

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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SPECIAL FALL
OUTLOOK ISSUE





MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

2011 will go in the record books, and in the memories of all, as nothing short of incredible, and in some instances, disastrous. We endured a third consecutive severe winter, flooding for much of summer, and other weather anomalies that were difficult to fathom.

I doubt there aren't many of us not directly or indirectly affected by high water. And, of course, rumors and casting blame for the high water are running rampant. As I've said to my wife countless times, there's a conspiracy theory under every rock and this year has been no different with its multitude of extreme and severe events.

I think Bismarck Mayor John Warford summed it up best when he said we can't make good decisions based on rumor, instead we have to use the best information available and then make the best decision possible.

One thing I've learned throughout my life in North Dakota is that we will persevere and recover from these tough times. Granted, it will take time and effort, but it will happen. I have no doubt.

The time of year many of us can't wait to arrive is almost here, the fall hunting season.

The cooler temperatures, turning leaves and shorter daylight hours trigger anticipation in a large percentage of the North Dakota population. I'm no different in that I'm finding myself checking my guns more, inventorying reloading supplies, and generally thinking about what I need to do as fall approaches.

Once September hits, the season openers are fast and furious. It seems like another

season opener begins every weekend until deer gun season arrives, the culmination for many outdoor enthusiasts in our great state. While I realize almost all openers are special, the deer opener has a holiday-like feel and takes a backseat only to Christmas in North Dakota. Maybe this is a bit of an exaggeration, but the passion it stirs in many of us is hard to discount.

This issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS* provides a forecast for the hunting season, which will hopefully help you to plan your fall. I've never put much emphasis on shooting my limit, but instead focus on the fun I had during a given day outdoors. We're all accountable for what occurs during any hunting trip.

Bear in mind, the fallout of a summer of high water will extend into fall in some areas. Is the road I normally take to my hunting spot flooded? How will I get there via an alternate route? I know I've done a little homework already and know I'm probably going to have to walk an extra half-mile to get to my normal hunting spot because the section line is under water. But anticipating the fun I'm going to have, it's well worth the effort.

As we head into the field this fall anticipating another great hunting season in North Dakota, let's remember that the fun we have really rests on our shoulders. Respect the game you're pursuing, respect the land you're on, private or open to the public, and respect the law. I know that it's going to be another great fall in North Dakota.

Terry Steinwand

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Front cover: Deer season is arguably the most anticipated hunting season in North Dakota. Photo by Craig Bihrl, Bismarck.



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100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501-5095
Website: gf.nd.gov • email: ndgfd@nd.gov
Information (701) 328-6300 • Administration (701) 328-6305
Hunter Education (701) 328-6615 • Licensing (701) 328-6335
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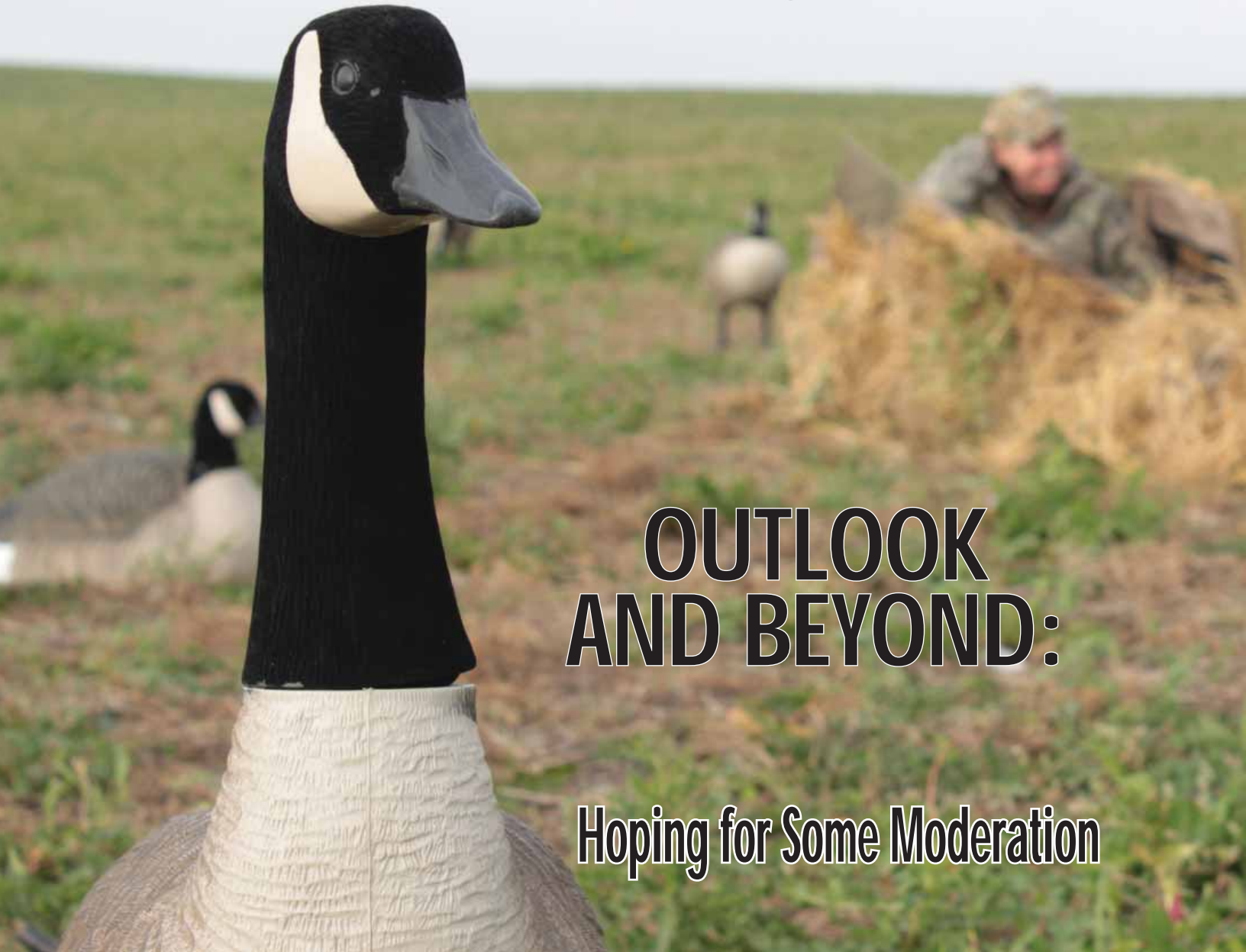
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The 2011 Hunting Season



OUTLOOK AND BEYOND:

Hoping for Some Moderation

It's no secret that those of us who have hunted in North Dakota the past two decades have ridden a high tide of opportunities. In fact, this run of "good old days" has existed long enough that many people consider what we have experienced as normal.

Even during the best times, wildlife populations can go up or down from year to year. However, this fall, for the third

year in a row, the outlook is a bit less optimistic than the year before, and it looks like the start of a trend that may not right itself for some time.

Over the next several pages, Game and Fish Department biologists have summarized what we have learned from biological and hunter harvest surveys over the past 12 months, but to set the stage, consider the following:

The hunting opportunities that attracted record numbers of resident and nonresident hunters are primarily a result of two factors. One, a run of generally mild winters from about 1998 to 2007 allowed some wildlife species to survive winter, and reproduce in spring, at levels well above normal.

And two, habitat conditions not seen for a generation, created by federal farm

One of the upsides this fall in North Dakota is the waterfowl hunting outlook.



By Randy Kreil

SANDRA JOHNSON

programs and policies coupled with balanced stewardship of the land by agricultural producers.

We have seen habitat changes coming for some time, and have tried to prepare hunters for what will happen. Significant changes in federal farm policy have made enrolling land into conservation programs less profitable than growing commodities. Even more tragic is the

increasing conversion of native prairie and other grasslands to cropland at a rate not seen since the early 1970s, when the phrase “plant from fence row to fence row” got its infamous start.

At the same time the state was losing hundreds of thousands of acres of grassland habitat, three brutal winters in a row have hastened the impending downward slide of some wildlife populations and associated hunting opportunities.

The first indication of trouble was observed in species with limited range in North Dakota. Game and Fish first closed the sage grouse season in 2008, and closed the prairie chicken season in 2010.

Even more troubling and disappointing to many North Dakotans is closure of pronghorn season again this year. Only four years ago the state had a record population of these speedsters of the prairie, which meant that some units even had second doe licenses available.

A similar trend is also evident for some

of our more common species. In 2007 Game and Fish made nearly 150,000 deer licenses available and now, with three miserable winters and the loss of a million acres of Conservation Reserve Program grassland, we are down to less than 110,000.

Fortunately, we still have enough deer hunting opportunities for everyone who wants to hunt during the gun season.

According to our licensing staff, a record 99,000 people applied in the first lottery this year. Not everyone will get the license they want in the unit they want, but the deer hunting tradition will carry on.

Our pheasant, partridge and sharp-tailed grouse populations also took a hit from the winters. More importantly, their ability to bounce back from winter losses is diminished by the loss of a million acres of CRP and conversion of other grasslands.

Pheasant harvest peaked in 2007 at more than 900,000 birds, and fell to less than 600,000 roosters last year.

Winter mortality, questionable weather during the nesting and brood rearing period, statewide flooding problems, and the additional conversion of even more CRP and other grassland acres will likely combine to produce fewer birds this year as well.

The upside to a year like this is the outlook for waterfowl hunting. Recent state and federal surveys indicate healthy duck and goose populations in both prairie Canada and the prairies of the United States. While populations are good this year and the number of wetland acres in the state is near an all-time high, the same factors that affect pheasants are also a concern for waterfowl. Lost grassland means lost nesting habitat for many duck species as well.

This fall will still have plenty of opportunities for North Dakota hunters, and compared to, say, the mid-1980s, things are still pretty good.

However, we could use a little moderation in weather patterns – like more mild winters, fewer spring monsoons, and no droughts. We also need moderation at the federal level, to retain policies and programs that at least give agricultural producers a reasonable and economically viable choice to include conservation in their farming practices.

Such moderation still might not get us back to the highest tide from a few years back, but would certainly provide some good news overall.

RANDY KREIL is the Game and Fish Department's wildlife division chief.

PHEASANTS

RING-NECKED PHEASANTS

Opens Regular Season: Oct. 8
Delayed Opener: Oct. 15
Closes Regular Season: Jan. 8
Delayed Opener: Jan. 8
Daily Limit: 3
Possession Limit: 12
Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

with poor production the last three springs, the forecast for a lower pheasant population is realistic. While June wasn't the best for nesting or brooding hens, one positive this spring was habitat quality in the state, which could help hatching success and chick survival. Game and Fish Department roadside brood counts in late summer will provide a better estimate of

containing good habitat. In many instances, they even breed and winter in areas not typically considered good turkey habitat. Harvest and population data since 2008 indicates poor production and chick recruitment in many hunting units in the western part of the state and along the Missouri River. Consequently, fewer birds are found in these hunting



CRAIG BIRBLE



Hunters shot more than a half-million birds during the 2010 pheasant season in North Dakota.

Weather and habitat play important roles in the number of pheasants hunters see each fall. After three difficult winters and poor brooding conditions, it wasn't a surprise that rooster crowing counts were down about 18 percent statewide this spring.

In recent years, nearly 100,000 hunters have annually harvested 800,000-plus pheasants. But hunter numbers declined to 88,487 in 2009 and 91,984 in 2010, while harvest followed suit with 651,778 roosters in 2009 and 552,884 in 2010.

For much of the 2000s, hunters have enjoyed fall pheasant numbers like most have never seen. However, removal of more and more Conservation Reserve Program acres, most notably in southeastern North Dakota, will surely reduce the state's pheasant population. Coupled

production and a preview of fall's pheasant hunting season.

Stan Kohn, Upland Game Management Supervisor, Bismarck

TURKEYS

WILD TURKEYS

Opens: Oct. 8
Closes: Jan. 8
Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

Nonnative wild turkeys have adapted well to North Dakota's limited woodland resources. However, winter does pose a problem for birds since natural woodland foods are scarce.

