

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

\$2.00 AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2012

SPECIAL FALL OUTLOOK ISSUE





MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

It must be a sign of getting older, but I have no idea where summer has gone. I've only accomplished about half of what I intended, and that might be an exaggeration.

Of course, now we're heading into fall, and hunters in North Dakota have already taken to the field. Early Canada goose season opened August 15 and from reports I've received, hunting has been great and a lot of folks are taking advantage of this opportunity.

It's been a few years since I hunted during the early goose season. I remember my first experience, sitting in a harvested wheat field amongst a few decoys, sweating and getting chewed up by mosquitoes, wondering what I'd gotten myself into.

Yet, given the brisk mornings of late August, the juices started to flow again and I'm thinking I should go out and give it another try.

I've often said that fall is a time of decision in North Dakota. Numerous hunting seasons start to show up on the calendar and fishing is typically fantastic. From all the information I've received from Game and Fish Department surveys, and from talking with people across the state, it should be another good year.

The ring-necked pheasant population looks to be in good shape, with preliminary reports

showing pheasant numbers might be the best since 2008. The recent mild winter, followed by one of the better hatching and rearing periods in a long time, have greatly contributed to that positive report. In addition, we still have decent habitat conditions that allow wildlife to survive.

As those conditions change, however, so will the ability of wildlife to bounce back from bad weather.

While pheasants, ducks and geese are all up from last year, not all populations are doing as well as we'd like. The sage grouse, prairie chicken and pronghorn seasons will remain closed this year, and of course our deer populations in most areas are well below where they were five years ago.

Still, the opportunities are almost endless if you want to get out and enjoy what North Dakota offers. Just think about our options as fall creeps nearer. Hunting for sharp-tailed grouse, ducks and geese, pheasants, deer with a bow or gun, and then there's fall fishing. What a list to choose from.

I don't know how everyone else views the transition from summer to fall, but I look forward to it every year. I enjoy the crisp mornings and the anticipation of getting out and enjoying North Dakota's fish and wildlife resources. I encourage you to do the same.

Terry Steinwand

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

The mission of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department is to protect, conserve and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their habitats for sustained public consumptive and nonconsumptive use.

Editor: Ron Wilson Graphic Designer: Connie Schiff Circulation Manager: Dawn Jochim

AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2012 • NUMBER 2 • VOLUME LXXV

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FEATURES	
2012 Hunting Outlook	2
PLOTS Then and Now	18
First Time Field Hunt Photo Essay.....	20
DEPARTMENTS	
Buffaloberry Patch.....	26
Back Cast	33

DEPARTMENT DIRECTORY

Governor Jack Dalrymple
ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION
Game and Fish Director: Terry Steinwald
Chief, Administrative Services: Kim Molesworth
Business Manager: Corey Wentland
Administrative Assistant: Gerylyn M. Evans
Administrative Officer/Building Maint. Supvr: George Lee
Building Maint. Tech: Dustin Repnow
Chief Accountant: Angie Krueger
Accountants: Kelly Wike, Melissa Long, Ashley Baker
IT Section Supervisor/GIS Specialist: Brian Hosek
IT Coordinators: Sally Sorenson, Alan Reile
Programmer Analyst: Tiffany Qsart
Licensing Manager: Randy Meissner

Assistants: Gail Mosset, Katherine Mernitz, Janet Wolf, Amanda Anstrom
Administrative Assistant – Dickinson: Janel Kolar, Stephanie Richardson
Administrative Assistant – Devils Lake: Lisa Tofte
Administrative Assistant – Jamestown: Tonya Kukowski
Administrative Assistant – Riverdale: Clare Renner

CONSERVATION AND COMMUNICATIONS DIVISION

Division Chief: Greg Link, Bismarck
Administrative and Water Safety Coordinator: Nancy Boldt, Bismarck
Communications Supervisor: Craig Bihrl, Bismarck
Editor, North Dakota OUTDOORS: Ron Wilson, Bismarck
Website Editor: Pat Headrick, Bismarck
News Editor: Greg Freeman, Bismarck
Video News Director: Tom Jensen, Bismarck
Videographer: Mike Anderson, Bismarck
Information Specialist: Dawn Jochim, Bismarck
Graphic Artist: Connie Schiff, Bismarck
Outreach Supervisor: Chris D. Grondahl, Bismarck
Outreach Biologists: Doug Leier, West Fargo; Greg Gullickson, Minot; Marty Egeland, Grand Forks; Pat Lothspeich, Bismarck
Education Coordinator: Jeff Long, Bismarck
Hunter Education Coordinator: Zach Peterson
Conservation Supervisor: Steve Dyke, Bismarck
Resource Biologists: Alexis Duxbury, John Schumacher, Bruce Kreft, Bismarck
Conservation Biologists: Sandra Johnson, Patrick Isakson, Bismarck

ENFORCEMENT DIVISION

Division Chief: Robert Timian, Bismarck
Investigations Supvr: Bruce Burkett, Bismarck
Investigator: Scott Winkelman, Bismarck
Region No. 1 Warden Supvr: Corey Erck, Jamestown
District Wardens: Jackie Lundstrom, Bismarck; Amy Jo Winkelman, Bismarck; Jerad Bluem, Steele; Mark Pollert, Jamestown; Michael Seclacek, Fargo; Tim Phalen, Wyndmere; Andrew Dahlgren, Edgeley; Erik Schmidt, Linton
Region No. 2 Warden Supvr: Paul Freeman, Devils Lake
District Wardens: Jonathan Tofteland, Bottineau; Randy Knain, Rugby; Kurt Auf-forth, Cando; Greg Hastings, Cavalier; Gary Rankin, Larimore; Jim Job, Devils Lake; James Myhre, New Rockford
Region No. 3 Warden Supvr: Doug Olson, Riverdale
District Wardens: Jim Burud, Kenmare; Al Howard, Minot; Tim Larson, Turtle Lake; Ken Skuza, Riverdale; Michael Raasakka, Stanley; Brent Schwan, Watford City
Region No. 4 Warden Supvr: Dan Hoenke, Dickinson
District Wardens: Ryan Tunge, Hazen; Bill Schaller, Killdeer; Art Cox, Bowman; Courtney Sprenger, Elgin; Jeff Violet, Mandan
Administrative Assistant: Lori Kensington, Bismarck

WILDLIFE DIVISION

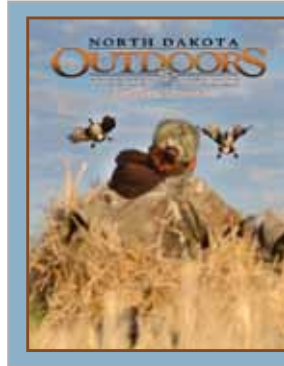
Division Chief: Randy Kreil, Bismarck
Assistant Division Chief: Jeb Williams, Bismarck
Game Mgt. Section Leader: Michael A. Johnson, Bismarck
Procurement Officer: Ray Parsons, Bismarck
Pilot: Jeff Faught, Bismarck
Upland Game Mgt. Supvr: Stan Kohn, Bismarck
Upland Game Mgt. Biologist: Aaron Robinson, Dickinson
Migratory Game Bird Biologist: Mike Szymanski, Bismarck
Big Game Mgt. Supvr: Bruce Stillings, Dickinson
Big Game Mgt. Biologists: Bill Jensen, Bismarck; Brett Wiedmann, Dickinson, Jason Smith, Jamestown
Survey Coordinator: Jerry Gulke
Wildlife Veterinarian: Dr. Daniel Grove, Bismarck
Furbearer Biologist: Stephanie Tucker, Bismarck
Game Management Technician: Rodney Gross, Devils Lake
Wildlife Resource Management Section Leader: Scott Peterson, Lonetree
Wildlife Resource Mgt. Supvrs: Bill Haase, Bismarck; Brian Prince, Devils Lake; Kent Luttschwager, Williston; Brian Kietzman, Jamestown; Dan Halstead, Riverdale
Wildlife Resource Mgt. Biologists: Arvid Anderson, Riverdale; Randy Littlefield, Lonetree; Rodd Compson, Jamestown; Judd Jasmer, Dickinson
Wildlife Techs: Tom Crutchfield, Jim Houston, Bismarck; Dan Morman, Robert Miller, Riverdale; Ernest Dawson, Jamestown; Morgan Johnson, Seth Gaugler, Lonetree; Alan Roller, Williston; Scott Olson, Devils Lake
Private Land Section Leader: Kevin Kading, Bismarck
Asst. Private Land Coordinator: Doug Howie, Bismarck
Private Land Field Operation Coordinator: Casey Anderson, Bismarck
Private Land Biologists: Jon Roldson, Colin Penner, Terry Oswald, Jr., Levi Jacobson, Bismarck; Ty Dressler, Dickinson; Ryan Huber, Riverdale; Nathan Harling, Devils Lake; Renae Heinle, Jamestown; Todd Buckley, Williston
Administrative Assistant: Dale Repnow, Bismarck
Lonetree Administrative Assistant: Diana Raugust, Harvey

FISHERIES DIVISION

Division Chief: Greg Power, Bismarck
Fisheries Mgt. Section Leader: Scott Gangl, Bismarck
Fisheries Supvrs: Fred Ryckman, Riverdale; Jeff Hendrickson, Dickinson; Jason Lee, Riverdale; Paul Bailey, Bismarck; Randy Hiltner, Devils Lake; Gene Van Eeckhout, Jamestown; Dave Fryda, Riverdale
Fisheries Biologists: Brandon Kratz, Jamestown; Russ Kinzler, Riverdale, Todd Caspers, Devils Lake
Fisheries Techs: Shane Shefstad, Williston; Phil Miller, Devils Lake; Pat John, Jamestown; Justen Barstad, Bismarck; Brian Frohlich, Riverdale; Jeff Merchant, Dickinson
Production/Development Section Supvr: Jerry Weigel, Bismarck
Aquatic Habitat Supvr: Scott Elstad, Bismarck
Fisheries Development Supvr: Bob Frohlich, Bismarck
Fisheries Dev. Proj. Mgr: Wesley Erdle, Bismarck
Fisheries Development Technician: Kyle Hoge, Bismarck
Administrative Assistant: Janice Vetter, Bismarck

ADVISORY BOARD

District 1 Jason Leiseth, Arnegard
 District 2 Robert Gjellstad, Voltaire
 District 3 Thomas Rost, Devils Lake
 District 4 Ronald Houdek, Tolna
 District 5 Loran Palmer, Wahpeton
 District 6 Joel Christoferson, Litchville
 District 7 Frank Karch, Bismarck
 District 8 Dwight Hecker, Fairfield



Front Cover

The final approach by geese or ducks committed to a decoy set is a highlight moment of any waterfowl hunt. See more images from this successful day afield starting on page 20.

