

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

It's been one of those years so far, starting with a mild winter in the southern part of the state and a long winter in the northern half. It looked like we were heading into a dry spell and then the skies opened up. In other words, normal for North Dakota.

We'll have to wait and see how the weather pattern has affected our fish and wildlife populations. We already know that deer populations were affected in the northern half of the state by a solid winter that hung around for months. What we don't know at this point, and likely won't for a month or so, is how the wet spring affected our upland game bird populations. Heavy rains undoubtedly created a situation where pheasants in some areas were forced to abandon nests and had to reneest. If we continue with seasonable temperatures and precipitation they should do fine.

The beneficiary of both winter and the high precipitation pattern has been the fisheries. Statewide, fisheries are in very good shape in terms of water levels and fish populations. The Game and Fish Department is managing a record number of fisheries and most are producing some pretty good fishing. This won't last forever, but it sure looks like it's going to last for another few years.

These fisheries are a product of a number of years with above average precipitation. When water levels climb, Department fisheries crews immediately jump to provide fishing opportunities for the public. And they've done a lot of jumping the last few years.

Along with the creation and management of a fishery comes the work of assuring that there is adequate access, be it by boat or shore. This work is coordinated, and at times implemented, by a small collection of Game

and Fish staff. But it also couldn't be accomplished without the cooperation of local park boards, county commissions, hunting and fishing groups and others. So it truly is a coordinated and collaborative effort.

We're well into the fishing season and I've heard some good fishing stories to date. As usual, the Missouri River outside of Bismarck started with a bang, but has since quieted down, which is typical, but will likely continue with the forage deficiency.

Many of the smaller lakes had good pike fishing and I've heard that walleye fishing has been pretty good, but inconsistent, in the lower third of Lake Sakakawea. And while I haven't heard anything yet, I have to believe the catfish bite on the Red River is underway.

My point is that North Dakota offers a wide variety of fishing opportunities. You just have to take the time to go out and experience it.

As most readers know, the deer gun and muzzleloader drawing deadline was in early June. Hopefully you submitted your deer application on time and, if so, good luck. Rebuilding the deer herd so most hunters can get a deer license in the future is a challenge. We need a combination of good habitat and relatively mild winters to get us to that goal.

Favorable weather and quality habitat are also critical in building North Dakota's upland game bird populations for the coming fall hunting season and autumns to follow.

As always, this is going to be a good summer so get out and enjoy the great fishing North Dakota has to offer. Fall, and a host of hunting opportunities, will be here soon enough. No matter the season, it's all about spending some time in the great North Dakota outdoors.

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.

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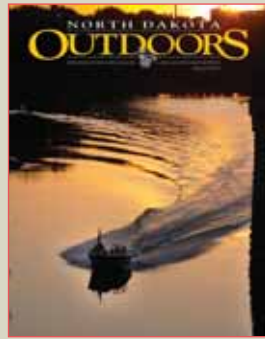
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Front Cover

An angler heads back toward the ramp after an early summer evening of fishing on the Red River at Grand Forks. *Photo by Craig Bihrl, Bismarck.*



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Northern pike spawn in spring. Spawning starts immediately after ice-out, sometime in April or May. Adult females distribute thousands of adhesive eggs that stick to submerged vegetation.

An underwater photograph of a fish, likely a trout, swimming in clear water. The fish is positioned on the left side of the frame, with its head and eye visible. The water is filled with light rays and bubbles, creating a shimmering effect. The overall color palette is dominated by greens and yellows, suggesting a sunlit underwater environment. The text 'FROM PREY' is repeated five times in a light, semi-transparent font, stacked vertically in the center of the image. The final word 'TO PREDATOR' is written in a larger, bold, dark font, spanning across the middle of the image.

FROM PREY
FROM PREY
FROM PREY
FROM PREY
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FROM PREY

TO PREDATOR

BY RON WILSON



RANDY HILNER

Northern pike are arguably one of the top underwater predators found in North Dakota's waters. Just looking at a pike swimming in shallow water you can tell its body is built for quick bursts of speed. Pike will hide near cover and ambush unsuspecting prey, from water birds to minnows that venture by.

Nothing about an adult northern pike, from a mouthful of large canines and brushlike teeth, to an elongated body built for quick bursts of deadly speed, suggests a perilous upbringing.

Yet, studies indicate the crossing from egg to, say, a pike 2-3 inches in length that is able to escape most predators, isn't a trouble-free summer swim through submerged vegetation. Of the thousands of eggs deposited by spawning females, the vast majority – 90-plus percent in some scenarios – never make it.

Northern pike eggs and newly hatched young are prey to a number of fish species, including other pike, aquatic insects, mammals and diving birds. Plus, there is always the chance of eggs left high and dry, stranded as water levels fall from shallow spawning areas.

Of course, there are always survivors and always will be. Native to the



GREG GULLICKSON

Northern Plains, northern pike, especially during the spring spawn, can swim great distances, negotiating no-named and big-named streams alike, before settling into waters that meet their needs.

“Northern pike were here long before us and they will be here long after we are gone,” said Greg Power, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries chief. “Pike are survivors, big time predators that, when conditions are right, thrive in wetland complexes, with deep water refuge.”

North Dakota anglers and pike have a long history. For a time, they were the favored game fish. Seventy-plus years ago, news of a big northern caught by a shore angler made headlines. From the mid-1960s to early 1970s, Lake Sakakawea arguably featured some of the best pike fishing in the country, boasting of fish weighing more than 20 pounds.

Pike thrived in Sakakawea as waters backed up behind the newly constructed Garrison Dam, inundating mature trees, and untold acres and acres of brush and grasses, creating perfect spawning habitat for native northerns.

“The pike fishing in Sakakawea certainly wasn’t a secret as anglers in North Dakota, in surrounding states and elsewhere knew about it,” Power said.

Things changed sometime in the 1970s, as they so often do on the Northern Plains, as the rock substrate preferred by spawning walleye was washed clean of layers of sediment. As the lake went from weeds to rocks, Power said, the walleye population exploded.

“About that time, more and more anglers were getting boats, access was improved with new boat ramps and anglers started changing their tactics and targeting walleye,” Power said.

And they haven’t looked back. Year in and year out, the greatest amount of angler interest in North Dakota is focused on catching walleye. In 2013, for example, 81 percent of open water anglers said they most often fish for walleye, while 8 percent said they preferred pike. In 2006, the percentages were nearly the same, with anglers again preferring walleye.

“The beauty of fishing for pike is that you don’t need a boat or a bunch of fancy equipment, especially in spring when the fish move into shallow waters,” Power said. “Pike fishing is pretty basic and has always remained so. The red and white Dardevle used by grandpa is still very effective today.”