When snow hits in North Dakota, wild turkeys usually wander into farmsteads of generous landowners where food and cover is available to survive winter. Turkeys occupy all areas of the state

units. In addition, license increases and longer seasons since 2003 have started to stabilize turkey numbers in many other units.

Major flooding on the Missouri, Little Missouri and Souris river bottomlands this summer likely disturbed some nesting habitat.

On a positive note, abundant moisture the last three years has improved upland habitat conditions in much of the state, and turkeys will benefit.

Though we expect fewer birds in some western hunting units this fall, hunters will likely find turkey numbers in the central and eastern parts of the state comparable to 2010.

Stan Kohn

GROUSE RUFFED GROUSE

Opens: Sept. 10

Closes: Jan. 8

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

The native aspen woodlands in Rolette, Bottineau, Pembina, Walsh, Cavalier and portions of McHenry counties are an



Ruffed grouse tail feathers.

RON WILSON

interesting segment of the North Dakota landscape. These forests are important because they harbor ruffed grouse, our only native woodland species.

More than 40 years of census data in North Dakota shows that ruffed grouse numbers tend to cycle about every 8-10 years. Even though our native forests continue to shrink, these birds are doing their best to adapt to what is available.

Ruffed grouse hunting season dates, bag limits, hunter numbers and harvest have remained fairly constant the last 20 years. In 2010 it seemed we were slowly moving out of the low point in the population cycle.

However, this spring's state-wide drumming counts took a dip of 15 percent. The number of drumming males increased almost 13 percent from 2010 in the Pembina Hills, but the Turtle Mountains showed a 28 percent decrease from 2010.

In early July, nesting success and production information for ruffed grouse were unknown, but

Three consecutive harsh winters and a wet, cold spring this year delayed nesting across the state. Warm weather did not arrive until the first week of July, resulting in poor initial nesting attempts for grouse and other upland game birds. Summer brood counts, which are the most accurate predictor of the fall hunting season, will tell us much more when



The sage grouse season in southwestern North Dakota is closed again this fall.

CRAIG BIRKLE

even if fall numbers are low, it is always enjoyable to hike through North Dakota's native woodlands.

Stan Kohn

SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

Opens: Sept. 10

Closes: Jan. 8

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

Hunters are going to see change this hunting season. Loss of acreage enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program and loss of native prairie are negatively affecting the sharp-tailed grouse population in North Dakota.

completed by early September.

Warm, dry weather is crucial to a decent hatch and mid-summer nesting conditions were better than early summer. Only time will tell how the active weather has affected grouse. Hunters should expect to see lower numbers of all upland bird species this hunting season.

Aaron Robinson, Upland Game Management Biologist, Dickinson

SAGE, PINNATED GROUSE

Hunting seasons for sage and pinnated grouse are closed again this fall.

This is the fourth year in a row that North Dakota won't have a sage grouse season, and the second year in a row for no season on

pinnated grouse, or prairie chickens, in the northeastern and southeastern parts of the state.

Sage grouse are the largest member of the North American grouse family, and in pioneer times they were the leading upland game bird in nine Western states. Yet, the species was never widespread in North Dakota and today is confined to the southwestern portion of the state.

A recent decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed sage grouse as a candidate species under the Endangered Species Act, which means sage grouse are warranted for listing as endangered, but precluded due to other priority species.

Sage grouse have declined more than 50 percent over their entire range. In the last four years, North Dakota's population has declined by 60 percent due to the loss of big sagebrush, fragmentation, fire, energy development and west Nile virus.

A local working group established in North Dakota is helping to maintain and restore sage grouse. The group includes local landowners, federal and state agency personnel and concerned citizens.

Male prairie chicken spring booming counts have dramatically declined the last three years. Wet conditions in eastern North Dakota have contributed to poor nesting success.

PARTRIDGE HUNGARIAN PARTRIDGE

Opens: Sept. 10

Closes: Jan. 8

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

This fall, hunters will likely see fewer Hungarian partridge than last year.

While license numbers have declined, the Game and Fish Department still made available nearly 110,000 licenses to hunters in 2011.



CRAIG BIRLE

Spring was extremely wet and cold, likely reducing chick survival, forcing adult pairs to renest. The last three severe winters have cut the adult breeding population leading into the spring nesting season.

Hunters might find pockets of decent hunting in areas where multiple pairs reproduced successfully,

in a row, we have reached management goals in most of the state. Over the past year, Department staff reevaluated management goals for each hunting unit. The process involved historical harvest rates for each unit, harvest rates in surrounding units, winter aerial survey data, trends in the number of deer

and 13 are eligible to receive a statewide license for an antlerless white-tailed deer, valid only during the youth season (September 16-25).

- 1,091 nonresident any deer archery licenses are available for 2011, 214 fewer than in 2010. The number of nonresident any-deer archery licenses



A trio of tough winters has been hard on mule deer in the badlands.

MIKE ANDERSON

but they will need to spend some time in the mornings scouting.

Aaron Robinson

DEER WHITE-TAILED DEER

Archery Opens: Sept. 2

Archery Closes: Jan. 8

Regular Gun Opens: Nov. 4

Regular Gun Closes: Nov. 20

Muzzleloader Opens: Nov. 25

Muzzleloader Closes: Dec. 11

This year the Game and Fish Department made available 109,950 deer licenses for the regular gun season, or 6,825 fewer than 2010.

Starting in 2004, when the first management goals were set for each hunting unit in the state, antlerless license numbers were steadily increased. With the help of three tough North Dakota winters

sighted by hunters during opening weekend of regular deer gun season, and cultural and biological issues specific to each unit. The statewide goal for the next five years was set at 124,800 deer licenses.

Deer hunting opportunities in 2011 include:

- 2,108 muzzleloader licenses – 1,054 antlered licenses and 1,054 antlerless licenses. This is 84 fewer muzzleloader licenses than 2010.
- 250 restricted youth mule deer buck licenses, 70 fewer than 2010, in units 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, 4E, 4F, 3B1 and 3B2. An unlimited number of youth deer hunting licenses, valid for any deer statewide except antlered mule deer in the above restricted units, are also available. Residents ages 12

will decrease to 682 in 2012.

- See the 2011 Deer Hunting Guide for details on special archery herd reduction hunting opportunities for Fargo and Mandan.

Remember, hunting big game over bait is prohibited on all state-owned or managed wildlife management areas, all U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service national wildlife refuges and waterfowl production areas, U.S. Forest Service national grasslands, as well as North Dakota state school, state park and state forest service lands.

*Bill Jensen,
Big Game Biologist,
Bismarck*

MULE DEER

Archery Opens: Sept. 2

Archery Closes: Jan. 8

Regular Gun Opens: Nov. 4

Regular Gun Closes: Nov. 20

Recent severe winters have been tough on mule deer in the badlands.

Production in 2010 was the lowest ever documented with 72 fawns per 100 does, while 2009 results were



CHRIS GRONDAHL

Moose in the Missouri River bottoms south of Bismarck.

only slightly better at 74 fawns per 100 does.

This poor production, combined with higher adult mortality rates, was evident in the 2011 spring index of six mule deer per square mile. This was 23 percent lower than 2010 and 38 percent below the 2007 index.

Part of the fallout is a necessary reduction in mule deer licenses, set at 4,550 this fall, 2,725 fewer than last year due to lower deer numbers and low production in 2010, and anticipated lower production again in 2011.

Eventually, winter weather conditions will moderate, providing deer with conditions to foster increased survival and fawn recruitment.

*Bruce Stillings,
Big Game Management Supervisor,
Dickinson*

MOOSE

For season details, refer to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2011 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

North Dakota's largest big game species continues to do well despite three consecutive harsh winters, and is expanding its range south and west onto the prairie and along the Mis-

souri River corridor.

There is one caveat. While the distribution of moose across the state has shifted, numbers continue to remain low in what is considered traditional moose habitat in the Pembina Hills and Turtle Mountains of northeastern North Dakota.

While the distribution has changed significantly, the number of licenses issued since 1988 has not. In 1988, 131 moose hunters harvested 126 animals. North Dakota's 2011 fall moose season features 162 licenses, down from last year when 173 license holders harvested 167 animals.

Snow cover last winter allowed for a review of all moose survey areas. The survey indicated stable moose populations in the Turtle Mountains area as well as north central and northwestern survey areas.

The boundary for unit M-11 in western North Dakota has been expanded to allow hunting over a

The difficult winter of 2010 likely didn't have much effect on the state's elk population.



CRAIG BIRBLE

wider area where moose numbers have increased south of Williston along the Missouri River corridor. License numbers were reduced, however, from 20 to 10 to maintain viable moose numbers. Because Lake Sakakawea is now full and high water along the Missouri River has flooded much of the habitat that allowed moose numbers to grow, biologists will have to closely monitor this population.

Because of continued low numbers in the Pembina Hills area, unit M1-C is again closed for the 2011 hunting season.

*Jason Smith,
Big Game Biologist,
Jamestown*

ELK

For season details, refer to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2011 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

While winter likely had little effect on elk in the state, license numbers still changed some in 2011. This year's elk season features 501 licenses, down from 577 last year.

one of these coveted licenses in 2011 should have a good season and expect results similar to last year.

Jason Smith

SHEEP BIGHORN SHEEP

For season details, refer to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2011 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

North Dakota's bighorn sheep population has remained relatively

Roosevelt National Park. Lamb recruitment was only 19 percent in 2010, which is well below average, but not surprising given last year's severe winter. Ram-to-ewe ratios remained stable, and Game and Fish issued six hunting licenses in 2011, the same as 2010.

Brett Wiedmann, Big Game Biologist, Dickinson

Six bighorn sheep hunting licenses have been issued for 2011.



CRAIG BIHRE

Elk numbers in unit E1 remain stable, while slightly increasing in unit E2. The biggest change is in units E3 and E4 where the number of elk licenses was reduced by 100 after a successful population reduction effort at Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

Last year, nearly 200 volunteers helped remove 406 cow elk from the park, while hunters took an additional 76 cow elk in units E3 and E4, reducing the cow elk population in and around the park by a third.

This year, E3 and E4 license holders will have maximum opportunity to harvest an elk, as all licenses issued are for any-elk.

The park's continued elk herd reduction efforts could reduce hunting opportunities in E3 and E4 in the future.

Hunters who were able to draw

stable despite three consecutive winters that brought frigid temperatures and deep snows throughout their range.

Although mortality of radio-marked bighorns was negligible last winter, the Game and Fish Department will have a better grasp on winter's influence at the completion of the summer survey in late August.

The state's 2010 survey showed a minimum of 283 bighorn sheep in the badlands, a 4 percent reduction from 2009, but still above the five-year average. However, the southern badlands' population has suffered more significant reductions than northern herds, as it has declined 39 percent since 2008.

The 2010 count included 95 rams, 158 ewes and 30 lambs, with an additional 30 animals in the North Unit of Theodore

PRONGHORN

A summer survey of the state's pronghorn population indicates the statewide population is 30 percent lower than last year and down nearly 70 percent from 2008.

As such, North Dakota Game and Fish Department officials decided, for the second year in a row, and just the second time in nearly three decades, to not hold a pronghorn hunting season.

Bruce Stillings, Game and Fish Department big game supervisor, Dickinson, said poor winter survival and low fawn production has dropped the statewide population estimate to about 4,500 animals. Until last year when the population fell to 6,500 pronghorn, the statewide population was at or above 10,000 animals since 2003, including two years with more than 15,000.

“Our numbers are declining with few young animals observed due to poor production in 2009 and 2010,” Stillings said. “To make matters worse, production this year was the lowest documented since biologists began surveying in the late 1950s.”

The aerial survey is flown in late June/early July after young-of-

said. “A much needed mild winter would increase adult survival and leave females in good condition for fawning.”

Biologists will continue to monitor pronghorn numbers in the future, and will reopen the season when the population returns to a level capable of withstanding a harvest.

good opportunities again during the first two weeks of September. Nationwide, North Dakota’s mourning dove breeding population ranked fifth in 2011, based on a call-count survey conducted in late May.