Photo by Craig Bihrl, Bismarck



Official Publication of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department (ISSN 0029-2761)
 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501-5095

Website: gf.nd.gov • email: ndgf@nd.gov

Information (701) 328-6300 • Administration (701) 328-6305

Hunter Education (701) 328-6615 • Licensing (701) 328-6335

24-Hour Licensing by Phone: (800) 406-6409

The TTY/TTD (Relay ND) number for the hearing or speech impaired is (800) 366-6888

North Dakota OUTDOORS is published 10 times a year, monthly except for the months of April and September. Subscription rates are \$10 for one year or \$20 for three years. Group rates of \$7 a year are available to organizations presenting 25 or more subscriptions. Remittance should be by check or money order payable to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. Indicate if subscription is new or renewal. The numbers on the upper right corner of the mailing label indicate the date of the last issue a subscriber will receive unless the subscription is renewed.

Permission to reprint materials appearing in *North Dakota OUTDOORS* must be obtained from the author, artist or photographer. We encourage contributions; contact the editor for writer and photography guidelines prior to submission.

The NDGFD receives federal financial assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In accordance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the NDGFD joins the U.S. Department of the Interior and its bureaus in prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, sex (in education programs or activities) and also religion for the NDGFD. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity, or facility as described above, or you desire further information, please write to: N. D. Game and Fish Department, Attn: Chief Administrative Services, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501-5095 or to: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Attn: Civil Rights Coordinator, 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Mail Stop: MBSP-4020, Arlington, Virginia 22203.

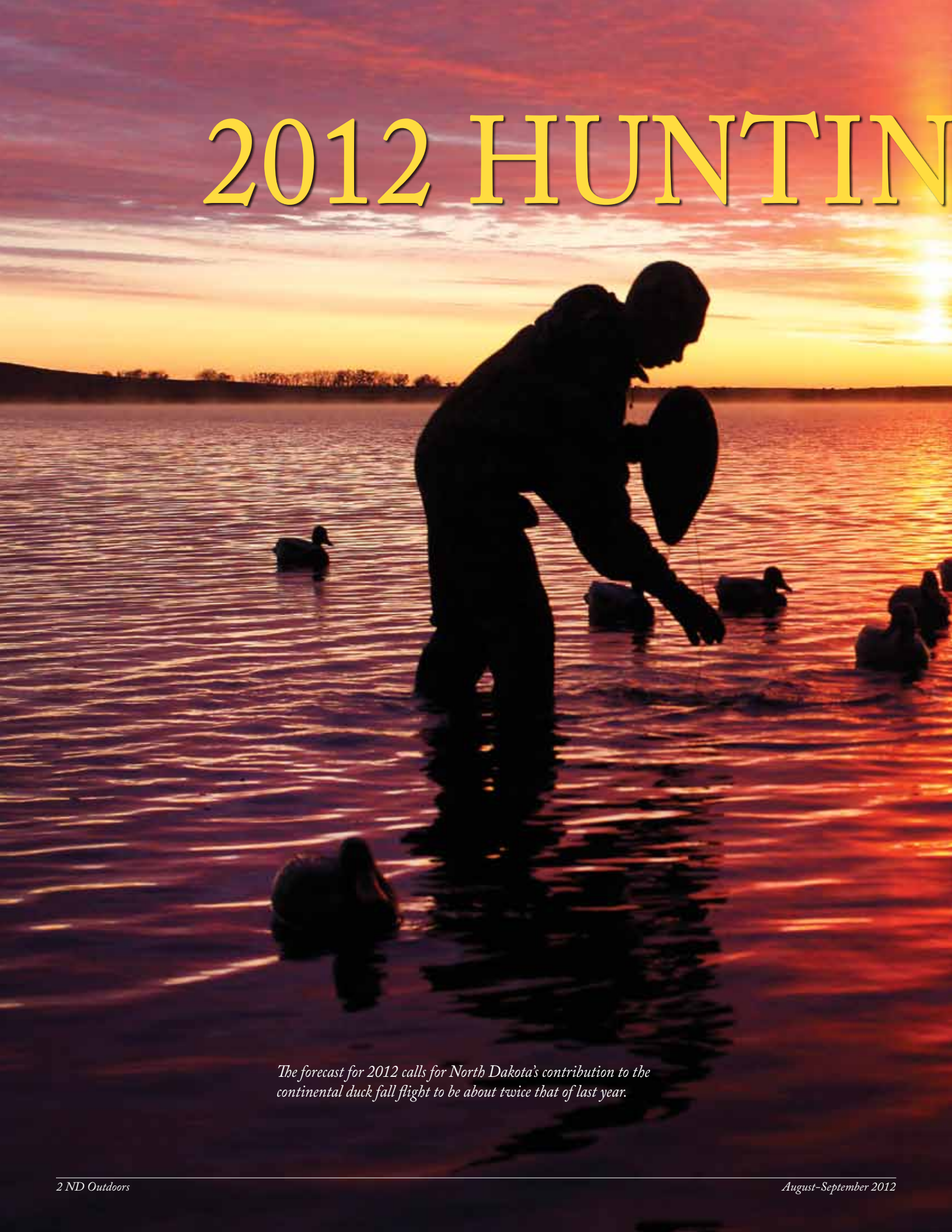
Periodical Postage Paid at
 Bismarck, ND 58501
 and additional entry offices.
 Printed in the United States

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to:
North Dakota OUTDOORS
 100 North Bismarck Expressway
 Bismarck, ND 58501-5095

Report All Poachers (RAP) 800-472-2121

In cooperation with North Dakota Wildlife Federation and North Dakota State Radio.

2012 HUNTING



The forecast for 2012 calls for North Dakota's contribution to the continental duck fall flight to be about twice that of last year.

HUNTING OUTLOOK

A PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTY

By Randy Kreil

Choosing a theme for the 2012 hunting outlook was difficult. We have excellent prospects for ducks and geese, and a somewhat surprisingly good forecast for pheasants. On the other hand, for the third straight year North Dakota won't have a pronghorn season, and deer license numbers are the lowest in 20 years.

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

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

We've seen hopeful signs that wildlife populations might rebound from three tough winters.

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

The nesting and brood-rearing period

in late spring and early summer were mild and likely beneficial to upland game.

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

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

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

While waterfowl hunters will enjoy good bird numbers, finding hunting spots over water and in fields will be a

challenge due to lower water levels and fewer acres of small grains resulting from changing cropping practices.

The future is uncertain as well.

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

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

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

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

A mild winter in 2012 is expected to help deer populations rebound across much of the state.



UPLAND AND SMALL GAME

There are some positive signs in the pheasant world, pointing to the possibility of better than normal production statewide.



CRAIG BIHRLE

▶ RING-NECKED PHEASANTS

Regular Season Opens: Oct. 13

Delayed Opener: Oct. 20

Regular Season Closes: Jan. 6, 2013

Delayed Season Closes: Jan. 6, 2013

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

Because habitat and weather play important roles in the number of pheasants hunters see each fall, last winter's mild conditions were a welcome development, providing a jumpstart for spring breeding.

Winters of 2008-11 were hard on pheasants caught in poor cover. Those winters were followed by cool, wet conditions during brooding and fewer young birds were recruited into the fall population. Knowing this, Game and Fish biologists expected that this spring's rooster crowing counts might be down, but instead the index was up 10 percent statewide from 2011.

In 2009-10, the number of pheasant hunters in North Dakota dropped below 100,000, with a harvest of about 500,000 or more roosters annually.

More hunting opportunities meant more pheasants taken during the 2011 season, as last fall's pheasant harvest was 683,000, up from 552,000 in 2010. While the overall landscape probably didn't have more birds, Mother Nature allowed for an increase in harvest due to mild weather and minimal snow cover in November, December and early January.

Since 2000, hunters have enjoyed fall pheasant numbers like most had never seen. Unfortunately, birds are losing nesting and brooding habitat with the continued decline of Conservation Reserve Program acres across much of the state, most notably in southeastern North Dakota.

Loss of this critical habitat will surely negatively influence the pheasant population. Combine this with long, snowy winters and cold, wet weather at hatching time, and pheasant numbers decline.

