

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

While it wasn't designed to be this way, the July issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS* has sort of a bird theme.

Three of the magazine's main pieces feature looks at wildly different birds – white-faced ibis, Canada geese and sage grouse. What's interesting is how these birds' stories and ties to North Dakota differ.

The white-faced ibis, for instance, is sort of a newcomer to North Dakota. With a wealth of large marshes and smaller lakes they prefer dotting the landscape, these birds have taken to returning to this neck of the Northern Plains to nest and raise young.

If you go back a decade or more, it was a much more uncommon occurrence to spot the brilliantly colored ibises wading the shallows in search of food. Today, birders and wildlife photographers are seeing them regularly. Oftentimes, the results of these encounters are wonderful photographs, some of which are featured in the following pages.

North Dakota's resident Canada goose population is strong and has provided many hunting opportunities over the years.

The state has had an early Canada goose season for more than a decade to trim the resident population and in doing so, reducing crop damage for some landowners.

While resident Canada geese are common today, there was a time when that wasn't the case. By the early 1900s, breeding Canada geese were almost gone from our wetlands. For a time, biologists would tell you the last known goose nest was reported in Kidder County in 1925.

Today, these big birds nest from border to border across the landscape. Their return to the prairie is a success story.

The chapter on sage grouse and whether these native birds can make a comeback in the arid sagebrush county of southwestern North Dakota, however, has yet to be written.

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has joined forces with other state, federal and local agencies and private landowners to improve sage grouse habitat and conserve a population that is struggling.

This effort is part of the Sage Grouse Initiative that was launched in 2010.

Loss of habitat, disease and other factors has conspired against sage grouse over the years in southwestern North Dakota. Game and Fish Department biologists did their first grouse strutting ground count in 1951, when 367 males were counted on 11 active leks. Two years later, more than 540 birds were counted on 18 leks.

Earlier this spring, Department biologists counted a record low 31 males on six active strutting grounds. Last year, the count was 50 males on 11 active leks.

To learn more about the Sage Grouse Initiative, see the story in this issue of *OUTDOORS*. Also, we encourage you to read the state's long-term sage grouse management plan. North Dakota's sage grouse plan is available on the Department's website at gf.nd.gov; by calling 701-328-6300; or by email request at ndgf@nd.gov.

North Dakota is a wonderful place. We can say this, in part, because of the animals that inhabit our wild places. These animals, and the sage grouse is a good example, need our help in conserving and enriching the habitat needed to survive. Keep this in mind the next time you are out enjoying North Dakota's great 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.

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

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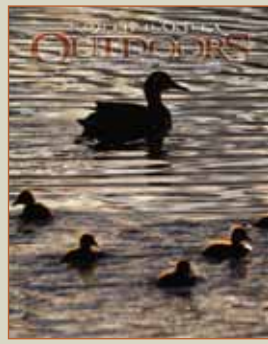
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Front Cover

A hen mallard watches over her newly hatched brood on a North Dakota wetland. Breeding duck numbers were again high this spring, setting the stage for another year of good production. *Photo by Craig Bihrl, Bismarck.*



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IN PURSUIT OF CONSISTENT CRAPPIE FISHING

By Ron Wilson



*Brandon Kratz,
North Dakota
Game and Fish
Department
fisheries biologist,
weighs a crappie
netted in spring
from Jamestown
Reservoir.*

MIKE ANDERSON

While results from a decade-old creel survey on Pipestem Reservoir didn't immediately change the way fisheries biologists managed the reservoir's crappie population, it did spur further investigation into how they could produce more reliable fishing opportunities for anglers.

What the 2002-03 winter survey revealed wasn't surprising: Pipestem Reservoir was an at-times phenomenal crappie fishery that was being heavily utilized by anglers specifically pursuing these fish.

"It was sporadic, however, and as fast as the fishery appeared to come online, it dissipated," said Brandon Kratz, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries biologist in Jamestown. "The question was why? And how could the Game and Fish Department remove some of the peaks and fill in the valleys to provide longer, more consistent fishing opportunities?"

