

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

\$2.00 JANUARY 2013





MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

January didn't start out like a typical January. On the 9th it was 36 degrees and on the 10th as I write this, it's expected to hit 41.

That's T-shirt weather on the Northern Plains.

Not surprisingly, things were expected to change. Forecasters told us a winter storm was brewing, and snow and temperatures well below zero degrees were on the way.

We're accustomed to change in North Dakota. When the weather turns in January, we put on another layer and go about our lives. We adapt. We make do. We move ahead.

It's amazing to me to think that in 2011 we were dealing with flooding issues around the state. The Missouri River left its banks and muscled its way over roads, through homes, while also inundating thousands of acres of wildlife habitat on 20-plus wildlife management areas. A year later, water was still an issue, but this time the concern was about not having enough of it in the right places. In 2012, water levels on many recreational fisheries declined and wetlands that had water for years dried up.

What 2013 will bring is only a guess, but if we have another dry year, with little winter runoff, some of our fisheries could suffer because of the loss of spawning habitat. Access to those fisheries may also be a concern as water levels decline.

Yet, without the luxury of having a crystal ball to forecast what is in store in 2013, my plan is to take advantage of the outdoor opportunities that North Dakota provides, and I encourage you to do the same. We have more fisheries on the landscape today than ever before, many holding record numbers of northern pike and other game fish. Work and family obligations permitting, I plan to catch some of those fish this year.

While it's a given that we can't change the weather, we can voice our opinions to help foster change about the natural resources that we feel so strongly about and are such a big part of our heritage. The 63rd legislative assembly started this month and I encourage you to stay abreast of natural resource issues that cross lawmakers' desks. While Game and Fish personnel strive to provide professional and scientific guidance to legislators dealing with natural resource issues, it's still the public that has the ear of legislators.

Game and Fish staff does a wonderful job of tracking legislation dealing with hunting and fishing issues on the Department's website, gf.nd.gov. A brief description of each bill is noted, along with the bill sponsor and hearing schedule. To view each bill in its entirety, click on the hot-linked bill number.

While I embrace what 2013 will bring, there will be challenges on many fronts. Stemming the loss of critical wildlife habitat and improving the Conservation Reserve Program in North Dakota is one of them. Another is working with oil and gas interests to minimize the disturbance of wildlife habitat in the western part of the state. Strides have been made on this front and we have been encouraged with some efforts by energy companies interested in lessening habitat disturbance where it's possible.

Before we know it, we'll be making that wonderful transition from winter to spring, which means open water fishing is on the horizon. In the interim, gather family members and drill some holes through the ice and catch a pike, go for a hike and quietly follow animal tracks in the snow, or try to lure a coyote out of hiding with a predator call. Step outside to one of the best places around, North Dakota's outdoors.

Terry Steinwand

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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

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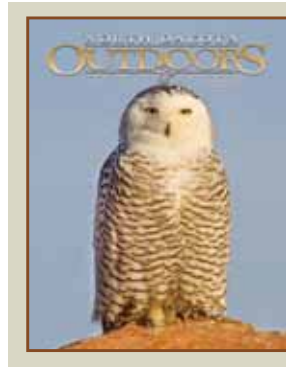
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Front Cover

Snowy owls live and breed on the tundra, but they migrate to North Dakota in winter when food supplies are in short supply in the Far North.

Photo by DeVane Webster, Beulah



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Overall, fishing in North Dakota was excellent in 2012. Fisheries biologists also have high expectations for 2013 and beyond.

Year 2012 *in Review*

By Terry Steinwand, Game and Fish Director



CRAIG BURRLE

W

Weather has such a profound influence on North Dakota fish and wildlife populations that it's hard to consider anything else as the top story of the year, every year.

While 2011 had its severe winter followed by epic flooding, 2012 answered with a mild winter and spring and basically no flooding. This was a welcome break for many wildlife species, but by late summer the lack of moisture throughout the year became a concern on several fronts.

Lack of snow helped deer and pronghorn begin a road to recovery, and pheasant numbers increased nicely from the year before, but lack of runoff meant falling water levels on the Missouri River System and many other waters, which generally hurt fish reproduction.

Such are the trade-offs on the Northern Plains. The wet and dry years tend to balance

each other as long as the extremes are short-lived. If we have another abnormally dry year in 2013, we'll start to see water level issues and dry wetlands – not good for fishing or fishing access in places, and not good for waterfowl.

On the other hand, a cold and snowy start to 2013 could inhibit recovery potential for our deer, pronghorn and pheasants. So far, the winter is starting off as one that would favor resident wildlife, but as we all know, winter doesn't always end like it starts out. Following is a summary of some of the major issues that Game and Fish dealt with in 2012.



While North Dakota still has abundant wetlands holding water, many shallow basins dried up in 2012, reducing waterfowl production potential in 2013 if dry conditions continue.

CRAIG BIRNIE



Roughly half of North Dakota's PLOTS acres are tied into the Conservation Reserve Program. An agency challenge for 2013 is adding CRP acres to PLOTS while program acres in the state are declining.

LOSS OF CRP

All in all, the plusses outweigh the minuses when it comes to the weather last year, but it's hard to find any plusses related to the loss of Conservation Reserve Program grasslands, unless you employ the "glass is half full" theory. That is, in 2007 North Dakota had about 3.3 million acres of CRP, and now we have about 1.6 million acres. About 650,000 acres of that loss occurred in 2012.

While CRP is tied mostly to a dramatic increase in the state's pheasant population, it is also vital to increased duck production over the past two decades and certainly benefitted white-tailed deer as well.

As an agency, we are anxiously awaiting finalization of a new farm bill to find out what conservation provisions are included. The "fiscal cliff" legislation passed by Congress at the end of 2012 included an extension of the 2008 farm bill, which pushes development of a new five-year farm bill well into 2013.

