

# NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

\$2.00 JULY 2011



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Fishermen Only**  
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# MATTERS OF OPINION



**Terry Steinwand**  
Director

The Conservation Reserve Program is 25 this year. That's something of a milestone for a program that has done so much good for landowners, the environment, hunters and wildlife in North Dakota.

Unfortunately, it's difficult to get in the mood to celebrate CRP's silver anniversary because of the path the land-based program is taking. In an article in this issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*, you'll read that North Dakota will have 1 million fewer CRP acres this fall than it had in 2007. The forecast gets worse as CRP acres for the state are expected to fall below the 1 million-acre mark by 2013, with no end in sight for its descent.

We've been telling hunters for some time that these are the good old days of hunting in North Dakota. While a string of mild winters in the early and mid-2000s had something to do with an increase in pheasant and deer populations, having good habitat in CRP on the landscape was the major ingredient for abundant game.

Without quality habitat, pheasant, deer and duck populations will decline. Replacing, or reviving, the Conservation Reserve Program in North Dakota will be a challenge, but it's one we will face head on.

CRP, as many hunters understand, is vital to the Game and Fish Department's popular walk-in hunter access program. The Private Land Open To Sportsmen program is made up of 1 million acres, nearly half of which is CRP. The opportunities these CRP acres melded into the PLOTS program provide hunters every fall are countless.

The Game and Fish Department has maintained for years that land enrolled in PLOTS is an enhancement, not a cure all, for hunters seeking permission from private landowners for places to hunt. But with the loss of about 40,000 acres of CRP from the PLOTS program since 2007, and more

likely coming down the road, concerns over habitat quality and finding places to hunt will intensify.

The worth of CRP as quality wildlife habitat is especially evident when, like the last three winters, cold and snow settle into the state in fall without a hint of leaving until spring. Some CRP, located on PLOTS tracts or not, provides winter wildlife habitat, but almost all of it offers nesting and rearing habitat for survivors when winter has finally abated.

It's difficult to even comprehend what our friends and neighbors across the state who have been fighting high water for much of spring and summer are going through. Certainly our thoughts and best wishes are with them.

Yet, as professionals entrusted with managing wildlife in North Dakota, it's our duty to evaluate how an amazing amount of water may rewrite the state of North Dakota's natural resources.

Many, many acres of wildlife habitat have been flooded, reshaping the landscape in ways we cannot predict at this time. You'll learn in this issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS* of the uncertainties wildlife managers will face as flood waters eventually recede. Much of the infrastructure at our wildlife management areas adjacent to the Missouri River System has certainly been damaged, if not lost. It will be some time until Game and Fish Department personnel can assess the fallout of the unprecedented high waters.

In the interim, get out and enjoy whatever it is you cherish about North Dakota's outdoors. Sink a worm on one of the hundreds of fishing waters the state offers, or simply take a hike across the landscape in search of native wildflowers that are at their best this time of the year. We are lucky because our slice of the outdoor world has so much to offer.

*Terry Steinwand*

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NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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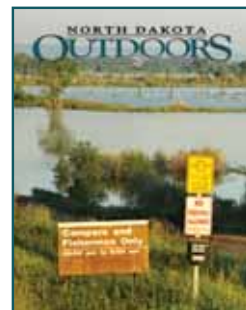
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Front cover: Almost the entire acreage of the Oahe Wildlife Management Area along the Missouri River south of Bismarck and Mandan was under water in mid-June. Photo by Craig Bihle, Bismarck.



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# STATE WMAS AWA

An aerial photograph showing a large body of water that has flooded a landscape. In the center, there is a small island with several green trees. To the left, a line of trees is partially submerged. A long, narrow structure, possibly a dam or a breakwater, extends into the water from the top center. The surrounding land is green and hilly. The title 'FISH IN UNKNOWNNS' is overlaid in large, bold, yellow-green letters with a black outline.

# FISH IN UNKNOWNNS

*By Ron Wilson*

*Located downstream of Bismarck on Oahe Wildlife Management Area, the popular MacLean Bottoms gun range is flooded by high water from the Missouri River. It will be weeks, or longer, before Game and Fish Department officials can get a handle on total damage to lands and infrastructure on WMAs along the Missouri River.*



*Like much of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's wildlife management area lands along the Missouri River System, Oahe WMA was overtaken by high water. Of the 20-plus WMAs along the Missouri River System, all were expected to flood entirely or partially.*

**W** With high water in much of the state, from the Devils Lake basin to the Missouri River corridor and in between, North Dakota is as wet as it's been in perhaps the last 150 years.

In many places, high water has caused disorder by flooding crop fields, washing out roads and dams and encumbering livelihoods. With runoff in the mountain west yet to spill North Dakota's way in early June, the Missouri River had already passed flood stage in the Bismarck-Mandan area, spreading overland with impunity, inundating homes and infrastructure of the river-bound communities. In some areas, sand bags stacked into place by muscle and faith by friends, neighbors and volunteers were topped by river water seeking familiar and unencumbered passage of pre-dam days. Earthen dikes built by humans and machines to safeguard hundreds of residences had yet to be tested by a growing river.

"No matter where people have been fighting high water in the state, our concerns go out to them first and foremost," said Scott Peterson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife resource section supervisor.

Yet, too much water on the landscape will affect more than just people. And it's the responsibility of wildlife officials to assess how unprecedented high water will reshape the state's natural resources. Answers to those concerns, however, are wildly unknown at this time.

"Unfortunately, lots of people and lots of things, including our wildlife management areas and the animals that inhabit them around the state, are affected by the water," said Randy Kreil, Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief.

For starters, some animals are displaced, booted from preferred habitats to drier and many times less productive haunts. The reproductive potential of ground-nesting birds,



MIKE ANDERSON

before all is said and done. “This is not a temporary, week to 10-day thing, either, it’s long-term,” he said.

What the river has in store for whatever it encounters is only a guess. With flows the highest since Garrison Dam was built more than a half-century ago, the river is going places and doing things most people have never seen. It’s hungry, eating at banks, swallowing trees and inundating acres and acres that are now unrecognizable from land or air.

“We don’t know what the landscape, what our WMAs are going to look like when this is all over,” said Greg Link, Game and Fish Department assistant wildlife division chief. “Are there going to be new channels? Where is the scouring going to take place and where is the deposition going to be? No one really knows.”

Because upland grasses will last only a week or two under water before dying, certainly the grassy areas on many WMAs along the Missouri River System will need reseeded. Beyond that, there will be damage and worse to food plots, access roads, fences, signs, dikes, pumps, ponds, water control structures, boat ramps, shooting ranges and so on. There is concern, too, about what the high water carries.

“Will these flooded lands all come up in Canada thistle or leafy spurge?” Peterson said. “Think of the huge flush of invasive species, such as salt cedar and purple loosestrife. There are so many unknowns that it’s hard to know where to even start when you list them.”

What is known, Peterson said, is that repairs to infrastructure and attention to creating quality wildlife habitat won’t happen quickly. “The task that will follow is so hard to quantify because it’s so huge,” he said. “To repair and replace could take years.”

And it will certainly come at a price.

While grasses and other vegetation will succumb to weeks of being under water, the outlook for mature, stately cottonwoods that line much of the Missouri River is brighter.

Mature cottonwoods are resilient and able to withstand much of what nature dishes out, including an enduring flood, according to Tom Claeys with the North Dakota Forest Service. “The cottonwood, of all species, is adaptable ... the larger cottonwoods should not be affected,” he said. “Of course, we’ll see how long the water will be here.”

such as ring-necked pheasants, will be lost for the year if birds can’t find suitable habitat in which to nest and rear young.

A prime example of this is the 12,000-plus acre Lewis and Clark WMA south of Williston along the Missouri River and Lake Sakakawea. “Lewis and Clark WMA is entirely under water ... think about the deer, turkeys and pheasants that were chased out of there by water,” Peterson said. “Pheasants are sitting in the ditch along the highway because that’s all they have. They get up to fly to where they were going to roost, but come back to the ditch because that’s the only piece of dry land. Many of the birds are getting killed on the highway.”

Lewis and Clark is not the exception. Peterson said of the 20-plus WMAs (or about 72,000 acres) along the Missouri River System, all will flood entirely or partially

Damage from high water is not limited to the Missouri River bottoms. A flooded WMA or road in Nelson County is no different than along the Missouri River. "You talk to Game and Fish district managers all around the state and all of them have issues on their WMAs," Link said. "We have the Missouri River on our mind because it is happening in our backyard and the situation is so unprecedented, but flooding and other problems are certainly not isolated."

The list of damages to Department wildlife management areas is already long and varied. For example, Brian Prince, Game and Fish Department wildlife resource management biologist in Devils Lake, said the dam at Wakopa WMA in Rolette County has washed out for a third time since 2000. He said it will likely cost in excess of \$100,000 to repair the dam.

"Wakopa dam is just one of the things we'll be dealing with around the state in the future," Peterson said. "To give you a complete list at this time of the damage high water has caused on 200,000-plus acres of WMAs around the state would be impossible. We're still trying to get a handle on it."