To answer those questions, Kratz said, Department fisheries biologists needed more consistent data specifically aimed at the species. For the last several years, fisheries biologists have netted crappie from Pipestem Reservoir and Jamestown Reservoir, another on-again, off-again crappie fishery.

Unlike some other game fish species, which are sampled in summer, adult crappie are targeted in spring.

"Other fish species we manage (northern pike, walleye and yellow perch) are assessed or 'tracked' from data we collect during adult population surveys," Kratz said. "These surveys take place annually and occur primarily to monitor population trends, not necessarily to solve mysteries with a particular fishery, or to generate statistically significant data."

During this spring's annual crappie assessment, eight trap nets were set in Jamestown Reservoir and six in Pipestem. Nets in both waters were set for two nights.

"Northern pike, walleye and yellow perch are quite susceptible to our sampling gear throughout the summer months, but crappies are not because they are occupying a plethora of different habitat types and depths during that time," Kratz said. "In spring, they move into shallow water and are

relatively predictable, which allows Department fisheries biologists to most effectively sample them."

The catch in the six trap nets on Pipestem Reservoir was down slightly this spring from the eight-year average. Kratz said the decline was likely due to an aging population with limited recruitment, combined with less than perfect weather conditions during sampling.

On the flip side, the eight nets in Jamestown

Reservoir held an above average catch for a number of reasons.

"Recruitment is the number one reason for the increase. Fish from the 2008 year-class are becoming sexually mature, thus contributing favorably to the catch in our nets," Kratz said. "The days we had our nets deployed in Jamestown Reservoir also happened to be sunny and relatively calm, which resulted in a

sudden warming in the shallows. Since we experienced below normal temperatures most of spring, this condition most certainly amplified our catch."

Currently, Kratz said, Pipestem has one dominant year-class (2005). "The majority of the crappie in the reservoir measure between 11-12

"When there is a good crappie bite, it will draw people from other parts of the state when they hear the fish are abundant and good-sized."

The eight trap nets set in Jamestown Reservoir in spring held an above average catch of one of the reservoir's most popular game fish.



MIKE ANDERSON



BRANDON KRATZ

inches," he said. "The population is trending downward, but still remains high in terms of historical averages."

The crappie population in Jamestown Reservoir mainly consists of the 2008 and 2011 year-classes. "Most of the crappie in the reservoir range from about 8-11 inches. Crappies are extremely abundant. In fact 2014 was a record year in terms of numbers caught in our nets," Kratz said.

The size structure of a fish population, Kratz said, is important in a balanced fishery. "For example, too many small fish and not many larger fish observed over a period of years may indicate poor growth, or overharvest of that fraction of the population that may have the potential to become larger," he said. "Sizes of fish in combination with age data reveal growth rates. Growth rates, size structure and mortality are three important factors when developing regulations."

Crappie assessments will continue on both Pipestem and Jamestown reservoirs in the future because both are important fisheries in North Dakota.

Regulation changes were made to statewide panfish limits in 2006. Fisheries managers had enough biological information at the time to support a reduction to 20 panfish daily and 80 in possession over much of the state, down from 35 and 175. The crappie limit at Pipestem Reservoir was reduced even more to 10 and 20 fish.

Kohl Kratz (top) caught this nice crappie in Jamestown Reservoir. Fishing from boat or shore, there is plenty of public access at both Jamestown and Pipestem reservoirs. With crappies like this (right) inhabiting Jamestown and Pipestem reservoirs, fisheries biologists expect good fishing opportunities for anglers this year.



MIKE ANDERSON

The statewide crappie daily (10) and possession (20) limit, which went into effect April 1, 2014, now mirrors that of Pipestem.

“One of the main purposes of daily limits is to spread the catch out over time for more anglers to have more opportunities,” said Scott Gangl, Department fisheries management section leader. “So, when you do get the occasional strong year-class, the reduced limit helps to prevent that year-class from getting fished down very quickly.”

Crappie assessment netting data prior to 2011 at Pipestem Reservoir indicated that an extremely large year-class of fish was approaching harvestable size. Based on this information, a winter creel survey was initiated to verify what the 2002-03 survey suggested – potential interest in a crappie fishery, and harvest during a peak year.