We'll be working with our congressional delegation on the merits of strong conservation provisions in that farm bill, but it's vital that individual hunters and anglers provide input as well.

An improved CRP would add to our habitat base and therefore our potential for improved wildlife populations, but CRP also provides places for hunting in general and also provides roughly half of

the acres in our Private Land Open To Sportsmen program. We actually had some new opportunities for CRP acres that we could have added to the PLOTS program in 2012, but we didn't have the budget to move on them without cancelling some contracts that already existed.

Even if nothing happens, North Dakota will still have CRP on the landscape well into the future. Our challenge for 2013 is to find ways to add to that habitat base without counting on additional CRP.

Hunters often wonder why Game and Fish doesn't just start a program similar to the CRP on its own. Here's a good way to look at it: For Game and Fish to develop a program to fund long-term contracts for just the CRP tracts that are in our PLOTS program – about 400,000 acres – it would cost approximately \$16 to \$20 million per year, or about half or more of the agency's annual budget. Currently we're spending about \$6 million a year for just access on nearly 900,000 acres in the PLOTS program.

To create habitat that would benefit wildlife populations takes multi-year contracts so any type of program that would mimic CRP, even on a much smaller scale, would have to guarantee funding over a number of years.

REDUCED DEER SEASON

The Game and Fish Department has had to reduce the number of deer licenses available each fall since 2009, but 2012 was the first time that a significant number of hunters had to sit out a season because the number of licenses was well below the number of potential hunters. In addition to those who didn't have a license, it was also the first time in many years that hunters could not receive more than one gun license.

Despite this reduced opportunity, the general reaction to the 2012 deer season was fairly positive. Hunters saw deer and most people understood that cutting licenses, especially doe licenses, was necessary to start building deer numbers back up again.

We are on the right path, but rebuilding the deer – both mule deer and whitetail –

population to where we'd like to see it is not a one-year fix. Unless the rest of this winter becomes much more difficult than has been the case so far, we'll likely see more deer licenses available in 2013, at least for whitetail, but we'll still be conservative with doe licenses until deer numbers start to meet population objectives in specific units.

On a related note, we did not have a pronghorn season again in 2012, as one mild winter was not enough to spur a significant population increase. While it's not out of the question that we could see a limited number of licenses available in a few pronghorn units this fall, it will likely take several years of good weather and conservative management before we see pronghorn numbers even coming close to where they were in the mid-2000s.



CRAIG BHIRLE

The Game and Fish Department greatly reduced the number of whitetail doe licenses in 2012 and did not offer any mule deer doe licenses, in an effort to turn around a three-year deer population decline.

ENERGY FORUM/GIS HABITAT MAPPING

In late November, Game and Fish was part of a working group of conservation and energy industry organizations to announce cooperative development of tools that could reduce potential wildlife habitat disturbance from oil and gas development activities.

The primary tools are a set of geographic information systems – GIS – maps that identify critical habitat for western North Dakota species like mule deer, sage grouse and pronghorn; plus a document containing recommended management practices for companies to consider during their planning processes.

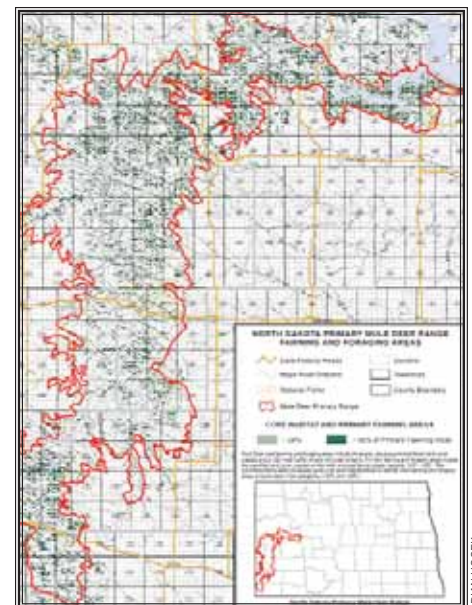
A lot of Game and Fish staff effort went into developing the GIS maps and RMPs, and that's only the beginning. In 2013 we are going to put a significant effort into working with energy development companies on an individual basis.

It's important for people to understand that Game and Fish does not have a regulatory role when it comes to energy

development on private or public land. The whole energy forum experience, however, has been positive for us because we learned that many of the companies operating in western North Dakota are willing to consult with us on wildlife issues.

Having the GIS maps completed is a big step and some companies are already using the information to adapt their plans to avoid certain habitat features with roads, or perhaps locate a tank battery or other structure away from important habitat.

Again, this is all voluntary on the part of energy companies, and it's gratifying to see that all the work our staff and the rest of the energy forum put into developing the GIS maps and RMPs is getting used as intended, not to inhibit energy development, but to simply minimize wildlife and habitat disturbance where it's possible and cost-effective. And we'll continue to work with companies for enhancement of fish and wildlife resources and opportunities for the public.



BRIAN HOSEK

FLOOD RECOVERY AND MISSOURI RIVER WATER LEVELS

With little runoff into the upper Missouri River System in 2012, water levels in both lakes Sakakawea and Oahe declined over spring and summer, which was not an ideal situation for natural fish reproduction. The water level reduction is continuing and it looks like Sakakawea will come out of winter at about 1,828 feet above mean sea level.

That's nearly 30 feet lower than the peak from summer 2011.

That's a significant number because the level that Game and Fish Department biologists feel is the minimum for at least average walleye and rainbow smelt spawning potential is 1,825 msl. Without some decent runoff in 2013, we may be one year away from game fish and forage declines as well as a return to chasing boat ramps to maintain access as the water level goes down.