As this is written, it's still too early to make any predictions about fall numbers and distribution of pheasants, but there are some positives, including last winter's mild weather, which was good for pheasants, especially hens. Habitat conditions and weather during spring

nesting and brooding were quite good across the state, which could mean better than normal production statewide.

Game and Fish Department roadside brood counts in late summer will provide a better estimate of production and a more definitive preview of this fall's pheasant hunting season.

Stan Kohn, Upland Game Management Supervisor, Bismarck

▶ WILD TURKEYS

Opens: Oct. 13

Closes: Jan. 13, 2013

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

Wild turkeys are not native to North Dakota, but they have adapted to our limited woodland resources. Even so, winter does pose a problem for birds since natural woodland foods are scarce.

When winter hits in North Dakota, wild turkeys usually travel to farmsteads of generous and tolerant landowners where food and cover is available. Here they find the necessities needed to survive winter.

Turkeys occupy all areas of the state



CRAIG BIHRLE

The weather was nearly perfect this year for nesting and brooding hens.

Pheasant hunters shot 683,000 birds last season.

containing good habitat. In many instances, they even breed and winter in areas not normally considered good turkey habitat. Like other game birds, poor production and chick recruitment has trimmed the overall population since 2008.

Almost all hunting units have experienced a decline in turkey numbers, leading to fewer hunting licenses. It's too early to estimate a fall population as some nesting habitat along the Missouri, Little Missouri and Souris river bottomlands was disturbed during major flooding last summer.

On a positive note, spring habitat conditions in much of the state looked quite good and the weather was almost perfect for nesting and brooding hens, likely adding more young birds to the population than the previous three years.

Even though license numbers are down in most hunting units, with some preseason scouting and contacts, hunters should be able to locate birds along wooded river bottoms, drainages and forested areas.

Stan Kohn

▶ **SHARP-TAILED GROUSE**

Opens: Sept. 8

Closes: Jan. 6, 2013

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

Upland game species in North Dakota declined rapidly following three difficult winters. Last winter, however, set the stage for a potential rebound going into the 2012 hunting season if conditions are favorable for nesting and brood rearing.

Most upland game species have the reproductive potential to recover quickly from drastic reductions caused by weather, but there is a caveat. Recovery depends on the quality of habitat within the species' home range and if weather is favorable to allow chicks the opportunity to survive.

In North Dakota, quality habitat is being lost as acreage enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program is removed from the landscape. Additionally, fragmentation associated with energy development and loss of native prairie are negatively affecting sharp-tailed grouse populations and other wildlife species.

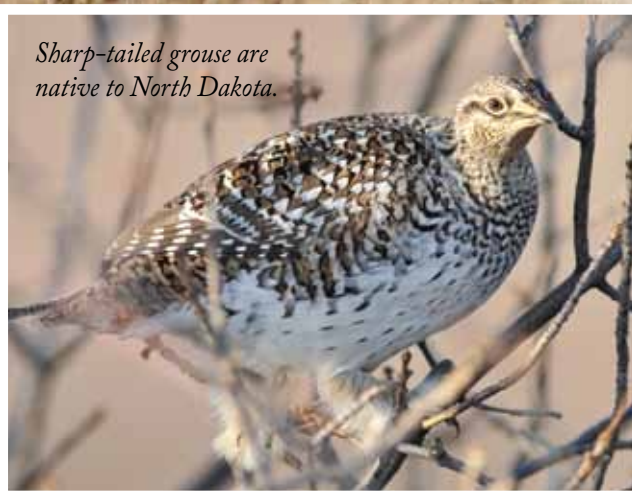
Summer sharptail brood counts, which are the most accurate predictor of the fall hunting season, were not conducted by the time of this writing. The data available is last year's hunter harvest age ratios, which indicated poor production in many areas of the state for 2011, and spring dancing ground trends, which showed a slight increase this year compared to 2011.

Neither method can provide an accurate prediction for this fall's hunting season so hunters must wait for later summer brood count reports.



CRAIG BIRNIE

Sharp-tailed grouse are native to North Dakota.



MIKE LALONDE

As a best guess, nesting conditions were optimal with relatively mild weather across the state. Southwestern North Dakota is enduring a significant drought that will reduce insect production and ultimately affect brood survival. The state's northern tier had timely precipitation, but only time will tell how grouse respond. Hunters should expect to see slightly increased numbers of sharp-tailed grouse this hunting season.

Aaron Robinson, Upland Game Management Biologist, Dickinson

▶ RUFFED GROUSE

Opens: Sept. 8
Closes: Jan. 6, 2013
Daily Limit: 3
Possession Limit: 12
Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

Ruffed grouse inhabited the native aspen woodlands in Rolette, Bottineau, Pembina, Walsh, and Cavalier counties prior to European colonization. These birds provide an interesting segment of the North Dakota landscape, and are our only native woodland grouse species.

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

Ruffed grouse hunting season dates, bag limits, number of hunters and harvest has remained fairly constant over the last 20 years.

In 2010, it seemed we were slowly moving out of the low point in the population cycle. However, spring drumming counts in both 2011 and 2012 showed a decrease from 2010.

This spring's drumming counts were down 37 percent statewide from 2011,

and dropped 24 percent in the Turtle Mountains and almost 42 percent in the Pembina Hills. In early July, nesting success and production information on ruffed grouse were unknown, but even if the population is low, it is always enjoyable to hike through North Dakota's native woodlands in fall.

Stan Kohn

▶ HUNGARIAN PARTRIDGE

Opens: Sept. 8
Closes: Jan. 6, 2013
Daily Limit: 3
Possession Limit: 12
Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

This fall, hunters will likely see slightly higher numbers of partridge in the field compared to last year.

Spring weather was favorable in many parts of the state. A string of tough winters reduced the adult breeding population, but last winter should help the population recover heading into nesting season.

Pockets of decent hunting may be found in areas where multiple pairs reproduced successfully, but hunters will need to spend some time in the mornings scouting out potential areas.

Aaron Robinson

▶ SAGE GROUSE, PINNATED GROUSE

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

While the number of strutting males observed during the spring sage grouse survey was up 15 percent from last year, showing some hope for a struggling species, the population remains well below management objectives.

This is the fifth year in a row that North Dakota won't have a sage grouse season, and the third year in a row for no season on pinnated grouse, or prairie chickens, in the northeastern and southeastern parts of the state.

Game and Fish Department biologists counted 72 male sage grouse in spring on 12 active strutting grounds. Last year, 63 males were counted on 12 active leks in southwestern North Dakota.

The number of males counted on leks each spring has gradually declined since 2000. In 2008, spring counts dropped dramatically throughout North Dakota's sage grouse range due to West Nile virus.

Numerous conservation efforts have taken place in the past four years which will hopefully help the sage grouse population recover. Sage grouse management in North Dakota and the entire range of 11 western states is a collaborative effort.

Sage grouse are North Dakota's largest native upland game bird. They are found in extreme southwestern North Dakota, primarily in Bowman and Slope counties.

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

▶ TREE SQUIRRELS

Open Area: Statewide
Opens: Sept. 8
Closes: Jan. 6, 2013
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 rifles, or with bow and arrows legal for taking upland game.



Sage grouse have been slow to rebound in southwestern North Dakota.

CRAIG BIRRE

▶ WHITE-TAILED DEER

Archery Opens: Aug. 31

Archery Closes: Jan. 6, 2013

Regular Gun Season Opens: Nov. 9

Regular Gun Season Closes: Nov. 25

Muzzleloader Opens: Nov. 30

Muzzleloader Closes: Dec. 16

The Game and Fish Department made available 65,300 licenses for the regular gun season, which is 44,650 fewer than 2011. This is the lowest number of deer licenses since 1988, due to a combination of three consecutive hard winters, and an epizootic hemorrhagic disease outbreak in southwestern North Dakota in 2011.

It is expected that few, if any, licenses will remain after the lottery drawings. Hunters will be allowed only one license for the gun season.

Deer management has always been a balancing act between conflicting public desires and the vagaries of weather. The severity of winter weather has direct effects like die-offs due to exposure and starvation, and indirect effects like fawn production rates, on deer populations.

According to the winter severity index for deer, based on minimum daily temperatures and snow depth throughout the state starting in winter of 1949-50, the winter of 2010-11 ranked as one of the more severe since 1949, particularly in northwestern, north central, and west central portions of the state. In contrast, 2011-12 ranked as one of the milder winters in the past 62 years, raising expectations for a possible increase in fawn recruitment across the state.

Currently, all hunting units in the state are below deer population management goals except 3E2 and 4F. The large cut in licenses in 2012 is necessary to allow deer populations to increase.

Deer hunting opportunities in 2012 include:

- 1,200 antlered mule deer licenses, but in 2012, no antlerless licenses were issued in hunting units 3B1, 3B2, 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, 4E, and 4F. This is 3,350 fewer mule deer licenses than 2011.
- 1,282 muzzleloader licenses – 641 antlered licenses and 641 antlerless licenses. This is 826 fewer muzzleloader licenses than 2011.
- 120 restricted youth mule deer buck licenses, 130 fewer than 2011, in units 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, 4E, 4F, 3B1 and 3B2. Youth deer hunting licenses, valid for any deer statewide except mule deer in restricted units are unlimited.
- 682 nonresident any deer archery licenses are available, 409 fewer than 2011. The number of nonresident any deer archery licenses will decrease to 180 in 2013.

Deer licenses for fall were cut statewide by nearly 45,000. Much of the reduction came from doe licenses. The regular gun season opens November 9.

CRAIG BIRHLE



CRAIG BIRHLE

- See the 2012 Deer Hunting Guide for details on special archery herd reduction hunting opportunities for Bismarck, Fargo and Mandan.