Summer was late to arrive, and windy, turbulent weather may have delayed initial nesting efforts in



Hunters are encouraged to hunt doves early in fall before cool weather ushers the majority of the birds out of state.

CHRIS GRONDAHL

the-year are born and visible. Five airplanes covered more than 11,000 square miles of aerial transects within pronghorn habitat.

Survey results indicate the population in the western Bowman and southern Slope management regions are doing the best, while pronghorn in the northern badlands and northern Slope areas are in the poorest condition. Pronghorn in all management regions are well below population objectives.

Northern Great Plains pronghorn are susceptible to dramatic population declines due to extreme winter conditions, Stillings said. The last three years have been a perfect storm of bad news for pronghorn in North Dakota, similar to 1977-79 when three consecutive severe winters hit the region, resulting in closed seasons from 1978-81.

“The last thing pronghorn needed was another severe winter,” Stillings

Since the 2011 pronghorn season is closed, gun hunters who have accumulated preference points in past seasons will maintain their current points.

DOVES DOVES

Opens: Sept. 1

Closes: Oct. 30

Daily Limit: 15

Possession Limit: 30

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

North Dakota’s dove breeding population changes relatively little from year to year. That’s good since we generally have a sizeable breeding population in the state.

The biggest changes that hunters must deal with this year are crop rotations and an abundance of water on the landscape, making it a little more difficult to narrow down a waterhole hunt for doves.

Dove hunters should experience

many areas. However, doves nest multiple times throughout summer (sometimes up to four times) so good reproduction is still possible.

Eurasian collared doves continue to expand throughout North Dakota and are found in almost every small town and city. However, Eurasian collared doves are not often found outside of municipalities, and rarely show up in hunter harvest. These birds, along with white-winged doves, are included with mourning doves in the daily bag limit of 15.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service may contact some dove hunters to participate in a wing survey, which involves removing one wing from each dove they shoot early in the season to send in for analysis. Hunters are also reminded to look for banded mourning doves in their bag and report bands directly to the Bird Banding Laboratory at

(800) 327-BAND (2263), or on the web at www.reportband.gov.

Mike Szymanski, Migratory Game Bird Biologist, Bismarck

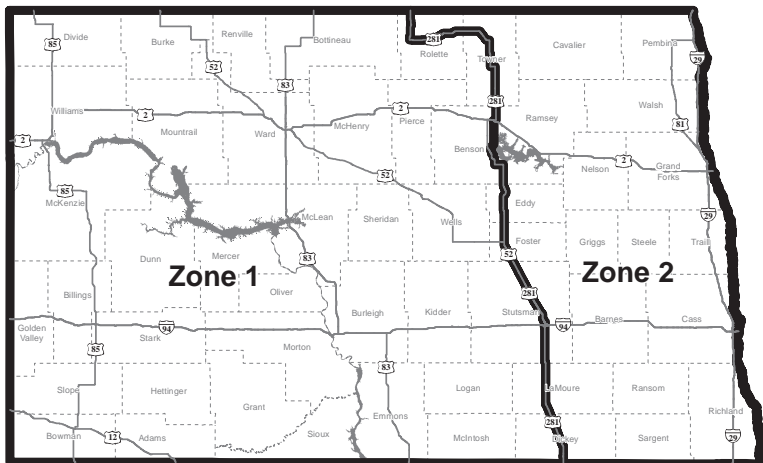
water is too deep. Overall, sandhill crane hunting opportunities should be good statewide this fall.

The two-zone structure for sandhill cranes will continue. Zone 1 (west of U.S. Highway 281) has a season length of 58 days and a daily bag limit of three cranes. Zone 2 (east of U.S. Highway 281) has a season length of 37 days and a daily bag

recorded history.

Wetland conditions across North Dakota this spring were high again, with abundant snow cover and significant rains maintaining record-high water levels. The 2011 water index was up 34 percent from 2010, and up 128 percent from the 1948-2010 average. The wetland

SANDHILL CRANE ZONES



A canvasback in flight.

BRIAN HOSEK

STEVE SILSETH

CRANES SANDHILL CRANES

Opens Zone 1: Sept. 17

Zone 2: Sept. 17

Closes Zone 1: Nov. 13

Zone 2: Oct. 23

Daily Limit Zone 1: 3

Daily Limit Zone 2: 2

Possession Limit Zone 1: 6

Possession Limit Zone 2: 4

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. daily through Nov. 5; to 2 p.m. Nov. 6-13

The Mid-Continent Sandhill Crane Population is in good shape heading into hunting season. The 2011 spring index will likely exceed 425,000 birds after survey estimates are finalized, putting the breeding population index above average levels.

Staging areas are excellent statewide with the exception of some traditional areas where

limit of two cranes.

Hunters are reminded to make sure of their target before shooting, as federally endangered whooping cranes migrate through North Dakota in fall. Report all whooping crane sightings to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department in Bismarck at (701) 328-6300.

Mike Szymanski

WATERFOWL DUCKS AND GEESE

Conditions are incredibly good for waterfowl in North Dakota.

Driving across the state, a challenge in itself with all the flooded roads, it's hard to believe the amount of water on the landscape. Except for a brief "drier" spring in 2008, wetland conditions have been exceptionally high since summer 1993. The state is as wet as it's been in

index is the second highest in survey history, exceeded by 1999. Seven of our 10 highest wetland counts have occurred since 1995.

Numbers of breeding ducks in North Dakota in 2011 were the ninth highest on record, down slightly (minus 9 percent) from last year, which was the third highest index on record. The 2011 duck index was 85 percent above the long-term average.

Changes from 2010 for individual duck species were variable. Wigeon (plus 15 percent), blue-winged teal (plus 12 percent) and pintails (plus 4 percent and the highest level since 1970) were the only ducks to show increases.

Shovelers were down 13 percent from their record-high last year. Mallards were down 4 percent from 2010, but had the sixth highest count on record. Indices for all other species were

below that of 2010, with the most significant decreases for ruddy ducks (minus 62 percent), lesser scaup (minus 58 percent) and red-heads (minus 33 percent). In 2010, redheads and ruddy ducks were at record highs and scaup numbers were also well above average, so these declines are not surprising.

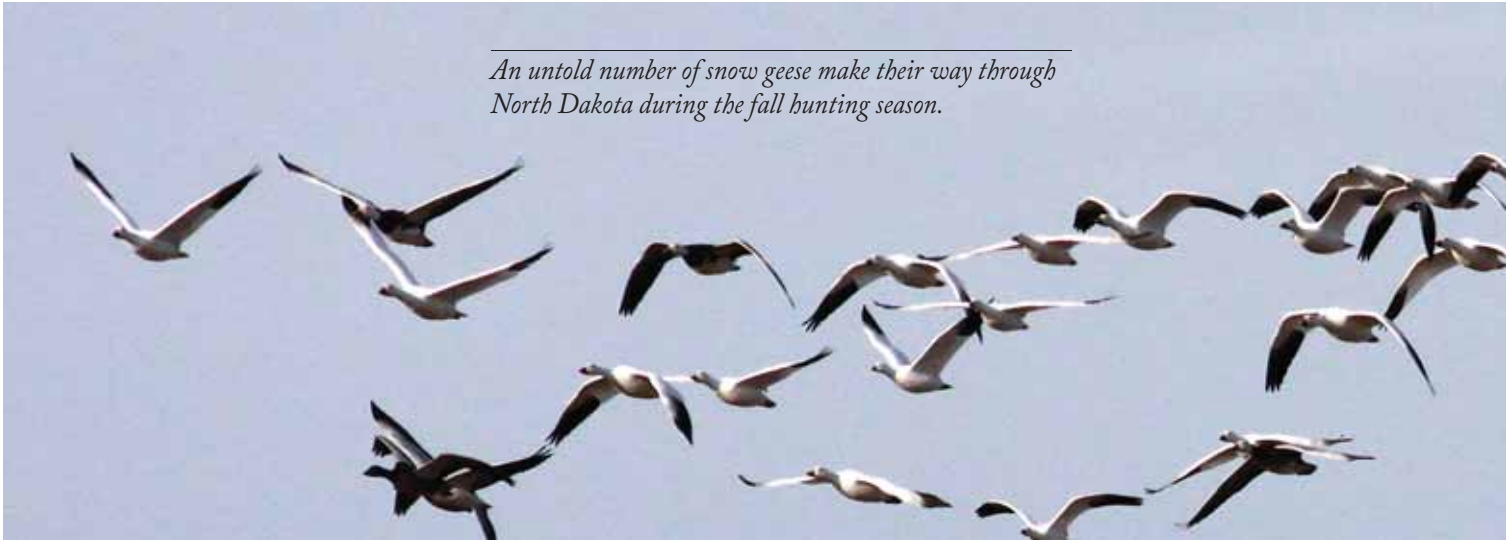
All species, except scaup (minus 17 percent), were above the long-term average, including shovelers

observe broods. There is a tremendous amount of water out there, lots of emergent vegetation and lots of places for broods to hide.

In addition, because of cold, wet conditions, duck nesting was delayed this year. There are strong indications of an exceptional late hatch. Since our surveys were completed in mid-July, observers have been seeing large numbers of newly-hatched ducks throughout

state's most abundant breeder, typically have headed south before October 1. But last year it appeared that many other species had also moved from the state in mid-September, likely north to newly-flooded wetlands in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, before migrating south later in fall.

An untold number of snow geese make their way through North Dakota during the fall hunting season.



(plus 168 percent), mallards (plus 132 percent), canvasbacks (plus 94 percent), redheads (plus 79 percent), blue-winged teal (plus 75 percent), pintails (plus 66 percent), gadwalls (plus 49 percent), ruddy ducks (plus 45 percent), green-winged teal (plus 43 percent) and wigeon (plus 37 percent).

The number of ducks tallied during the survey is consistent with the well-above-average populations North Dakota has carried since 1994, following wet conditions that have been in place since summer 1993.

Our duck brood index (the number of broods observed) this year was down 26 percent from 2010, but the average brood size (7.7) was the highest since 1975. But these numbers don't tell the whole story. July water conditions were the highest on record, making it difficult for survey crews to

the state. We are expecting a fall flight (adults plus young) from North Dakota that is on par with large fall flights produced since the mid-1990s.

Numbers of resident Canada geese, Western Prairie Canada geese, arctic nesting Tallgrass Prairie Canada geese, and snow and Ross's geese all remain high. Hunting opportunities for all these birds are good, but are highly dependent on fall weather conditions, especially for migrant birds.

As is the case every hunting season, fall weather and migration patterns will have a big influence on hunting success for ducks and geese. Last year was a good example of this. Despite the huge duck production North Dakota experienced last year, hunters reported that duck numbers were down throughout much of the fall.

Most blue-winged teal, the



Results of the 2010 harvest survey indicate that 45,466 waterfowl hunters hunted an average of 7.6 days each. Total duck harvest of 267,795 birds was about the same as 2009, and the total regular season goose harvest of 192,958 birds was down about 9 percent from 2009.

*Mike Johnson,
Game Management Section Leader
Bismarck*

YOUTH WATERFOWL SEASON

(For legally licensed residents and nonresidents ages 15 and younger.)

Opens: September 17

Closes: September 18

Shooting hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Daily limit: Ducks – same as regular duck season. Three Canada geese.

Closes: December 4

Opens: December 10

Closes: January 1

Shooting hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Daily limits: Six ducks, which may include no more than five mallards (two of which may be hens), two scaup, two redheads, three wood ducks, one canvasback, two pintails. Possession limit is twice the daily limit.

WHITE-FRONTED GEESE (STATEWIDE)

Opens: September 24 (residents only), October 1 (nonresidents)

Closes: December 4

Daily limit: Two geese, possession limit is four.

CANADA GEESE REGULAR SEASON

Opens: September 24 (residents only), October 1 (nonresidents)

Closes: December 30 (Missouri River Zone), December 22 (rest of state)

Daily limit: Three Canada geese daily, possession limit six.

LIGHT (SNOW) GEESE (STATEWIDE)

Opens: September 24 (residents only), October 1 (nonresidents)

Closes: December 30

Daily limit: 20 geese, with no possession limit.