The one-year reprieve from significant



Work on the Sugarloaf boat ramp on the Missouri River south of Mandan. By the time construction season ended, only one ramp on the Missouri was still unusable because of flood damage that occurred in 2011.



After floodwaters receded in fall 2011, much of Oahe Wildlife Management Area, south of Bismarck-Mandan, held little growing vegetation.



In 2012, this same field had recovered nicely.

moisture, however, was a big help to our fisheries development team in its effort to reestablish access at flood-damaged ramps up and down the Missouri River System. By the end of the construction season, only one major ramp – Kimball Bottoms or the “Desert” south of Bismarck – was still awaiting major repairs, and that project is on the agenda for 2013.

Within our thousands of acres of wildlife management areas along the Missouri we also saw a welcome return of habitat in 2012. An innovative effort to seed inaccessible areas by plane was successful, and in many other areas vegetation came back on its own. Our staff put in a considerable effort to start rebuilding washed out roads and repairing fences.

STATE FAIR REFURBISHMENT

It wasn't just our management areas and boat ramps that needed fixing in 2012. The state fairgrounds in Minot was inundated by the Souris River flood in 2011.

Game and Fish has had a large fishing, shooting and trapping education program at the state fair since the early 1990s, and every structure in our area was significantly damaged by the flood. It took an incredible effort to clean and fix the buildings, reseed grass, rebuild the fishing pond and docks, and even add a new area to our operation.

AQUATIC NUISANCE SPECIES

As far as major developments, we really didn't have any related to aquatic nuisance species in 2012. Our biologists confirmed curly leaf pondweed, which exists in the Missouri River System and several other lakes in the state, in Lake Elsie in Richland County, but we didn't detect any new species in North Dakota.

However, it's probably only a matter of time before we see zebra mussels in the Red River, as they are well established in the Otter Tail River in Minnesota, which flows into the Red at Wahpeton. While there isn't really much we can do about that, we can do our best to ensure it doesn't get spread beyond the Red River.

Nobody wants additional regulations, and I think our state's anglers and boaters have done exceptionally well in accepting our current rules over the past few years. Do we need more regulations, such as mandatory boat washing when leaving infested waters? Or can we manage the threat with ongoing education and awareness efforts?

I think North Dakota has done well to minimize ANS spread or introduction on a limited available budget.



The Game and Fish Department's state fair operation attracted a record number of participants in 2012.

CRAIG BIRRE

WHAT'S AHEAD IN 2013?

With challenges come opportunities. In the coming year Game and Fish is going to put considerable effort into coming up with a way to start replacing some of the habitat we have lost in the last few years.

We have tens of thousands of people, both resident and nonresident, who expect value from their hunting and fishing license purchase. I think for the most part North Dakota has probably exceeded those expectations over the last decade. It is a challenge for all of us to keep that going for the next decade as well.

FINANCIAL STATEMENT July 1, 2011 to June 30, 2012

Income	\$26,217,503
Expenses	\$26,403,632
FUND BALANCES, FIXED ASSETS AND LONG-TERM DEBT	
Game and Fish General Fund	\$29,136,241
Habitat and Depredation Fund	\$636,748
Nongame Wildlife Fund	\$109,079
TOTAL ALL FUNDS	\$29,882,068
FIXED ASSETS	\$40,493,354
DEPARTMENT NET WORTH	\$70,375,422

2011 LICENSES AND PERMITS ISSUED

	Resident	Nonresident
Fishing	45,367	12,310
Husband/Wife Fishing	11,592	2,903
Senior Citizen Fishing	10,059	
Disabled Fishing	412	
Short-Term Fishing		
10-Day		4,452
3-Day		18,532
Paddlefish Tags	2,687	885
Commercial Tags	16	
Retail Bait Vendor	241	
Wholesale Bait Vendor	25	10
Fish Hatchery	3	
2011 Boat Registrations (First year of 3-year decal)	48,510	
Boat Rentals	28	
General Hunting	46,015	46,193
Small Game Hunting	20,859	27,546
Combination License	57,856	
Waterfowl Hunting		23,323
Furbearer Hunting/Trapping	15,667	4,355
Fur Buyer	39	3
Deer Gun Hunting	94,131	3,784
Deer Gun Hunting (Gratis)	14,357	261
Deer Bowhunting	17,515	2,884
Moose Hunting	141	
Moose Hunting (Preferential Landowner)	21	
Elk Hunting	446	
Elk Hunting (Preferential Landowner)	78	
Bighorn Sheep	5	
Turkey Hunting (Spring)	6,370	
Turkey Hunting (Fall)	4,357	
Turkey Hunting (Gratis Spring)	302	
Turkey Hunting (Gratis Fall)	350	
Habitat Stamp	92,208	
Shooting Preserve	11	
Fishing/Hunting Guide	217	24
Taxidermist	235	
Falconry	4	
Scientific Collector	51	
Swan	1,128	1,070
Sandhill Crane	2,429	5,692

2012 SPECIAL BIG GAME LICENSES

	Licenses Available	Applications Received
Moose	142	11,399
Elk	311	9,741
Bighorn	3	8,704