The silver lining, and there is one, is that an untold amount of new habitat currently exists for ducks and fish. Mike Johnson, Game and Fish Department

game management section leader, said for the first time since breeding duck surveys were conducted in 1948, there is good water over the entire prairie pot-hole breeding range from eastern Montana to prairie Canada. North Dakota's wetland index this year is the second highest ever.

"Newly-flooded marshes will be productive, which is a plus for ducks," he said. "Then again, those marshes that have high water for too long become unproductive. There are oceans of water out there as many ponds have melded together."

While waterfowl hunters in North Dakota will likely rejoice come fall, upland bird and deer hunters who pursue game on state WMAs may have to look elsewhere for now and maybe longer.

"The impact on the state's hunting resources on WMAs along the Missouri River System and elsewhere could be felt for a long time," Peterson said. "Think about the recreation time alone spent by pheasant hunters on Lewis and Clark WMA near Williston. Hunters likely won't be shooting many pheasants there this year."

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**RON WILSON** is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



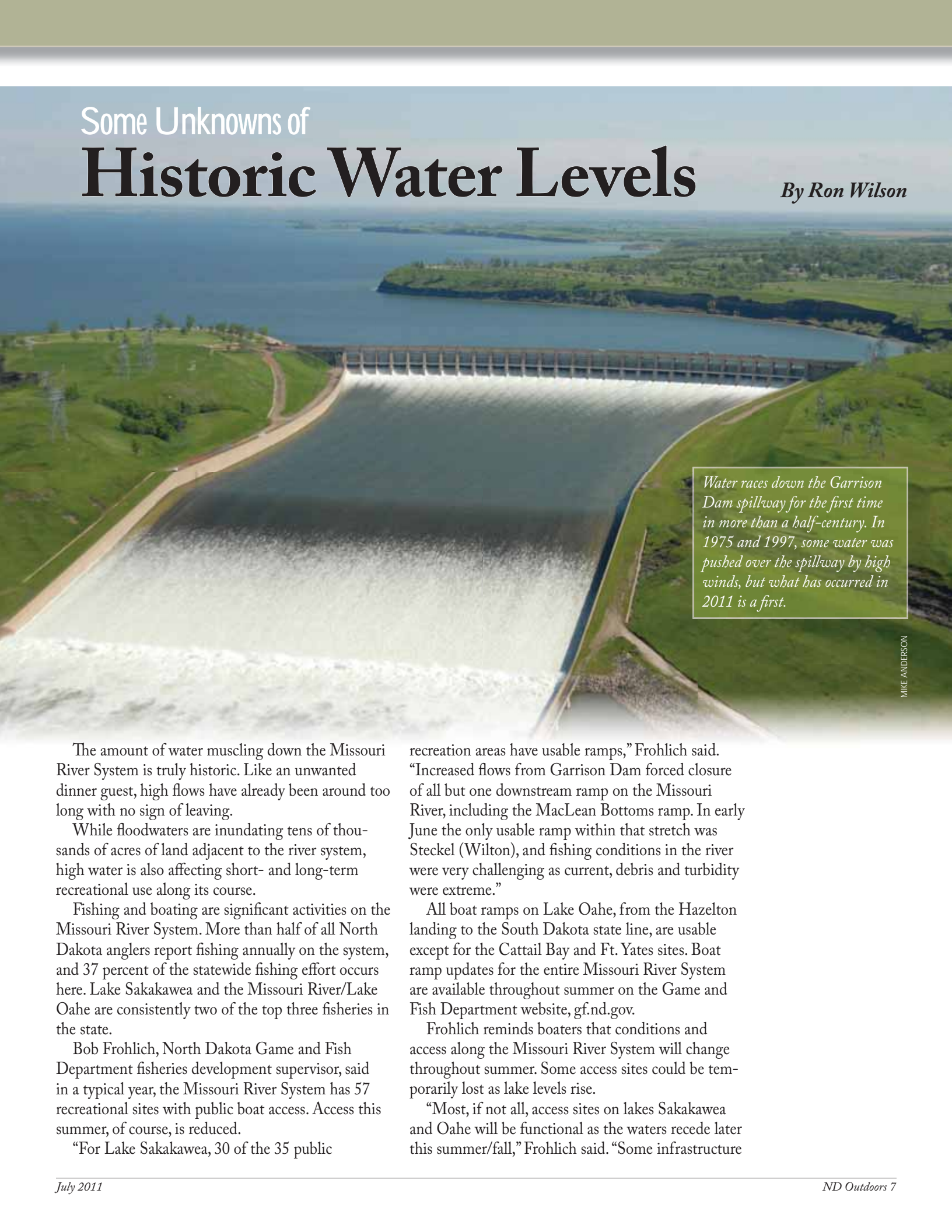
*Running with unimaginable might, the Missouri River eats away at the shoreline, swallowing trees and flooding acres and acres of land now unrecognizable from land or air.*

MIKE ANDERSON



# Some Unknowns of Historic Water Levels

By Ron Wilson



*Water races down the Garrison Dam spillway for the first time in more than a half-century. In 1975 and 1997, some water was pushed over the spillway by high winds, but what has occurred in 2011 is a first.*

MIKE ANDERSON

The amount of water muscling down the Missouri River System is truly historic. Like an unwanted dinner guest, high flows have already been around too long with no sign of leaving.

While floodwaters are inundating tens of thousands of acres of land adjacent to the river system, high water is also affecting short- and long-term recreational use along its course.

Fishing and boating are significant activities on the Missouri River System. More than half of all North Dakota anglers report fishing annually on the system, and 37 percent of the statewide fishing effort occurs here. Lake Sakakawea and the Missouri River/Lake Oahe are consistently two of the top three fisheries in the state.

Bob Frohlich, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries development supervisor, said in a typical year, the Missouri River System has 57 recreational sites with public boat access. Access this summer, of course, is reduced.

“For Lake Sakakawea, 30 of the 35 public

recreation areas have usable ramps,” Frohlich said. “Increased flows from Garrison Dam forced closure of all but one downstream ramp on the Missouri River, including the MacLean Bottoms ramp. In early June the only usable ramp within that stretch was Steckel (Wilton), and fishing conditions in the river were very challenging as current, debris and turbidity were extreme.”

All boat ramps on Lake Oahe, from the Hazelton landing to the South Dakota state line, are usable except for the Cattail Bay and Ft. Yates sites. Boat ramp updates for the entire Missouri River System are available throughout summer on the Game and Fish Department website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).

Frohlich reminds boaters that conditions and access along the Missouri River System will change throughout summer. Some access sites could be temporarily lost as lake levels rise.

“Most, if not all, access sites on lakes Sakakawea and Oahe will be functional as the waters recede later this summer/fall,” Frohlich said. “Some infrastructure



MIKE ANDERSON

*Fisheries biologists predicted that sight-feeding fish like walleyes will spend more time in Lake Oahe this summer. Turbidity and fast flows in the Missouri River make it harder for these fish to feed.*

## Make Local Contacts

For the past 15–20 years the number of natural lakes in North Dakota that support recreational fisheries has grown dramatically. This increase has largely been driven by abnormally wet conditions statewide.

Currently, there are about 350 fishable water bodies, many offering outstanding fishing opportunities. However, with the unprecedented flooding that continues to plague much of the state, access to some of these lakes has become difficult and sometimes impossible.

In wet portions of the state, anglers may want to make local contacts before venturing to a new fishing lake, ensuring that the roads leading to the lake and boat ramp at the lake are usable.

will likely require some attention.”

Many Missouri River boat ramps will experience considerable damage. Roads,

toilets, fish cleaning stations and docks will also require a large investment of time and money to reclaim their former usefulness, said Scott Gangl, Game and Fish Department fisheries management section leader. Game and Fish officials will assess the damage sometime in fall.

Because flows of this magnitude haven't occurred since the Missouri River dams were built, it's hard to say exactly how fish will respond. “Different species will react in different ways,” Gangl said. “High flows may trigger some large river fish, such as paddlefish, to move farther upstream, while others, such as sturgeon or blue suckers, may stay in the river and ‘enjoy’ conditions for which they're well adapted, but haven't experienced since the dams were built.”

Some predators, especially coldwater species like salmon and trout, may key in on abundant forage coming through the dam. During summer months, species that prefer slower moving water, such as carp and gar, will continue to use flooded, shallow backwater areas away from the main river channel. “Many fish species, particularly sight-feeders like walleye, will likely spend more time in lakes Sakakawea and Oahe rather than in the river, where turbidity and fast flows will make it harder for them to feed,” Gangl said.

There is always some fish loss through the dams and Gangl said his immediate concern is the potential loss of salmon and rainbow smelt, two species that spend a significant amount of time near dams as summer progresses and water temperatures warm. “If history is an indication, we are very concerned with potential loss of smelt through Oahe Dam this summer, and less concerned with Lake Sakakawea,” he said. “Our most recent experiences with high flows, albeit

much lower than current flows, was in the late 1990s.”