Shooting hours for all geese: Half-hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. each day through November 5. Starting November 6, shooting hours are a half-hour before sunrise to 2 p.m. each day.

Exception: shooting hours are a half-hour before sunrise to sunset on all Saturdays and Wednesdays through the end of each season. Starting December 1, all-day hunting is also allowed on Sundays through the end of each season.



CRAIG BIRRE

EARLY CANADA GOOSE SEASON

Opens: August 13 (statewide)

Closes: September 7 (Missouri River Zone), September 15 (statewide)

Shooting hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Daily limit: Eight Canada geese daily, possession limit 16.

Note: Nonresidents can hunt during the early Canada goose season in Benson, Ramsey, Richland, Sargent and Towner counties without counting against their 14-day regular season period. Nonresidents who hunt in other counties during this season would have at least a seven-day period count against their 14-day license.

REGULAR DUCK SEASON

LOW PLAINS UNIT

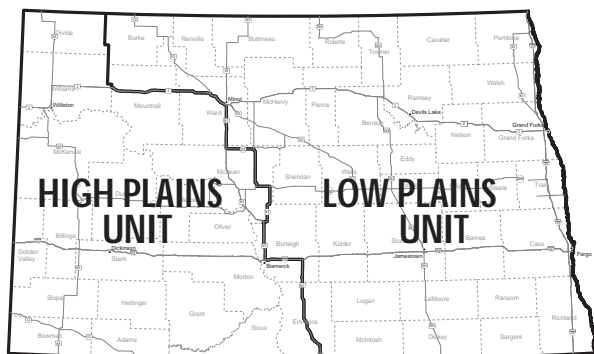
Opens: September 24 (residents only), October 1 (nonresidents)

Closes: December 4

Shooting hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

HIGH PLAINS UNIT

Opens: September 24 (residents only), October 1 (nonresidents)



BRIAN HOSEK

FURBEARERS

For season details, refer to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2011 furbearer hunting and trapping guide.

Noteworthy to this year's furbearer seasons is the first regulated trapping season for fishers

use floating trap sets later in the spring this season, although regulation for this activity requires additional precautions to prevent the capture of loafing waterfowl.

Raccoon and skunk indices are up statewide compared to last year. Additionally, fox numbers are up in the Prairie Pothole Region, beaver are up in the

average. A milder upcoming winter may bring up the bobcat harvest, although fewer prey on the landscape may also contribute to lower than average bobcat harvest.

Spring and summer field activities indicate mountain lion densities in the badlands remain low, which is typical for large,



in the state. A large member of the weasel family, this animal has recolonized its historic range in North Dakota, allowing for this new opportunity.

Similar to last year, fur harvesters will have plenty of coyotes and muskrats to pursue. Spring surveys indicate coyote numbers are increasing in central North Dakota, with lower numbers in western and eastern regions.

Muskrats likewise continue to increase in the eastern half of the state, with the highest index in the southern Prairie Pothole Region. Muskrat trappers can

Red River Valley, and badgers are increasing in both of those regions.

Surveys have yet to show an upward trend in the mink population in response to increased numbers of muskrats, a major mink prey species. Historical records, however, indicate it takes several years of high muskrat numbers before a corresponding increase in mink.

Trappers and hunters harvested 39 bobcats last season, a drop of 24 percent compared to the previous season and 37 percent lower than the 20-year

territorial carnivores. However, population models indicate a slight increase in the harvest quota will not affect the population's sustainability.

Therefore, the upcoming hunting season will allow a quota of 14 mountain lions in Zone 1, divided into an early and late season. Pursuit with hounds is limited to the late season, which starts after deer gun season closes and has a quota of four cats. The early season quota is 10.

Stephanie Tucker, Furbearer Biologist, Bismarck

MOUNTAIN LIONS

MOUNTAIN LIONS

Zone 1 (early) Opens: Sept. 2

Closes: Nov. 20

Zone 1 (late) Opens: Nov. 21

Closes: Mar. 31, 2012

Zone 2 Opens: Sept. 2

Closes: Mar. 31, 2012

There is a quota of 10 mountain lions in Zone 1 early season. Once the quota is reached, the early season in Zone 1 will close immediately. The quota in the late season is four lions. Once that quota is reached, the late season in Zone 1 will close immediately.

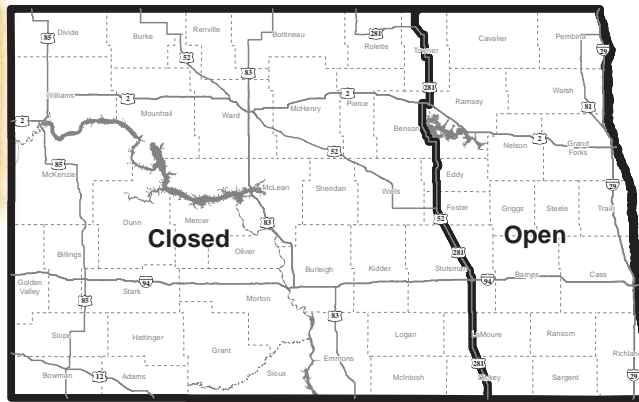
There is no mountain lion quota in Zone 2.

Mountain lions may be hunted statewide by residents using legal firearms or archery equipment during regular hunting hours. Beginning November 21, mountain lions may also be harvested by pursuing with dogs. Cable devices and traps are not allowed. The limit is one lion per hunter per season. Kittens (lions with visible spots), or females accompanied by kittens, may not be taken. Any lion taken must be reported to the Department within 12 hours and the entire intact animal must be submitted for analysis. Legally taken animals will be returned to the hunter.

For more information, see the North Dakota 2011-12 Furbearer Guide.

FISHERS

FISHER HARVEST ZONES



BRIAN HOSEK

FISHER TRAPPING AND CABLE DEVICES

Opens: Nov. 21

Closes: Mar. 11, 2012

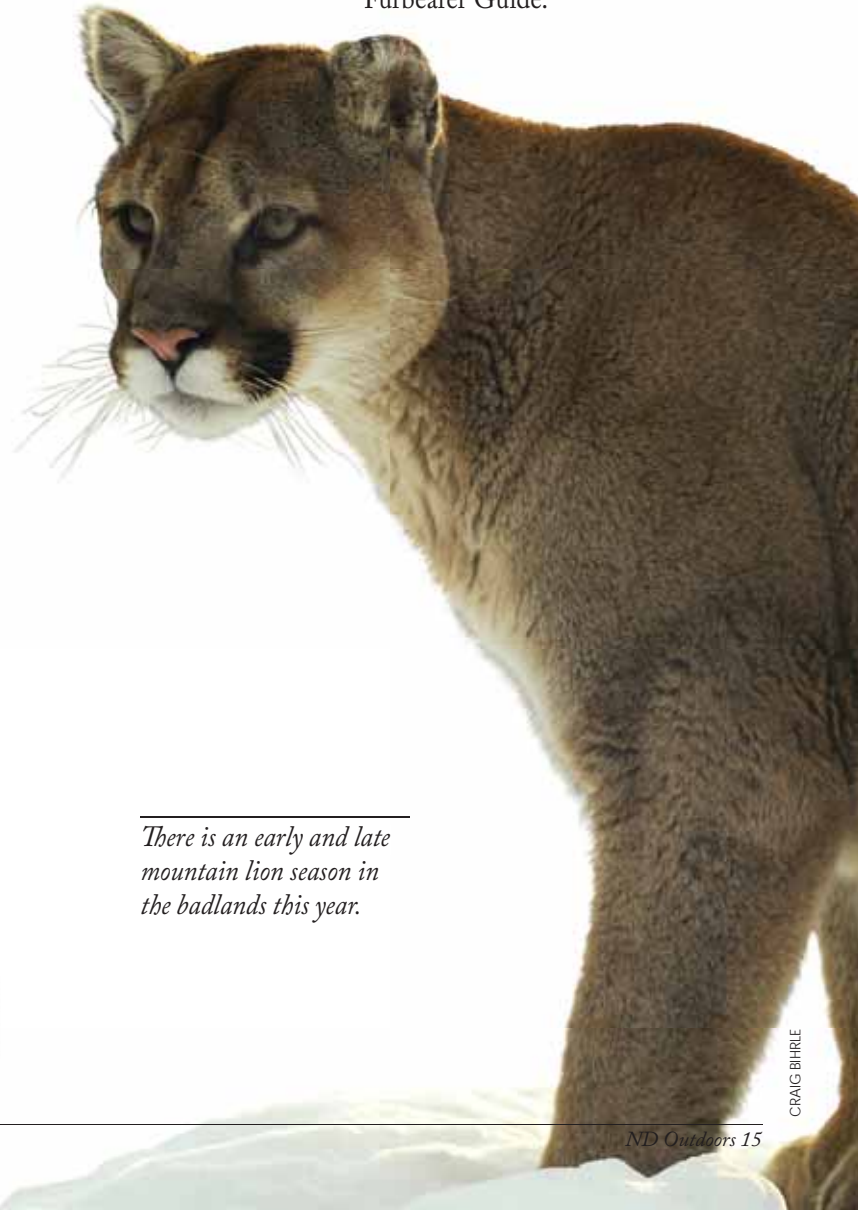
There is a quota of 10 fishers.

Once the quota is reached, the season will close immediately.

Fishers may be harvested by North Dakota residents only in the open area east of U.S. Highway 281 and ND Highway 4. The limit is one animal per trapper per season. Any fisher taken must be reported to the

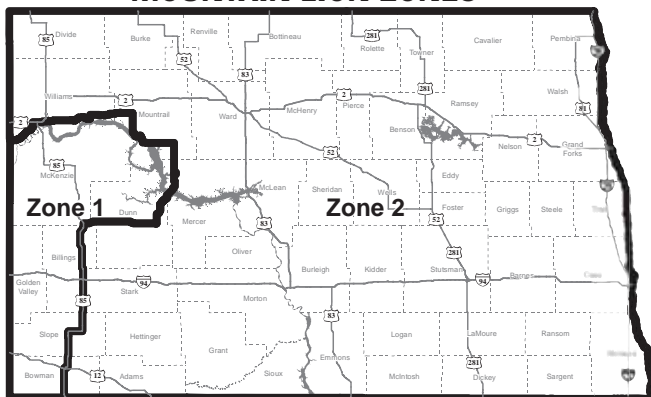
Department within 12 hours. The pelt must be removed from the carcass prior to presenting the animal to the Department for tagging. The carcass shall remain with the Department.

For more information, see the North Dakota 2011-12 Furbearer Guide.



There is an early and late mountain lion season in the badlands this year.

MOUNTAIN LION ZONES



MINK AND WEASELS

MINK AND WEASEL HUNTING

Opens: Nov. 21
Closes: Mar. 11, 2012

Mink, weasel and muskrat may be hunted statewide with .22 caliber rimfire rifles or pistols, muzzleloaders of .45 caliber or smaller, longbows and crossbows.

MINK AND WEASEL TRAPPING

Opens: Oct. 22
Closes: Mar. 11, 2012

MINK AND WEASEL CABLE DEVICES

Opens: Nov. 21
Closes: Mar. 11, 2012

MUSKRATS

MUSKRAT TRAPPING

Opens: Oct. 22
Closes: Mar. 11, 2012

MUSKRAT CABLE DEVICES

Opens: Nov. 21
Closes: Mar. 11, 2012

Muskrat huts may be opened for insertion of traps or cable

BOBCATS

BOBCAT HUNTING OR TRAPPING

Opens: Nov. 5
Closes: Mar. 11, 2012

BOBCAT CABLE DEVICES

Opens: Nov. 21
Closes: Mar. 11, 2012



With an abundance of water on the landscape, muskrat numbers have climbed.

SANDRA JOHNSON

devices; however, the huts must be restored to their approximate original condition to prevent freeze-up.

In addition, muskrats may be trapped statewide with foothold traps or colony traps using underwater sets that are at least 2 inches under water, or trapped with conibear-type traps or cable devices with no more than 2 inches of the conibear trap or cable device above the water surface from March 12, 2012, through May 6, 2012. During this time, float-sets are prohibited, and trapping or cable devices on the outside of any muskrat house or structure of any size is prohibited.