FOCUS ON 2012 STATISTICS, SURVEYS AND HIGHLIGHTS

- The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual midwinter bald eagle survey along the Missouri River from Bismarck to Garrison Dam showed a record 108 eagles, breaking the previous best of 85 in 2008.
- The Game and Fish Department's annual midwinter waterfowl survey showed 279,000 birds, a record for the number of ducks and geese wintering in the state.
- A New Town angler, Royce Johnston, reeled in a 16-pound, 6-ounce lake trout from the Garrison Dam Tailrace in March, breaking the old record that stood for 30 years by more than 2 pounds.
- While many of the state's western big game populations remained at low population levels in 2012, bighorn sheep held their own. A July-August survey showed a minimum 299 bighorn sheep, a slight increase from 2011 and just 17 below 2008's record summer survey.
- North Dakota's late summer roadside pheasant survey suggested much improved production in spring 2012, with total pheasants statewide up 59 percent from 2011. In addition, brood observations were up 65 percent, and the average brood size was up 16 percent.
- Though the number of strutting males observed during the 2012 spring sage grouse survey was up 15 percent from 2011, the population still remained well below management objectives. Therefore, the sage grouse hunting season remained closed in 2012. Game and Fish Department biologists counted 72 males on 12 active strutting grounds. In 2011, 63 males were counted on 12 active leks in southwestern North Dakota.
- For the third year in a row the Game and Fish Department closed the hunting season for pinnated grouse, or prairie chickens, in northeastern and southeastern parts of the state because of a continued decline in male prairie chicken spring booming counts.
- The Game and Fish Department's annual fall survey showed low numbers of young-of-the-year fish in the Missouri River System, while Devils Lake once again showed exceptional numbers of young-of-the-year walleye. Devils Lake had the second highest young-of-the-year walleye catch rate on record, second only to 2009.
- 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 in 2012, plus 2.3 million pike fingerlings in 69 lakes and rivers.
- Game and Fish Department fisheries crews completed their annual salmon spawning operation on Lake Sakakawea after collecting 1.5 million eggs, easily surpassing the goal of 900,000.
- Game and Fish Department biologists stocked roughly 225 adult gizzard shad in Lake Oahe to help jumpstart a limited forage base.
- Spring survey numbers revealed that mule deer in North Dakota's badlands were down 23 percent from 2011 and 52 percent below 2007. Overall mule deer density in the badlands was 4.6 deer per square mile, down from 6 deer per square mile in 2011. As a result, Game and Fish did not allocate any antlerless mule deer licenses for the 2012 season in units 3B1, 3B2, 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, 4E and 4F. Aerial observations in October indicated mule deer production in 2012 was about the same as 2011's record low. The buck-to-doe ratio of .37 was similar to the long-term average of .43 bucks per doe, and the fawn-to-doe ratio of .59 equaled the lowest fawn-to-doe ratio since the demographic survey began in 1954. The long-term average is .92 fawns per doe.
- The Game and Fish Department made available 65,300 licenses for the regular deer gun season, which was 44,650 fewer than 2011. This was 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.
- The Game and Fish Department's annual spring breeding duck survey showed an index of 4.8 million birds, up 16 percent from 2011 and 112 percent above the long-term average (1948-2011). The 2012 index was the third highest on record. The spring water index was down 57 percent from 2011 and 6 percent from the long-term average. The mid-July waterfowl production survey revealed the duck brood index was up 110 percent from 2011 and 155 percent above the long-term average. Average brood size was 6.9 ducklings, down .8 from 2011. The long term average is 7.1 ducklings per brood. The water index in mid-July was down 48 percent from 2011, but still 10 percent above the long-term average.



OVERALL WINNER

*White-tailed deer fawn
Steve Oehlenschlager, Elk River, Minnesota
Nikon D90
Photo taken at Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge*

2012 Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest

By Patrick T. Isakson

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest is closing in on a quarter-century.

The 23rd annual contest, like many in the past, featured a number of animal species, highlighting North Dakota's great wildlife diversity. More than 300 photos were entered in the nongame, game and plants and insects categories.

In all, 13 photos were chosen – one overall winner and a first place winner and three runners-up in each of the three categories. The 2012 contest overall winner is a whitetail fawn taken by Steve Oehlenschlager of Elk River, Minnesota. Steve's photo was taken at Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge on one of his many trips to North Dakota.

The white-tailed deer is North Dakota's most common and widely pursued big game animal. We most commonly see whitetails photographed as adults, but they all start out like this little fawn.

Most adult female whitetails have at least one fawn per year, and twins are common in areas with good winter cover and food supplies. Even fawn triplets are occasionally recorded.

Born in late May to early June, fawns literally hit the ground running as they are able to walk shortly after birth. They also have a reddish-brown coat and white spots that offers a natural camouflage to help them hide from predators.

PATRICK T. ISAKSON is a Game and Fish Department conservation biologist.



GAME 1ST PLACE

Mallard

Steve Oehlenschlager, Elk River, Minnesota

Nikon D90

Photo taken near Crosby



GAME RUNNER-UP

*Mallard hen and ducklings
Dave Bruner, Grand Forks
Canon 40D
Photo taken in Grand Forks*



GAME RUNNER-UP

*Muskrat
Ross Warner, Bismarck
Nikon D300
Photo taken near Bismarck*



GAME RUNNER-UP

*Badger
Chad Allmendinger, Medora
Nikon D300
Photo taken near Medora*



NONGAME 1ST PLACE

Great blue heron

Mike LaLonde, Bismarck

Nikon D300S

Photo taken on a Missouri River backwater south of Bismarck



NONGAME RUNNER UP

Le Conte's sparrow

Sharon Watson, Buxton

Canon 7D

Photo taken in Traill County



NONGAME RUNNER UP

Ferruginous hawk

Kelly Krabbenhoft, West Fargo

Canon 50D

Photo taken in Morton County

NONGAME RUNNER UP

Great egret
Cole Morris, Wahpeton
Nikon D300
Photo taken near Kulm



PLANT AND INSECT 1ST PLACE

Meadowhawk dragonfly
Stephanie Slabodnik, Williston
Nikon D700
Photo taken at Lake Sakakawea
State Park



PLANT AND INSECT RUNNER-UP

Honey bee
Christy Patino
Minot, ND
Canon Rebel T3i
Photo taken near Minot



PLANT AND INSECT RUNNER-UP

Milkweed
Bonnie P. Kuntz, Lincoln
Canon Rebel T3
Photo taken near Lincoln



PLANT AND INSECT RUNNER-UP

Monarch butterfly
Sharon Watson, Buxton
Canon 7D
Photo taken in Buxton

Cold Weather Waterfowl Count

By Ron Wilson

With open water along the Missouri River and food sources available in harvested crop fields, Canada geese find no reason to leave North Dakota despite it being January.