Grandpa, however, wouldn’t recognize the northern pike fishing opportunities to be had

Pike Over Time

- 1932 – 19-pound, 8-ounce northern pike from Lake Metigoshe mentioned as the largest fish taken in the state that year.
- 1945 – 25-pound pike taken from the Red River near Grand Forks noted as the largest fish caught in North Dakota, although a similar size pike was taken from the Sheyenne River in 1942.
- 1950 – First attempt to take eggs from northern pike in North Dakota (Red River) unsuccessful.
- 1951 – First successful pike egg take in North Dakota from James River near Ludden.
- 1955 – *North Dakota OUTDOORS* states northern pike are the species of choice of North Dakota anglers.
- 1956 – Although historically present, northern pike first stocked into Devils Lake. This was the first time Devils Lake was stocked with a game fish species.
- 1959 – First northern pike weighing more than 20 pounds reported from Lake Sakakawea.
- 1960 – First year of the Game and Fish Department’s Whopper Club. Pike qualifying weight set at 18 pounds.
- 1961 – Pike Whopper Club qualifying weight increased to 20 pounds as the number of Whopper pike from Lake Sakakawea was increasing rapidly.
- 1962 – First Game and Fish Department fish tagging project. About 700 pike tagged at Lake Ashtabula.
- 1963 – State record pike, 32 pounds, 6 ounces from Lake Sakakawea.
- 1968 – New state record pike, 37 pounds, 8 ounces from Lake Sakakawea. This record stands today. Until the early 1970s, Sakakawea featured some of the best pike fishing around. One highway sign even proclaimed it as “Pike Capitol of the Nation.”
- 1969 – Northern pike named, by legislative resolution, as North Dakota’s state fish.
- 1990s – Sakakawea and Lake Oahe’s pike population expanded as a result of excellent spawning success, but then declined as drought conditions set in.
- 2001 – North Dakota’s first darkhouse spearfishing season for northern pike and nongame fish species. Just 28 waters were open to spearing.
- 2009 – The boom and bust cycle of northern pike in lakes Sakakawea and Oahe came full circle as the number of young pike produced was the highest in more than 30 years.
- 2012 – North Dakota boasts a record number of more than 200 waters in the state that harbor northern pike.
- 2012 – Daily and possession limits on northern pike increased statewide to five and 10 respectively.
- 2012-13 – To further take advantage of record-setting pike populations, the entire state opened to darkhouse spearfishing, except the Red River and lakes with muskellunge.
- 2013 – Northern pike abundance in lakes Sakakawea and Oahe, as well as many of the state’s smaller waters, is higher than ever.

in the state today. "Thirty years ago, North Dakota had fewer than 100 lakes with mediocre expectations and success," Power said. "Today, North Dakota has more than 200 lakes with pike, and many of those have record populations, with fish in the 5- to 10-pound range. Some fish are even larger."

Unfortunately, Power said, these wonderful pike fishing opportunities have a shelf life. "The pike fishing should remain good for another couple years or more, barring some serious summer or winterkill," he said. "However, without some phenomenal wet conditions in the next spring or two to again increase good spawning habitat, the good pike fishing opportunities we are experiencing today are on the clock."

While Power said he doesn't know where the interest for fishing for northern pike will be 10 years from now, he said there will likely remain an interest in catching trophy pike. "People want to catch big pike and in the next decade, more of those large fish will be there to be had," he said.

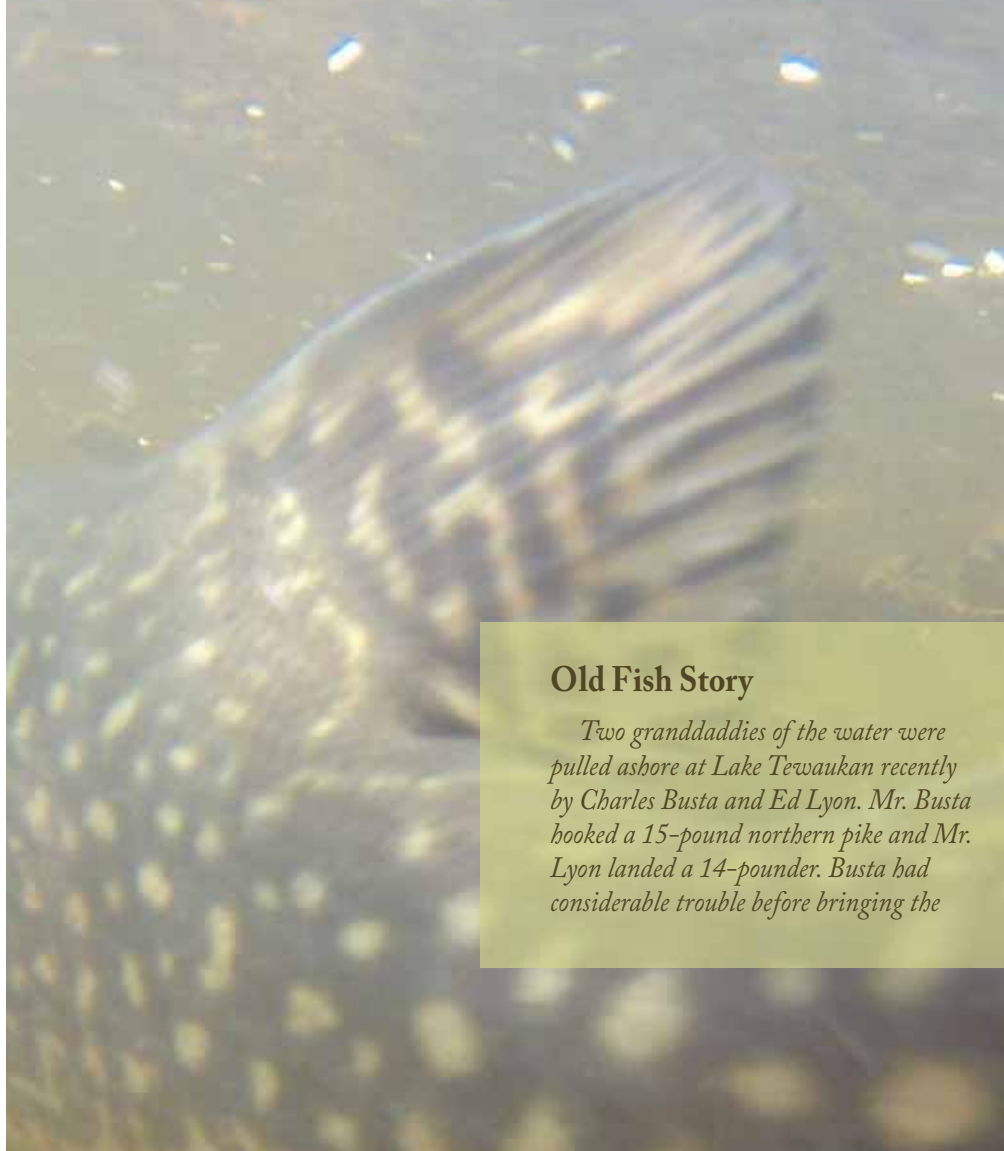
It takes the right kind of environment, however, to grow big pike. And the list of North Dakota waters with the ability to produce really big fish isn't long.

"Most North Dakota lakes have fathead minnows, which are wonderful for pike to grow that first year or two, but beyond that, they need bigger prey, bigger meals," Power said.

Scott Gangl, Game and Fish Department fisheries management section leader, said in waters with a quality food source, a pike hatched in, say, April, will be 9-12 inches by fall. "Once they get to about 3 inches in length and are able to eat other fish, their growth really takes off," he said. By the following fall under the same conditions, those same fish can measure in at 24 inches.

The bigger meals needed to grow bigger pike are typically found in North Dakota's larger reservoirs, such as Lake Ashtabula, Lake Darling, lakes Sakakawea and Oahe, and so on. "A 10-pound pike isn't going to get bigger by eating minnows, but it will by preying on white sucker, carp, buffalo, perch and walleye," Power said. "These fish are fantastic predators and if the food source is available, they'll take advantage of it."

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



Old Fish Story

Two granddaddies of the water were pulled ashore at Lake Tewaukan recently by Charles Busta and Ed Lyon. Mr. Busta hooked a 15-pound northern pike and Mr. Lyon landed a 14-pounder. Busta had considerable trouble before bringing the



The North Dakota state record pike was featured on the cover of North Dakota OUTDOORS in 1969. The 37-pound, 8-ounce fish was taken from Lake Sakakawea by Melvin Slind of Roseglen in 1968. Slind used 40-pound line and three small minnows as bait.