Remember, hunting big game over bait is prohibited in deer hunting units 3C, 3E1, 3E2, 3F1 and 3F2 and 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 Management Biologist, Bismarck

► MULE DEER

Archery Opens: Aug. 31
Archery Closes: Jan. 6, 2013
Regular Gun Opens: Nov. 9
Regular Gun Closes: Nov. 25

Mule deer in North Dakota's badlands continue to struggle following a string of severe winters.

The fallout is a decrease in adult mule deer survival and the three lowest measurements of fawn production on record. Fawn production, measured by fawns per doe in October, was .74 fawns per doe in 2009, .72 in 2010, and .59 in 2011. The long-term average for fawn production in the badlands is .93.

These recent poor years of production, combined with higher adult mortality rates, was evident in the 2012 spring population index of five mule deer per square mile. This was 23 percent lower than 2011 and 33 percent below the long-term average.

In response to the continued decline, hunting licenses were reduced for the third consecutive year, and no antlerless mule deer licenses were issued in the badlands

units (4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, 4E, 4F, 3B1 and 3B2) in 2012.

There were 1,200 mule deer buck licenses issued for fall, 3,350 fewer than 2011. The combination of a mild winter in 2011 and no antlerless harvest in the badlands for 2012 should help start a mule deer population recovery.

*Bruce Stillings,
Big Game Management Supervisor,
Dickinson*

There were 1,200 mule deer buck licenses issued for fall.



► MOOSE

For season details, refer to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2012 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

North Dakota's largest big game species appears to have fared well after a mild winter.

The distribution of moose across the state has shifted south and west onto the prairie and along the Missouri River corridor. Numbers continue to remain low in what is considered traditional moose habitat in the Turtle Mountains and Pembina Hills in northeastern North Dakota.

While moose distribution has changed, the number of licenses issued since 1988 has not. In 1988, 131 moose hunters harvested 126 animals. North Dakota's 2012 fall moose season features 143 licenses, down from last year when 159 hunters harvested 140 animals.

Aerial surveys were limited last winter due to lack of significant snow cover. A survey along the Missouri River corridor in February indicated low moose numbers. Moose have dispersed from the Missouri River bottoms in unit M11 due to flooded habitat caused by increased water levels in Lake Sakakawea. Because of this, hunting unit M11 was eliminated and included as part of unit M10.

A continued downward trend in the moose population in northeastern North Dakota, which includes units M4, M8 and M1-C, is a concern. No antlerless licenses will be issued for M8, while licenses in M4 will remain the same. Moose numbers will be monitored closely in M4 and a unit closure in 2013 is a possibility if the negative trend continues. Unit M1-C will again be closed in fall due to continued low numbers in the Pembina Hills area.

*Jason Smith,
Big Game Management Biologist,
Jamestown*

► ELK

For season details, refer to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2012 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

While last year's mild winter likely benefited elk in the state, there were changes in license numbers for fall.

North Dakota's 2012 elk season features 301 licenses, 200 fewer than in 2011 when 437 hunters harvested 219 elk.

The season outlook for 2012 is good, with expected success similar to last year.

Elk numbers in southwestern North Dakota continue to decline due to a successful herd reduction effort in Theodore Roosevelt National Park in 2010-11 when 868 cow elk were removed. An additional estimated 299 elk were taken by hunters in E3 and E4 in 2010-11.

This year, 100 any elk licenses were issued for units E3 and E4, down 200 licenses from 2011. The park's reduction effort and management of its elk herd could reduce hunting opportunities in E3 and E4 in the future. Numbers of elk in units E1 and E2

remain stable and licenses issued were the same as last year.

Early landowner contacts and pre-season scouting is recommended and is an essential component to a successful elk hunt.

Jason Smith

► BIGHORN SHEEP

For season details, refer to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2012 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

The 2011 bighorn sheep survey revealed a minimum of 283 animals in western North Dakota, unchanged from 2010 and only 3 percent below the five-year average.

Biologists counted 86 rams, 158 ewes and 39 lambs. Not included are about 30 bighorn sheep in the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. The northern badlands population was unchanged from 2010 while the southern badlands herds stabilized following several years of declining numbers.

Despite ewes enduring a brutal winter in 2010-11, lamb recruitment increased 28 percent in 2011, and 83 percent of lambs counted during the survey survived winter.

After three consecutive severe winters, mild conditions experienced during winter 2011-12 were fortuitous for bighorn sheep, as not a single



Preseason scouting is a must for hunters lucky enough to draw an elk tag in North Dakota.

CRAIG BIHRLE



Bighorn sheep continue to hold their own in western North Dakota.

CRAIG BIHRLE



CRAIG BIRHLE

Game and Fish officials closed the pronghorn season for a third consecutive year as the population, hard hit by a string of difficult winters, rebounds.

mortality was documented while tracking 71 radio-marked animals. Although spring lamb production was low in 2011 due to the severity of the previous winter, lamb survival through last winter was exceptional. Moreover, adult ewes were in excellent condition prior to giving birth in 2012, so a bumper crop of healthy lambs is expected this year. Just how many will be determined in August.

Although results of the 2011 survey were encouraging, a 10 percent decline in the ram count from 2010, and a continued low population and poor lamb recruitment in the southern badlands are a concern. The ram-to-ewe ratio in 2011 declined to 54 rams per 100 ewes.

Game and Fish issued four bighorn sheep licenses in 2012, two fewer than 2011.

*Brett Wiedmann,
Big Game Management Biologist, Dickinson*

► PRONGHORN

A summer survey of North Dakota's pronghorn revealed the statewide population is 20 percent lower than last year.

Therefore, Game and Fish Department officials decided for the third year in a row not to hold a pronghorn hunting season.

The statewide population estimate has declined to approximately 3,600 animals, and pronghorn in all four management regions decreased in numbers from last year and are well-below population objectives.

Three severe winters of 2009-11, and virtually no fawn recruitment following these winters have left an aging population with few prime-aged breeding females. The result was another poor fawn crop, but there were signs of recruitment with more yearlings being observed this year.

The recent scenario is similar to the large-scale pronghorn decline in the late 1970s. Three consecutive harsh winters beginning in 1977 forced the season to remain closed for four years, finally reopening in 1982.

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.

The 2012 pronghorn season will be closed to both gun and archery hunters. Applicants who have accumulated preference points will maintain their current points.

Bruce Stillings

MIGRATORY BIRDS

There shouldn't be a shortage of waterfowl hunting opportunities this fall in North Dakota.

► DUCKS AND GEESE

In 2012, Game and Fish biologists conducted the Department's 65th annual breeding duck survey, perhaps the longest running operational breeding waterfowl survey in the world, covering more than 1,800 miles on eight transects, assessing spring wetland conditions and the number of waterfowl in the state.

What biologists saw in 2012 was different than 2011. Last year's flooded conditions have dried considerably, although many roads were still underwater or impassable. Given the dry fall and snowless winter, spring wetland conditions were considerably below the near record-high of last year. The 2012 water index was down 57 percent from 2011, and 6 percent below the 1948-2011 average.

Breeding duck numbers generally track water conditions, but this year was an exception, with large numbers of birds returning to nest in North Dakota. Numbers of breeding ducks were the third highest on record, up 16 percent from last year, which was the 10th highest index on record. The 2012 duck index was 112 percent above the long-term average.

Changes from 2011 for individual duck species were variable. Mallards were unchanged and down almost 25 percent from a high in 2001. Only pintails, shovelers and canvasbacks were down from 2011. All other species were up from 17 (redheads) to 125 (green-winged teal) percent. Blue-winged teal were at their highest since a record high in 2001.

All species were above the long-term average. Wigeon (plus 88 percent) and green-winged teal (plus 221 percent) were at record highs. Mallards, gadwall, blue-winged teal, shovelers, redheads and ruddy ducks all exceeded the long-term average by more than 100 percent. Pintails (plus 26 percent) and canvasbacks (plus 53 percent) were also above the long-term average.

The large number of ducks tallied is consistent with the well-above-average populations North Dakota has carried since 1994, because of wet conditions and the exceptional nesting cover provided by CRP.

Our July brood survey indicated that water conditions were down 48 percent from 2011, but were 10 percent above the 1955-2011 average. Brood numbers were up 110 percent from 2011, and were 155 percent above the long-term average.

The average brood size was 6.9 ducklings per brood, down .84 ducklings from last year and .2 below the

long-term average. We forecast that North Dakota's contribution to the continental fall duck flight will be about twice that of last year.

Numbers of resident Canada geese, Western Prairie Canada geese and arctic nesting Tallgrass Prairie Canada geese, and snow geese and Ross's geese all remain high. Reports indicate that snow and Ross's geese experienced below average production this year, while the Tallgrass Prairie Canadas had about average production. Hunting opportunities for all these birds are good.

As always, however, fall weather and migration patterns will have a big influence on hunting success for ducks and geese. Last fall ducks and geese arrived early and stayed late, providing one of the best hunting seasons in recent memory.

*Mike Johnson, Game Management
Section Leader, Bismarck*

▶ YOUTH WATERFOWL SEASON

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

Opens: Sept. 15

Closes: Sept. 16

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

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

▶ EARLY CANADA GOOSE SEASON

Opens: Aug. 15 (statewide)

Closes: Sept. 7 (Missouri River Zone), Sept. 15 (statewide)

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

Daily Limit: 15

Possession Limit: 30

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.