CRAIG BIRKLE

To the pedestrian, swathed mummy-like from head to toe in wool and Gortex to run a short errand, it likely seems improbable that sometimes thousands of ducks and geese, birds with the aptitude to migrate miles and miles to lands without ice and snow, are hanging around the state during its leanest months.

Depending on the availability of open water and food, this is true, and a survey started in 1935 confirms it.

The midwinter waterfowl survey, dubbed the oldest operational survey still being conducted annually, is a nationwide effort to assess the distribution and abundance of waterfowl across North America in winter. For the first 20 years of the survey, the midwinter evaluation served as a major source of information for developing hunting regulations until 1955, when breeding ground surveys were initiated.

"This was basically our first waterfowl survey that measured the abundance and distribution of waterfowl," said Mike Johnson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department game management section leader, who flew his first midwinter survey for the Department 31 years ago this month. "It's a cooperative state and federal survey that is conducted in all states and parts of Canada."

Johnson said the survey is held and completed the first full week of January for all participants so birds aren't counted more than once if they happen to migrate. Game and Fish Department waterfowl biologists can get their aerial leg of the survey completed in one day, concentrating mostly on the Missouri River System from Williston to south of Bismarck.

"Sometimes we ask field personnel to check below

the dams at Jamestown and Heart Butte and other places where they know there is open water, but the bulk of the birds in the state are typically found on the Missouri River," Johnson said. "There have been times when portions of Lake Sakakawea are open, or birds are sitting on the ice, and there are always some Canada geese and mallards at the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers near Williston."

In other states much farther south, such as Texas, the aerial survey takes much longer as large concentrations of wintering birds can be spread far and wide. "As you go south, biologists are identifying all the duck and goose species and it can get complicated," Johnson said. "It can be a real challenge for them."

In North Dakota, mallards and geese – giant Canada geese, Western Prairie Canada geese and, to a lesser extent, Tallgrass Prairie Canada geese – make up the bulk of the birds hanging around in January.

Counting and telling birds apart from the air at speeds that would undoubtedly get you a ticket on the interstate is difficult. "You have to concentrate, you have to have a good pilot, which we do in Jeff Faight, who can put the plane where you can see the birds," Johnson said. "It's not a super accurate count. Lots of times there is fog and steam, the birds are tucked into the bank and you can hardly see them, or you have mallards and Canada geese mixed together and you're trying to count both."

Johnson said it's certain that biologists are underestimating the number of birds when they are flying the surveys. "You never count all the geese and you never see all the ducks," he said.

Yet, what the surveys do reveal over time are



Harvested crop fields, weeks away from being turned and replanted in spring, attract geese and other waterfowl wintering along the Missouri River and other unfrozen waters.

CRAIG BIRKLE



DEVYNE WEBSTER

An untold number of Canada geese (top), and likely other migratory waterfowl that are tough to identify from a distance, rest on open water at Garrison Dam on Lake Sakakawea. During mild winters (bottom) open water can be found along the Missouri River for the majority of winter, providing a safe harbor for birds with no reason to head south.

trends. “The trend counts are pretty good,” Johnson said. “While we can’t tell you exactly how many geese there are, we think we have a pretty good idea if their numbers are going up or down.”

Even so, the number of birds seen in North Dakota during the midwinter survey has nearly everything to do with mood of Mother Nature. For example, in 2009, the first tough winter in a string of three, just 9,700 Canada geese were counted along the Missouri River System. Starting in 2005, however, a new record-number of birds was set every year, and in 2008, 175,000 geese were tallied.

“When several years of favorable conditions are

strung together, you can start to build new migratory traditions,” said Mike Szymanski, Department migratory game bird biologist, in 2009. Prior to 1998, it was rare to count more than 10,000 Canada geese on the river during the midwinter survey. From 1998 to 2004, the number bounced between 2,000 and 89,000 geese.

In 2012, during one of the mildest winters in North Dakota in some time, the Game and Fish Department’s annual survey showed 279,000 birds, a record for ducks and geese wintering in the state. This was a dramatic turnaround from 2009-11 when fewer than 36,000 total waterfowl were observed statewide each year.



CRAIG BHRLE

Change, Johnson said, is the name of the game when it comes to migrating waterfowl. While today many Western Prairie Canada geese are typically mixed in the survey results, there was a time when this wasn't the case. "These birds weren't staging here in fall in any numbers until the 1980s," he said. "Before that, they simply flew over North Dakota."

What made the Western Prairie geese change their migration habits is only a guess, but likely had to do with an increased availability of food, hunting pressure in South Dakota and warmer fall weather.

Although weather is a factor in the number of giant Canada geese showing up in midwinter survey results, more big geese are counted today than 20 years ago and earlier simply because there are so many more birds.

At one time in the early 1900s, giant Canada geese were considered extinct, but some were "rediscovered" in the early 1960s. In 1965 it was believed that North Dakota had about 100 wild breeding pairs.

Following years of aggressive management to restore giant Canada geese, the birds responded and their numbers slowly climbed. Goose populations really took off in the mid-1990s when sorely missed precipitation returned to the Northern Plains, filling thousands of wetlands that had been dry for years. With acres and acres of new breeding habitat, the goose population took off. Today, giant Canada goose numbers are at an all-time high.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



MIKE JOHNSON

There are some years when mallards make a large appearance during the midwinter waterfowl survey. In 2010, thousands of mallards were photographed on open water near Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery. From a plane overhead, it's difficult to get an accurate handle on how many birds are sitting on the water. Waterfowl biologists later counted the birds from this photograph taken while flying. The tally upon further review was 5,819 ducks.