MUSKRAT HUNTING

Opens: Nov. 21
Closes: May 6, 2012

Open only in the area south and west of the Missouri River.

The pelt and carcass of each bobcat must be presented to Game and Fish Department personnel for inspection and tagging prior to sale or transfer of possession, but no later than 14 days after the close of the season. No bobcat pelt will be tagged until the animal is skinned and presented with the intact carcass. The carcass shall remain property of the Department. No fur dealer shall possess or purchase an untagged bobcat.

RED FOX, GRAY FOX, COYOTES AND BADGERS

RED FOX, GRAY FOX, COYOTE AND BADGER CABLE DEVICES

Opens: Nov. 21
Closes: Mar. 11, 2012

RED FOX, GRAY FOX, COYOTE AND BADGER HUNTING OR TRAPPING

Open year-round (Officially from Apr. 1, 2011 – Mar. 31, 2012)

In addition, red fox, gray fox and coyote may be hunted at any hour from November 21, 2011, through March 11, 2012. Any hunter who engages in the hunting of red fox, gray fox or coyote during the time from half-hour after sunset to half-hour before sunrise, must hunt exclusively on foot and use a predator call. The use of a spotlight or any other artificial light is prohibited.

BEAVERS AND RACCOONS

BEAVER AND RACCOON HUNTING, TRAPPING AND UNDERWATER CABLE DEVICES

Open year-round (Officially from Apr. 1, 2011 – Mar. 31, 2012)

BEAVER AND RACCOON CABLE DEVICES ON LAND

Opens: Nov. 21
Closes: May 6, 2012

From March 12, 2012, through May 6, 2012, cable devices must be within 50 feet of water; they must be no more than 4 inches off the ground and they must have a stop restricting loop size to 12 or less inches in diameter.

Beaver dams may be dismantled when their presence causes property damage.

CROWS

CROWS

Open Area: Statewide
Fall Season Opens: Aug. 13
Closes: Oct. 23
Spring Season Opens: Mar. 10, 2012

Closes: Apr. 22, 2012
Daily Limit: There is no limit on crows.

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset
In addition to the crow season, crows may be taken when committing or about to commit depredations as specified in Federal law (50CFR21.43).

TREE SQUIRRELS

TREE SQUIRRELS

Open Area: Statewide
Opens: Sept. 10
Closes: Jan. 8, 2012
Daily Limit: 4

Possession Limit: 12
Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

Tree squirrels may be taken with firearms loaded with shot, rimfire and muzzleloading firearms, or with bow and arrows legal for taking upland game.

SNIPE

SNIPE

Open Area: Statewide
Opens: Sept. 17
Closes: Dec. 4
Daily Limit: 8
Possession Limit: 16
Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

WOODCOCK

WOODCOCK

Open Area: Statewide
Opens: Sept. 24
Closes: Nov. 7
Daily Limit: 3
Possession Limit: 6
Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

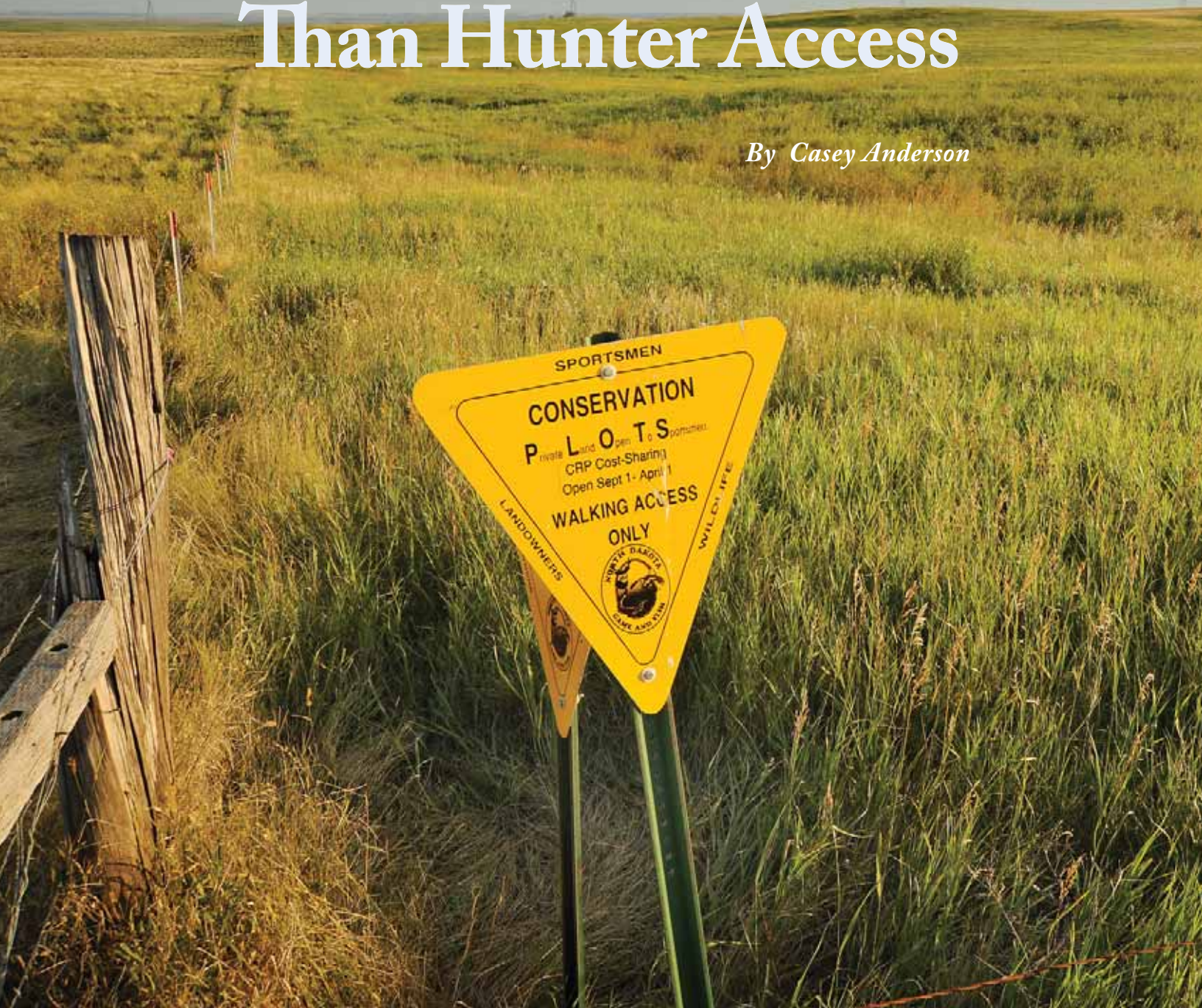
Common snipe are often overlooked by hunters in North Dakota.



CRAIG BIRLIE

PLOTS Means More Than Hunter Access

By Casey Anderson



Hunters are familiar with the inverted triangular yellow signs that signify land enrolled in the Game and Fish Department's popular walk-in access program, but placing signs is not the only work that goes into creating a Private Land Open To Sportsmen tract.

Everyone who hunts in North Dakota purchases a general game and habitat license. A portion of the proceeds land in the Private Land Habitat and Access Improvement Fund. This fund, along with interest from the Department's general fund and some federal dollars, pave the way for the PLOTS program to establish, manage and improve wildlife habitat on private land, in addition to providing



CRAIG BIRHLE

A PLOTS tract on the border of Burleigh and Kidder counties flourishes after being burned (above). A controlled burn, as seen in this inset photo, is one of the tools land managers use on enhance PLOTS tracts for wildlife and landowners.



KEVIN KADING

public hunting access. The bulk of the funds go directly to landowners in the form of various payments, cost-share or reimbursement for habitat development.

The Department has a variety of PLOTS options for landowners, depending on the type of land they are enrolling, whether the land is in a federal farm program like the Conservation Reserve Program, or is actively farmed or ranched. Some PLOTS acres are already wildlife friendly, while others require a lot of work to establish or enhance habitat. Regardless, whatever habitat is there eventually needs managing, both for wildlife and the landowner.

The Game and Fish Department works with landowners to help manage PLOTS tracts in different ways. For instance, land enrolled in a federal program, as well as PLOTS, must often meet the requirements of the federal program. Other times, special federal funds are used by the Department for sensitive species or habitat, and require specific management objectives as a condition of using federal funds.

The most common methods of management on PLOTS include haying, prescribed grazing, disking or harrowing, and prescribed burning. These practices are frequently tied directly to the landowner's farming or ranching venture, so there is often a benefit to the operation as well as the habitat.

Different wildlife species have different habitat needs. Some prefer undisturbed cover, while others need periodic habitat disturbance, such as grazing.

Consider this: A patch of bare ground in your yard, left unattended, will not stay that way for long. Annual weeds will quickly take hold and other grasses, forbs and legumes fill in behind. During this early succession, insects and other bugs are numerous, attracting many different wildlife species. This is usually the most productive part of succession. However, if left alone with no disturbance, the area will

eventually become choked with heavy litter, causing a change in soil temperature.

Because of cooler soil temperatures, less desirable species can conquer the area and productivity will decrease. Periodic disturbance breaks the late succession stage and restarts the process. After all, we know that native grasslands evolved with disturbance such as grazing and fire, long before humans considered ways to manage these areas.

North Dakota is fortunate to have some native prairie. Contrary to what passersby may see, these tracts are some of the richest, most diverse ecosystems on the planet. However, if left alone with little or no disturbance for years, they can become monocultures, or succumb to invasion by undesirable introduced species. And once that happens, it is usually difficult to get them back to their original state.

Other grasslands such as CRP are not quite as fickle, and since these areas are on former cropland, there is the chance they will become cropland again.

Department private land biologists work with landowners on some PLOTS tracts to develop prescribed grazing plans, which involve designing a system that includes specific timing, duration and number of animals released into an area.

Plans range from somewhat simple and straightforward, or may include many different pastures and detailed components such as cross-fencing, water developments and staggered grazing dates. These plans are meant to complement or benefit the landowner's operation as well as manage and enhance wildlife habitat.

Haying is another management tool frequently used on PLOTS acres, and is widely accepted by landowners because haying is not only easy, it is something they can use in their operations. The Department tries to minimize the effect haying has on wildlife by not haying before July 15, when many birds are still nesting or have broods, by promoting use of a sickle mower and rake to disturb old litter at ground level, promoting use of wildlife friendly haying techniques to not trap broods, and limiting haying to portions of fields and leaving large blocks undisturbed for wildlife.

The Department also uses prescribed burning. Fire has a completely different effect on species than haying or grazing, and if timed correctly can have a significant influence on undesirable cool season species. Additional management, such as grazing, must be continued after the initial burn to maintain species richness and diversity.

Conversely, managing and improving existing habitat is often much more complicated. A landowner may already have habitat in place, but may want to improve it for a specific animal, enhance all-around habitat productivity, or for the benefit of as many animals as possible. Once that is determined, it has to be decided which treatments are viable options for reaching the goal.

Here's an example:

A landowner has a tract of "never-been-farmed prairie" with the goal of trying to benefit as much wildlife as possible. A Game and Fish Department private land biologist inspects it and determines the tract has started to shift from a native plant community to one invaded with Kentucky bluegrass, reducing the diversity and productivity that was once attractive to most animals in the area.

Some treatments to help shift the plant community back to a more diverse native plant structure could include fire, grazing, haying and other methods.

The challenge is that one treatment alone usually isn't enough to help the landowner reach the intended goal. In addition, what works on one side of the road might not work on the other side because of soils, terrain or other environmental conditions that humans can't control. Moreover, the landowner might not have access to cattle, haying equipment, or other things needed to carry out a specific treatment.

Once the landowner chooses viable treatments, he or she may receive cost-share funds from PLOTS for implementing them. If the treatments are successful, the landowner may actually gain better cattle forage, along with better habitat, for animals in the area.

While placing and maintaining boundary signs is an important part of the PLOTS program, a lot can go on behind the signs as well to improve prospects for hunters who choose to use these areas each fall.