On Lake Sakakawea, the dam's intakes are located in deep water, where smelt and walleye don't reside for long periods of time. “While at times in 1997 it appeared that large numbers of smelt went through Garrison Dam into the Tailrace, we really didn't see a negative impact on the population as a whole,” Gangl said. “With an abundant smelt forage base, the Sakakawea walleye population continued to flourish until the drought of the 2000s took hold.”

However, timing of releases this year could compromise the smelt population because massive water releases are occurring earlier in the season than in 1997. “Most smelt inhabit shallower waters in spring and deeper, cooler waters later in summer,” said Dave Fryda, Game and Fish Department Missouri River System supervisor. “The release of surface water in June from Sakakawea via the spillway, which didn't occur in 1997, may have meant more smelt and other fish flushing through the dam.”

On Lake Oahe, fisheries biologists saw extreme negative effects from high flows in the 1990s. “The water intakes for Oahe Dam are located midway down the water column, not at the bottom like at Garrison Dam. In 1997, as the thermocline set up at the same level as the intakes, large numbers of smelt were flushed through the dam,” Gangl said. “South Dakota biologists estimated more than 90 percent of Lake Oahe smelt went through the dam that summer. Without that forage base, walleyes suffered from slower growth, poor body condition, and overall higher mortality rates for a number of years.”

Lake Oahe's walleye population currently has an abundance of younger walleyes less than 14 inches long due to good natural reproduction in recent years. Yet, fisheries biologists worry about losing Oahe's smelt population again, which was only recently reaching a satisfactory level of recovery from the last flush, and those younger walleyes will lack the forage needed to grow to a desirable angling size.

“In the short-term, this could lead to good fishing as the walleyes will be hungry,” Gangl said. “But in the long-term, as they deplete other alternative forage sources, we would begin to see the same things that occurred in

the 1990s and early 2000s – skinny fish that are smaller than average – and we will lose far more fish to natural mortality (starvation) than to angling.”

No doubt historic water levels and flows will change the Missouri River System, but it’s only a guess at what kinds of changes they will be. “Lake Sakakawea and the river reaches above will likely change the least as they annually experience a true ‘June rise’ from the uncontrolled Yellowstone River,” said Greg Power, Game and Fish Department fisheries chief. “Sediment deposition in the upper end of Sakakawea is an annual event, but 2011 will be the extreme of extremes.”

Lake Oahe, especially the upper end from immediately south of Bismarck to approximately the Hazelton/Ft. Rice area, will experience more sediment deposition than ever. Power said it’s possible that many of the distinctive backwater areas and oxbow lakes will fill with sediment by late fall when water recedes. Both Sakakawea and Oahe will also experience record high-bank erosion.

“The 70 or so miles of river below Garrison Dam will experience the most profound change. Extremely high releases over a prolonged period will greatly scour the river bed, and hundreds, if not thousands, of acres of bottomland will erode,” Power said. “The current will likely displace all the islands and sandbars that populated the river for the past half-century. And in some cases, the main river channel may reclaim some of its former self by incising a new path of least resistance. Even the Garrison Dam Tailrace and the area immediately downstream will take on a different look and, perhaps, function.”

Sandbars, islands and drop-offs are key fish structure and in large part responsible for the world-class recreational fishing the Missouri River System provides. The dramatic changes during the 2011 open-water season will dictate the future of this fishery.

Lake Audubon, which is also part of the Missouri River System, will also experience some change as its level was increased to store some of the excess water. The original plan was to raise Audubon up to an elevation of 1,854 feet above mean sea level, or 7 feet higher than the typical summer operating level. By June 9, however, the

*Different fish species will react in different ways during times of high flows. Paddlefish, fisheries biologists suspect, may move farther upstream, while other species may retreat to flooded backwaters.*



lake level had only increased to short of 1,850 msl where it will remain until more storage is needed or until it can return to its normal operating level.

“The current rise of 3-plus feet may actually benefit the Lake Audubon fishery because it will flood some terrestrial vegetation,” Gangl said. “This flooding will release nutrients into the water, thus increasing the productivity and food base for fish and wildlife that use the lake. Also, such a modest rise shouldn’t have a major negative effect on access or infrastructure.”

However, anything above 1,850 msl is a negative. Most boat access is lost if the lake is above 1,852 msl. In addition, erosion is already occurring around much of the shoreline. “If the lake reaches even higher elevations, we will see significant erosion damage to much of Audubon National Wildlife Refuge on the south side of the lake, and our state wildlife management area on the north side,” Gangl said.

Higher spillway flows from Garrison Dam have also backed up water around Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery, complicating the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s ability to fill and drain ponds used for rearing fish from fry to fingerlings. Efforts were underway in June to work around the challenging conditions to minimize potential stocking shortfalls.

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*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*

## Historic Flows

In a typical year, the State Water Commission reports that the total combined annual flows of the Red, Sheyenne, James and Souris rivers in North Dakota is only 4 percent of the Missouri’s flow in Bismarck.

Projected Missouri River flows will far exceed that this year. Prior to 2011, the highest release from Garrison Dam was 68,800 cubic feet per second in 1975, with 40 days of around 65,000 cfs from July 10 to August 18. More recently, 1997 saw peak flows of about 59,000 cfs with flows topping 50,000 cfs for 65 days.

This year peak flows will be around 150,000 cfs, with flows projected to exceed 100,000 cfs for perhaps 80 consecutive days. The Missouri River at Williston recorded an all-time high in mid-June and the river near Bismarck reached a record-high elevation for the summer period. In addition, Lake Oahe hit a record-high elevation on June 6 and Lake Sakakawea may reach an all-time high record by early July.



# 25 years

CRANC BIRHLE

## A Quarter-Century of CRP

By Ron Wilson

*Ring-necked pheasants and other ground-nesting birds flourish in the dense nesting cover provided by Conservation Reserve Program acres.*

A celebrated conservation program that improves water quality, safeguards soils on marginal cropland and provides indispensable cover for a host of animals big and small turns 25 this year.

Unfortunately, the silver anniversary of the Conservation Reserve Program may be the last noteworthy milestone for the lauded environmental undertaking that changed North Dakota's landscape. What's certain about the future of CRP is that the program is swathed in so much uncertainty.

Signed into law in 1985, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program was designed to reduce grain surpluses to jumpstart commodity prices, and decrease erosion on marginal croplands. It did that and more, scientists say, helping to reduce soil erosion by millions of tons across the country.

Lands enrolled in CRP are planted in grass and left mostly undisturbed for 10 years or more with periodic management, such as haying or grazing. Landowners receive rental payments and cost-share assistance to participate in the voluntary program.

When the Conservation Reserve program was at its peak in North Dakota, say, around 2007, the state was heir to 3.4 million acres of mostly idle grassland. Large grass blocks – entire sections in some areas – blanketed the landscape. Today, the picture is more and more fragmented. Even though the state gained nearly 132,000 acres in a March-April signup, about 387,000 CRP acres will expire by fall in North Dakota, leaving the state 1 million acres poorer since its heyday. The final balance this fall will be about 2.4 million CRP acres across the state's countryside.

“Fundamentally, CRP acres are winding down in North Dakota because the cap is down,” said Greg Link, North Dakota Game and Fish Department assistant wildlife division chief. The nationwide CRP cap was cut from 39 million acres to 32 million in the 2008 Farm Bill.

A reduced cap and other factors – high commodity prices, high cash rents, demands for more cropland for food, feed and fuel production – have encouraged producers to seriously mull participation in the program. “With commodity prices the way

they are, people are saying they need to make hay while the sun is shining,” Link said. “When producers are renting or buying land, they need to maximize profit, so to some, CRP doesn’t seem like the way to go.”

With deliberations already underway on a new farm bill, Link said some of the feedback points to an even lower nationwide CRP cap of a staggering 20-22 million. “The future for the program is not bright,” he said. “States could end up with CRP acres here and there that are tied to protecting the most critical landscapes and helping the most sensitive critters like sage grouse. It could be more of a triage program for the highest priority species, those animals in the direst need of first aid, rather than spreading CRP across the landscape knowing that a lot of animals are going to benefit.”

While CRP’s obituary is written in the minds of many, hope for gaining more acres nationwide and in North Dakota may lie in the unforeseen, considering the program does have a history for sticking around longer than people originally thought possible. “Everyone in the beginning thought it was going to be a really short program,” Link said. “They were saying ‘Let’s get that highly erodible land shored up, get that crop surplus fixed, but once things get right, we won’t need the program anymore.’ But over time other benefits started to become apparent, such as emergency forage for livestock producers, a drawing card for hunter dollars, and secure annual revenue for collateral. Seeing the tremendous response by wildlife to the grassy cover, the conservation community and others fought for CRP and we got it in the 1991 Farm Bill for another 10 years, and it became engrained in North Dakota and started to look like a mainstay on the landscape.”

Wildlife managers talk about an entire generation of hunters who have never seen North Dakota’s landscape without acres and acres of CRP. Not to mention bountiful animal populations that are the product of the dense cover that shelters them from unpredictable Northern Plains weather, while providing nesting and rearing habitat for ground-nesting birds.