BUFFALOBERRY PATCH

By Greg Freeman, Department News Editor



RON WILSON

TENTATIVE 2013 SEASON OPENING DATES

To help North Dakota hunters prepare for hunting seasons in 2013, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department annually provides its best estimate for opening dates for the coming year.

Dates become official when approved by governor's proclamation. Tentative opening dates for 2013 include:

Spring Crow	March 9	Youth Deer	September 20
Spring Turkey	April 13	Early Resident Waterfowl	September 21
Fall Crow	August 10	Regular Waterfowl, Swan	September 28
Early Canada Goose	August 15	Youth Pheasant	October 5
Deer Bow, Mountain Lion	August 30	Pheasant, Fall Turkey	October 12
Dove	September 1	Mink, Muskrat, Weasel Trapping	October 26
Sharptail, Hun, Ruffed Grouse, Squirrel	September 14	Deer Gun	November 8
Youth Waterfowl	September 14	Deer Muzzleloader	November 29

ANS PREVENTION IN WINTER

North Dakota ice anglers are reminded that regulations designed to reduce the spread of aquatic nuisance species also apply in winter.

It's important to reiterate that only legal live bait can be transported in water in a container of up to five gallons. Neither game nor nongame species can be transported in water, although a daily catch can be packed in snow.

Other simple methods to prevent winter ANS introductions are:

- Do not use illegally imported baits.
- Do not empty a bait bucket into any water body.
- Do not drop plant fragments into the water.
- Dispose of unused bait into the trash.

FISH HOUSE REGULATIONS

Winter anglers are reminded that any fish house left unoccupied on North Dakota waters must be made out of materials that will allow it to float.

A popular question is if campers qualify as legal fish houses. The answer is the same for any structure taken on the ice – if it's left unattended, it must be able to float; if it's not able to float, it must be removed when the angler leaves the ice.

Other fish house regulations include:

- Fish houses do not require a license.
- Occupied structures do not require identification. However, any unoccupied fish house must have the owner's name, and either address or telephone number, displayed on its outside in readily distinguishable characters at least three inches high.
- Fish houses may not be placed closer than 50 feet in any direction to another house without consent of the occupant of the other fish house.
- Fish houses shall be removed from all waters by midnight, March 15, of each year. They can be used after March 15 if they are removed daily.

Anglers should refer to the 2012-14 North Dakota Fishing Guide for winter fishing regulations.



NONRESIDENT ANY-DEER BOW LICENSES

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department will have 180 any-deer bow licenses available to nonresidents in 2013.

Similar to 2012, and pending the final proclamation, antlerless mule deer may not be legal to harvest within a large area of western North Dakota.

The deadline for applying is April 1. A lottery will be held if more applications are received than licenses available. If licenses remain the deadline, they will be issued on a first-come, first-served basis. Applicants can apply together as a party. A separate check is required for each application.

The nonresident any-deer bow application is available at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov. The application must be printed and sent in to the Department.

The number of nonresident any-deer bow licenses available is 15 percent of the previous year's mule deer gun license allocation. The Game and Fish Department issued 1,200 antlered mule deer licenses in the 2012 deer gun lottery.

WMA TREE STAND DEADLINE

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department reminds hunters the deadline is near to remove tree stands from state wildlife management areas.

The deadline for removing tree stands from state-owned or managed WMAs is January 31. The archery season has been extended into January for a number of years, and this will allow archers plenty of time to remove tree stands.



GREG GULLICKSON



RON WILSON

Legislation on Web

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department will track hunting and fishing issues during the 2013 legislative session.

Interested outdoor enthusiasts can follow proposed outdoors-related bills by logging onto the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov.

A brief description of each bill will be included, along with the bill sponsor and hearing schedule. To view each bill in its entirety, click on the hot-linked bill number.



SIGN UP FOR WINTER BOW

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Becoming an Outdoors-Woman program is accepting registrations for a one-day winter workshop January 26 at Upper Souris National Wildlife Refuge, Lake Darling, and a three-day workshop February 22, 23 and 24 at Lake Metigoshe State Park, Bottineau.

A darkhouse spearfishing class is offered for \$50 at Upper Souris.

Dog sledding, snowshoeing, winter survival, darkhouse spearfishing, and cross-country skiing are classes available at Lake Metigoshe. Cost of the workshop is \$135.

Women interested in the workshops are encouraged to register online at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov. Those interested should sign up immediately, as each class is limited to 12 participants. Preregistration with payment is required. Equipment and snacks will be provided.

More information is available by contacting Nancy Boldt at (701) 328-6312, Brittany Fish at (701) 527-3075, or email ndgf@nd.gov.



HUNTER EDUCATION CLASSES

Individuals interested in taking a hunter education class in 2013 should know that most courses are offered early in the calendar year.

To register for a hunter education course, students need to sign up online at the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov. Many classes will be added over the next several weeks, and the rest will be added throughout the year as they are finalized.

To register, click on the online services tab, and "online course enrollment" under the hunter education heading. Classes are listed by city, and can also be sorted by start date. To register for a class, click on "enroll" next to the specific class, and follow the simple instructions. Personal information is required.

Those who do not have Internet access and want to sign up for a class can call the hunter education program in Bismarck at (701) 328-6615.

State law requires anyone born after December 31, 1961 to pass a certified hunter education course to hunt in the state. Hunter education is mandatory for youth who are turning 12 years old, and children can take the class at age 11.

SPRING TURKEY APPS

Hunters interested in applying for a 2013 spring turkey license should watch the Game and Fish website in late January for applications.

Applicants can apply online at gf.nd.gov. Applications can also be submitted by calling (800) 406-6409.