CASEY ANDERSON is the Game and Fish Department's private land field operation coordinator.

ANNUAL PLOTS ACRES

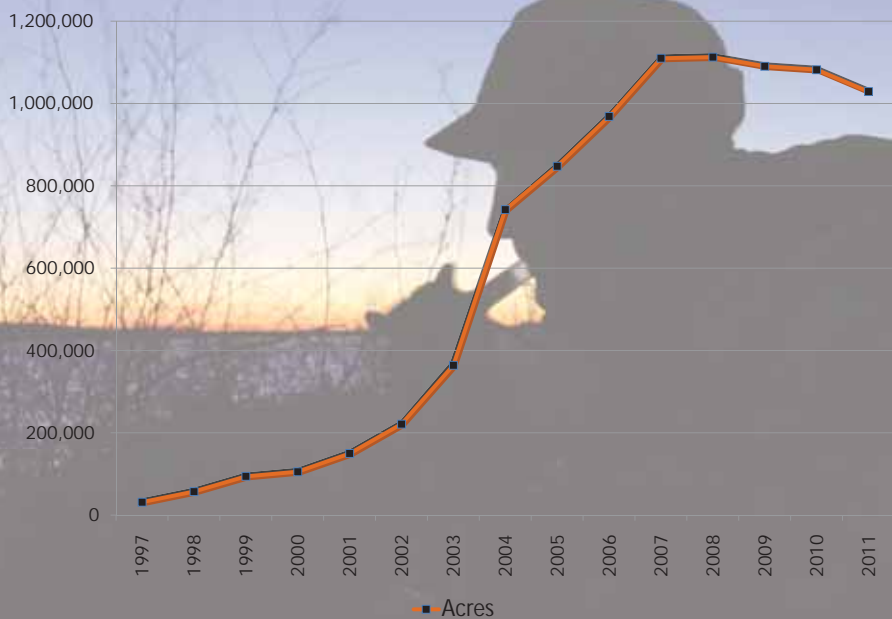


PHOTO BY CRAIG BHIRLE. GRAPH BY COLIN PENNER



2011 PLOTS Guides

Free Private Land Open to Sportsmen guides can be found at most license vendors throughout the state in early September.

The 2011 guide, the Game and Fish Department's 13th edition, will feature about 1 million PLOTS acres. Because the guide is printed in August and distributed in September, there will be some PLOTS in the guide that were removed from the program since distribution. Also, there will be some PLOTS tracts that will remain in the program, but the habitat and condition of the tracts may change significantly.

PLOTS map sheets will be updated weekly on the Department's website, gf.nd.gov, to minimize problems. Hunters can also view the guide, which highlights walk-in areas, on the website, and find a list of vendors where guides are available.

The guides are available at county auditor offices and license vendors in the state; by walk-in at the Game and Fish Department's Bismarck office; and at district offices in Riverdale, Harvey (Lontree), Williston, Dickinson, Jamestown and Devils Lake. The guides are not available to mail.

TODAY AND TOMORROW

PLOTS

There are about 1 million acres in the Game and Fish Department's PLOTS program, a goal reached in 2007 and maintained since then.

It hasn't been easy keeping that many quality acres enrolled in the Department's popular hunter access program, considering the decline of Conservation Reserve Program acres in the state. The CRP program was at its peak in North Dakota at 3.4 million acres in 2007. The balance this fall will be about 2.4 million acres.

Kevin Kading, Game and Fish Department private land section leader, said today about a half-million CRP acres are associated with the Department's PLOTS program. About 40,000 CRP acres, however, have been lost from the PLOTS program since 2007.

"While we have been able to replace some of those lost CRP acres over the years, it's getting harder and harder to do so," Kading said. "Because of CRP, we've been able to enroll thousands of acres of quality wildlife habitat into PLOTS. With the continued loss of CRP across the state, however, the PLOTS program will suffer."

But certainly not fade away.

Kading said the PLOTS program, and all private land conservation programs, are continually adjusting to farm bill policy, commodity prices, agricultural markets and producer demand. These adjustments, however, will become more challenging due to a tighter federal budget and reduced conservation program funding.

"This will put incredible pressure on wildlife habitat and conservation, and will result in some tough decisions for landowners as they are faced with fewer options for conservation," Kading said. "While our nation's leaders are struggling to decide how to right our country's financial situation, we need to remind them that conservation programs are not the places to cut. Conservation pays, it doesn't cost the taxpayer, it saves the taxpayer. When producers have the option for good conservation programs, not only does the PLOTS program benefit, our wildlife and all natural resources benefit."



Leaving the Decoys at Home

by Mike Szymanski

CHRIS GRONDAHL

CRAIG BIHRLE

It seems like nowadays when people think of waterfowl hunting, they envision the latest and greatest in camouflage patterns and mountains of decoys.

Whatever happened to the days when a hunter, and a maybe a buddy or two, would throw on drab-colored coats with a box of shells separated in the pockets, and simply grab their guns and go?

While a lot has changed in the past 20 years, there is no real smoking gun as to why fewer people are waterfowl hunting today. Duck populations have been above average during most of this two-decade stretch. Maybe, at least in North Dakota, hunters have opted to spend their time hunting deer, pheasants or turkeys. There are a number of other plausible hypotheses regarding hunting access and where people live these days, but still nothing that answers the question wholesale.

The thing is, you don't need all the trappings you see on TV or in magazines to hunt and harvest a few ducks or geese. Don't get me wrong, I've got all sorts of random acts of waterfowl hunting innovation, and a ton of decoys in all shapes and sizes with varying price tags. However, setting out a fortune in decoys is not the only way to hunt waterfowl.

While I enjoy hunting over decoys, sometimes the situation calls for pass-shooting. Perhaps my schedule doesn't allow me to set out decoys, fields are too wet to drive in, or in the case of snow geese, I might not have enough equipment. At any rate, it's important not to confuse pass-shooting with sky-busting, or just shooting at birds as they move from point A to point B. When done correctly, pass-shooting can offer excellent hunting opportunities while not pressuring birds out of an area in the process.

A time when I really do prefer pass-shooting waterfowl or cranes is during a stiff wind, mixed with a little precipitation. During a good wind, birds typically fly lower, and the report from your shot is muffled and maybe even carried away from birds on the ground or still on the roost.

As access has become more difficult in North Dakota, pass-shooting is sometimes the best tactic because habitat/cover requirements are much less specific, allowing access to birds that were formerly inaccessible.

The key to effective pass-shooting is strategically selecting shots. In the case of snow geese, the daily bag limit is 20 birds in fall and unlimited in spring, so you could have lots of shooting opportunities if you can keep the situation sustainable by not disrupting the birds' flight pattern. You don't want to change the place the birds are headed – a flock on the ground, for example – or the approach they are taking. Since the whole purpose of pass-shooting is positioning yourself between where the birds are coming from, and where they are headed, if either of these two things happens you might not be able to access the flight line, or find cover under the birds' path.

Maintaining the flight line is not rocket science. The way I think of it is that I'm ambushing birds and I don't want any other flocks to know that it's happening. I generally follow these rules:

- Don't push birds off feeding or roosting areas.
- If possible, position yourself so the wind is blowing away from birds either on the ground or roost so they aren't spooked by the shot.
- Don't take shots that you can't make cleanly.
- Don't take every shot possible. Let some birds make it through to keep the line intact. I also try to shoot only once or twice unless the next flock is a long way away.

Pass-shooting situations vary, but if you decide to try and pass-shoot a roost – an area where a large number of birds are congregated on the water – it's important that you don't blow the birds off the roost, so you need to keep a good distance from the water.

Sometimes when working a roost, you can try "back-shooting" (i.e., pass-shooting birds as they return to roost in late morning or early afternoon). When back-shooting, you don't want to spook birds off the roost, and you also want to make sure you let some flocks get by so they can get into the roost.

If you're pass-shooting birds as they leave their roost on their way out to feed, you don't want to spook the birds on the water.

The easiest way to think about keeping a hunting situation sustainable is to expose as few birds to the gun as possible, while still harvesting some for yourself. That will keep hunting in the area better for everyone.

While good pass-shooting days summon visions of lying in a fencerow or on a hillside in "collar-up" weather, I've found ducks or mourning doves crowding into a feeding area, or consistently flying past a piece of cover, under varying weather conditions. These situations call for little equipment other than your shotgun, shells, and some drab clothing.

Waders are certainly helpful; not only to get you closer to the water, but also to keep you dry when retrieving game. While useful, waders are not necessary to harvest a few ducks, especially if you have a dog. If you're careful with shot selection, you can be sure to only drop birds in areas where you can retrieve them. If the water runs into a bare shoreline, you can also wait for the wind to blow downed birds to within reach.

Upland game hunting also falls into the category of minimal equipment needs, and I do plenty of that, too. But the point is that if you'd like to harvest a few migratory game birds, simply head out in search of a situation where a few birds will wing past within range.

MIKE SZYMANSKI is a Game and Fish Department migratory game bird biologist.



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LAWS NOW IN PLACE

- Remove plants and plant fragments from decoys, strings and anchors.
- Remove plant seeds and plant fragments from waders, other equipment and dogs before leaving hunting areas.
- Remove all aquatic plants from boats and trailers before leaving a marsh or lake. (Does not include cattails or bulrushes used for camouflaging boats.)
- Remove all water from decoys, boats, motors, trailers and other watercraft.



PLANTS CAN SEVERELY DEGRADE WATERFOWL HABITATS AND FISHING WATERS



NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

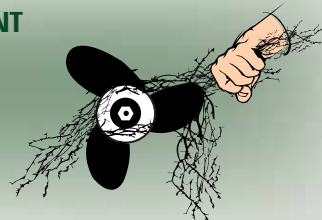
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701.328.6300

Email: ndgf@nd.gov

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BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



By Greg Freeman, Department News Editor



Some whitetail doe licenses are still available to hunters in North Dakota.

Antlerless Deer Licenses Available

Hunters still have time to purchase doe licenses for North Dakota's 2011 deer gun season. Refer to the Game and Fish Department website at gf.nd.gov for an update of licenses available.

Hunters can apply for these first-come, first-served licenses online on the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov. Paper applications are available from Game and Fish offices, county auditors and license vendors. Hand-delivered applications will not be processed at the Department while the applicant waits. Residents and nonresidents are eligible to apply.

Additional concurrent season doe licenses can be used 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. These licenses must be used 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.

The archery season opens September 2, youth deer September 16, regular deer gun November 4 and muzzleloader November 25.

Healthy Fish Populations in Missouri River System

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department completed its annual summer fish population sampling on the Missouri River System and found positive results in both Lake Sakakawea and Lake Oahe. The Missouri River from the Garrison Dam to Bismarck was not sampled due to high water.

Scott Gangl, Department fisheries management section leader, said when Lake Sakakawea began to refill in 2009, all fish populations started to rebound, beginning with the smelt forage base. "The drought of the early 2000s hurt fish populations because low water reduced spawning habitat and the available forage base," Gangl said. "Now, after a couple years of higher water, we are seeing a turnaround."

After years of drought, higher reservoir levels gave fish access to gravel and cobble spawning areas that were dry just a few years ago. There is also much more sheltered shallow-water habitat in the backs of bays that are important nursery areas for many fish species.

Netting operations in Lake Sakakawea found abundant walleyes, with many in the 18-22-inch range. Biologists also noted substantial numbers of yearling walleye in the nets, an indication of good reproductive and stocking success in 2010.

Northern pike, yellow perch and sauger were also plentiful in the survey nets. Sauger numbers have been good in recent years, and the size structure is favorable for anglers. Meanwhile, northern pike and yellow perch reproduction has flourished since the return of water to the reservoirs. Although their size is still on the smaller side due to their younger age,



Northern pike numbers in Lake Oahe are, as a Game and Fish Department fisheries biologist puts it, through the roof.

RON WILSON

MIKE ANDERSON

Gangl said they are growing well.

Smallmouth bass are rebounding with the water levels as well, Gangl said, with good numbers of moderately-sized fish in the nets.

