

Public Uses of Wildlife Management Areas

Game and Fish Department wildlife management areas are a remarkable benefit for North Dakota hunters, anglers and trappers.

These public lands as a group provide just about every type of hunting, fishing or trapping in the state, which is a good thing because hunters, anglers and trappers contribute the license dollars and excise taxes to pay for their management.

At the same time, WMAs are open to a variety of other compatible public uses, including hiking, nature study, berry picking, camping, cross-country skiing, boating, horseback riding, photography and many others.

Like all other types of public lands, from city parks to national forests, Game and Fish WMAs have use guidelines designed to maintain the integrity of the land and water as well as provide reasonable access and recreation potential for people, within the scope of the agency mission. Sometimes, compatibility conflicts arise. Resolving a conflict often means that Game and Fish managers must make a choice to restrict or prohibit one activity or the other.

On state WMAs, the activities of hunters, anglers and trappers typically get priority, because of their role in funding management, and because of the Department's mission. In addition, Game and Fish also places a high priority on wildlife production on WMAs, so any activity that is detrimental to actual nesting, rearing of young or wintering wildlife, or that can have a negative effect on habitat, is also not generally allowed.

Over the past year, through the administrative rules process, which involves opportunities for public input before changes in rules are put in place, the Game and Fish Department addressed some recent concerns regarding activities on WMAs.

One of those concerns originated with bowhunters and one of the new rules actually relaxes a provision that previously required removal of portable tree stands by January 10 of each year. Game and Fish extended that deadline to January 31 to give hunters extra time, because the bow season now typically ends on the first Sunday in January, rather than December 31, which was the closing date when the original rule was made.

In addition to the removal extension, another part of that rule change also involves portable tree stands. Tree stand owners must now attach a metal or plastic tag to the stand that displays the owner's name, address and telephone number, similar to identification requirements for unoccupied fish houses on public waters.

This provision allows Game and Fish to contact tree stand owners if there is a conflict, and it may also reduce thefts of tree stands.

The other new regulations relate to paintballing and geocaching, two group activities that have no relation to the Department's mission, can have an impact on wildlife and wildlife habitat, and can disturb hunters – particularly bowhunters early in the season.

While not all potential interaction between user groups can be avoided, such as bowhunters and squirrel hunters vying for the same space, wildlife managers must ask the question "Who should have priority use?" when it comes to an activity related to hunting, fishing or trapping, compared to one that is not.

Over the course of a year, the Game and Fish Department gets many questions about WMA uses and why some activities are allowed and others aren't. Here's a summary of other WMA regulations and their intended function.

Note: Not all regulations are included. For a complete listing of WMA rules and regulations, visit the Game and Fish Department website at gf.nd.gov, or check with the district wildlife



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In addition to general rules that apply to all state wildlife management areas, some areas may have special regulations that are posted at entrance areas.

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Motor vehicles

Use of motorized vehicles is restricted to constructed roads, well-worn trails and parking areas normally used by passenger cars. Motor vehicles may not be used off established roads and trails for retrieval of big game or for waterfowl hunting on wildlife management areas, except where allowed by governor's proclamation or as posted at public road entry points.

This provision is intended to prevent conflicts between hunters, habitat destruction and wildlife disturbance by vehicles, which include autos, off-highway vehicles and snowmobiles.

Watercraft

No person may leave watercraft unattended on a wildlife management area unless the watercraft is being used on a daily basis. This rule is intended to prevent people from preempting fishing or hunting spots on public land, and also to prevent the development of private mooring sites on public land.

Littering and abandonment of property

Disposal of refuse, rubbish, bottles, cans or other waste materials is prohibited except in garbage containers where provided. Abandonment of vehicles or other personal property is not allowed, and camper holding tanks may not be dumped within a WMA.

Obviously, littering is not compatible with public land use.