Application forms will also be available at most license vendors, county auditors and Game and Fish offices. The deadline for applying is February 13. Online or phone applications must be logged before midnight that day.



Spring turkey licenses are available only to North Dakota residents.

NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH ONLINE

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

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STAFF NOTES/AWARDS



STAN KOHN NAMED GAME AND FISH EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR

Stan Kohn, North Dakota Game and Fish Department upland game supervisor in Bismarck, received the agency's Director's Award for professional excellence during the Department's annual winter meeting.

Terry Steinwand, Game and Fish director, said Kohn has been a dedicated and effective employee for more than three decades. "Stan has always gone the extra mile for the Department and the sportsmen and women of North Dakota," he said.

Kohn was mentioned for being a strong supporter of developing sound science and in collecting and using the best data for guiding management decisions. "His work is completed on schedule and is always well done," Steinwand said. "He is a strong supporter of our Department's hunting programs and he works hard to ensure that our hunters are provided the best opportunities in the field."



MIKE SEDLACEK NAMED WILDLIFE OFFICER OF THE YEAR

Mike Sedlacek, Department district game warden in Fargo, is the state's 2012 Wildlife Officer of the Year. Sedlacek was honored by the Shikar-Safari Club International, a private conservation organization that annually recognizes outstanding wildlife officers in each state.

In a nomination letter sent to Shikar-Safari, chief warden Robert Timian said Sedlacek's district is the most populated in the state, which presents many challenges.

"Warden Sedlacek has fostered such a relationship with officers in Cass County that they often call him regarding possible violations, and he works with other law enforcement officers on investigations and complaints," Timian said. "He has also developed new relationships with landowners throughout the district."

AWARDS FROM OTHER AGENCIES



Mike Raasakka

LIFE SAVING AWARD

Mike Raasakka, Department district game warden from Stanley, was recognized by the North Dakota Peace Officers Association with the Life Saving Award for his efforts in rescuing stranded boaters on Lake Sakakawea.



Greg Hastings

NATIONAL WILD TURKEY FEDERATION AWARD

Greg Hastings, Department district game warden from Cavalier, was honored by the North Dakota State Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation as its Wildlife Law Enforcement Officer of the Year.



Gene Masse

NASBLA AWARD

Gene Masse, recently retired district game warden from New Rockford, received the 2012 National Association of State Boating Law Administrators Officer of the Year award for North Dakota.

Among the criteria for receiving the award is boating activity in regards to law enforcement, education, search and rescue, outreach and training.



STAFF NOTES

GAME AND FISH RECOGNIZES EMPLOYEE EFFORTS

North Dakota Game and Fish Department Director Terry Steinwand honored a number of employees with performance-based awards in December.



Renae Heinle

• Renae Heinle, private land biologist, Jamestown, received the Special Projects award, given to an individual or group who implemented a successful new project. Heinle was recognized for her project creativity and resourcefulness on private lands. "In addition to her normal workload, Renae has created several partnership opportunities for habitat management and establishment," Steinwand said. "She continues to help the Department adapt to changing conditions on the landscape."



Alan Reile

• Alan Reile, IT coordinator, Bismarck, received the Solid Foundation award, presented to an employee who demonstrates exemplary work in their field. Reile was recognized for his aggressiveness in staying on top of the latest technology developments. "The Department is fortunate to have someone who continually monitors change in the technology field," Steinwand said. "Alan keeps us on the leading edge of development. He continues to discover ways to streamline everyday processes in addition to providing support to our Department needs."



Kent Luttschwager

• Kent Luttschwager, wildlife resource management supervisor, Williston, and Brandon Kratz, fisheries biologist, Jamestown, were presented with the Innovations award, which recognizes staff for implementing a process to improve Department goals and objectives. Luttschwager was recognized for his efforts pertaining to oil and gas activity in the Williston Basin, and for coordinating the recovery efforts of the 2011 flood on several Missouri River wildlife management areas. "In dealing with these issues, Kent's priority has always been the protection of the natural resources of North Dakota," Steinwand said. Kratz was honored for his work with aeration systems to improve fish habitat. "Brandon began using summer aeration at Heinrich-Martin Dam in 2006 and immediately found positive results," Steinwand said. "Since then, we have seen increased overall dissolved oxygen levels in both summer and winter."



Brandon Kratz



Greg Gullickson

• Greg Gullickson, outreach biologist, Minot, received the Public Outreach award, presented to an employee or group for showing a significant effort, ability or accomplishment in interacting with the public while promoting the Department's programs. Gullickson was recognized for his efforts in coordinating the state fair renovation project. "Greg's ability to pull together this task went beyond our expectations," Steinwand said. "The entire area had to be redone, including major repairs to structures, landscaping and the fishing pond."

UPDIKE HIRED AS WARDEN

Brian Updike has been hired as a district game warden in Watford City. Previously, Updike was an officer for the Minot Police Department.

Updike is a native of Beach and received a bachelor of science in criminal justice from Minot State University.

Long-term Employees

Long-term employees were recognized for their service to the state of North Dakota at the Department's annual staff meeting in December.

- **40 years** – Bruce Burkett, investigations supervisor, Bismarck
- **35 years** – Doug Howie, assistant private land coordinator, Bismarck; Gary Rankin, district warden, Larimore; Bill Schaller, district warden, Killdeer
- **30 years** – Pat Lothspeich, outreach biologist, Bismarck; Terry Steinwand, Game and Fish director, Bismarck
- **25 years** – Steve Dyke, conservation supervisor, Bismarck; Randy Hiltner, fisheries supervisor, Devils Lake; Kim Molesworth, chief of administrative services, Bismarck; Alan Roller, wildlife technician, Williston; Kelly Wike, accountant, Bismarck
- **20 years** – Corey Erck, investigations supervisor, Bismarck; Russ Kinzler, fisheries biologist, Riverdale; Brandon Kratz, fisheries biologist, Jamestown; Robert Miller, wildlife technician, Riverdale; Brian Prince, wildlife resource management supervisor, Devils Lake; John Schumacher, resource biologist, Bismarck

back cast

By Ron Wilson



It's Christmas Eve, 18 below zero when I woke this morning, but the day is slowly warming and is expected to top out somewhere in the single digits. It's not ideal weather for what I have planned, but it often never is this time of year.