"All fish are in excellent condition and plump, a huge turnaround from a few years ago when drought conditions resulted in extremely skinny fish," he said.

On Lake Oahe, the walleye population is still strong, with numbers similar to the past three years. Although larger walleye remain in Oahe, many fish in the nets were less than 14 inches in length. Gangl said high numbers of small walleye is the result of strong reproduction since the lake refilled in 2009.

"Northern pike numbers on Lake Oahe are also through the roof, higher than we've ever documented," Gangl added. "Like in Sakakawea, these fish are still growing in size and will produce some exceptional fishing opportunities in the

coming years."

Catfish were the most predominant fish in the Oahe nets.

Hunters Advised to Check Water Conditions

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department advises hunters to be cautious with their dogs around water, due to potential health hazards associated with blue-green algae.

Dr. Dan Grove, Game and Fish Department wildlife veterinarian, said late summer and early fall offer prime conditions for blue-green algae growth in many state waters. Ingestion by a hunting dog while perhaps retrieving a bird during the early goose season, or just practicing retrieving, can lead to severe illness and potential death.

"Conditions are right this year for stagnant water to become contaminated, especially with all of the overland flooding

that has occurred," Grove said.

Potentially toxic algae blooms occur under conditions of hot, dry weather. Shallow, stagnant water with moderate to high nutrient content provides an optimum environment for algal growth. Water or wind movements often concentrate the algae, and eventually the bloom appears as a blue-green "scum" floating on the water's surface. The threat disappears once the weather turns colder.

"Hunting dogs shouldn't drink or swim in discolored water or where algal blooms are apparent," Grove said. "If dogs retrieve in these conditions, they should be rinsed off immediately and shouldn't be allowed to lick their coat."

For additional information about the effects of blue-green algae blooms on hunting dogs, contact the Animal Health Division, North Dakota Department of Agriculture, at (701) 328-2655; or a local veterinarian.



CHRIS GRONDAHL

HIP for Migratory Bird Hunters

Migratory game bird hunters are reminded to register with the Harvest Information Program prior to hunting in North Dakota this fall.

HIP certification is required for all migratory bird hunters, regardless of age, before hunting ducks, geese, swans, mergansers, coots, cranes, snipe, doves or woodcock.

Hunter compliance is essential to obtain reliable national and regional estimates of annual harvest of all

migratory game bird species. These estimates provide information biologists need to make sound decisions concerning hunting seasons, bag limits and population management.

Hunters who purchase a license through the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's electronic licensing system (gf.nd.gov) or instant licensing telephone number (800-406-6409) can easily get HIP certified.

Otherwise, hunters can access the

Department's website, or call (888) 634-4798 and record the HIP number on their fishing, hunting and furbearer certificate.

Those who registered to hunt the spring light goose season in North Dakota do not have to register with HIP again, as it is required only once per year. However, hunters must HIP register in each state for which they are licensed before hunting migratory game birds.



A longtime urban archery hunt in Bismarck has been put on hold this fall because of flooding.

RON WILSON

Special Bismarck Area Deer Hunts on Hold

Flooding along the Missouri River north and west of Bismarck forced the State Game and Fish Department to put an experimental deer herd reduction hunt on hold.

The agency was going to start issuing up to 200 special antlerless licenses in early August, but Department officials postponed the process due to uncertainties over habitat condition and deer availability after floodwaters recede.

“This experimental season was designed

to reduce deer numbers on private land in a relatively small area,” said Randy Kreil, Department wildlife division chief. “We had good support from landowners who were committed to hosting hunters, but most of them are dealing with flooding issues. Our agency and the landowners feel it’s better to wait a year and hope that normal conditions return.”

The experimental hunt area included land west of River Road and N.D. Highway 1804, north and west of Bismarck, with Wilderness Cover Road near Pioneer Park as the southern boundary and 149th Ave. NW (north of Double Ditch Indian Village) as the northern boundary. During the regular deer season, much of this area is not open to hunting with centerfire rifles.

While Game and Fish will not issue special licenses, the experimental hunt area is still open to archery and gun hunting for those with appropriate bow or firearm season licenses.

In addition, the Bismarck Police Department will not issue trespass permits for this fall’s special herd reduction deer and turkey bow seasons within the city limits, due to water still covering a large portion of the hunting zone and associated flood recovery efforts.

A special herd reduction season on antlerless deer was scheduled to run in Bismarck from September 2 through January 31, 2012. In addition, up to 25 hunters licensed to bowhunt deer within the city could have received a turkey license to help control a growing population of birds in residential areas.

The city bowhunt is a cooperative effort between the city of Bismarck and the Game and Fish Department. Hunters are required to receive a trespass permit from the Bismarck Police Department before receiving a hunting license from the Game and Fish Department.

Millions of Walleye Stocked in State Waters

North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel, along with staff from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, stocked 8.3 million walleye fingerlings in 88 lakes and rivers across the state.

Jerry Weigel, Department fisheries production and development section leader, said while this year’s goal was to meet or exceed last year’s record stocking of 11.5 million walleye, challenges from flooding and cooler spring weather reduced hatchery output.

The Garrison Dam (7.7 million fingerlings) and Valley City (600,000) national fish hatcheries were both hampered by Mother Nature – Valley City with high flows and Garrison Dam with limited food production due to a cool spring and record releases.

Despite challenges, Weigel said fish quality was good and stocking conditions were great, with lots of cool water and flooded vegetation at stocking sites. “Given all the problems ... production turned out remarkably well,” he said.

That was also the case with northern pike (2.3 million stocked in 59 waters), and early indications are that stocking efforts and natural reproduction have set the stage for another good year for both walleye and pike.

Fisheries personnel will know more this fall when crews check on survival rate of stocked fish and determine the amount of natural reproduction.



CRAIG BHRLE

Hunting permits are required when hunting sandhill cranes in North Dakota.

Sandhill Crane Permits Required

Hunting permits for North Dakota's 2011 sandhill crane season, opening September 17, are available from the Game and Fish Department.

Hunters need a special crane permit, regardless of age. The permit costs \$5 and is available through the state Game and Fish Department's Bismarck office.

Hunters can purchase their crane permit online at the Department's website, gf.nd.gov. Another option is to send the permit fee, along with personal information, including height, weight, sex, social security number, date of birth, color of hair and eyes, and hunter education number and state issued, to Crane Permit, NDGF, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.

Fall Turkey Licenses Remain

Fall turkey licenses are still available to hunters this fall. Remaining licenses are issued on a first-come, first-served basis. Hunters are allowed a maximum of 15 licenses for the fall season.

Resident and nonresident hunters can apply online, or print out an application to mail, at the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov. Paper applications are available at license vendors.

Refer to the Game and Fish website for an update of licenses available. The fall turkey season runs October 8 through January 8, 2012.

Agencies Prohibit Hunting Over Bait

Hunters are reminded that hunting big game over bait is prohibited on all state owned or managed wildlife management areas, all U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service national wildlife refuges and waterfowl production areas, U.S. Forest Service national grasslands, and all North Dakota state school, state park and state forest service lands.

In addition, the governor's proclamation relating to chronic wasting disease includes a provision that prohibits hunting big game over bait on both public and private land in deer unit 3F2.

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.

Hunters Urged to Use Caution on Rural Roads

North Dakota hunters are reminded to be cautious of farm, ranch and other traffic when traveling on rural roads.

"As fall activities like harvesting crops, moving cattle and hauling bales gets started, there's more heavy machinery moving around," said Jeb Williams, wildlife resource management supervisor for the state Game and Fish Department. "Hunters driving around on country roads should just be aware to slow down when meeting another vehicle, and pull well to the right when topping a hill where you can't see what's coming from the other direction."

To maintain positive landowner/hunter relations, hunters are asked to move to the side of the road and allow wide farm vehicles to pass, park vehicles in a place that will not block a roadway, field approach or gate, pick up trash and empty shells, and not clean game in the road ditch or approach.



CRAIG BHRLE



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Youth Hunting Trailer Available

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department, Ducks Unlimited and Avery Outdoors are making it easier for young people to go on their first waterfowl hunt. Families with young hunters can now check out a trailer full of decoys and blinds to hunt waterfowl.

“The equipment needed to hunt waterfowl can sometimes be expensive and may discourage families from trying to hunt,” said Pat Lothspeich, Game and Fish Department outreach biologist.

Money for purchasing the trailer was provided by the Game and Fish Department’s Encouraging Tomorrow’s Hunters special grant program, which was developed to enhance recruitment of hunters.

Families with young hunters can check out one of three equipment packages, which are located in Bismarck. By calling DU’s Bismarck office at (701) 355-3500, they can reserve a fully equipped trailer with goose and duck decoys for field hunting or one of two bags of floating duck decoys and marsh seats for duck hunts in a wetland.

Artists Sought for 75th Anniversary WSFR Prints

State and federal natural resource agencies will celebrate the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program’s 75th anniversary in 2012.

In recognition of this milestone, an art contest is in the works, with the winning submission used to create limited edition prints.

All submissions must be original, hand-drawn creations, and must capture and illustrate the spirit of the WSFR program. Artwork should highlight one land and water dwelling species – wild mammal, bird or sport fish – found in the United States. Multiple submissions are permitted.

The design must be an original drawing or painting approximately 18 inches by 9 inches, drawn in any medium and either multicolor or black and white.

A complete list of rules for the art contest, including where to submit entries, is available at www.wsfr75.com. Artwork must be submitted before November 14, 2011.

WSFR provides grants to state fish and wildlife agencies for wildlife and fishery-related projects. The program is funded through purchases of firearms, ammunition, archery equipment, fishing equipment, and motor boat and small engine fuels.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

NEW STATE RECORD BUFFALO

Keith Huschka’s catch on June 19 is the only entry so far on North Dakota’s list of state record fish in 2011. The Dickinson angler caught a 54-pound buffalo from the Heart River in the tail waters of Heart Butte Dam.

The 42-inch fish broke the old record of 51 pounds, 4 ounces taken by Joshua Bartz of Bismarck from the Missouri River in 2009.

Zebra Mussel Still Present in Red River

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has confirmed that zebra mussel veligers were found in the southern Red River in the same vicinity where they were discovered in 2010.

A zebra mussel veliger, a microscopic free-swimming (young) stage, was originally found in a plankton sample taken at Kidder Dam in Wahpeton in June 2010. Sampling efforts conducted twice in early summer found veligers in the area on both occasions. Additional zebra mussel veligers were found in the lower Otter Tail River at Breckenridge, Minnesota.

The Otter Tail and Bois de Sioux rivers join at Wahpeton-Breckenridge to form the Red River.

Biologists believe the zebra mussels sampled in the Red River originated from Pelican Lake in Minnesota, which is in the Otter Tail River's drainage. Adult zebra mussels were found in Pelican Lake in fall 2009.

Zebra mussels are an aquatic nuisance species introduced into North America and currently found in many states east and south of North Dakota. Adult zebra mussels have not yet been found in North Dakota or the Red River.

Zebra mussel veligers can float along in river currents for weeks before eventually attaching to hard structures and growing into dime-sized mussels. When established, these invasive mussels reproduce at rapid rates. One female can produce up to one million eggs a season and each egg has the potential to develop into an adult.

Adult mussels attach to hard surfaces such as rocks, submerged trees, bridge abutments, docks and industrial or municipal water intake pipes. When in dense colonies they can block water flow in pipes.

Zebra mussels can also alter natural ecosystems. They are siphon feeders capable of filtering about one liter of water per day while feeding primarily on plankton.

These exotic mussels have the ability to alter the food chain and eventually deplete native flora and/or fauna in the affected water.

Game and Fish staff will continue periodic sampling of the Red River during the open-water season, as well as work with local government entities along the Red to monitor boat docks and other hard structures for the presence of adult zebra mussels.

Zebra mussels, like most aquatic nuisance species, are extremely difficult and costly to eliminate once established. The Game and Fish Department reminds water recreationists to abide by laws that are already in place to prevent introduction of ANS into new waters.