The Call for a State Fish

Eleven states now have officially designated "state fish," whereas "official" trees, flowers, and birds have been designated in all 50 states. The 11 progressive states that have adopted various species of fish as official

symbols are: Alabama (tarpon); Alaska (chinook salmon); California (golden trout); Kentucky (spotted bass); Maryland (striped bass); Michigan (brook trout); Minnesota (walleye); New Mexico (cutthroat trout); Ohio

(smallmouth bass); Oregon (chinook salmon); and Wisconsin (muskellunge). We suggest the next session of the legislature proclaim the pike as North Dakota's state fish. — North Dakota OUTDOORS, September 1968.

fish under control. He had placed a piece of beefsteak on the hook of his three-year-old line for bait. The line was only about 25 feet from shore. When he got the big fish to the shallows near the beach the line broke. He grabbed the fish in his arms and three times

the pickerel wriggled away from him. He finally made certain of the catch by gripping it behind the fins. Several scratches testify to the resistance given by the fish. — Reprinted in 1941 in North Dakota OUTDOORS courtesy of the Lidgerwood Monitor.

Not a Wild Fish Story

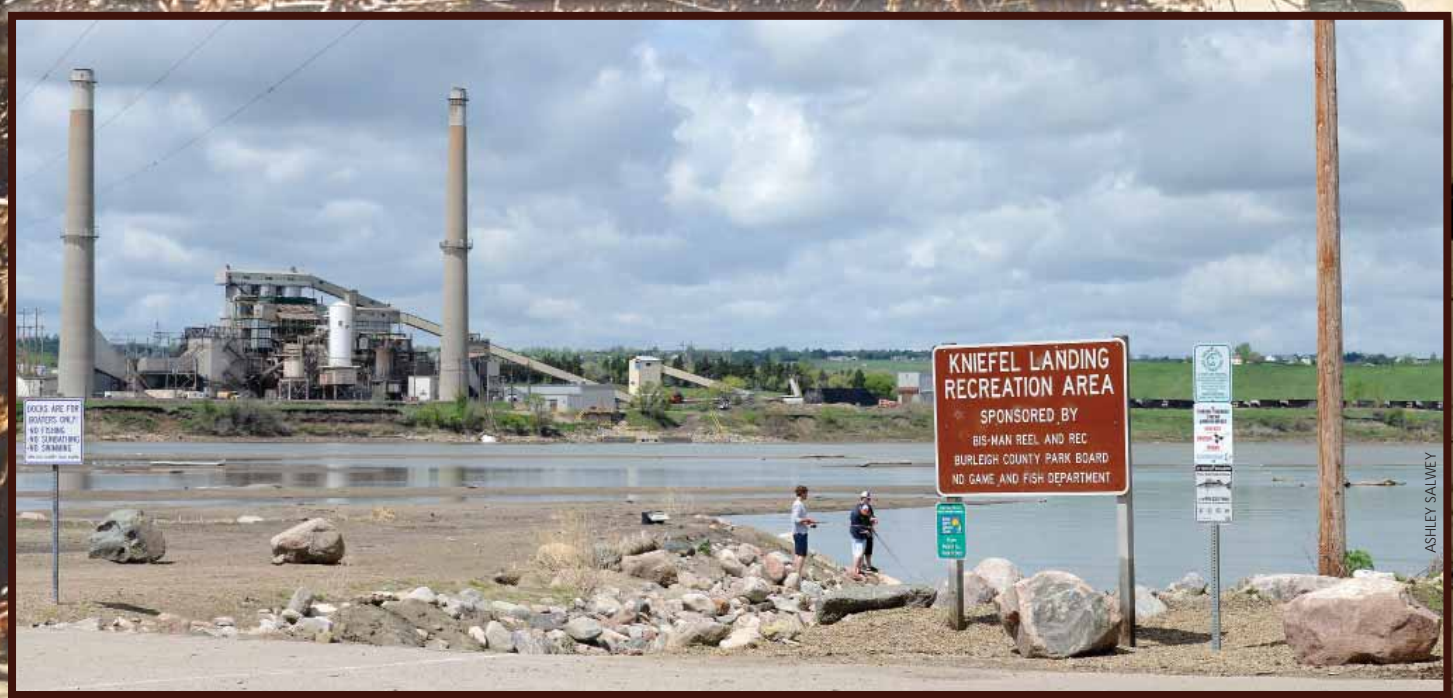
My most exciting experience was at Clark's Creek in 1965. I am sure I had on a record pike. I played it out and was actually able to put my landing net on it.

It was a 43-inch long net and when the fish swam as far into the net as it could go, there was still 8 or 10 inches of its tail outside the net. When I tried to lift it

out of the water it got away. This is not a wild fish story, but the truth. — As told by a Watford City angler in North Dakota OUTDOORS.



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ASHLEY SALWY

Like other access sites along the Missouri River, Kniefel Landing took a bit during flooding in 2011. The landing was covered in several feet of sand and debris, which has since been removed, opening access to shore and boat anglers.

TWO YEARS REMOVED

By Ron Wilson



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Two years ago, North Dakota was soaked, as wet as it had been in years. An abundance of water across much of the state, including a 500-year flood along the course of the Missouri River, altered the fishing landscape.

From a wildlife perspective, some changes were positive and some negative. Whether the outcome, the pros compared to the cons, was a wash is a matter of perspective.

CRAIG BIHRLE



CRAIG BIRHLE

Floodwaters inundated roads across the state in 2011. In some instances, anglers couldn't get within miles of their favorite fishing spots. The flooded road pictured here and since repaired, is located on Oahe Wildlife Management Area south of Bismarck.



CRAIG BIRHLE

Flooding Positives

“As a general rule, more water leads to good things for North Dakota’s fisheries,” said Paul Bailey, North Dakota Game and Fish Department south central district fisheries supervisor.

The abundant precipitation created a number of new lakes and marginal waters got deeper, decreasing the odds of summer and winter fish kills. Starting in 2009, North Dakota saw an increase in the number of lakes, and 2011 added to that list. Today, there are more than 400 fishing lakes, which is a record for the state.

“With shallow, marginal lakes, there is a lot of decomposition, which uses up much of the oxygen fish need to survive,” said Scott Gangl, Department fisheries management section leader. “By increasing the volume of water in these lakes, the fish have more

room to roam and can escape where the oxygen is being consumed by decomposition.”

Bailey said Logan WMA and Wentz WPA, two shallow, budding walleye fisheries in Logan County, would have likely suffered summer or winterkills if not for the substantial increase in the volume of water. “Logan and Wentz are just a couple of examples of shallow waters in south central North Dakota that benefited,” he said. “There are a number of waters across the state that fisheries biologists could add to this list.”

Some lakes, especially those with high salinity, were refreshed with snowmelt and rain, making the habitat more conducive to fish survival. “Lakes with salinity issues affect the reproduction of walleye, perch ...” Gangl said. “Too much salt will kill the eggs.”

Flood waters also inundated untold acres of terrestrial vegetation, providing spawning habitat for a variety of fish species, and nursery cover for newly hatched young, said Jason Lee, Department north central district fisheries supervisor.

“Plants, such as cattails, provide habitat for adhesive northern pike eggs to attach to until they hatch,” Lee said. “Perch drape their skeins – egg sacks full of eggs – over flooded vegetation until they are ready to hatch. Without this type of habitat, perch and pike eggs will be deposited in the soft, muddy bottom of lakes where spawning success is lower.”

Nursery habitat is important as it offers cover for young walleye, perch, pike and forage fish to hide from predators. “In addition, the flooded vegetation fuels the food chain by stimulating bug production to feed young fish,” Lee said. “In some lakes, the benefits of a major flooding event will be seen for many years. For example, a strong year-class of walleye, perch and pike can provide anglers with good fishing opportunities for the life of the fish, which can be 20 years or more for some fish.”

When the Missouri River flooded in 2011, and water pushed its way into areas that hadn't been that wet since the creation of Garrison Dam in 1953, native species once accustomed to the seasonal ebbs and flows of the river, benefited.