▶ CANADA GEESE REGULAR SEASON

Opens: Sept. 22 (residents only), Sept. 29 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 28 (Missouri River Zone), Dec. 20 (rest of state)

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 6

▶ WHITE-FRONTED GEESE (STATEWIDE)

Opens: Sept. 22 (residents only), Sept. 29 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 2

Daily Limit: 2

Possession Limit: 4

▶ LIGHT (SNOW) GEESE (STATEWIDE)

Opens: Sept. 22 (residents only), Sept. 29 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 30

Daily Limit: 20, no possession limit

Shooting Hours for all Geese:

Half-hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. each day through Nov. 3. Starting Nov. 4, 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 Dec. 1, all-day hunting is also allowed on Sundays through the end of each season.

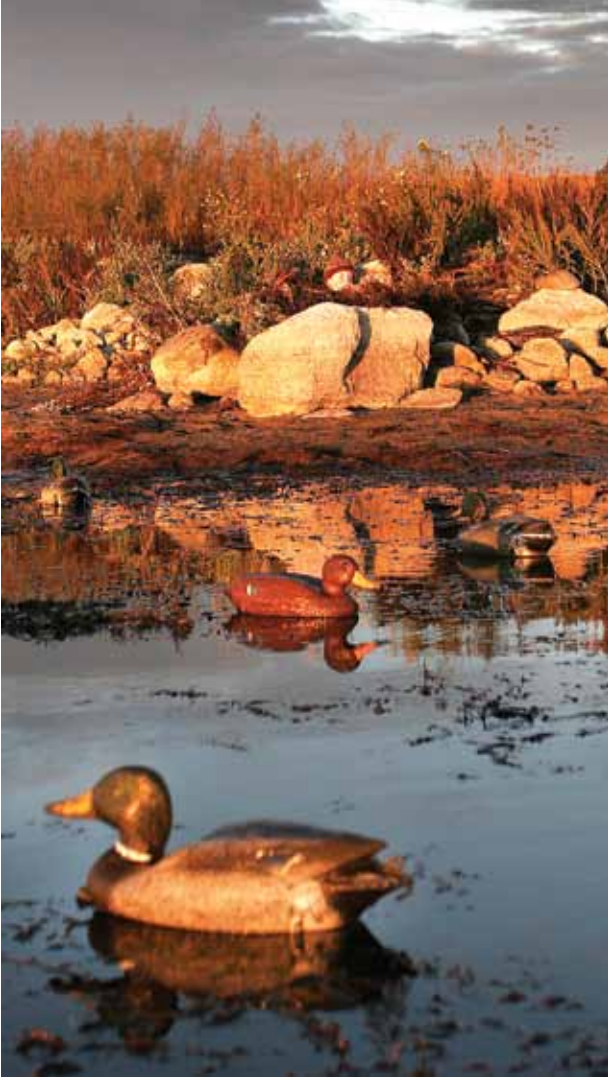


CRAIG BIRKLE

The daily limit for snow geese is 20 birds.



BRIAN HOSEK



► **REGULAR DUCK SEASON**

Low Plains Unit

Opens: Sept. 22 (residents only), Sept. 29 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 2

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

High Plains Unit

Opens: Sept. 22 (residents only), Sept. 29 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 2

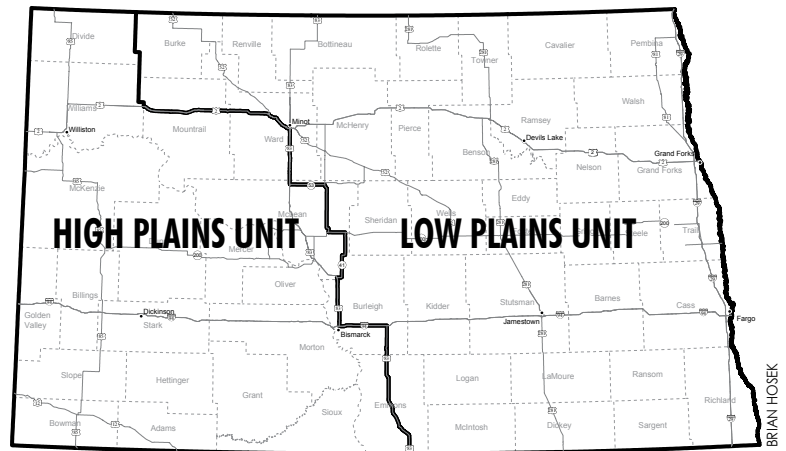
Opens: Dec. 8

Closes: Dec. 30

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 redheads, three wood ducks, one canvasback, two pintails. (Scaup limit was increased from two to six this year).

Possession Limit: 12 (including no more than twice the daily limit for each individual species).



CRAIG BIRHLE

BRIAN HOSEK



► **SANDHILL CRANES**

Opens Zone 1: Sept. 15

Zone 2: Sept. 15

Closes Zone 1: Nov. 11

Zone 2: Oct. 21

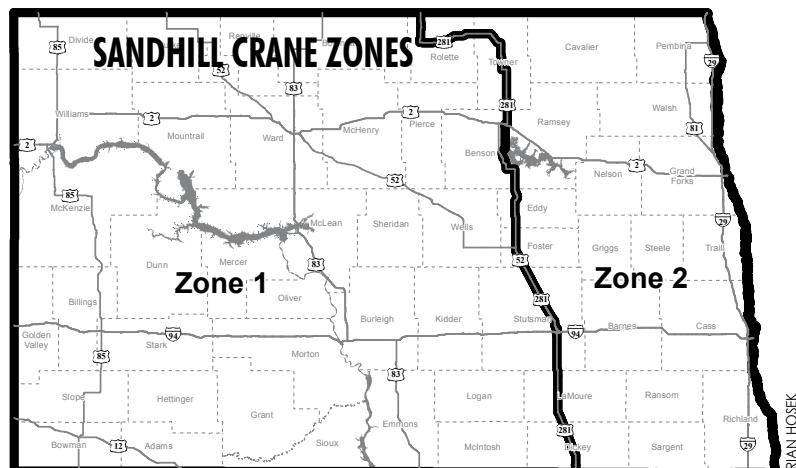
Daily Limit Zone 1: 3

Zone 2: 2

Possession Limit Zone 1: 6

Zone 2: 4

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. daily through Nov. 3; to 2 p.m. Nov. 4-11



CRAIG BIRHLE

BRIAN HOSEK

The Mid-Continent Sandhill Crane Population is in good shape heading into hunting season. However, the 2012 spring index will be considerably lower than last year's estimate after survey numbers are finalized.

This year's spring migration was drawn out due to the lack of winter and an early spring up and down the Central Flyway. As a result, many cranes had left the Platte River Valley prior to the survey, with numerous sightings occurring in North Dakota.

Staging areas are abundant in the state and some areas that were flooded last year may again be attractive to cranes. Overall, sandhill crane hunting opportunities should be good statewide this fall.

Hunters are reminded to be 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.

All crane hunters must HIP register before hunting by calling (888) 634-4798. HIP registration is also available online at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov.

Mike Szymanski, Migratory Game Bird Biologist, Bismarck

▶ DOVES

Opens: Sept. 1

Closes: Oct. 30

Daily Limit: 15

Possession Limit: 30

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

In stark contrast to last year, watering areas for doves could be a limiting factor that helps hunters hone in on a good hunt. Hunters should look for small pockets of water that are surrounded by bare dirt where doves can get an easy drink after feeding.

North Dakota's mourning dove breeding population doesn't change much from year to year. That's good since we generally have a sizeable population of breeding doves in the state. The biggest changes that dove hunters must deal with this year are crop rotations and fluctuations in water-holes.



The sandhill crane population that migrates through North Dakota is in good shape.

CRAIG BIRBLE

Dove hunters should have good opportunities during the first two weeks of September. Nationwide, North Dakota's mourning dove breeding population ranked fifth, based on a call-count survey in late May.

Spring came early and the weather was relatively even-keeled, allowing for successful early nesting efforts. As of early July, a strong second hatch of doves was taking to the wing.

Eurasian collared doves continue to expand throughout the state and can be found in almost every small town and city, yet these birds are not often found outside of municipalities and have rarely shown up in hunter harvest. Eurasian collared doves and white-winged doves are included with mourning doves in the daily bag limit of 15.

Some dove hunters may be contacted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to participate in a wing survey, which involves clipping 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.

All dove hunters must HIP register before hunting by calling (888) 634-4798. HIP registration is also available online at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov.

Mike Szymanski

▶ CROWS

Open Area: Statewide

Fall Season Opens: Aug. 11

Closes: Oct. 21

Spring Season Opens: March 9, 2013

Closes: April 21, 2013

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).

▶ SNIPE

Open Area: Statewide

Opens: Sept. 15

Closes: Dec. 2

Daily Limit: 8

Possession Limit: 16

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

▶ WOODCOCK

Open Area: Statewide

Opens: Sept. 22

Closes: Nov. 5

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 6

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset

f FURBEARERS

► FURBEARERS

For season details, refer to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2012-13 furbearer hunting and trapping guide.

Trappers legally harvested fishers for the first time last year in eastern North Dakota, and the opportunity to pursue this large member of the weasel family has been expanded this year with an increased quota of 15 animals.

Spring surveys indicate muskrat and mink numbers increased statewide compared to last year, with the highest indices coming from central North Dakota. However, reduced water levels in many wetlands this summer may have a profound effect on numbers of these semi-aquatic furbearers available this fall. The mink trapping season will be extended into the spring to coincide with muskrat seasons.