“A creel survey took place the winter of 2011-12 and sufficient data was produced not only to continue the experimental reduced crappie limit regulation at Pipestem, but to expand it statewide,” Kratz said. “Data from this creel survey indicated that anglers overwhelmingly supported the reduced bag proposal.”

Gangl said annual crappie assessments will continue on both Pipestem and Jamestown in the future because both reservoirs are important fisheries in North Dakota.

“When there is a good crappie bite, it will draw people from other parts of the state when they hear the fish are abundant and good-sized,” Gangl said.

Kratz said anglers interested in catching crappie from either impoundment this season should have some great days ahead.

“Whether you fish from a boat or shore, plenty of public access is available,” he said. “Boat ramps are numerous and well maintained. Abundant, readily accessible shore-fishing areas open to the public also exist.”

While Jamestown Reservoir may produce slightly higher catch rates for anglers, Kratz said, Pipestem will likely produce a larger average-sized fish. Anglers are also reminded that there are some tagged crappie in Pipestem Reservoir and are asked to report tags either on the Game and Fish Department’s website at gf.nd.gov or by calling their local Game and Fish Department office.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



The crappie population in Jamestown Reservoir mainly consists of the 2008 and 2011 year-classes.

MIKE ANDERSON



EARLY GOOSE SEASON LICENSE HELPS TO BETTER TRACK HUNTERS

Resident and out-of-state hunters combined to harvest about 48,000 birds during North Dakota's early Canada goose season in 2013.

While harvest was down 30 percent from the early season in 2012, it was still the third highest on record. North Dakota held its first early Canada goose season in 1999 in an effort, which continues today, to reduce the state's resident Canada goose population and thereby reduce crop depredation concerns. Seasons dates in 2013 were August 15 through September 15.

Mike Szymanski, North Dakota Game and Fish Department migratory game bird biologist, said the decline in harvest was influenced by a cold, late spring in 2013 that led to poor production for resident Canada geese.

"Some pockets of geese did OK, but for the most part there was pretty poor production statewide in 2013," he said.

With so few juvenile geese in the mix, it's more

difficult for most hunters to fool geese within shotgun range.

"It's easier hunting when you have more juvenile birds in the population because younger birds decoy better and will drag adult birds into decoy spreads," Szymanski said. "With the population made up of mostly adult birds, the hunting gets tougher."

Another factor to the fall in harvest during last year's early Canada goose season was the reduction in the number of active hunters, which declined 36 percent from 2012. According to a Game and Fish Department report, an estimated 4,192 residents and 745 nonresidents actively hunted. The average season bag in 2013 for residents was 9.97 geese, while the average season bag for nonresidents was 8.34 birds.

"I think a lot of hunters realized that it was going to be harder to find hunts due to the poor goose production and late harvest of crop fields," Szymanski said.

For the first time in 2013, hunters needed a special license to participate in the early Canada goose season. The fee, which is also mandatory for hunters in 2014,



By Ron Wilson

CRAIG BIRLIE

is \$5 for all residents, regardless of age, and \$50 for nonresidents, except that nonresidents under age 16 (as of September 1) would pay the resident rate if their state has a reciprocal youth licensing agreement with North Dakota.

The move by state lawmakers in 2013 to create the new early Canada goose license provided the Game and Fish Department a means to better identify who to sample, and obtain better estimates of harvest and hunting effort during the early season.

“We needed our early season harvest survey to be more efficient,” Szymanski said. “It’s a good tool and it’s working.”

At season’s end in 2013, 6,534 licenses for the early season were sold to residents and 789 to nonresidents. Questionnaires were mailed to 2,886 residents and 771 nonresidents.

“Based on the survey information, it was clear that the Department was better able to find active Canada goose hunters to survey,” Szymanski said. “Prior to the new license, the Department sent a lot of surveys to people (70-80 percent) who ended up not hunting.

Now a much higher percentage of those who are sent surveys are goose hunters.”