“The Missouri River would flood on a pretty regular basis before Garrison Dam was built, which was important to native fish such as gar, buffalo and blue suckers, as it provided them the opportunity to fulfill part of their lifecycles,” Gangl said. “While some people might not see this as a benefit, it was a benefit to the fish.”

Big, undammed rivers are accustomed to the shifting and changing of the channel. “Much to the dismay of homeowners who now have big sandbars in front of their homes, the redistribution of sedi-

ment provides a pretty dynamic mosaic of braided channels and backwater habitats that are important to fish,” Gangl said.

While many fish and forage species were lost through entrainment on dams such as Garrison and Oahe, high water at Lake Darling flushed many fish into the Souris River, creating new shore-fishing opportunities.

“The tremendous entrainment wasn’t great news for Darling, but it was a good thing for anglers along the Souris River,” Gangl said. “There was and continues to be tremendous fishing for pike and walleye downstream of the dam, as fish were distributed throughout the reach of the river.”

High water on river systems farther east, such as the Sheyenne and James, enabled fish to easily maneuver over lowhead dams that regularly blocked them most years from moving into new reaches to spawn.

Flooding Negatives

While more water typically leads to positives for North Dakota’s fisheries, the fallout of flooding can also cause problems for fish.

“The unprecedented precipitation of 2011 created many connections between lakes that facilitated movement of fish from one lake to another,” Bailey said. “In some cases, predatory walleye and northern pike were able to enter lakes that were being managed for yellow perch. This may impact some of the perch fisheries, but angling opportunities will likely remain good in many of these lakes.”

In other cases, new lake-to-lake connections may have more severe consequences by allowing the introduction of undesirable fish, such as white sucker, black bullhead or common carp, the state’s top aquatic nuisance species.

Alkaline Lake in Kidder County serves as a good example. “In May 2011, Alkaline, which doesn’t contain carp, reached its natural outlet and water began flowing through the 15-mile-long valley to Lake Isabel, which does contain carp,” Bailey said. “Fortunately, the Game and Fish Department was able to work with a landowner in the valley to install a fish barrier to prevent carp from entering Alkaline Lake.”

Just getting to some of North Dakota’s fishing waters was difficult, or out of the question, in 2011, said Greg Power, Department fisheries chief.

“At its worst, we had 20 lakes that were inaccessible across the state,” Power said. “Some farm-to-market roads that led to productive fishing lakes took more than a year to repair. Along with that, we had some infrastructure issues with vault toilets and fishing piers. Some boat ramps are still under water today.”

On the Missouri River, the embankment that created Riverdale Spillway Lake was breached, drastically lowering the lake level and exposing a permanent pump used to fill 40 Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery ponds. The ponds annually yield millions of pike and walleye fingerlings used to stock lakes statewide.

“Starting in 2012, we had to rent pumps, at \$50,000 per year,” Power said. “In 2014, we hope to have a permanent pump in place for the hatchery ponds.”

High water on the Missouri River System washed away more than Spillway Lake, as many game and forage fish were swept through Garrison and Oahe dams.

Entrainment (loss) of rainbow smelt through Garrison Dam was estimated at 38 percent, while 88 percent of the smelt in Lake Oahe were ushered downstream by high water. Today, forage for game fish in the fishery between Garrison and Oahe dams is significantly depressed.

“To give you some perspective on the number of fish, not just forage fish, that washed through Garrison Dam during the flood, fisheries biologists estimated that there were 1,500 to 2,000 Yellowstone-Sakakawea stock of paddlefish in the Tailrace area in 2012,” Gangl said of the of paddlefish targeted each May in western North Dakota by snaggers.

Power said entrainment in 2011 wasn’t limited to the Missouri River System as other reservoirs in North Dakota are feeling the loss of prey today. “Jamestown Reservoir, for example, lost spottail shiners and minnows and now the reservoir is dealing

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department installed a barrier in a 15-mile-long valley to keep carp from Lake Isabel from entering Alkaline Lake.



© GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT PHOTO

with an inadequate forage base,” he said. “There are a lot of thin fish, with not a lot to eat.”

While high water is typically a good thing in terms of fish reproduction, it wasn't in 2011 as the nursery habitat for fish in Lake Oahe was eliminated, and turbidity throughout much of the system hindered photosynthesis and the production of zooplankton. “Without zooplankton, there wasn't anything for the fish to eat once they hatched,” Gangl said.

Power said the loss of rainbow smelt and other forage fish in the Missouri River System is a short-term issue that will right itself. Changes to the makeup of the river, however, will take years to work out.

“The Missouri River fishery was so good for years because it had diverse habitat – sandbars above the waterline, side channels and backwater areas,” Power said. “Much of that habitat is gone after being deposited on point bars or on the floodplain below Bismarck. The Garrison Reach of the Missouri is not void of good fish habitat, but there is certainly less of it.”

Power said the channel bottom from Bismarck upstream is 1-2 feet lower than before the flood. “The river is now deeper and narrower,” he said. “The 100 million dollar question is when will the river be able to restore itself? We don't have any idea.”

Fish habitat conditions are far better downstream of Bismarck where the water slows and sediment is deposited. “Some sediment is positive as it keeps the river changing and alive,” Power said.

What were once good fishing spots are no

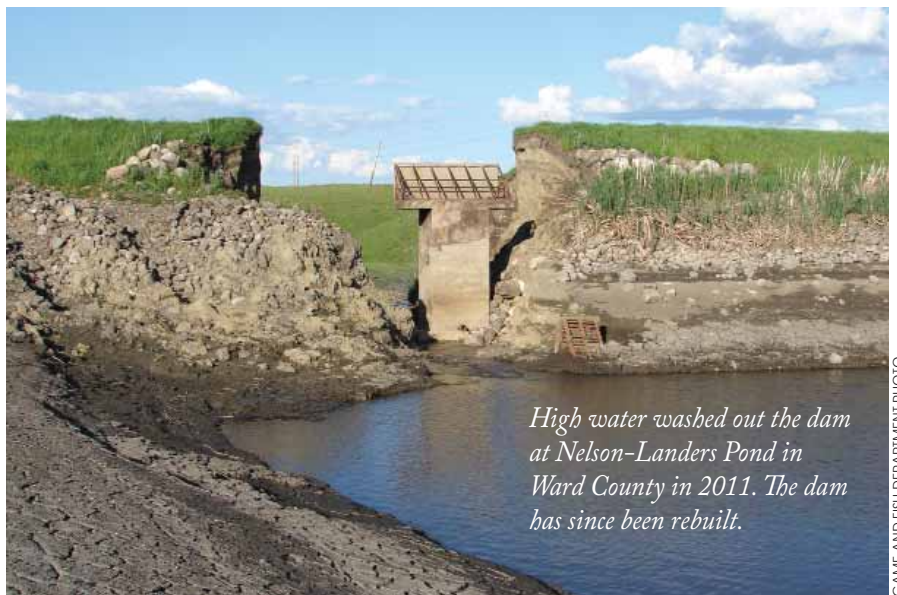


GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT PHOTOS

Photos taken north of Bismarck illustrate how historic flooding on the Missouri River in 2011 dramatically altered the makeup of the river. The photo on the left was taken in 2010 and shows diverse fish habitat. The photo on right shows how the river has become channelized in spots, ridding the system of habitat fish prefer.

longer. “With the loss of current breaks and sandbars, there are fewer spots where fish can rest to find food and avoid predation,” Gangl said. “Having fewer of those kinds of places means we might have fewer fish, and what remains won't be as widely distributed throughout the system.”

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



High water washed out the dam at Nelson-Landers Pond in Ward County in 2011. The dam has since been rebuilt.

GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT PHOTO

Ramp Recovery

From May through August 2011, thanks to high water and strong flows not seen in at least 60 years, there was only one useable boat ramp on the Missouri River from Garrison Dam to the South Dakota border.

