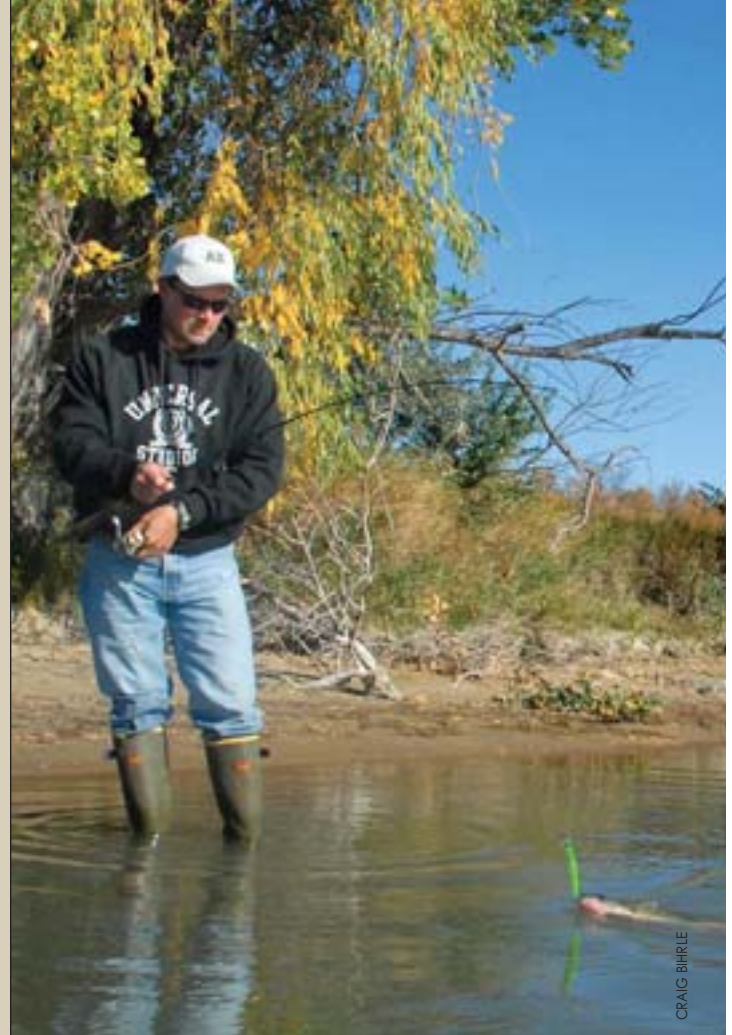
On the bright side, paddlefish reproduction was very good and sauger seemed to do well. Both can be tied to flows in the Yellowstone.

CWD and TB Surveillance

The state Game and Fish Department continued its Hunter-Harvested Surveillance program during the 2008 hunting season by sampling deer for chronic wasting disease and bovine tuberculosis from units in central North Dakota. In addition, all moose and elk harvested in the state, regardless of hunting units, were eligible for sampling.

Samples from hunter-harvested deer were tested from units 2H, 2I, 2J1, 2J2, 2K1, 2K2, 3A4, 3B3 and 3C. In addition, the Game and Fish Department continued bovine tuberculosis testing in northeastern North Dakota by collecting 250 samples from deer harvested from units 2C and 2D.

To date, CWD has not been diagnosed in wild or farmed deer or elk in North Dakota. The Game and Fish Department continues to sample the entire state over a three-year period.



Some good news in 2008 for walleye anglers who fish some of the state's more popular walleye fisheries.



Chronic wasting disease monitoring efforts continued in 2008.



CRAIG BHIRLE

Mule Deer Population

The mule deer population in western North Dakota was in good shape in 2008. Surveys continued to indicate a population with stable recruitment and good numbers of adult bucks.

Aerial observations in fall revealed two primary indicators – ratio of fawns-per-doe, and bucks-per-doe – were near long-term averages. The fawn-to-doe ratio was .89 fawns per doe, and the buck-to-doe ratio was .50 bucks per doe.

Observers who accompanied pilots in fixed-wing planes counted 2,208 mule deer during the October survey, which encompassed 24 study areas and 291 square miles in western North Dakota.

Each spring, biologists survey the same study areas to determine a population index.

Like most years, hunting mule deer in the badlands was a popular draw for hunters in 2008.

