

2012 Hunting Season – A Period of Uncertainty

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Photo by Renae Heinle

Choosing a theme for the 2012 hunting outlook was difficult. We have excellent prospects for ducks and geese, and a somewhat surprisingly good forecast for pheasants.

On the other hand, for the third straight year North Dakota won't have a pronghorn season, and deer license numbers are the lowest in 20 years.

These extremes are easily identified by looking at statistics, but other factors that influence any fall hunting season are less certain.

As we know, the prairies of the Northern Plains almost define the term uncertainty because of the ever-changing weather and dynamic natural ecosystems. Add in a hotly debated national farm policy and this unpredictable mixture has always had a significant impact on wildlife populations and hunting opportunities.

We saw hopeful signs that wildlife populations might rebound from three tough winters.

Female deer and pronghorn exited winter in good shape and should have produced a good fawn crop, which is essential in helping populations rebound. Upland game species also likely experienced little winter mortality and spring

populations were in good shape.

The nesting and brood-rearing period in late spring and early summer were mild and likely beneficial to upland game.

For ducks, spring water conditions were adequate, upland nesting habitat sufficient and waterfowl pair counts and summer brood counts were high.

However, the continuing loss of habitat from an upswing in the conversion of native prairie to crop fields, the impending loss of more than 650,000 acres of CRP this fall, the hot and dry summer conditions that will shrink or dry wetlands, may create some challenges for hunters this fall.

With upland game and waterfowl populations in good shape, large numbers of resident and nonresident hunters will be taken to the field, but North Dakota will have fewer acres available to hunt this fall. That could mean more crowded conditions in some places.

While waterfowl hunters will enjoy good bird numbers, finding hunting spots over water and in fields will be a challenge due to lower water levels and fewer acres of small grains resulting from changing cropping practices.

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The future is uncertain as well.

Should we experience a return to more typical North Dakota winters, existing wildlife populations will be hampered in their ability to rebound, with less habitat of lower quality on the landscape.

This fall will be decent for hunters in North Dakota. However, there is a lot of uncertainty about what will happen with wildlife habitat down the road.

Always hopeful, we will continue to work with landowners, hunters and other conservation organizations to salvage and maintain habitat friendly programs and policies, to develop a more certain future than exists today.

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Photo by Mike Szymanski