By mid-October, most of the 22 ramps that dot that 140-mile stretch of river were up and running, but certainly not at full speed.

“As soon as floodwaters started going down, we dropped everything and devoted resources to cleaning the debris and sand off ramps to get anxious anglers on the river for the fall walleye bite,” said Bob Frohlich, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries development supervisor.

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

“In 2012, we started addressing bigger concerns, working with engineers, securing permits and funding to make repairs on a number of boat ramps that were severely damaged,” Frohlich said.

Two years later, work continues.

“We’re still dealing with repairs from the flood,” Frohlich said. “The two big projects are Kimball Bottoms, located south of Bismarck, which was destroyed, and a ramp near Williston.”

Devastation to boat ramps and facilities wasn’t limited to the Missouri River System, including lakes Sakakawea and Oahe, in 2011.

“In many areas in the state, parking lots, ramps, toilets and other facilities were totally inundated,” Frohlich said. “Access to many of our district lakes was cut off. Anglers couldn’t get within miles of some lakes because of flooding.”

Work on roads also continues today.

“Effects of the 2011 flooding will be felt for years to come,” Frohlich said.

From a boating access standpoint today, Frohlich said the state is in good shape.

At Lake Sakakawea and Lake Oahe,

which are approximately 10 feet lower than last year at this time, anglers shouldn’t have a problem finding public access points to launch a boat.

Frohlich said most of the main recreation areas will have a usable boat ramp and provide ample boating access. “Some of the main concrete ramps are out of the water, so anglers will have to use low-water ramps in those areas,” he said. “While these low-water ramps will certainly be sufficient to get boaters on and off the water, anglers may notice that some may not be as wide or quite as nice as the primary ramps and may be located some distance from the other amenities in the area.”

Many low-water ramps were installed through cooperative efforts during the previous drought, Frohlich said, and are now becoming usable once again as the water level approaches those same elevations.


At Lake Sakakawea, where fisheries biologists expect a banner open-water fishing season, all but two of the 34 recreation sites will have a usable ramp. Only Littlefield Bay and West Totten Trail will be unusable.

All 12 boat ramps will be usable on the Missouri River stretch from Garrison Dam to MacLean Bottoms. “These ramps are usually more reliable as they are not dependent on a lake elevation,” Frohlich said. “The biggest problem with these river ramps is the 2 foot degradation in the river bed that occurred during the 2011 flood, so there’s now 2 feet less water on each ramp with the same exact releases from the dam as there was pre-flood.”

Seven of eight recreation areas will have operational ramps on Lake Oahe from Hazelton to the South Dakota state line. Only the Fort Yates ramp will be unusable.

In the northeast portion of the state, Frohlich said the Devils Lake Basin had above average moisture and is expected to be up 2 feet this summer. “All nine boat ramps are in exceptional shape and will be fully functional,” he said.

A complete status report of Missouri River and Devils Lake boat ramps is on the Game and Fish website at gf.nd.gov.



A new boat ramp was constructed in 2012 at Graner Bottoms (Sugar Loaf). A number of ramps along the Missouri River received considerable work following historic flooding in 2011.

Here



Ons

*By Ron Wilson
Photos by Mike LaLonde*

in the Shallows

Standing statue still or stalking prey with the tiptoeing pace of a cartoon burglar, the great blue heron is one of North Dakota's most familiar wading birds, and the largest of North America's herons.

Taller than a sandhill crane, with a wingspan of 6 feet or more, the great blue heron is mainly grayish, with a pale yellow bill. When the light is right, however, the bird's blue plumage, as its name implies, is evident.





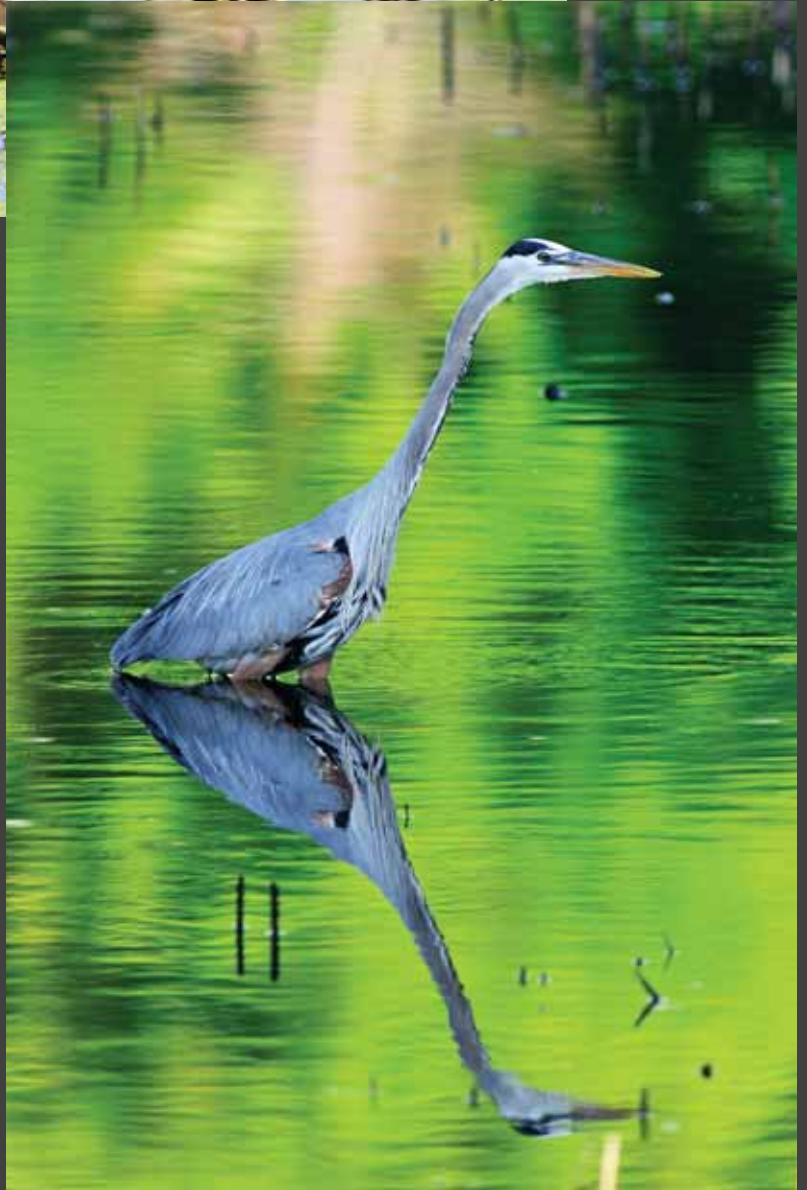
“When you see great blue herons from a distance, they look gray, but I was amazed at their colors when the light hit them right,” said Mike LaLonde of Bismarck.

LaLonde is the photographer behind all the shots in this photo spread. They were taken last summer south of Fox Island along the Missouri River. For nearly two months, LaLonde visited the herons almost daily, trying to get close and get the best photographs possible.

He succeeded.

“There were four or five herons hanging around about every morning that I’d go out there,” said LaLonde, who taught photography part-time at Bismarck State College for about 35 years. “They were always in this marshy area where the water was shallow, maybe 6-8 inches deep. It was the perfect place for them to fish.”

The great blue heron is an excellent predator, wading slowly or standing seemingly motionless for long periods, waiting for prey to come within range of their long necks and blade-like bills. The birds’ main prey is small fish, but frogs, snakes, insects and small mammals make it onto the menu.







“It was so interesting to observe the birds and learn their habits, particularly when they were stalking fish in a very predictable way,” LaLonde said.

Heron harvest prey with quick strikes from their sharp bills, and swallow what they kill whole. Scientists report that some great blue herons have died choking on fish too big for their S-shaped necks.

On the wing, great blue herons are also unmistakable. The bird flies with slow, deep wing beats, its long neck curved into an S-shape, and its head hunched back into its shoulders.