Salmon Spawning

Fisheries crews completed their annual salmon spawning operation at Lake Sakakawea, and with the help of a neighboring state, reached their goal of collecting 600,000 eggs.

Nearly 400,000 eggs were collected from Sakakawea and the Garrison Dam Tailrace. Average size of Lake Sakakawea females was about 6 pounds, which was similar to 2007. The Missouri River salmon were slightly smaller than 2007.

South Dakota had an exceptional run in 2008, enabling North Dakota fisheries crews to travel to South Dakota's Whitlock station to collect another 200,000 eggs.

Plans are to stock approximately 65,000 salmon – split between spring and fall stocking – in Lake Sakakawea and 50,000 spring-stocked fish in the Missouri River in 2009.

Chinook salmon begin their spawning run in October. Since salmon cannot naturally reproduce in North Dakota, state Game and Fish Department and Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery personnel collect eggs and transport them to the hatchery.

Once the eggs hatch, young salmon spend several months in the hatchery before being stocked in Lake Sakakawea and the Missouri River.



MANDY THOMAS



MANDY THOMAS

(Top) One of the better bets for hooking a salmon in North Dakota in 2008 was the Garrison Dam Tailrace. The Game and Fish Department has been stocking salmon in the Tailrace to help sustain the state's salmon population during those years of low water in Lake Sakakawea. (Bottom) In 2009, about 50,000 salmon will be stocked in the Missouri River and another 65,000 in Sakakawea.

SUMMARY OF VIOLATIONS – JULY 1, 2007 TO JUNE 30, 2008

BIG GAME (GUN)

Hunting without a license	10
Hunting without general game license/habitat stamp	1
Using another's license	4
Failure to carry license on person	21
Failure to sign or affix stamp	3
Shining (using artificial light)	5
Illegal possession/taking	30
Unlawful transportation	4
Aiding in concealment of unlawful game	2
Exceeding limit	2
Hunting in a closed season	2
Hunting in wrong unit or closed area	5
Failure to tag game	40
Killing wrong species or sex	9
Use of motor vehicle off established trail	23
Harassing game with motor vehicle	1
Hunting on posted land without permission	23
Hunting before/after legal hours	1
Failure to accompany/transport other's game	10
Failure to wear fluorescent orange	8
Gratis hunter hunting off described land	2
Other big game violations	43
Total	249

BIG GAME (BOW)

Failure to carry license on person	1
Hunting in closed area	2
Failure to tag game	5
Hunting on posted land without permission	3
Other big game (bow) violations	1
Total	12

UPLAND GAME

Hunting without small game license	7
Hunting without general game license/habitat stamp	1
Failure to carry license on person	16
Using gun holding more than three shells	59
Illegal possession/taking	2
Unlawful transportation	1
Aiding in concealment of unlawful game	1
Exceeding limit	26
Hunting in a closed season	5
Hunting in a closed area	9
Failure to leave identification or sex of game	91
Killing wrong species or sex	12
Using motor vehicle off established trail	6
Hunting on posted land without permission	18
Hunting before or after legal hours	3
Failure to accompany/transport other's game	3
Other upland game violations	7
Total	267

MIGRATORY BIRDS

Hunting without small game/nonresident license	11
Hunting without general game license/habitat stamp	1
Failure to carry license on person	32
Failure to sign or affix stamp	6

Using gun holding more than three shells	19
Illegal possession/taking	3
Aiding in concealment of unlawful game	1
Exceeding limit	65
Hunting in closed season	11
Hunting in closed area or zone	2
Failure to leave identification or sex of game	22
Killing wrong species or sex	14
Wanton waste	13
Hunting on posted land without permission	4
Hunting before/after legal shooting hours	4
Failure to accompany/transport other's game	1
Nontoxic shot violation	14
Hunting without federal waterfowl stamp	6
Other migratory bird violations	16
Total	245

FURBEARER

Hunting/trapping without license	6
Failure to carry license on person	2
Untagged cable devices	4
Trapping/hunting in closed season	2
Failure to tag	1
Trapping within 25 feet of exposed bait	1
Harassing furbearers with motor vehicle	5
Hunting/trapping on posted land without permission	1
Other furbearer violations	2
Total	24