“This generation will be severely disappointed in coming years unless we are able to salvage CRP and other landscape-level conservation programs,” said Randy Kreil, Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief. “It’s going to be a very big challenge in these financially difficult times, but the long-term benefits to wildlife resources and quality of life to this state and others is something that shouldn’t be ignored.”

While it makes perfect sense today that big blocks of grass spread across the countryside is a wonderful thing for wildlife, there was some uncertainty as to

the kind of influence it would have on many species when the Conservation Reserve Program was initiated.

Mike Johnson, Game and Fish Department game management section leader, said in the early 1980s, waterfowl biologists were investigating many avenues – nesting structures, peninsula cutoffs, electric fence enclosures, island construction, the list goes on – to improve duck nesting success in the state.

“We didn’t know how we were going to raise ducks,” he said. “Then came CRP and we were totally shocked what the ducks could do with that much grass on the landscape ... no one had any idea that it could happen or would happen.”

Waterfowl didn’t realize immediate benefits of CRP until after 1993 when water returned to the prairie after a prolonged drought. “The combination of grass and water was the perfect storm that has made for terrific nest success in North Dakota since 1994,” said Johnson. “CRP is so beneficial to ducks because they look for tall, dense cover, sometimes up to a mile away from water, as it provides security from predators. The more large blocks of habitat you have, the more difficult it is for fox and other predators to find the nests.”

Without CRP, and native grasslands that are also disappearing at a similar rate in North Dakota, Johnson doesn’t see a happy ending for ducks or for those who hunt them. “Without CRP and the native grass that remains, we will be right back where we were, trying to devise some kind of intense and expensive fragmented strategy to raise ducks,” he said. “I don’t see any way we are not going back to the way we were

*Large blocks of CRP on North Dakota’s landscape provide ideal nesting cover for ducks. With plenty of grass on the landscape, it makes it that much more difficult for predators to find nests full of eggs.*



*Wildlife biologists will tell you that CRP is the main ingredient to a quality pheasant population in North Dakota.*

prior to CRP. It's pretty depressing ... we haven't heard any good news concerning CRP in a long time."

The fact that there is plenty of water spread across North Dakota today isn't enough to cheer up Johnson. "Having water without the grass doesn't do ducks much good," he said.

Kreil said CRP changed the way Game and Fish officials manage the state's natural resources because as the program ramped up, there was suddenly more of everything – habitat, wildlife, hunters and places to hunt. "The result was a significant increase in sales of resident and nonresident hunting licenses," he said.

The decade prior to CRP in North Dakota, total resident and nonresident pheasant hunter numbers topped 45,000 only once, and dipped to about 32,000 in 1979. Yet as the program rooted itself into the state's soil, hunter numbers climbed over the years, topping out at a high of nearly 108,000 in 2008.

Wildlife biologists will tell you that while a string of mild winters and favorable weather now and again during nesting and rearing certainly helped pheasant populations in the last 25 years, their numbers would have been scant in comparison if it weren't for CRP.

"You can have good weather and all that, but the birds can't nest in the dirt," Kreil said. "CRP is the main ingredient to a quality pheasant population in North Dakota."

Where CRP really demonstrated its worth were the years following the historic winter of 1996-97 when many pheasants and other animals died after enduring months of snow and cold. Total pheasant harvest in 1997 was 136,000 birds – less than half of the take from 1996 – but that total increased to more than a half-million birds by 2002 and more than 900,000 by 2007.

"Because there were millions of acres of quality habitat on the ground, pheasants rebounded very quickly," Kreil said. "If it weren't for CRP, that rebound could have taken years."

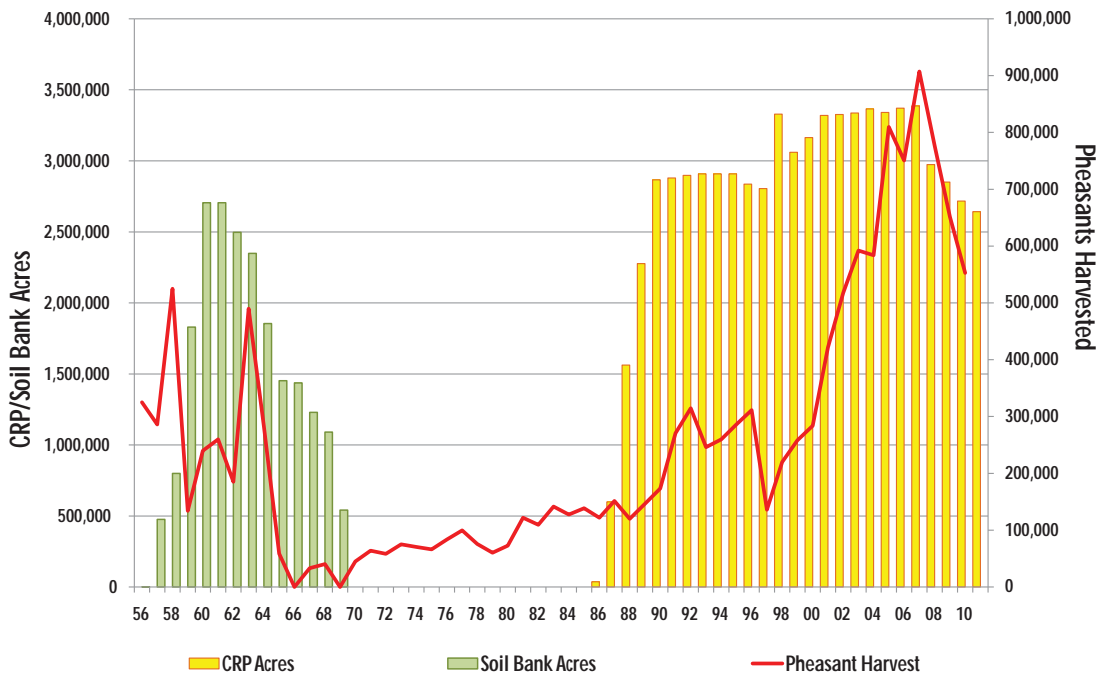
North Dakota's deer herd also took to the dense grass cover, which can provide food and shelter from the weather and hideaways to birth fawns. "Predators are going to have a much more difficult time finding a fawn in a 640-acre CRP field than along some fence line," Kreil said.

Teamed with a decade or so of decent winters, deer numbers increased across the landscape. In 1985, the Game and Fish Department made available just 70,625 deer licenses. By 2008, that number more than doubled to a high of 149,400.

"The Conservation Reserve Program has proven over and over again that if you put quality habitat on North Dakota's landscape, the wildlife responds," Kreil said. "CRP has also dramatically changed our Private Land Open To Sportsmen program as we've been able to enroll

CRAIG BIRNLE

## CRP AND SOIL BANK PROGRAMS/PHEASANT HARVEST 1956-2011



COLIN PENNER

thousands of acres of high quality wildlife habitat into this hunter access program, providing countless days of recreation for an increased number of hunters looking for a place to go.”

Kevin Kading, Game and Fish Department private land section leader, said that while it’s possible to enroll land into PLOTS that doesn’t contain CRP, CRP lands are highly sought, especially in high pheasant harvest counties because of the hunting opportunities and habitat they provide.

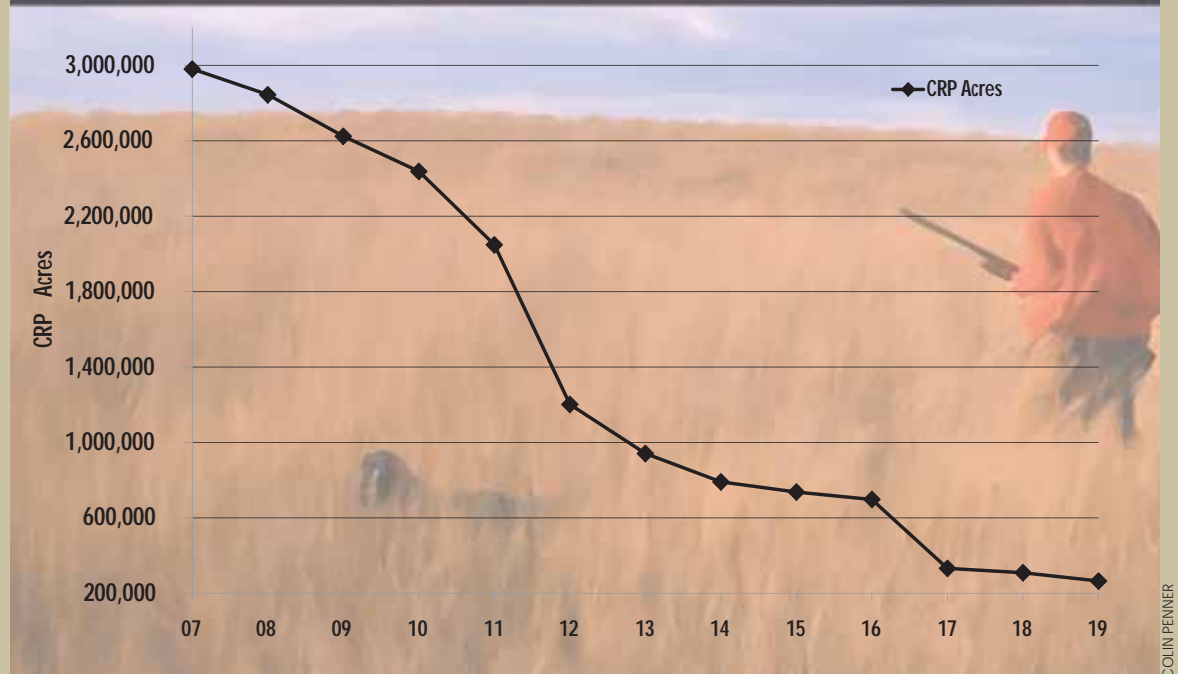
There are nearly a half-million CRP acres associated with the Department’s 1 million-acre PLOTS program. “Each year we lose some CRP from PLOTS, but we have been able to replace some of those lost acres with new CRP elsewhere,” Kading said. “However,