Heron nest in colonies or small groups in nests high in trees. Both sexes share in the incubation,



lasting about 28 days, of the three to seven pale blue eggs. The adult birds turn the eggs by rolling them with their bills once every two hours in an effort to keep the eggs at an even temperature.

"I could never find where these birds were nesting, and I wanted to because I wanted shots of them on their nests," LaLonde said. "Even so, I was happy just watching and photographing them wading in the shallows. They are fun birds to watch."

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



BUFFALOBERRY PATCH

By Greg Freeman, Department News Editor

Record Fish is a Saugeye

Lab results confirm Dave Faiman's state record fish is a saugeye.

The Fairview, Montana angler caught the 12-pound record fish on January 16 from the Yellowstone River. Because the fish had identifying characteristics of both species, genetic material was sent to a lab to determine whether the fish was a walleye, sauger or saugeye, which is a cross between the two.

Faiman's catch broke the previous record by 4 ounces, which was set in 1984.



SUBMITTED PHOTO



CRAIG BHIRLE

MULE DEER SURVEY SHOWS INCREASE

Western North Dakota's mule deer population increased 15 percent from last year, according to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's spring survey.

However, the 2013 spring mule deer index is still 22 percent lower than the long-term average.

Bruce Stillings, Department big game supervisor, said the increase is a result of no antlerless deer harvested in 2012, and relatively mild winter conditions across much of mule deer range.

"It's encouraging, but challenges remain for further population growth, including changes in habitat, energy development, predators and weather patterns," Stillings said.

The population change from 2012 was not consistent across the entire mule deer range. Stillings said hunting unit 4F

in the southern portion of the badlands stayed the same, while the core mule deer range covering hunting units 4B, 4C, 4D and 4E had a healthy increase. The northernmost mule deer unit, 4A, experienced a substantial population decline.

Biologists counted 1,638 mule deer in 306.3 square miles during this year's survey. Overall mule deer density in the badlands was 5.3 deer per square mile, which is up from 4.6 in 2012, but less than the long-term average of 6.8 deer per square mile.

The spring mule deer index is used to assess mule deer abundance in the badlands. It is conducted after the snow has melted and before trees begin to leaf out, providing the best conditions for aerial observation. Biologists have completed aerial surveys of the same 24 study areas since the 1950s.

Big Trout Stocked in Six Lakes

North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel stocked six lakes with 2- to 5-pound trout from Wyoming.

Jerry Weigel, Department fisheries production and development section leader, said each year Wyoming Game and Fish provides trout as part of a trade for walleye fingerlings. This year, Wyoming provided surplus brood stock.

A total of 800 rainbows, with a combined weight of 2,100 pounds, were stocked in Camels Hump Dam (Golden Valley County), Dickinson Dike (Stark County), North Woodhaven Pond (Cass County) and Mooreton Pond (Richland County).

In addition, nearly 400 cutthroats weighing 750 pounds were split between

Northgate Dam (Burke County) and Kettle Lake (Williams County).

The Game and Fish also stocked nearly 50,000 10-inch rainbow trout from Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery in 50 waters statewide.

Anglers should refer to the fishing tab at the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, for a complete stocking report.

CAMPING RESTRICTIONS ON SOME WMAS

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department will continue to implement camping restrictions established last year on some wildlife management areas in western North Dakota and along Lake Sakakawea.

Overnight camping is prohibited on the following WMAs: Antelope Creek, Lewis and Clark, Big Oxbow, Ochs Point, Neu's Point, Overlook, Sullivan and Tobacco Garden, all McKenzie County; Van Hook, Mountrail County; and Hofflund and Trenton, Williams County.

In addition, the following WMAs are closed to camping on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, but open to camping Thursday-Monday: North Lemmon Lake, Adams County; Bull Creek, Billings County; Alkali Creek and Spring Creek, Bowman County; Smishek Lake and Short Creek Dam, Burke County; Harris M. Baukol, Divide County; Killdeer Mountains, Dunn County; Camels Hump Dam, Golden Valley County; Indian Creek, Hettinger County; Audubon, Custer Mine, Deepwater Creek, deTrobriand, Douglas Creek and Wolf Creek, all McLean County; Beaver Creek and Hille, Mercer County; Storm Creek, Morton County; Cedar Lake and Speck Davis Pond, Slope County; and McGregor Dam, Williams County.

On those WMAs where camping is allowed Thursday through Monday, all equipment must be removed on Tuesday and Wednesdays when camping is not allowed.

The rules ensure these areas are available for hunters and anglers. Camping restrictions at all WMAs are posted at entry points.



CRAIG BIRRE

Sage Grouse Counts Remain Low

Results from North Dakota's spring sage grouse survey indicate the number of strutting males observed remains well below management objectives. Therefore, the sage grouse hunting season will remain closed in 2013.

Aaron Robinson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department upland game bird biologist, said biologists counted a record low 50 males on 11 active strutting grounds in May. Last year, 72 males were counted on 12 active leks in the southwest.

“The most plausible reason why the population declined so dramatically this year was the severe drought the southwest experienced last summer,” Robinson said. “Sage grouse live in very arid areas, and in severe drought and heat, chicks are not able to find insects, which account for almost 100 percent of their diet while they are growing. This vital source of protein is necessary for development of young chicks and drought typically reduces the availability of insects.”

Due to the abnormal rainfall and dry conditions from last summer, Robinson said the potential for a successful nesting season this year is slim with limited residual grass cover.

“We have learned from our recent research conducted in North Dakota that sage grouse rely heavily on residual grass cover for concealment during nesting season,” he said. “Without grass cover, mortality of females on nests increases and the probability that the nest will be depredated also increases. The outlook for a favorable hatch this year does not look optimistic.”

Sage grouse management in North Dakota has followed a specific plan developed by a diverse group of participants. The plan outlines hunting harvest objectives for the species, with a recommendation that the hunting season close if the spring census indicates fewer than 100 males in the population. If the spring breeding population increases above 100 males, Game and Fish Department biologists will evaluate if a hunting season is plausible given the threats facing the species in North Dakota.

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.



SOME NORTH DAKOTA LAKES SUFFER WINTERKILL



JASON LEE

Although this past winter stretched beyond the norm, snowfall throughout most of the state was far from record-setting. Therefore, the number of lakes suffering a fish kill was not extreme.

Scott Gangl, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries management section leader, said approximately 30 winterkills were confirmed. "Fortunately, the majority of these were considered minor/partial kills, meaning there are still desirable fish to catch in those lakes," he said.

However, Gangl mentioned a number of lakes scattered across the state that appear to have suffered a significant kill. These

include Powers Lake (Burke County), Warsing Dam (Eddy County), Juanita (Foster County), Schlecht-Weixel (LaMoure County), Stanley Reservoir (Mountrail County), Buffalo Lake (Pierce County), Fenster Lake (Ramsey County), Island Lake and School Section Lake (Rolette County), Coal Mine Lake and Wolf Lake (Sheridan County), and Harvey Dam (Wells County).

"The severity of a die-off may vary by lake, but usually there are some fish left in the lake," Gangl said. "Most of the lakes that experienced winterkill are prone to die-offs. So while there was some

disappointment in losing good fisheries, there weren't many surprises."

Fisheries personnel will restock lakes that experienced winterkill. "We are stocking with hatchery-raised fish, or fish transported from another lake," Gangl said. "These fish may take awhile to grow to catchable size, but in two to three years there should be populations of fish for anglers to catch."

Anglers can contact the local Game and Fish Department fisheries district offices to get more information on the status of these lakes, or to report fish kills that may not be on the list.

Family Fishing Days at Bismarck OWLS

Family fishing days return to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Outdoor Wildlife Learning Site.

The catch-and-release only fishery is stocked with trout, bluegill, largemouth bass, catfish and other species.