Removal and destruction of property

Archaeological artifacts or cultural resources may not be removed from WMAs. In addition, trees, shrubs, vines, plants, gravel, fill, sod, water, crops, firewood, posts, poles or other property may not be mowed, clipped, cut or removed without a permit, except that firewood may be removed under certain stated conditions from designated firewood cutting plots. Commercial cutting of firewood is prohibited on designated firewood cutting plots. Gathering of downed wood for campfires is permitted. Berries and fruit may be picked for personal use, but not to sell, unless prohibited by posted signs at public road entry points.

Private property and structures

No person shall construct or maintain any building, cabin, dock, fence, beehive, billboard, sign or other structure on any wildlife management area except by permit. Fish houses may be used during the ice fishing season in accordance with the governor's proclamation. Duck, goose, crane, and other types of decoys may not be left unattended on any state wildlife management area.

This rule is intended to prevent people from preempting hunting, fishing or access spots.

Cropping, haying and commercial enterprises

Cropping, haying and livestock grazing are allowed on some WMAs, generally as a management practice to rejuvenate habitat in select areas or to provide a wildlife food source. Other commercial enterprises are allowed only by lease or permit.

Animals prohibited – exceptions

Most animals other than free-ranging wildlife are detrimental to the protection and propagation of wildlife and other natural resources on WMAs. Livestock are not allowed except by permit, and pets, except for hunting dogs accompanied by hunters, are not permitted to run unattended on WMAs.

Horseback riding, including hunting from horseback, is allowed as long as the activity does not cause unnecessary disturbance to wildlife or habitat. Groups of 25 or more riders must first obtain a permit.

Camping

Camping is generally allowed (but may be prohibited in specific places), but not for longer than 10 consecutive days on any WMA. Trailers, campers, motor homes or tents may not be left on any WMA unless used for daily lodging. Mowing of vegetation for campsites is not allowed.

These rules are designed to emphasize overall public use and sharing of resources. Individuals cannot preempt camping areas if they are not using them, and once the 10-day

maximum is reached, they must give others a chance to use the area.

Group activities

Group activities attended by more than 25 people require a permit. Large gatherings may require more accommodations for activities, parking, camping and restrooms than the WMA is capable of providing, and can also lead to substantial impacts to wildlife and wildlife habitat.

Tree stands

No person may construct or use a permanent tree stand or permanent steps to a tree stand on any WMA. Portable tree stands and portable steps, screw-in steps, and natural tree stands may be used. Tree stands do not preempt hunting rights in the vicinity of the tree stand, and may not be put up before August 20, and must be removed prior to January 31.

Dogs

No person may conduct, permit, or carry out field trials for dogs on any WMA without a permit. Training of bird and gun dogs is prohibited from April 1 through August 15 on all WMAs. Professional training of dogs is prohibited at all times. This provision protects birds from unnecessary disturbance during the primary nesting season.

Glass beverage containers or kegs prohibited

No person may use or possess glass beverage containers or kegs on any WMA.

Hunting over bait

No person may place or use bait for attracting or luring wildlife to the bait location for hunting or any other purpose on a WMA. Bait includes grains, minerals, salt, fruits, vegetables, hay, or any other natural or manufactured feeds. Bait does not include lures, scents or liquid attractants for hunting, or management activities of the Department. A person may use bait to lure and take furbearers when engaged in lawful trapping activities.

The placement of bait can disrupt deer feeding patterns, unfairly lure game away from other hunters, habituate wildlife to an artificial food source, and increase the likelihood that disease will spread from one animal to another. This provision is consistent with most other types of public land in North Dakota.

Fireworks and model rocket engines

No person may possess, discharge, or set off within any WMA any form of fireworks, model rocket engine, or combustible or explosive material without a permit. In addition to noise disturbance, fireworks and other combustible materials can start fires that could destroy wildlife habitat.

What do you think? Are the existing rules reasonable, restrictive, or not restrictive enough?

To pass along your comments, send us an e-mail at ndgf@nd.gov; call us at (701) 328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.