I'm not looking to start a tradition, to cement a ritual into our holiday that will be carried on for years, like unwrapping one gift on Christmas Eve before diving into the remainder the following morning after Santa comes. I simply want to do something that will get us outdoors for a spell, away from the cookies, dips, chips and venison enchiladas smothered in an embarrassing amount of cheese.

The only direction I give my family is to dress from head to toe as if they were going for a winter hike in ankle-deep snow away from the vehicle's heater.

We load up on coffee drinks and drive north of Mandan on N.D. Highway 1804, passing the Tesoro Refinery and the Missouri River on our right. Not long after the pavement turns to gravel we see at least two dozen wild turkeys on our left that stand out like inflated black leaf bags against the white background.

The small parking area at Smith Grove Wildlife Management Area is empty, and there's no sign in the snow that anyone has been here in a day or two. It's 4 degrees and will only get cooler when the sun sets in about an hour.

Smith Grove is a forested, Missouri River bottoms treasure owned and managed by the Game and Fish Department. The Department originally purchased 25 acres from the Smith family in 1972, while

adding another 200 acres in 2009 by the wishes of the family looking to preserve it for future generations.

It's a short hike from the prairie bench to where we slip-slide down a steep slope into the heart of Smith Grove. We're not a quiet bunch and every animal worth its salt in surviving in the wild knows we're here. Their tracks, made hours or just minutes ago, cut across a clearing and melt into the understory shaded by green ash, box elder, bur oak and American elm.

Full disclosure: I'm not a tree guy and am only able to rattle off the names of trees because there are wooden signs pounded into the ground at their bases here and there that read "bur oak" and so on. The signs are found along an unobtrusive interpretive path that passes for a deer trail in the snow that snakes north and south through timber.

From a Volkswagen-sized brush pile we flush a cottontail rabbit that takes a couple of bunny hops before freezing behind a bump in the terrain, hiding all but its brownish eyes and ears. Besides inquisitive black-capped chickadees and nuthatches inching down tree trunks headfirst, the rabbit tops our wildlife viewing list.

We pass three empty ladder stands secured to trees that would likely go unnoticed to most passersby if you weren't looking for them. The stands were tethered to trees sometime in fall, but according to WMA regulations, hunters must disassemble and remove them by the end of January.

We abandon the cottontail and hike farther north, ducking under leafless limbs, around deadfall and back on to what we

believe is the trail. I have something I want to show my family, but no one asks what specifically, as they are simply happy to be tramping through the woods without an agenda.

Smith Grove harbors some of the oldest and largest cottonwood trees in the state. Writers, me included, can hardly pen a piece about the trees without telling readers that some of the cottonwoods standing today were rooted firmly in the Missouri River bottoms when explorers Lewis and Clark passed more than 200 years ago.

Yet, no matter how tired that fact may be, there is nothing cliché about the largest of the cottonwoods resolutely standing watch in Smith Grove. When you see one for the first time, be it on a nice summer day or a chilly Christmas Eve, you stop in your tracks, marvel at its circumference, before tilting your head back in a dizzying search for the top of the crown.

They are impressive creatures, I think to myself, with centuries-long memories that include times of hardship, abundance and change. My kids, more to the point, think they are really cool.

With the sun and temperature falling, we point cold toes in the direction of the vehicle and begin the hike out. We are no quieter on our retreat as the conversation ping-pongs between the mammoth cottonwood my family could barely get its arms around, to the venison enchiladas waiting at home.

A year from now, I wonder which one the kids will remember more.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



A CLOSER LOOK

By Ron Wilson



KELLY KRABBENHOF

Northern Shrike

The Northern shrike is classified as a songbird, but if other birds lumped into the same group had any say, they'd likely beg to differ.

You see, the Northern shrike is the only songbird, scientists tell us, to consistently prey on, well, songbirds, as well as other vertebrate animals and insects when in season.

About the size of an American robin, with a bold black mask that ends at its bill, the Northern shrike is uniquely suited to play the role of predator, thanks to eyesight compared to some raptors, and a stout, hooked bill similar to a falcon. The bird will deliver repeated sharp blows to the head of prey with its bill and use it to bite and sever vertebrae when necessary.

During warmer months, the Northern shrike nests from Alaska across northern Canada. It's during the winter months when the shrike is most abundant in North Dakota and farther south as it migrates to the Northern Plains in search of food. Like other northern birds that depend on rodent populations for survival, the Northern shrike's movements are cyclical, becoming more plentiful in North Dakota when rodent populations farther north are low.

To search for prey, the Northern shrike, which is typically a solitary daytime hunter, will perch atop trees, power lines and poles in mostly open country, before dropping from its post and flying low over the ground.

A hungry Northern shrike will immediately eat what it kills. A bird not in a hurry to ingest its prey will hang it head-up on a thorn, barbed wire fence, sharp twig or tuck it into the fork of a branch. Dead prey can hang there for a day or two, and sometimes longer, before being consumed.

This practice of impaling and hanging its kill in the open air, before later dismembering with its powerful, hooked bill, is where the Northern shrike gets its "butcher bird" nickname.

Some research indicates that impaled prey is used not only as a food cache, but also to establish territories and attract mates. Either or, the end result is a testament to the meat-eating songbird's hunting abilities.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.