Existing ANS regulations include:

- All water must be drained from boats and other watercraft, including livewells, baitwells, bilges and motors before leaving a water body.
- All aquatic vegetation must be removed from boats and construction equipment, personal watercraft, trailers and associated equipment such as fishing poles/lures before leaving a body of water.
- All aquatic vegetation must be removed from bait buckets when leaving the water.
- Live aquatic bait or aquatic vegetation may not be transported into North Dakota. Also, all water must be drained from watercraft prior to entering the state.

25 Years as Conservation Volunteer

Sherry Niesar pictured with a rifle she received for years of volunteer service with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. Niesar is the first conservation volunteer educator to receive a 25-year service award with the Department. She began as a volunteer with the Project WILD program in 1985 and continues to work with other Department programs, such as Wildlife of North Dakota. Niesar teaches students in area schools about the importance of wildlife and their habitats.

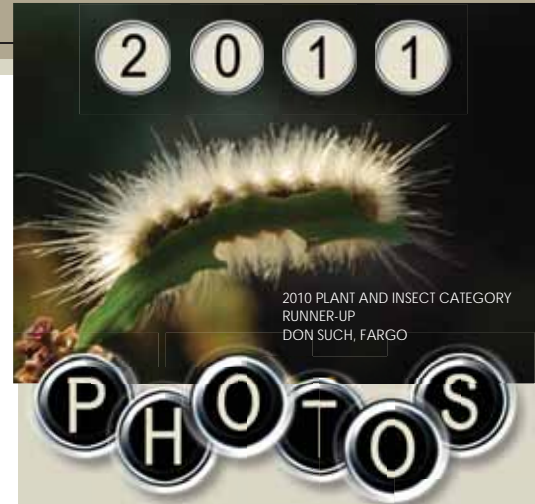


Photo Contest Deadline Nears

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. An overall winning photograph will be chosen, with the number of place winners in each category determined by the number of qualified entries.

Contest entries are limited to 5x7-inch or larger color prints, or digital files submitted on disk or by email to photocontest@nd.gov. Contestants are limited to no more than five entries.

Full contest rules were published in the July 2011 issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*, and are also available at gf.nd.gov.



Proclamation Signed As a Precaution Against Spread of CWD

The 2011 proclamation establishing guidelines for transporting deer, elk and moose carcasses and carcass parts into and within North Dakota is now in effect as a precaution against the possible spread of chronic wasting disease.

Hunters harvesting big game in North Dakota deer unit 3F2 cannot transport a carcass containing the head and spinal column outside of the unit unless it's taken directly to a meat processor. The head can be removed from the carcass and transported outside of the unit if it is to be submitted to a CWD surveillance drop-off location or a licensed taxidermist.

In addition, hunting big game over bait is prohibited in deer unit 3F2. Bait, in this case, includes grain, seed, mineral, salt, fruit, vegetable nut, hay or any other natural or manufactured food placed by an individual. Bait does not include agricultural practices, gardens, wildlife food plots, agricultural crops, livestock feeds, fruit or vegetables in their natural location such as apples on or under an apple tree, or unharvested food or vegetables in a garden.

Hunters are prohibited from transporting into North Dakota the whole carcass, or certain carcass parts, of deer, elk, moose or other members of the cervid family from areas within states and provinces with documented occurrences of CWD in wild populations, or from farmed cervid operations within states and provinces that have had farmed cervids diagnosed with CWD. Only the following portions of the carcass can be transported:

- Meat that is cut and wrapped either commercially or privately.
- Quarters or other portions of meat with no part of the spinal column or head attached.
- Meat that has been boned out.
- Hides with no heads attached.
- Clean (no meat or tissue attached) skull plates with antlers attached.
- Antlers with no meat or tissue

attached.

- Upper canine teeth, also known as buglers, whistlers or ivories.
- Finished taxidermy heads.

The following game management units, equivalent wildlife management units, or counties have had free-ranging deer, moose or elk diagnosed with CWD, and importation of harvested elk, white-tailed deer, mule deer, moose or other cervids from these areas are restricted.

- North Dakota – Deer unit 3F2. Gutted/eviscerated carcasses being taken to a North Dakota meat processor are exempt, as are heads removed from the carcass and taken to a licensed taxidermist or provided to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department for submission for CWD surveillance purposes.
- Alberta – Wildlife management units 150, 151, 163, 234, 236, 256 and 728.
- Colorado – All game management units.
- Illinois – Counties of Winnebago, Boone, McHenry, DeKalb, Ogle, LaSalle and Stephenson.
- Kansas – Counties of Cheyenne, Decatur, Rawlins and Sheridan.
- Minnesota – DPA 602.
- Nebraska – Upper Platte, Platte, Plains, Sandhills, Frenchman, Buffalo and Pine Ridge units, which include the counties of Cheyenne, Kimball, Sioux, Scotts Bluff, Morrill, Sheridan, Box Butte, Dawes, Banner, Cherry, Hall, Garden, Keith, Red Willow, Deuel, Grant and Arthur.
- New Mexico – White Sands Missile Base (GMU 19), GMU 28 and GMU 34.
- New York – Any deer taken within the CWD containment areas of Oneida and Madison counties.
- Saskatchewan – All wildlife management units.
- South Dakota – Prairie units WRD-

- 21A, WRD-27A and WRD-27B; Black Hills units BHD-BH1, BHD-BD3 and BHD-BD4.
- Utah – 16A, 16B, 16C, 13A, 13B, 8A, 8B, 8C, 9A, 9B, 9C and 9D.
- Virginia – Frederick County.
- West Virginia – Hampshire County.
- Wisconsin – Any deer registered with a Wisconsin DNR Red Registration Tag from the area designated as the Disease Eradication Zone or Herd Reduction Zone including deer management zones 54B-CWD, 70-CWD, 70A-CWD, 70B-CWD, 70C-CWD, 70D-CWD, 70E-CWD, 70F-CWD, 70G-CWD, 71-CWD, 73B-CWD, 73E-CWD, 75A-CWD, 75B-CWD, 75C-CWD, 75D-CWD, 76-CWD, 76A-CWD, 76M-CWD, 77A-CWD, 77B-CWD and 77C-CWD.
- Wyoming – All deer and elk units.

In addition, the following states and provinces have had farmed deer, elk, moose or other cervids diagnosed with CWD, and importation of farmed deer, elk, moose and other cervid carcasses or their parts are restricted: Alberta, Colorado, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New York, Oklahoma, Saskatchewan, South Dakota, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

Additional areas will be added as necessary and listed on the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov.

Because each state and province has its own set of rules and regulations, hunters should contact the state or province in which they will hunt to obtain more information.

Hunters with questions can contact the North Dakota Game and Fish Department at (701) 328-6300, or email ndgf@nd.gov.

■ ■ ■ GAME AND FISH STAFF NOTES



Paul Schadewald



Greg Link

Schadewald Retires, Link Named Chief

Longtime North Dakota Game and Fish Department division chief Paul Schadewald retired at the end of July after a 34-year career with the agency.

A Sykeston native and University of North Dakota graduate, Schadewald started his Game and Fish career in 1977 as the federal aid coordinator, and had served as administrative services division chief since 1989. In 2010 he assumed leadership of the conservation and communications division.

Greg Link, the Department's assistant wildlife chief since 2001, was promoted to the conservation and communications division chief position August 1. Link, a Richardton native with a degree in wildlife and fisheries zoology from North Dakota State University, started his career with Game and Fish as a wildlife technician in 1986. He was a habitat biologist from 1988-91, wildlife resource management supervisor from 1991-97, and private land coordinator from 1997-2001.



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NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT
 100 North Bismarck Expressway
 Bismarck, ND 58501-5095
 701.328.6300
 Email: ndgf@nd.gov



back cast

By Ron Wilson



To all the early morning people I've passed, nearly shoulder to shoulder going in the opposite direction since April, some trailing behind dogs clipped to leashes, others hooked up to iPods, this is goodbye.

You can have your blacktop walking path back, the cottontail rabbits that poke through the cyclone fence behind the tee box on No. 2 and the uninterested jackrabbits that look as tall as golf bags on the short, verdant fairway grass. It's all yours.

Starting soon, and lasting until winter shoves me indoors to the monotony of a treadmill and a TV playing ESPN that wiggles with each of my strides, its hunting season, featuring an asphaltless playing field of big bluestem, Western wheatgrass, buck brush, cattails, rolling hills and folds in the land that harbor so much possibility.

I'll burn my calories on long walks tracking two bird dogs crisscrossing each other's path, with a 20-gauge shotgun, older and more nicked up than the two of them, thrown over a shoulder. I'll trust that they remember the drill after months of no live fire or exposure to wild game, other than the handful of birds that accidentally ended it all trying to fly through windows at home. Any early season rustiness, I expect, will be made up by happy dog enthusiasm that is as infectious as it is fun to witness.

Creatures of habit, we'll hunt many of the same places, knowing that we've shot birds there in the past, but just how long ago that was is only a guess. Maybe the dogs know for sure, referring to some kind of internal canine hunting log that is

beyond human understanding. Then again, maybe their noses and manners are the only things admirable and, like me, sometimes can't remember what they had for breakfast.

I say that we'll hunt many of the same places, but I understand that's only wishful thinking in today's climate. Too many of the tracts of land we've enjoyed hunting – not only because they often held birds, but because they felt, if it's possible today, a little remote – are gone, converted to cash crop, posted, plowed. While I recognize the reasons for change, it doesn't mean that I have to like it. And with two dogs whining and grumbling in plastic travel crates with escaping on their minds, it does little good to stew over what's lost, but instead embrace what is not.

Like a lot of hunters, I'm weathered out, brain-sore from repeated mentioning of three back-to-back tough winters, questionable spring nesting and brood rearing weather, loss of habitat and what it all means to this fall's hunting season.

What it likely means, as our wildlife division chief said earlier in this magazine, is for the third year in a row, the fall hunting outlook is a bit less optimistic than the year before, and it looks like the start of a trend that might not right itself for some time.

While I understand the reasoning behind the forecast, it doesn't mean that I have to like it. Whatever the hunting season brings, be it bounty or the occasional bird here and there for ceremony at the dinner table, it beats the walking path.

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



STEVE SILSETH

Wood Duck

The description “ugly duckling” doesn’t apply.

The male wood duck, arguably one of nature’s best dressed, is a handsome bird. The female, while not sporting the multicolored crest of the male, has a delicately patterned body that makes her attractive in her own right.

While some ducks are hard to distinguish, we immediately recognize the male wood duck in all its spring Crayola crayon glory. Its crested head is metallic green with purple and white markings. The throat is white and bill red at the base, and its eyes bright orange-red. Its glossy purplish-brown chest fades into the white of the breast, and the back and rump are a rich bronze-green.

To see a male wood duck dressed its best during fall hunting season in North Dakota, however, is uncommon. Wood ducks migrate out of state early, about the first of October,

before the birds are colored-up, which typically doesn’t happen until sometime in mid-winter.

While North Dakota always has a few stragglers, waterfowl biologists tell us that chances are pretty slim to shoot a multi-colored male wood duck in the state during hunting season.

Hunters shoot only about 2,000 wood ducks each fall in North Dakota, which is just a sliver of the ducks harvested in the state. For example, the average number of mallards taken annually in the state over the last decade is a little more than 200,000.

Wood ducks are popular ducks in the daily bag of hunters elsewhere, though. In the Mississippi Flyway, for example, about 623,000 were harvested in 2009. By comparison, just 48,000 were taken in the Central Flyway in which North Dakota is located.

Wood ducks are a success story. The species was nearly extirpated by the early 20th century, but laws to safeguard wood ducks ended their demise in time. Today, wood ducks are expanding their range in North Dakota and increasing in numbers.

Wood ducks are cavity nesters. While nest boxes built and installed off the ground by humans have made a difference in their comeback, North Dakota’s aging tree habitat has played a larger role. Natural cavities created by broken limbs or splits in trees have provide places for the birds to nest and raise young.

Twenty-four hours after hatching, young are coaxed from the nest cavity and jump to the ground, sometimes from 50 feet high or more. Unbelievably, the abrupt stop at the bottom does them little harm.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.