CRAIG BIRBLE

*There are nearly a half-million CRP acres associated with the Game and Fish Department’s popular Private Land Open To Sportsmen program.*

## NORTH DAKOTA CRP PROJECTED LOSSES



the trend since 2007 has shown a loss of about 40,000 acres of CRP from the PLOTS program.”

Because CRP is tied closely to pheasant and waterfowl populations in the state, Kading said enrolling the mostly idle grasslands into PLOTS is always a plus. “CRP does provide the biggest bang for the buck, not only to the PLOTS program, but to hunters, wildlife, landowners and taxpayers,” he said.

Without CRP, Kading said, the PLOTS program would shrink because there is no way to have the same quality habitat and the same amount of habitat available without CRP. “It would be next to impossible for the Game and Fish Department’s PLOTS program to replace CRP as the annual PLOTS budget is about \$5 million, which is not even close to the \$94 million that CRP pays annually in North Dakota,” he said. “However, the Department is always looking for new opportunities.”

One example is the USDA’s Wetland Reserve Program. “There has been a tremendous amount of interest in this program because of the wet

cycle we are in,” Kading said. “The Department is offering incentives to landowners to allow public access through PLOTS on their WRP land.”

As the ebb of CRP continues in North Dakota, pheasants and ducks will be hit the hardest, Link said. “And what about our hunters?” he said. “Even now, with a million fewer CRP acres than we had in 2007, it’s going to put more pressure on our public hunting areas.”

The potential to lose much of the CRP in the state is a path North Dakota traveled before. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the federal government initiated Soil Bank, the predecessor to today’s Conservation Reserve Program. Environmentally friendly and a boon to wildlife, Soil Bank was eventually retired.

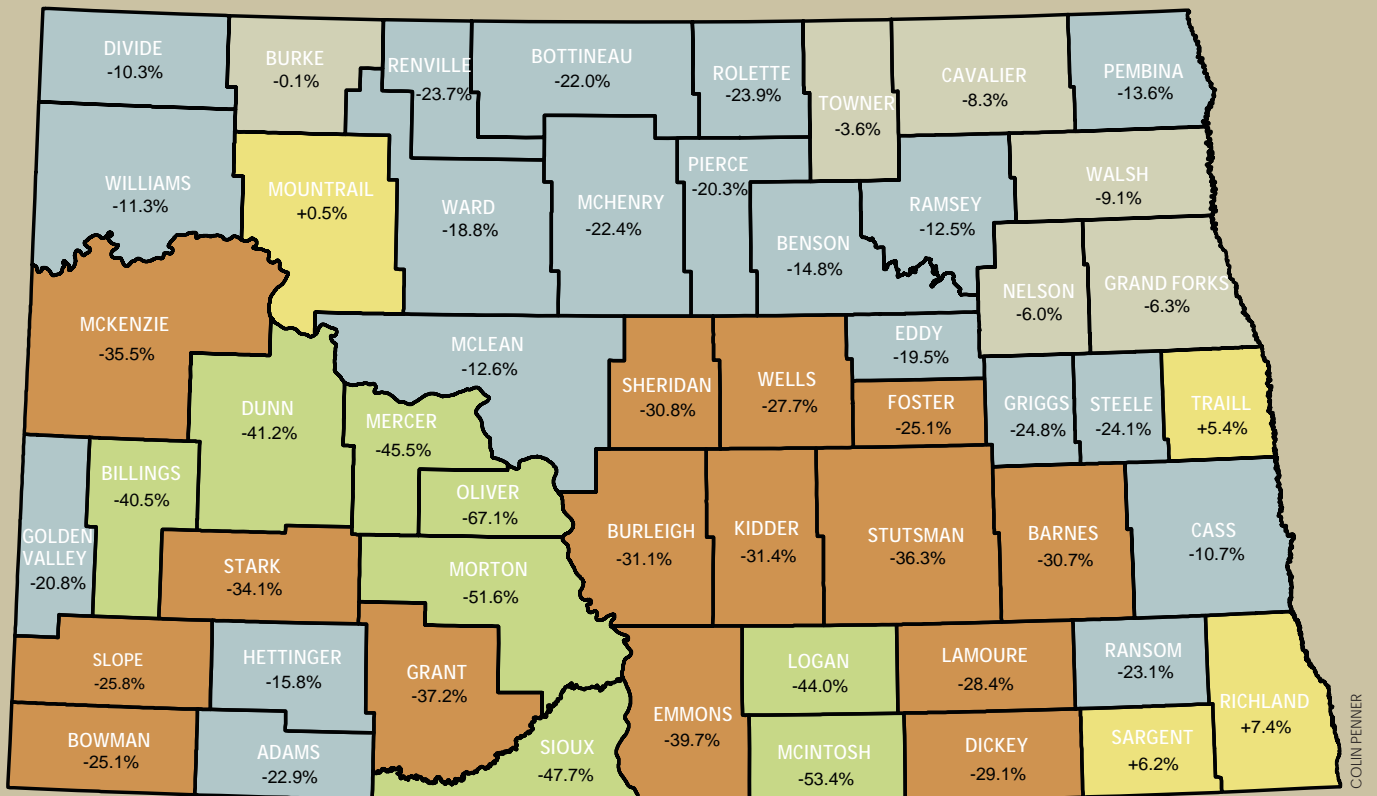
“That begs the question, ‘Will we ever learn?’” Kreil said.

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**RON WILSON** is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

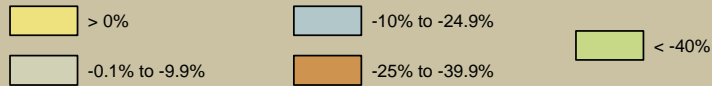


## PERCENT CHANGE OF CRP ACRES/COUNTY 2007 - PRESENT



COLIN PENNER

### PERCENT CHANGE



MIKE JOHNSON

# Fisher

TRAPPING SEASON IN THE WORKS

*By Greg Freeman*



The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is proposing a fisher trapping season in 2011. While details won't be finalized until the governor signs the small game and furbearer proclamation in late July, years of research, collecting data and monitoring the population indicate a season is merited.

Stephanie Tucker, Department furbearer biologist, said research findings indicate fishers have recolonized areas of the state where they historically occurred, and they may even expand a bit farther.

Fishers were historically found in northeastern North Dakota, but considered extirpated from the state by the early 1900s. Tucker said verified reports of fishers began increasing in the late 1990s. "Researchers examined the current distribution of fishers in the state and determined they were most likely found along riparian corridors in northeastern North Dakota," she said. "Reports of fisher occurrence are also increasing in east central and southeastern North Dakota."

Tucker says having a trapping season won't influence the population because fishers are already routinely trapped incidentally, killed by automobiles or removed for depredation. "Trappers have been reporting incidental captures of fishers since the late 1990s," she said. "Many of these trappers took the time to turn in carcasses of fishers that were incidentally trapped. These reports and carcasses were valuable in providing enough evidence and data to support the limited harvest season on fishers that is being proposed."

Currently, a minimum of 10-12 fishers are killed annually in North Dakota. Tucker said the actual number of mortalities per year is likely greater than that, but trends indicate the population is stable or increasing.

"Therefore, it would be desirable to allow people to keep the pelts of those that are already being killed each year," Tucker said. "Additionally,

opening a harvest season would facilitate an increase in available data, by requiring mandatory carcass collections, with which we could better monitor the population."

In addition, a research study conducted by students from Frostburg State University in Pennsylvania provided scientific evidence on fisher distribution in North Dakota. Tucker said this study compared current distributions with historical distributions, and documented detection rates, suitable survey techniques and reproductive evidence.

Though the study was completed in 2010, part of fisher management in the future will include mandatory carcass collections associated with a harvest season, population dynamics and modeling research.