Despite some slightly decreasing trends, coyotes and raccoons remain abundant throughout the state, providing ample hunting and trapping opportunities. Fox and skunk trends are down statewide compared to last year. Beaver numbers are similar to last year.

Trappers and hunters harvested 74 bobcats last season, an increase of 47 percent from the previous season. The milder winter no doubt contributed to this increase in harvest.

The Game and Fish Department has initiated a research project on mountain lions in the badlands region, which includes tagging and radio-collaring mountain lions. Research objectives include determining survival rates, habitat use and mountain lion movements in North Dakota. Additionally, the research will assist in helping set hunting quotas in future years.

Starting this season, pelt tags will be distributed for legally taken mountain lions.

Research surveys also continue for river otters in central and western North Dakota. If you know of river otters in

your area, please contact Game and Fish at (701) 328-6300.

*Stephanie Tucker,
Furbearer Biologist, Bismarck*

► MOUNTAIN LIONS

Zone 1 (early) Opens: Aug. 31

Closes: Nov. 25

Zone 1 (late) Opens: Nov. 26

Closes: March 31, 2013

Zone 2 Opens: Aug. 31

Closes: March 31, 2013

There is a quota of 14 mountain lions in Zone 1 early season. If the quota is reached, the early season in Zone 1 will close immediately. The quota in the late season is seven lions. If 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 Nov. 26, 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 2012-13 Furbearer Guide.

► FISHER TRAPPING AND CABLE DEVICES

Opens: Nov. 26

Closes: March 15, 2013

There is a quota of 15 fishers. If

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 2012-13 Furbearer Guide.

► WEASEL HUNTING

Opens: Nov. 26

Closes: March 15, 2013



A long-tailed weasel in its white winter coat.

CRAIG BIRLE

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

▶ **WEASEL TRAPPING**

Opens: Oct. 27
Closes: March 15, 2013

▶ **WEASEL CABLE DEVICES**

Opens: Nov. 26
Closes: March 15, 2013

▶ **MUSKRAT AND MINK TRAPPING**

Opens: Oct. 27
Closes: April 30, 2013

▶ **MUSKRAT AND MINK CABLE DEVICES**

Opens: Nov. 26
Closes: April 30, 2013

Muskrat huts may be opened for insertion of traps or cable 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 16, 2013, through April 30, 2013. 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 AND MINK HUNTING**

Opens: Nov. 26
Closes: April 30, 2013

▶ **BOBCAT HUNTING OR TRAPPING**

Opens: Nov. 10
Closes: March 15, 2013

▶ **BOBCAT CABLE DEVICES**

Opens: Nov. 26
Closes: March 15, 2013

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, COYOTE AND BADGER CABLE DEVICES**

Opens: Nov. 26
Closes: March 15, 2013

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

Open year-round (Officially from April 1, 2012 – March 31, 2013)

In addition, red fox, gray fox and coyote

may be hunted at any hour from Nov. 26, 2012, through March 15, 2013. 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.

▶ **BEAVER AND RACCOON HUNTING, TRAPPING AND UNDERWATER CABLE DEVICES**

Open year-round (Officially from April 1, 2012 – March 31, 2013)

▶ **BEAVER AND RACCOON CABLE DEVICES ON LAND**


Opens: Nov. 26
Closes: April 30, 2013

From March 16, 2013, through April 30, 2013, 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.



CRAIG BIRKLE

A photograph of a sharp-tailed grouse in a field of tall, dry grass. A large, bright yellow sign is visible in the foreground, slightly out of focus. The grouse is partially obscured by the grass.

*A sharp-tailed grouse
utilizes the cover found
on a PLOTS tract in
North Dakota*

PLOTS

Then and Now

By Ron Wilson

CRAIG BIRLE

The thousands of upturned yellow signs pounded into rural North Dakota are as commonplace as old farm machinery retired to prairie hilltops. Like the rusty threshers that resemble tired dinosaurs from a distance, the signs that welcome hunters willing to walk for their quarry, look right at home.

In the 1997 legislative session, lawmakers authorized the Game and Fish Department to establish programs for landowner assistance that encouraged public access to private lands for hunting. After considerable debate and reflection, what was born is the Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program.

Greg Link, who was hired as the Department's private land section leader in 1997, said there was some urgency to devise a program that would benefit landowners, hunters and wildlife.

"There was a lot of discussion on where

we were going to do this and how we were going to do this," said Link, currently the Department's conservation and communications division chief. "The pressure was definitely on."

The answer was a program that shared the cost of grass seed with landowners who enrolled or renewed cropland into the Conservation Reserve Program, the federal program that pays landowners to retire cropland and plant it to grass. In return, landowners agreed to allow hunting access for the length of their CRP contract.

While the PLOTS program is state-wide today, and uses many tools, including cost-sharing, to encourage landowners to participate, Department officials initially focused on six counties – Adams, Dickey, Divide, Grant, Hettinger and Morton – primarily because of their importance to pheasant hunting. "We held open houses in those counties for landowners and

what we were proposing was pretty well-received," Link said.

Even so, there was still a problem with the infant program that looked to have promise. It didn't have a name.

"A lot of names, some crazy acronyms were thrown out there," Link said, "but initially we didn't come up with anything that grabbed us. Plus, we needed to come up with some kind of sign and figure out a way to get them pounded into the ground in six counties ... I was getting nervous."

Private Land Open To Sportsmen, PLOTS, arguably the most well-known acronym to hunters in North Dakota today, came to Link out of the blue one morning. "Greg came into my office and said 'I think I got it,' and he did," said Randy Kreil, Department wildlife division chief.

The idea for the three-sided sign, with each side representing one of the three

pillars of the program – landowners, sportsmen and wildlife – came shortly thereafter.

“It took people awhile to get it, to understand what the project was about,” Link said.

Today, there is no question.

Moving Target

The Department’s PLOTS program reached its 1 million acre goal two years ahead of schedule in 2007. Today, because of a number of factors, that acre total has declined.

According to Kevin Kading, Game and Fish Department private land section leader, about 110,000 PLOTS acres, most of which is CRP, have been lost from the program, bringing the total to about 840,000 acres statewide. There is a plus, however, as about 50,000 CRP acres enrolled or reenrolled from the last CRP signup will be added to the PLOTS program. Yet, it’s unlikely many of those acres will be designated with PLOTS signs for the fall hunting season.

“One thing that is certain is that the PLOTS program has always been a moving target, adjusting to farm programs, budgets, weather and opportunities, which is the nature of dealing with private lands programs,” Kading said. “When something changes in the farming and ranching

world, we have to adjust. We’ve always been able to do that in some way, but with the changes upon us now, it’s going to be difficult.”

As the state continues to lose CRP, native prairie and wetlands, North Dakota’s wildlife populations and their habitats will be influenced.

To offset losses, Kading said the Department will continue to work with landowners to find ways to develop habitat when the resource is under such tremendous pressure.

“As we lose CRP acres from the PLOTS program, we will be looking to make up for the losses with a number of different habitat components, including high diversity cover crops, winter wheat, tall stubble, new grass plantings, existing grasslands, expired CRP, grazing lands, wetland buffers, and others,” Kading said. “No doubt these things will help offset the losses, but they will never completely replace large blocks of grassland habitat that CRP provides.”

In 2007, North Dakota had 3.3 million CRP acres, compared to 1.6 million acres that will remain at the end of 2012. At one time when the PLOTS program featured 1 million acres, more than half of those acres had a CRP component.

The reasons for the continued fall of CRP in North Dakota are many, including high commodity prices and the fact that the program is becoming increasingly more complex for producers.

“As the program has changed over the years, so have the eligibility requirements, management, payments, and so on,” Kading said. “Many producers have told us they like the concept of CRP, they like having wildlife habitat on their land, but they are simply tired of dealing with the complications of the program, which is unfortunate.”

Kading said many groups on the Northern Plains, including the Game and Fish Department, have been advocating for a more flexible CRP program, a “working lands” feature so that producers have assured use, such as for haying and grazing, built into their contracts from the beginning.

“We see this as a win-win for agriculture and wildlife,” Kading said. “If nothing changes with the program, there is a chance producer interest may eventually slip away to the point where the program becomes insignificant.”

This fall, however, Kading said hunters will find a significant number of PLOTS tracts with CRP. “And we will continue to have some of those CRP agreements in place for quite some time,” he said. “As some PLOTS agreements expire or drop out, we may replace lost acres with other acres elsewhere, offering new adventures and opportunities for hunters.”

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



2012 PLOTS Guide

Free Private Land Open to Sportsmen guides are available at most

license vendors throughout the state starting in early September.

The Game and Fish Department’s 2012 guide will feature about 840,000 PLOTS acres. Because the guide is printed in August and distributed in September, there will be some PLOTS tracts

highlighted in the guide that have been 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 will have changed 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 (Lonetree), Williston, Dickinson, Jamestown and Devils Lake. The guides are not available to mail.



The first PLOTS guide.



FIRST TIME

Story and Photos by Craig Bihrlle

For several years, the Game and Fish Department's Becoming an Outdoors-Woman program, with the help of volunteers from Delta Waterfowl, has sponsored a waterfowl hunt.

Last year, seven women signed up for

the weekend event, spending one day learning about hunting ducks and geese and improving shooting skills, then rising at 3:30 a.m. the next day to hunt. By luck of the draw or choice, one group set up to hunt ducks in a marsh, while the others set up in a stubble field where both ducks and

geese might come calling.