Family fishing days are Saturdays and Wednesdays through the end of August. Fishing equipment can be checked out at the OWLS Pond, located adjacent to the Department's Bismarck office, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Fishing rods and basic tackle are available for use free of charge.

Trained volunteers or Game and Fish staff will be in the area to answer questions and check out equipment, but there will be little or no direct supervision. Children who aren't old enough to get to the pond on their



RON WILSON

own should not be left unattended.

The OWLS area is fairly primitive, but includes a picnic shelter and benches upon entering the site, and a portable restroom. The area has no running water. Users should bring water, sunscreen, folding chairs and appropriate clothing.

The Game and Fish Department is seeking volunteer instructors to assist with the

program. Individuals at least age 18 with an interest in teaching kids to fish should contact the Department at (701) 328-6300.

The OWLS pond is open to fishing year-round during daylight hours. There are no bait restrictions and anglers must practice catch-and-release. The area is designed for wheel chair accessibility. Pets, glass bottles and alcohol are not permitted on the site.

Summer BOW Set

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Becoming an Outdoors-Woman program is accepting registrations for the annual summer workshop August 9-11 at Lake Metigoshe State Park, Bottineau.



Enrollment is limited to participants age 18 or older. Workshop fees of \$135 cover instruction, program materials, use of equipment, all meals and lodging.

Participants can choose from more than 30 programs, including archery, canoeing, introduction to firearms, fly-fishing, kayaking, global positioning system, plant identification, and tracking and trapping.

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

Women interested in attending a workshop can access an information brochure and enroll at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov. More information is available by contacting Nancy Boldt at (701) 328-6312, or email ndgf@nd.gov.



CHRIS GRONDAHL



RON WILSON

THREAT OF EXOTICS IN STATE WATERS CONTINUES

With more than 400 water bodies covering the state, outdoor recreationists are once again reminded to help prevent the introduction and spread of aquatic nuisance species in North Dakota.

Robert Timian, State Game and Fish Department enforcement division chief, said ANS violations include both warnings and citations. "Warnings serve a purpose in some occasions, but citations will become more commonplace this summer," he said. "We need to continue to send a message that we are serious about the introduction and spread of aquatic nuisance species in North Dakota."

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 in a livewell containing water. However, bait buckets and/or any

container of 5 gallons or less in volume can be used to transport legal live bait-fish or other 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, no aquatic vegetation, or parts thereof, shall be in or on watercraft, motors, trailers and recreational equipment when out of water. Time out of the water needed to remove aquatic vegetation at the immediate water access area is allowed.

All built-in structures to boats, including livewells and bait compartments, and containers (bait buckets) used to transport legal live bait, must also be free of aquatic vegetation.

Public participation will ensure ANS is not transferred from one lake to another.

DANZIG DAM GETS MAKEOVER

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Save Our Lakes program is renovating 800 feet of shoreline along Danzig Dam in Morton County.

The SOL project includes lowering the water level to remove 15,000 cubic yards of sediment, which will deepen the shoreline and create better access for shore anglers. Additionally, a water

control structure is being installed to enhance opportunities to address ongoing water quality issues.

While the project completion is expected in June, it is anticipated the water level within the reservoir will remain low until next spring. Also, fish eradication is planned for later this summer to remove undesirable species.



First Fish Certificate

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department reminds parents to capture their little angler's first catch on a specially designed First Fish certificate.

First Fish has no qualifying weights or measurements. The only requirement is the successful landing of a North Dakota fish. Certificates are available to all who request them, and have ample room for all the important information, such as name, age, lake and a short fish story, plus a blank space for a photograph big enough to contain the smile of the happiest little angler.

Free certificates are available by contacting the Game and Fish Department at (701) 328-6300, or send an email to ndgf@nd.gov.



Boat North Dakota Course

Kids ages 12-15 who want to operate a boat or personal watercraft this summer must take the state's boating basics course.

State law requires youngsters ages 12-15 to pass the course before they operate a boat or personal watercraft with at least a 10 horsepower motor. In addition, major insurance companies give adult boat owners who pass the course a premium discount on boat insurance.

The course is available for home-study from the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Bismarck office. Two commercial providers also offer the course online, and links to those sites are found on the Department's website at gf.nd.gov.

While the home-study course is free, students will be charged a fee to take it online. The online provider charges for the course, not the Game and Fish Department. The fee stays with the online provider.

Upon completion of the online test, and providing a credit card number, students will be able to print out a temporary certification card, and within 10 days a permanent card will be mailed.

The course covers legal requirements, navigation rules, getting underway, accidents and special topics such as weather, rules of the road, laws, life saving and first aid.

For more information contact Nancy Boldt, North Dakota Game and Fish Department, by email at ndgf@nd.gov; or call (701) 328-6300.



GAME AND FISH PAYS \$539,000 IN PROPERTY TAXES

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department paid more than \$539,000 in taxes to counties in which the Department owns or leases land. The 2012 in-lieu-of-tax payments are the same as property taxes paid by private landowners.

The Game and Fish Department manages more than 200,000 acres for wildlife habitat and public hunting in 51 counties. The Department does not own or manage any land in Traill or Renville counties.

Following is a list of counties and the tax payments they received.

COUNTY	TAX DUE	COUNTY	TAX DUE	COUNTY	TAX DUE
Adams	\$ 156.91	Grant	\$ 823.81	Ramsey	\$13,647.41
Barnes	4,957.53	Griggs	103.84	Ransom	1,416.28
Benson	3,699.49	Hettinger	3,598.01	Richland	16,963.09
Bottineau	4,871.77	Kidder	10,867.00	Rolette	20,967.06
Bowman	1,365.13	LaMoure	7,741.94	Sargent	15,236.55
Burke	782.10	Logan	1,565.99	Sheridan	58,920.64
Burleigh	29,156.80	McHenry	1,753.85	Sioux	260.03
Cass	6,791.70	McIntosh	7,740.47	Slope	1,246.71
Cavaller	25,297.98	McKenzie	27,847.85	Stark	227.18
Dickey	19,919.70	McLean	58,906.05	Steele	8,845.88
Divide	1,541.01	Mercer	14,854.56	Stutsman	4,630.45
Dunn	6,458.41	Morton	19,821.76	Towner	2,139.34
Eddy	4,591.21	Mountrail	10,242.93	Walsh	9,477.86
Emmons	3,880.35	Nelson	2,853.03	Ward	117.23
Foster	3,799.73	Oliver	2,855.34	Wells	53,680.86
Golden Valley	334.20	Pembina	17,754.61	Williams	7,048.21
Grand Forks	15,220.69	Pierce	2,569.11		

back cast

By Ron Wilson



You're familiar with those life list articles, aren't you? Those inspiring pieces that list the 50 or so things we *must* do before we die, from building a log cabin in the woods with just an axe and a pocketknife, to hiking the 2,100-mile Appalachian Trail on summer break.

I enjoy the lists for their ridiculousness, plus the accompanying photos are typically pretty good. And you just never know when you might run into something reasonable, something outdoorsy that could be pulled off on a weekend. Like, say, canoe camp a local river, or forage a meal from the wild.

I don't own a canoe, and the closest I've come to foraging wild edibles is picking apart acorns with a pocketknife while squirrel hunting in the river bottoms. But according to local morel mushroom hunters, the foraging for this edible fungus that has spawned annual festivals and fisticuffs over prime picking spots, was maybe never better in North Dakota than this spring.

"This was a spectacular year for morels ... It was a banner year in many places," said Fred Ryckman, Game and Fish Department fisheries supervisor and longtime forager. "When you get record-breaking rainfall in May, you know it's going to be good. This year the stars just aligned."

Reports of hunters filling 5 gallon buckets with big morels weren't uncommon.