"Opening the first ever regulated trapping season for fishers in North Dakota is a great success story of responsible wildlife management, not only in North Dakota but surrounding states and provinces as well," Tucker said. "We appreciate the enormous amount of help and information provided by fur harvesters, landowners, interested citizens, and other organizations and agencies during the past decade. Without their help, we still may have been years away from our current level of understanding regarding the fisher population in North Dakota."

**GREG FREEMAN** is the Game and Fish Department's news editor.

*Fishers are large members of the weasel family. Solitary, except when breeding or rearing young, these animals prey on rabbits, squirrels, mice, voles and shrews.*



JOHN ERB, MINNESOTA DNR

# Fisher Questions and Answers

**Q: How was the boundary of the open zone selected?**

A: We want to allow access to as much of the fisher population as possible, while avoiding the likelihood of people catching American marten while trapping for fishers. American marten are found primarily in the Turtle Mountains and are vulnerable to traps set for fishers.

**Q: Why is tagging necessary?**

A: Mandatory tagging of fisher pelts is consistent with other states' regulations, and helps facilitate collection of fisher carcasses, which are important for collecting biological data.

**Q: Why allow only trapping of fishers and not hunting?**

A: Fishers are a furbearer that is traditionally only trapped.

Additionally, allowing trappers to keep those fishers that are already caught incidentally is a major benefit of opening a harvest season. By allowing people to hunt fishers, this benefit would be lost.

**Q: Why can each person harvest only one fisher?**

A: Game and Fish wants to give as many people as possible access to the limited quota.

**Q: What data does Game and Fish have to support harvest of 10 fishers without hurting the population?**

A: Game and Fish has documented at least 10-12 fishers killed annually in North Dakota, and the fisher population continues to be stable or increasing. We are reasonably confident the

harvest of 10 fishers will not add to current mortality rates.

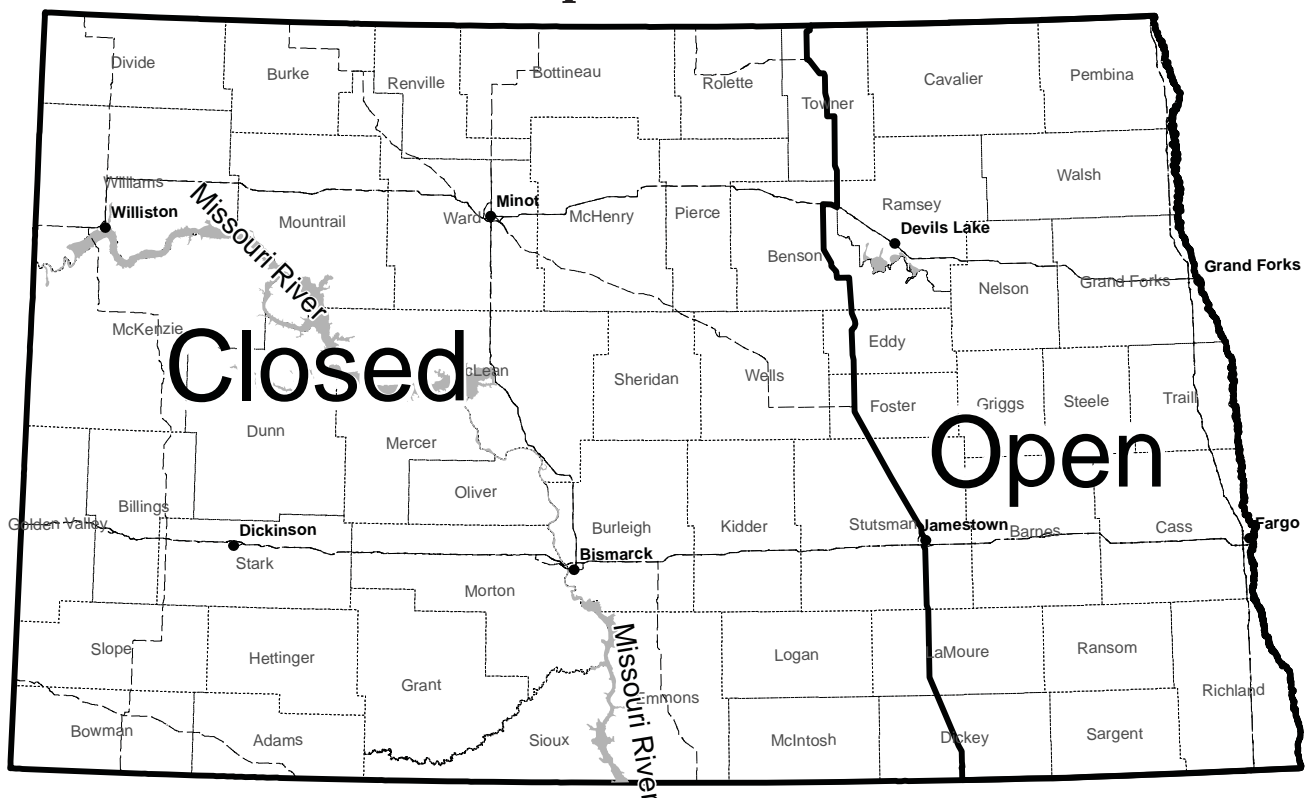
**Q: Will a fisher caught incidentally by a trapper who's already caught a fisher in the current year, count toward the quota?**

A: Yes, only fisher taken by U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services, Game and Fish Department or private landowners in defense of livestock or personal property do not count toward the quota.

**Q: Why not open the season earlier than mid- to late November?**

A: Fisher pelts do not prime up until then.

## Fisher Open/Closed Areas



# Aquatic Nuisance Species UPDATE

## DRAIN YOUR LIVEWELL



New state law now requires boat operators to drain livewells, even if they contain fish, when leaving a water body. "Leaving a water body" means beyond the adjacent boat ramp parking area.

## OTHER ANS PREVENTION MEASURES



*Remove all aquatic plants from boats, trailers and equipment before leaving any water body.*



*Drain all water from boats and other watercraft when leaving a water body.*



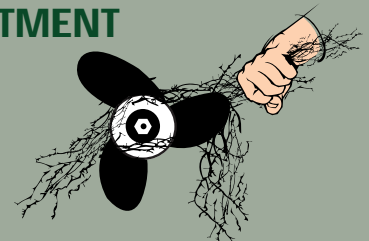
*Do not release baitfish in any North Dakota water, and do not bring in live aquatic bait from another state.*

## KEEP ANS OUT OF OUR WATER



### **NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT**

100 North Bismarck Expressway  
Bismarck, ND 58501-5095  
701.328.6300  
Email: [ndgf@nd.gov](mailto:ndgf@nd.gov)  
Web: [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov)



# BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



By Greg Freeman, Department News Editor

## Spring Duck Index Remains High, Water Conditions Up

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual spring breeding duck survey showed an index of more than 4.1 million birds, down slightly (minus 9 percent) from last year, but 85 percent above the long-term average (1948-2010). The 2011 index is the ninth highest on record.

Wigeon (plus 15 percent), blue-winged teal (plus 12 percent) and pintails (plus 4 percent and the highest since 1970) were the only ducks to show an increase from last year. However, all species except scaup were well above the long-term average.

Shovelers were down 13 percent from last year's record high. Mallards were down 4 percent, but had the sixth highest count on record. Indices for all other species were below those of 2010, with the most significant decreases for ruddy ducks (minus 62 percent), lesser scaup (minus 58 percent) and redhead (minus 33 percent).

"Redheads and ruddy ducks were at record highs last year and scaup numbers were also well-above average," said Mike Johnson, Game and Fish Department game management section leader. "So their decline was not surprising."

The spring water index was up 31 percent from 2010 and 128 percent above the long-term average. It was the second highest in survey history and the highest since 1999. The water index is based on basins with water, and does not necessarily represent the amount of water contained in wetlands.

"Water conditions were exceptional throughout the state, with abundant snow



*The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's spring breeding duck survey indicated an index of more than 4.1 million birds.*

CRAG BIRRE

cover and significant spring rains filling most basins," Johnson said.

Additionally, reports indicate that all of the Prairie Pothole Region in the United States and Canada (from Iowa to Alberta) has excellent water conditions this year. "To our knowledge this is an unprecedented occurrence, at least since surveys have been conducted," Johnson said.

The July brood survey will provide a better idea of duck production and insight into expectations for this fall. Observations indicate prospects for high production across the state due to excellent water conditions and increased wetland availability for brood production.

## Statewide Drop in Pheasant Crowding Counts

North Dakota's spring pheasant crowding count survey revealed a 14 percent

decrease statewide compared to last year.

The only area of the state showing an increase was the southwest, up 5 percent from 2010. The number of crows heard in the northwest was down 17 percent, while counts in the southeast were down 30 percent. In the northeast, where there is less pheasant habitat, counts decreased 36 percent.

Stan Kohn, North Dakota Game and Fish Department upland game management supervisor, said severe winters, poor production and loss of Conservation Reserve Program acreage have attributed to the three-year decline in crow count numbers.