While the marsh hunters had a decent day, the field hunters experienced one of those magical mornings that will likely always hang around near the top of the memory list: a brilliant and color-saturated prairie sunrise; mallards landing in



FIELD HUNT

the decoys even before the last tufts of stubble were stuffed in layout blinds; geese decoying readily, sometimes with ducks circling at the same time, waiting for the big birds to land so they could start their own approach; plenty of shooting chances so everyone got birds to contribute to the

post-hunt meal; plenty of missed shots to strengthen resolve for improvements the next time out.

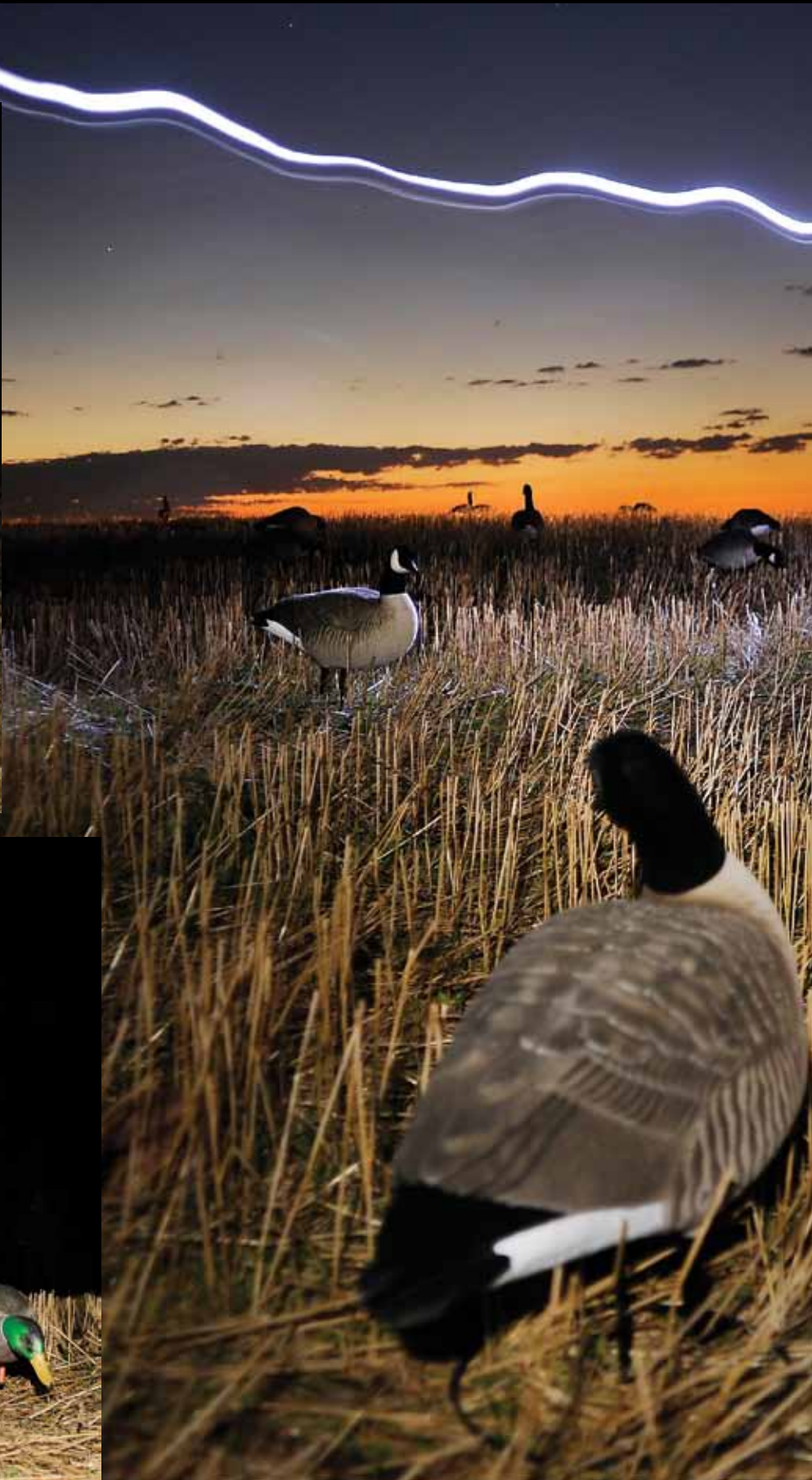
Who knows if the 2012 BOW waterfowl weekend October 6-7 will provide anywhere near the same experiences, but the images from that weekend last year

should give all of us who hunt ducks and geese a boost in enthusiasm as we count down the days until the opener.

CRAIG BIHRLE is the Game and Fish Department's communications supervisor.



Brittany Fish (above), Bismarck, and Jenny Heck (below), Mandan, help set decoys. Note: the light streak through the top of the main photo is the headlamp of one of the participants moving through the frame during a long exposure.







Upper left: Kari Charvart, Mandan, bagged a Canada goose on her first field waterfowl hunt. Upper center: Scott Terning, recruitment and education coordinator at Delta Waterfowl's headquarters in Bismarck,





2012 BOW Waterfowl Weekend

This year's BOW waterfowl workshop is based out of Bismarck October 6-7. For more details, contact Nancy Boldt or Brittany Fish at (701)328-6300, or visit Game and Fish online at gf.nd.gov/education.

helps BOW participant Holly Johnson, Bismarck, learn the best way to sit up and shoot from a field blind. Bottom sequence: Hit or miss, a memorable moment from a first field hunt.





BUFFALOBERRY PATCH

By Greg Freeman, Department News Editor



RON WILSON

CWD PROCLAMATION DETAILS

The 2012 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 a big game animal this fall 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 State Game and Fish Department district office, CWD surveillance drop-off location or a licensed taxidermist.

If the deer is processed in the field to boned meat and the hunter wants to leave the head in the field, the head must be legally tagged and the hunter must be able to return to or give the exact location of the head if requested for verification.

In addition, hunting big game over bait is prohibited in deer units 3C, 3E1, 3E2, 3F1 and 3F2.

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.

See the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, for game management units, equivalent wildlife management units, or counties that have had free-ranging deer, moose or elk diagnosed with CWD. Importation of harvested elk, white-tailed deer, mule deer, moose or other cervids from listed areas is restricted.

WALLEYE STOCKINGS COMPLETE

North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel, along with staff from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fish hatcheries, stocked 9.8 million walleye fingerlings in 113 lakes across the state this summer.

Jerry Weigel, Game and Fish Department fisheries production and development section leader, said this year's walleye goal required exceptional production from nearly every hatchery pond in the state.

Stocking goals for each water body can differ depending on need. Some of the notable stockings include: Lake Sakakawea – 4 million; Stump Lake – 577,000; Lake Darling – 450,000; Devils Lake – 367,000; Heart Butte Reservoir – 325,000; and Lake Ashtabula – 262,000.

"This year's efforts finished in the top five of most waters stocked and most fingerlings stocked," Weigel said.



CRAIG BIHRE

WMA CAMPING RESTRICTIONS

Some wildlife management areas in southwestern North Dakota now have the same camping restrictions adopted earlier this year on similar public lands along Lake Sakakawea.

The State Game and Fish Department has now included the following WMAs where overnight camping is prohibited on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, except holidays: North Lemmon Lake, Adams County; Bull Creek, Billings County; Alkali Creek and Spring Creek, Bowman County; Killdeer Mountains, Dunn County; Camels Hump Dam, Golden Valley County; Indian Creek, Hettinger County; Storm Creek, Morton County; and Cedar Lake and Speck Davis Pond, Slope County.

In April, the Game and Fish Department applied

the same restrictions on the following WMAs along Lake Sakakawea: Audubon, Custer Mine, Deepwater Creek, deTrobriand, Douglas Creek and Wolf Creek in McLean County; and Beaver Creek and Hille in Mercer County.

In addition, camping is not allowed at all, including holidays, at the following WMAs: Antelope Creek, Big Oxbow, Lewis and Clark, Neu's Point, Ochs Point, Overlook, Sullivan and Tobacco Garden, McKenzie County; Van Hook, Mountrail County; and Hofflund and Trenton, Williams County.

Camping restrictions at all WMAs are posted at entry points. Other WMA use regulations are available on the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov.



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT PHOTO



CRAIG BIRLIE

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 for 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 at (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.

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 units 3C, 3E1, 3E2, 3F1 and 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. 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.



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT SUBMITTED PHOTO

Waterfowl Hunting Gear Available for Kids

Families with young hunters can check out a trailer full of decoys and blinds to hunt waterfowl.

By calling Ducks Unlimited's Bismarck office at (701) 355-3500, families with young hunters can reserve one of three equipment packages: 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.

The trailer is courtesy of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, Ducks Unlimited and Avery Outdoors. Game and Fish purchased the trailer with funds from Encouraging Tomorrow's Hunters special grant program, and Avery donated the equipment.

Hunters can still purchase fall turkey licenses.

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, on the Game and Fish Department's 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 from October 13 – January 13, 2013.

NONRESIDENT BIRD LICENSES

Nonresidents purchasing small game or waterfowl licenses will not have to select a start date for the second week of their license at the time of purchase, but will need to set the start of their second week at least 24 hours before they hunt.

The changes can be made online on the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, by calling (800) 406-6409, or at license vendors that have online access.



CRAIG BIRHLE

ANGLER SURVEY TALLIED

Last year's historic flooding conditions caused a slight decline in fishing license sales, but it didn't keep anglers from wetting a line.

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual angler survey revealed 137,000 resident licenses were sold last year, down 2 percent from 2010-11. However, angler participation and effort actually increased.