"Most years you are lucky to get a gallon," said Bill Haase, Department wildlife resource management supervisor. "I had every intention of hunting for mushrooms this spring, but then I kind of spaced it out and went fishing instead. I'm disappointed that I missed it, but we did catch some fish."

For first time foragers, spring 2013 was the year to get their feet wet.

"This spring was the only time in my life that I'd ever done it," said George Lee, Department building maintenance supervisor. "I had heard a lot of talk and that propelled me to do it."

Lee hunted with his son-in-law, Brent Spooner of Bismarck, who did a bunch of research online to learn the kind of habitat the mushrooms prefer.

"Brent out picked me 10 to 1," Lee said. "I simply was picking the leftovers, the mushrooms that everyone else missed."

Lee likened foraging for morels to smelting.

"You only get this short window where things are happening, and even then, it's only good so many years," he said.

It also reminded him of metal detecting.

"The thrill is what you're going to find and when you're going to find it," he said.

Bob Frohlich, Department fisheries development supervisor, picked his first morel eight years ago. A May hasn't gone by since that he can't be found walking slowly in the woods, with his head down.

"I don't know anything about them, other than they're delicious," Frohlich said. "If you didn't like the taste of them, you certainly wouldn't put up with the wood ticks and mosquitoes."

While a mushroom hunter is willing to pass along favorite recipes, you don't ask the location of morel honey holes. Those are guarded secrets.

The hunters in this piece all forage along the Missouri River, and that's as specific as I expected them to get.

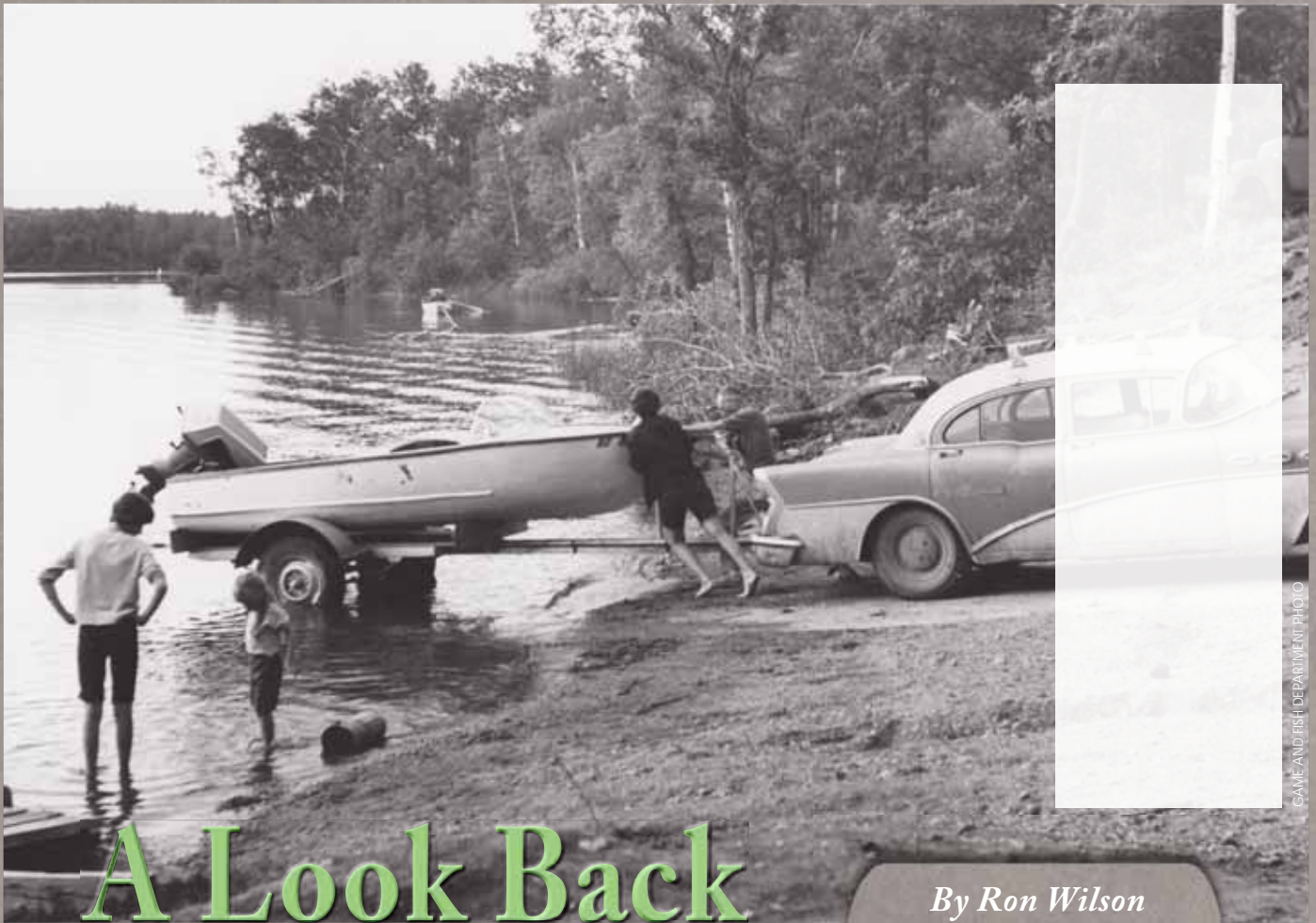
"I had a new spot this year along the river and there were mushrooms everywhere," Ryckman said. "I bet there were trillions of them that went to waste up and down the Missouri."

That's a lot of morels and mouthwatering meals.

"There's nothing better than a venison loin covered in three inches of morels," Ryckman said. "Nothing better."

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

Note: Morel mushrooms are delicious if you know what you are looking for. For safety reasons, don't eat any mushroom that you can't identify with certainty. If you're foraging for the first time, go with a veteran hunter who knows what they are looking for. Also, a number of written mushroom guides are available and some dependable information can be found online.



A Look Back

By Ron Wilson

Some of the old, black and white Game and Fish Department photos stored in gray and Army green file cabinets have notes penned on the back, confirming when and where the photos were taken.

Then there are those photographs, like this one, for instance, with no written clues. The evidence is simply found in what the photographer captured on film.

Working off of that premise, it's been decided that this photo was likely taken in the late 1950s, considering the vehicle towing the boat is a mid-1950s, or so, Buick.

The lake on which the family is about to enjoy the day, however, is simply a guess, but likely a good guess.

"It's definitely in the Turtle Mountains," said Nancy Boldt, North Dakota Game and Fish Department boat and water safety coordinator,

who grew up in Calvin, North Dakota, east of Rock Lake. "By looking at the shoreline, and maybe they all look alike in the Turtle Mountains, but it looks to me like Gravel Lake."

Boldt fished a number of Turtle Mountain waters, such as Gravel, Upsilon and Long, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. She still fishes occasionally in that neck of the woods today.

"We fished from shore and did a lot of tent camping," she said. "And I remember the fishing being pretty good in the Turtle Mountain lakes back then."

There were also far fewer cabins on many of the Turtle Mountains than you'd find today. "It was a lot quieter then," Boldt said.

If it is indeed Gravel Lake, we know from Game and Fish Department records that it was stocked for the first time with walleye fry 83 years

ago. Bullhead and yellow perch were introduced in 1946, walleye fingerlings, which are bigger than fry, in 1947, and largemouth bass in 1950.

While Gravel Lake was known as trout fishery for the longest time, from 1962 until the early 1990s, it's difficult to determine for certain when tiger muskies were introduced, but they were.

In 1975, a 40-pound tiger muskie – a cross between a female muskie and a male northern pike – was caught in Gravel and still stands as a record today.

Interestingly, tiger muskies weren't stocked intentionally into Gravel. The fish were destined elsewhere, but while being held in a net in the lake overnight, they escaped, with one fish growing to record size.

At least that's how the story goes.

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