"Three consecutive long winters with heavy snowfall have not been conducive to winter survival," Kohn said. "In addition, after a tough winter surviving hens enter spring stressed and in poor condition to begin reproduction, which may affect the number of eggs laid."

Poor production the last three springs led to fewer young birds entering the population in fall. "Poor production is a result of cool, wet weather at the time of hatching, which causes higher than normal mortality on chicks," Kohn said. "I anticipated the southwest to have higher crow count numbers than the other pheasant districts because good numbers of pheasants were observed in this area last winter."

Loss of CRP has decreased nesting and brooding cover, and Kohn said this has been most noticeable in the southeast where a decline in CRP across the last three years probably has had a significant effect

on the number of pheasants produced. "Couple that with the number of acres of small grains removed from the landscape and replaced by row crops, lower pheasant numbers are expected," he said.

In addition, predators could also be having an adverse effect on pheasants. "I don't have specific data to show a direct effect, but we do have an increase in mammalian predators on the landscape this spring, and they do eat eggs and meat to survive," Kohn said. "I suspect they may be affecting pheasant populations in some localized areas."

On the positive side, Kohn said pheasant hens are finding better quality nesting and brooding cover on the uplands this spring. However, lowland nesting attempts will probably be nonexistent in many areas because of high water levels

along streams and rivers, so a strong re-nesting effort will be needed for good production.

"However, on dry upland sites, native warm season plants are doing extremely well this spring and one would anticipate a good number of insects and eventually grasshoppers to become available with a good legume habitat component this summer," Kohn said. "June weather hasn't been the best for hatching chicks, but warm evening temperatures have been good. Recent downpours in some areas may jeopardize small chicks in localized spots, but we have not experienced large scale hail storms in the primary pheasant range yet this spring. So at present, we are in a wait-and-see process on how production turns out this spring for all our upland game birds."

Spring crowing count data has little to do with predicting the fall population. It does not measure population density, but is an indicator of the spring rooster population based on a trend of the number of crows heard. Brood surveys, which begin in mid-July and are completed by September, provide an indicator of the summer's pheasant production and provide insight into what to expect for a fall pheasant population.

Pheasant crowing counts are conducted each spring throughout North Dakota. Observers drive specified 20-mile routes, stopping at predetermined intervals, and counting the number of pheasant roosters heard crowing over a two-minute period. The number of pheasant crows heard is compared to previous years' data providing a trend summary.

## Summer Safety on the Water

Failure to wear a personal flotation device is the main reason people lose their lives in boating accidents.

The National Safe Boating Council warns boaters that most drowning victims had a life jacket available, but were not wearing it when they entered the water. "It is difficult to put a life jacket on once you are already in the water," said Nancy Boldt, boat and water safety coordinator for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. "The single most important part of safety on the water is wearing a personal flotation device."

North Dakota law requires all

children ages 10 and younger to wear a personal flotation device while in boats of less than 27 feet in length. The law also requires all personal watercraft users to wear a life jacket, Boldt said, as well as anyone towed on skis, tubes, boards or other similar devices.

Water users should make sure to wear life jackets that are the appropriate size and in good condition. It is also important that children wear a PFD while swimming.

When purchasing a PFD, Boldt suggests considering the most prevalent water activity. Water skiers and tubers should wear a life jacket with four nylon straps rather than one with a zipper, because straps are stronger than zippers upon impact with water. Anglers or persons paddling a canoe should opt for a PFD that is comfortable enough to wear for an entire outing.

Water skiers and tubers are reminded it takes three to ski and tube. When a person is towed on water skis or a similar

device, an observer other than the operator is required on the vessel.

It is important for swimmers to know water depth, as serious injuries can occur from diving into water. Larger objects can be hidden below the water's surface, potentially leading to a significant injury.

North Dakota boaters also are reminded that marine VHF radios are an important safety device and boaters should not use them improperly. Boldt said they are intended for boat operators who are in distress and facing an emergency situation.

Regulations to help ensure safe boating this summer are found in the 2010-12 North Dakota Fishing Guide. A more comprehensive listing is available in the North Dakota Boat and Water Safety Guide or the Boat North Dakota education book. These guides are available online at the Game and Fish website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov), by email at [ndgf@nd.gov](mailto:ndgf@nd.gov), or at a local Game and Fish Department office.



CRAIG BIRLE

### Third Lottery Doe Licenses

North Dakota deer hunters can look for third lottery applications in mid-July.

Resident and nonresident hunters who have not yet applied for the 2011 deer gun season, or who want additional licenses, must submit a third lottery application.

The third lottery application will be available online at the Game and Fish Department website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov). Paper applications will also be available from license vendors throughout the state.

Hunters can use the additional concurrent season doe licenses during the archery season with a bow; the deer gun season with a bow, rifle, or muzzleloader; or during the muzzleloader season with a muzzleloader. The licenses are for antlerless deer only, and hunters must stay in the unit to which the license is assigned.

In addition, youth deer license hunters ages 14 and 15 may purchase additional concurrent season doe licenses to use during the youth season.

### Early Canada Goose Season

An early hunting season intended to reduce local Canada goose numbers in North Dakota is tentatively scheduled to open statewide August 13.

Despite liberalized Canada goose seasons the past several years, the statewide population remains high, with numbers

well above population goals.

During the past decade, hunters have been able to take advantage of longer Canada goose hunting seasons, maximum bag limits and expanded shooting hours. While these strategies have resulted in considerable increases in harvest, the population remains above objective levels.

Normal licensing requirements for the regular season, including a federal duck stamp, apply to the early season. Non-residents who hunt in Benson, Ramsey, Towner, Sargent and Richland counties during the early season may do so without counting against their 14-day regular season license.

Hunters should refer to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov), for additional information and regulations, including Harvest Information Program certification and bag limits.

### Game and Fish Summarizes 2010 Pheasant Season

More pheasant hunters in the field in 2010 didn't correlate to an increase in roosters in the bag.

Last fall's pheasant harvest was 552,800, down from 651,700 in 2009. The number of total hunters increased 4 percent to 91,900. The number of resident hunters was up 3 percent to 61,100, while nonresident

pheasant hunter numbers increased 7 percent to 30,800.

Birds bagged per hunter decreased from 7.4 to 6.0, and each hunter spent an average of 4.9 days afield.

Counties with the highest percentage of pheasants taken by resident hunters were Hettinger, 7.3; Burleigh, 6.1; McLean, 6.0; Stark, 5.2; and Morton, 4.5.

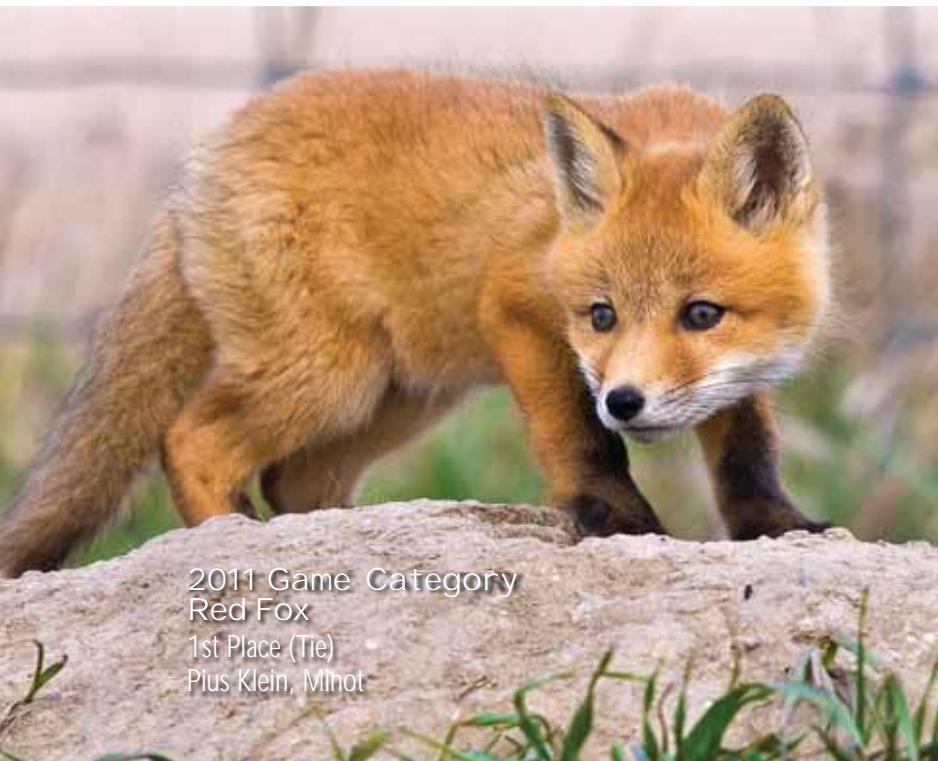
Top counties for nonresident hunters were Hettinger, 23.9 percent; Bowman, 6.2; McIntosh, 5.1; Dickey, 5.0; and Divide, 4.4.

Annual pheasant season statistics are determined by a mail survey of resident and nonresident hunters.