Greg Power, Department fisheries chief, said the small drop in license sales comes as no surprise as many of the state's water bodies were affected by high water in 2011.

The survey indicated 111,000 (up 9,000 from previous year) resident anglers fished open water, while 48,000 (up 15,000) residents fished through the ice. "Access was the key for the big increase in winter anglers," Power said. "We didn't have the severe winter like we had the previous three years."

The number of nonresidents coming to North Dakota to fish has stabilized at 23 percent of total license sales the past decade. A total of 41,000 (1,000 fewer) nonresident licenses were sold in 2011-12, but the number of nonresidents who actually fished increased from the previous year.

Nonresident license sales in the rapidly growing counties of Stark, Williams and Ward nearly doubled the past two years.

While Lake Sakakawea, Devils Lake and the Missouri River/Lake Oahe are the three major fisheries in North Dakota, numerous small lakes and rivers play a large role for anglers as well. "More than 300 small lakes, reservoirs and rivers account for nearly 50 percent of all fishing effort and are very important locally," Power said.

The state has a strong tradition and heritage of fishing, and statistics reveal this will continue. "We have decent water levels across most of the state and fantastic fish populations," Power said. "Unless North Dakota experiences a severe and prolonged drought, fishing should remain good to very good at least for the next few years."



CRAIG BIHRLE

Hunting permits for North Dakota's 2012 sandhill crane season, opening September 15, are available from the Game and Fish Department.

As in past years, prospective hunters need a special crane permit, regardless of age. The permit costs \$5 and is available through the Game and Fish Department's Bismarck office.

Hunters can purchase their crane permit online on 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.

ANS MONITORING CONTINUES

An ongoing effort to monitor state waters for aquatic nuisance species has not produced any significant discoveries so far this year.

Fred Ryckman, North Dakota Game and Fish Department ANS coordinator, said only one limited infestation – curly leaf pondweed – was found at Lake Elsie in Richland County.

"There were only a few individual plants in Lake Elsie, and they likely are already dying back for the year," Ryckman said. "However, anglers and other water recreationists should take extra time to inspect, clean and drain equipment before leaving the lake."

After documenting silver carp in the James River in 2011, this year's monitoring efforts, and the recent fish kill in the James River downstream of LaMoure, did not yield any silver carp.

Ryckman said it is vital that anglers and waterfowl hunters follow ANS regulations. "Our monitoring efforts will continue, and we ask those on the water to do their part as well," he said.

Current law states all water must be drained from watercraft prior to leaving a water body, including livewells. This means fish, including bait, cannot be transported across land in a livewell containing water.

However, bait buckets and/or any container of five gallons or less in volume can be used to transport legal live baitfish or other aquatic bait in water. All other fish species may not be held in water and/or transported in bait buckets/containers when away from a water body. Transportation of fish in or on ice is allowed.

In addition, any aquatic vegetation, or parts thereof, is not allowed on watercraft, motors, trailers and recreational equipment such as duck decoys when out of water.

Department game wardens will continue to enforce ANS regulations and violations will be dealt with appropriately according to the law.



CRAIG BIHRLE



PHOTO CONTEST DEADLINE NEARS

The deadline for submitting photos to the Game and Fish Department's annual Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest is September 28.

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 digital files submitted on disk or via email. Contestants are limited to no more than five entries. Photos must have been taken in North Dakota.

Full contest rules were published in the July 2012 issue of this magazine. They are also available at gf.nd.gov.



2011 WATCHABLE WILDLIFE RUNNER-UP
American White Pelicans
Troy Gunderson, Jamestown



2011 WATCHABLE WILDLIFE RUNNER-UP
Great Horned Owl
Jean Schuster, New Rockford



2011 WATCHABLE WILDLIFE RUNNER-UP
Tiger Lillies
Kelly Krabbenhoft, Fargo

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, Game and Fish Department assistant wildlife division chief. “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



CRAIG BIHRLE

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.

NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH ONLINE

visit <http://gf.nd.gov>

PURCHASE and Print Licenses and Apply for Lottery Licenses

VIEW North Dakota OUTDOORS Magazines

EXPLORE North Dakota PLOTS Guide

WATCH Outdoors Online Weekly Webcasts and TV Features



MORE FEATURES

- Current wildlife and fishing news
- GIS map creation
- Review important season dates and regulations
- Register for hunter education classes



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



WATERFOWL HUNTERS:

Help prevent

Aquatic Nuisance Species

IN NORTH DAKOTA



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

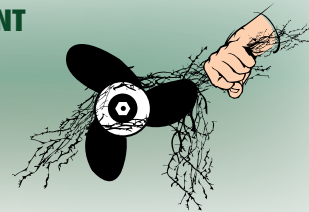
100 North Bismarck Expressway

Bismarck, ND 58501-5095

701.328.6300

Email: ndgf@nd.gov

Web: gf.nd.gov



back cast

By Ron Wilson



My introduction to ruffed grouse more than 20 years ago was along a meandering river in northern Minnesota named the Straight.

I was casting a black Mepps spinner under logs and behind rocks without much success when I heard the first thump in the woods, a drum-like sound that started slow, increased in tempo, then stopped as suddenly as it started.

It sounded mechanical, like an old, hard-starting tractor. I never imagined a bird, a male ruffed grouse standing on a log and beating his wings to attract females and warn off fellow suitors.

Armed with a 20 gauge and a nonresident license, I shot my first ruffed grouse that fall in woods maybe an hour or more from the river. More birds followed, but I remember the first.

It's been different in North Dakota.

There's some debate on the number of trips the three of us have made to the Turtle Mountains to hunt this bird that's a longtime resident of the state's native aspen woodlands. The best we can figure is that our first trip was in 2006 and we've traveled north more often than not in the years that followed.

What's not in dispute is the weight of my game bag. I've shot just one bird since 2006, and can count the number of noisy flushes, screened by trees and vegetation growing close together, positioning for whatever sunlight filters through the canopy, on one hand.

Even so, we still travel north most falls without hesitation.

We plan for our fall ruffed grouse hunt in summer because we need to secure lodging in the woods weeks ahead of time. It's along about the same time that Game and Fish Department biologists release spring drumming counts that often inspire little confidence. This spring's count in the Turtle Mountains, for

instance, was down 24 percent from 2011.

Ruffed grouse are an excuse to drive 3.5 hours north of home and sit around a campfire, cook on a camp stove, eat off paper plates and hunt in country that is poles apart from where we usually go. We leave behind the big sky and long distance views of the prairie to hike trails in what feels like a phone booth by comparison.



RON WILSON

The trails, and there are a bunch, twist and turn in places, winding around wetlands that seemingly always hold a handful of ducks.

Prints in muddy sections of the trail reveal there are a number of critters around, big and small.

Hunting ruffed grouse in the woods is one of those glass-half-full sorts of things. You can spend two days in the woods and never shoulder your shotgun, but you're doing it in good looking country, painted in

vivid yellows and reds of autumn if you timed it right. Plus, odds of bumping into something that gives you pause and makes your hunt that much more worthwhile are good, such as coyotes racing across the trail only yards ahead, watching a big bull moose at close range for a half-hour, walking behind a porcupine that refuses to leave the trail, finding the skull of some kind of predator picked clean of flesh and threaded on a tree branch ...

Hunting seasons for sage grouse and pinnated grouse, or prairie chickens, are closed in North Dakota, which leaves sharp-tailed grouse and ruffed grouse as fair game. With a continued loss of forest habitat and the influence that has on a far-from-robust population of birds, you can't help but ponder the birds' future and our access to them.

Meanwhile, I'll continue to hunt for a second bird.

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



CRAIG BIHRLE

Tundra Swans

It wasn't until the early 1980s that the whistling swan, originally named for the sound made by its powerful wings beating in flight, got a new handle.

Scientists renamed the big, long-necked white bird, which nests throughout the Northern Hemisphere's tundra region, the tundra swan.

No matter what you call it, the tundra swan, a frequent flier through North Dakota in spring and fall, is unmistakable. An adult swan is taller than a whooping crane, a big one measuring nearly five feet in length. Its plumage is all white, making it obvious from a distance when resting or feeding on a body of water.

What's not white on a tundra swan is its black feet and bill. Some birds can sometimes appear dirty, not so snow white, but this is because they've been feeding in murky waters.

Scientists tell us there are two populations of tundra swans in North America, one in the east and one in the west. The eastern population, which winters primarily on the East Coast, is the group that migrates through North Dakota.

In the early 1900s, tundra swans were safeguarded from unregulated hunting by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Prior to that, these birds were harvested extensively by market hunters on East Coast wintering grounds and migration areas.

Modern day tundra swan hunting began in Utah

in 1962, and expanded to other states thereafter. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department proposed an experimental season in 1988, and a limited hunting season continues today.

North Dakota serves as important staging area for tundra swans during spring and fall migrations. Often flying in a V formation, with necks and heads outstretched, traveling tundra swans emit a mellow, bugling *hoo-ho-hoo* call.

Made up of several family groups of 20 or more birds, flocks of tundra swans leave breeding grounds in Alaska and Canada in mid- to late September, en route to North Dakota and beyond. Migrating both day and night, birds sometimes reach altitudes of up to 6,000 feet and speeds of 55 miles per hour or more.

Following a diagonal route across North America to reach wintering grounds on the East Coast, young differ in appearance from the all-white adults. Young sport a grayer plumage and have pinkish bills.

While the call of migrating tundra swans can sometimes be confused for the honking of Canada geese, there is no mistaking the birds when spotted. And whether you call them whistlers or tundra swans, it really doesn't matter.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.