FISHING

Fishing without a license	55
No identification on fish house	9
Failure to carry license on person	97
Failure to sign or affix stamp	1
Illegal method of taking fish	3
Exceeding limit	96
Fishing in closed area	5
Taking undersized/oversized fish	3
Possession/fishing with illegal bait	2
Failure to attend lines	9
Fishing with excessive lines	40
Selling fish/bait without a license	8
Paddlefish/pallid sturgeon violations	8
Other fish, frog, turtle, clam violations	7
Total	343

BOATING

Use of unlicensed or unnumbered boat	131
Unlicensed boat rental	3
Operating without lights at night	27
Inadequate number of personal flotation devices	149
No observer while towing skier	70
Operating vessel under influence/when intoxicated	15
Reckless or negligent operation	7
Other prohibited/hazardous operations	62
Other boating violations	28
Total	492

MISCELLANEOUS

Failure to register snowmobile/ATV	4
Shining wildlife	3
Cartridge in chamber (loaded firearm)	112
440 yard violation	19
Killing/possessing harmless birds	3
Wildlife management area violation	24
Hunting an unharvested field	1
Hunting in federal refuge/park	2
Minor in possession of alcohol	35
Possession of controlled substance	4
Possession of drug paraphernalia	4
Hunting while intoxicated	2
No guide/outfitter license	39
No taxidermist license	1
Misrepresentation in license application	88
Purchasing hunting license without safety course	1
Hunt/fish/trap while privileges suspended	4
Leave fence gates open	1
Failure to appear on citation	9
Littering public areas/waters	48
Shooting preserve violations	1
Criminal trespass	22
Other ND Game and Fish violations	30
Non-ND Game and Fish violations	79
Total	536
Total Citations Statewide	2,168

2008 SPECIAL BIG GAME LICENSES

	Licenses Available	Applications Received
Moose	142	13,647
Elk	577	14,348
Bighorn	6	10,423

FINANCIAL STATEMENT July 1, 2007 to June 30, 2008

Income	\$27,659,074
Expenses	\$24,378,316
FUND BALANCES, FIXED ASSETS AND LONG-TERM DEBT	
Game and Fish General Fund	\$29,878,566
Habitat and Depredation Fund	\$522,750
Nongame Wildlife Fund	\$148,166
TOTAL ALL FUNDS	\$30,549,482
FIXED ASSETS	\$30,604,164
DEPARTMENT NET WORTH	\$61,153,646

2007 LICENSES AND PERMITS ISSUED

	Resident	Nonresident
Fishing	44,499	7,027
Husband/Wife Fishing	13,219	2,474
Senior Citizen Fishing	10,650	
Disabled Fishing	479	
Short-Term Fishing		
10-Day		5,896
3-Day		18,164
Paddlefish Tags	2,496	514
Commercial Tags	32	
Retail Bait Vendor	237	
Wholesale Bait Vendor	29	16
Fish Hatchery	2	
2007 Boat Registrations	6,106	
(Third year of 3-year decal)		
Boat Rentals	43	
General Hunting	58,563	54,126
Small Game Hunting	29,939	37,976
Combination License	51,870	
Waterfowl Hunting		23,490
Furbearer Hunting/Trapping	16,351	2,927
Fur Buyer (2006-07)	39	3
Nongame Hunting		1,739
Deer Gun Hunting	128,006	6,207
Deer Gun Hunting (Gratis)	14,933	185
Deer Bowhunting	17,145	2,819
Pronghorn Gun Hunting	5,202	
Pronghorn Gun Hunting (Gratis)	867	
Pronghorn Bowhunting	1,984	119
Moose Hunting	128	
Moose Hunting	19	
(Preferential Landowner)		
Elk Hunting	372	
Elk Hunting	65	
(Preferential Landowner)		
Bighorn Sheep	6	
Turkey Hunting (Spring)	6,597	
Turkey Hunting (Fall)	7,716	
Turkey Hunting (Gratis Spring)	364	
Turkey Hunting (Gratis Fall)	597	
Habitat Stamp	112,689	
Shooting Preserve	25	
Fishing/Hunting Guide	268	25
Taxidermist	221	
Falconry	1	
Scientific Collector	52	
Nonresident Swan	1,065	
Resident Swan	1,135	
Sandhill Crane	7,649	