GREG GULLICKSON





2011 Game Category  
Red Fox  
1st Place (Tie)  
Plus Klein, Minot

## WW Photo Contest Deadline

The deadline for submitting photos to the Game and Fish Department's annual Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest is September 30.

The contest has categories for nongame and game species, as well as plants/insects. Judges will choose an overall winning photograph, plus a number of place winners in each category.

Contest entries are limited to 5x7-inch or larger color prints, or digital files submitted on disk or via email. Contestants are limited to no more than five entries. Photos must have been taken in North Dakota.

By submitting an entry, photographers grant permission to Game and Fish to publish win-

ning photographs in *North Dakota OUTDOORS* magazine, and as part of the magazine on the Department's website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).

Prints or photo disks should be sent to Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest, C/O Patrick T. Isakson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501-5095.

Send emailed digital photos to [photocontest@nd.gov](mailto:photocontest@nd.gov). Digital submissions can be either original digital photographs, or scans made from prints or slides/transparencies. Photographers will need to supply the original image if needed for publication.

Prints will be returned if requested following judging. Photo disks will not be returned. All entries must be accompanied by the photographer's name, address, phone number and email address if available. Other information such as photo site location and month taken are also useful.

Although Game and Fish will take care with submitted material, the Department assumes no financial responsibility for lost or damaged materials.

# BOW

## Space Available for BOW

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is still accepting registrations for three Becoming an Outdoors-Woman workshops in 2011.

The 17th annual summer workshop is scheduled August 12-14 at Lake Metigoshe State Park, Bottineau. Participants may take several programs including archery, canoeing, field dressing big game, introduction to firearms, fly-fishing, kayaking, navigating outdoors, duck decoy painting, Dutch-oven cooking, global positioning system, plant identification, and tracking and trapping. Workshop fees of \$135 cover instruction, program materials, use of equipment, all meals and lodging.

Catfishing the Red River is set in Grand Forks August 27-28. Participants must have a valid fishing license, and will be instructed in identification, tackle, gear and techniques for fishing for catfish in the Red River. Workshop fees of \$50 include instruction in all sessions, program materials and use of equipment. No lodging is provided.

A waterfowl hunting workshop is scheduled October 1-2 in Bismarck. Participants will learn firearm and waterfowl safety, shotgun shooting, waterfowl identification, water/field decoys and gear, and techniques for decoying and calling waterfowl. October 2 will feature a mentored hunt.

Participants must possess a hunter education certificate, current hunting licenses, and provide their own hunting clothing, boots or waders. Workshop fees of \$20 include instruction, program materials and use of equipment. No lodging is provided.

BOW workshops are designed primarily for women with an interest in learning skills associated with hunting, fishing and outdoor endeavors. Although open to anyone age 18 or older, the workshops are tailored primarily to women who have never tried these activities or who are beginners hoping to improve their skills.

To receive a brochure and enrollment form, access the Game and Fish website at [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov), or contact Nancy Boldt, BOW coordinator, at (701) 328-6312; or email [ndgf@nd.gov](mailto:ndgf@nd.gov).

## Swan Application Deadline Upcoming

Swan applications will be online and at vendors throughout the state in mid- to late July.

Prospective hunters are encouraged to apply at the Game and Fish Department website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov). The website also contains application forms that can be printed and mailed. Regular license fees apply and no service charge is added.

Applications will be available at Game and Fish offices, county auditors and license vendors.

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

Residents and nonresidents can apply. Since swans are classified as waterfowl, nonresidents may hunt them only during the period their nonresident waterfowl license is valid.

The deadline for submitting a swan application is August 17.

## GAME AND FISH STAFF NOTES



Lori Kensington

Lori Kensington is the Game and Fish Department enforcement division's new administrative assistant. She is replacing Barb Schell, who recently retired after 18 years with the Department.



## NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH ONLINE

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NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT  
100 North Bismarck Expressway  
Bismarck, ND 58501-5095  
701.328.6300  
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# back cast

By Ron Wilson



Despite my age, nearly 50, I'm a member of the generation of hunters wildlife managers talk about who have never experienced North Dakota without oodles of CRP.

We are the beneficiaries of bountiful pheasant, duck and deer populations because, in large part, of the quality habitat the mostly idle blocks of grass have provided for years.

These same managers, who have also enjoyed the fruits of CRP professionally and personally, forecast our future discontent as North Dakota continues to lose acres and acres of dense cover, taking many of the animals with it.

We have been spoiled (my words, not theirs) and lucky to have been around in the best of times when it comes to hunting on the Northern Plains. CRP was at its peak, about 3.4 million acres, in North Dakota in 2007. Four years from now, if projected losses hold true, that acreage total will slide to less than 1 million acres. Four years after that, CRP could be a landscape oddity, something you pull over to look at and tell the grandkids stories about.

I fall into the generation of CRPers because I moved to North Dakota and started hunting here as the landscape-level conservation program was taking root. Initially, the big blocks of waist-high grass were intimidating to some hunters who spent previous seasons hunting what the countryside offered in much smaller doses – shelterbelts, brushy cover along fence lines and waterways, cattail-choked sloughs and grassy hilltops where landowners piled rocks and other debris.

On my first deer hunt in the state with a couple of longtime locals, they laughed at the notion of hunting CRP even though we saw deer in this exact cover all weekend. "Too big ... You need an army of hunters to hunt it right ... The deer see you coming a mile away ..."

Their excuses were many, but I think they had more to do with not wanting to get out of the vehicle, no matter the type of cover, than anything else.

I shot my first North Dakota deer in a CRP field the next season. It was a small buck that was swallowed by the grass when he'd decided it was time to bed down. It was a good place to hide, to ride out the morning invisible to passersby, until it was time to move again. Sometime later, I shot him when he stood.

CRP is one of those things we've long presupposed. Like water running downhill out of the tap when we turn the handle, we've taken the dense nesting cover mixes of alfalfa, sweet clover, big bluestem and tall and slender wheatgrass for granted, knowing, or certainly hoping, that it will always be there come hunting season, along with the wild game animals we hunt.

To steal from CPR, the life-saving technique with a similar acronym, the Conservation Reserve Program is in need of resuscitation. Whether we – conservationists, landowners, lawmakers – can revive it in a time of national debt reduction and a high demand for food, feed and fuel is the big question.

To steal from the piece on CRP's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in this issue: The potential to lose much of the CRP in the state is a path North Dakota traveled before. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the federal government initiated Soil Bank, the predecessor to today's Conservation Reserve Program. Environmentally friendly and a boon to wildlife, Soil Bank was eventually retired.

"That begs the question, 'Will we ever learn?'" said Randy Kreil, North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief.

Unfortunately, we probably never will.

**RON WILSON** is editor of North Dakota *OUTDOORS*.

# A CLOSER LOOK

By Sandra Johnson



CRAIG BIRKLE

## Virginia Rail

Wetlands are busy places. Yellow-headed and red-winged blackbirds spread-eagle atop cattails vying for territory. Coots, members of the rail family, meander about aimlessly, heads pumping along the way.

Chatter from critters more often heard than seen fills the air. Frogs and toads grunt, trill, snore and rattle. The sora, another rail, loudly screams its descending *whee-hee-hee-hee-hee*, a call familiar to those who have spent time by a wetland. Then a low, fast *tick-it tick-it tick-it* is broadcast from the Virginia rail, another fairly common rail in North Dakota, but perhaps less understood.

Rails are closely related to cranes, but look more like small chickens. These birds are made for living in dense vegetation. Narrow bodies, strong legs and toes, and a claw-like appendage at the bend of their flexible wings, helps in navigating through marshy jungles. The Virginia

rail's deep hues and banded coloration conceals its 10-inch long body perfectly in the wetland grasses as it balances on nearly 2-inch toes.

Virginia rails are distributed throughout much of the United States, southern and central Canada, and winter as far south as Mexico City. In North Dakota, they arrive in May and depart about mid-September.

Some of their various calls have been described as wheezy, pig-like grunts and more nasally than soras. These birds prefer shallow wetlands with muddy bottoms, mostly covered with emergent vegetation, but with some open water where they can find invertebrate prey.

The Virginia rail builds a nest above water and bends vegetation to form a canopy. Seven to 12 eggs fill a nest and chicks hatch in about 20 days. The chick's toes grow as long as their parents' by 3 weeks old.

This bird seldom flies, preferring to run or swim from danger. If you're lucky to see one flying you'll chuckle at the bird's awkwardness and big toes dangling. Like the rail pictured above, occasionally you'll catch a glimpse of one out of its element. This bird had wandered out of its marshy haunt into shorter vegetation at Game and Fish headquarters in Bismarck.

While they don't look it, rails are actually game birds. Several states have hunting seasons for Virginia rails, though it's not a highly pursued game bird. Compared to ducks, the number of Virginia rails bagged barely registers a blip on the harvest table. The only rail family member you can hunt in North Dakota is the not-so-elusive American coot.

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**SANDRA JOHNSON** is a Game and Fish Department conservation biologist.