It was also learned, along with the harvest total for the state, that Canada geese were bagged in all 51 counties that had reported hunting activity.

In 2013, resident and nonresident hunters were only able to purchase the early goose season licenses electronically, either online at the Game and Fish Department website (gf.nd.gov); via phone at 800-406-6409; or at license vendors in counties linked to the Department’s online licensing system.

Licenses, again, will be available only through electronic means in 2014.

Another change in 2013 that runs true today is that nonresidents who hunt during the early Canada goose season do not need the 14-day nonresident regular season waterfowl license. Previously, nonresidents needed to purchase a regular waterfowl license, and in all but Richland, Sargent, Benson, Ramsey and Towner counties, they had to use at least seven of their 14 days for the early season.

The \$50 nonresident early season license does not have a limit on the number of days a nonresident can hunt.

For both residents and nonresidents, a federal waterfowl stamp is needed September 1 by all hunters ages 16 and older. In addition, all resident hunters, regardless of age, need a general game and habitat license at \$20. Residents aged 16 or older also need a small game license.

All migratory bird hunters must also register with the Harvest Information Program prior to hunting. Hunters who purchase a license through the Game and Fish Department website, or instant licensing telephone number, can easily get HIP certified. Otherwise, hunters can call 888-634-4798 and record the HIP number on their fishing, hunting and furbearer certificate. Those who registered to hunt the spring light goose season in North Dakota do not have to register with HIP again.

Pending final approval of the governor’s proclamation in late July, tentative season dates for the early Canada goose season are August 15 through September 15, except in the special Missouri River zone, where the season would close September 7.

The eight fewer early season days in the Missouri River zone are added to the end of the regular goose season in that zone in December.

In 2013, the early Canada goose season had a daily bag limit of 15 and a possession limit of 45. Limits will likely be the same this year, pending approval of the governor’s proclamation and finalization of federal guidelines for the 2014 early season.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

ITINERANT

B



BIRDS

LAND IN NORTH DAKOTA

*By Ron Wilson
Photos by Mike LaLonde*





The white-faced ibis is a wanderer. Described as semi-nomadic by biologists, this gregarious, wetland bird is quick to search out and discover preferred habitat created by abundant precipitation.

Because of this itinerant characteristic, and North Dakota's wealth of bigger marshes and smaller lakes, the white-faced ibis has become a recurrent visitor to the state the last several years.

The white-faced ibis has become a recurrent visitor to North Dakota the last several years.

“With other parts of the country being drier, North Dakota is a draw to these nomadic birds because of our bigger marshes and smaller lakes that the birds prefer,” said Sandra Johnson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department conservation biologist. “There was a time when it was uncommon to see the white-faced ibis in the state, but within the last 10 years or so with a lot of water on the landscape, they

are becoming one of the more common wading birds you'll see. When you're out birding, you're not as surprised as you used to be to see them."

The white-face ibis is described as a large, chestnut-bronze marsh bird with a down-curved bill.

"If the sun is behind them, they just look like a dark bird," Johnson said. "But when the sun is right, they are very colorful. Catch them in the right light and their colors of a metallic purple, bronze and green really come through. I can understand why some people in North Dakota have taken to photographing them."

This ibis, however, is often mistaken for the glossy ibis, a much rarer species. Johnson said one tell-tale characteristic separating the two while in North Dakota in spring and summer is the narrow band of white feathers around the white-faced ibis's eyes.

"You don't see white around the eyes of the glossy," she said.

What the white-faced ibis is doing in North Dakota in spring and summer is breeding.

Johnson said the birds breed in colonies, building bulky platform nests in emergent vegetation, shrubs or trees to avoid predation. Males and females team up to build nests.

"Their nests are actually hard to locate because they are typically constructed on big wetlands, and they are hidden from view by cattails, bulrushes and other vegetation," Johnson said.

About two weeks after hatching, young will wander short distances from the nest, and will leave the colony after about seven weeks, biologists say.

Because of its gregarious nature, the white-faced ibis does little alone. Aside from breeding in colonies, the birds also feed in large groups. In some parts of the country, flocks of up to 1,000 birds have been reported.

"The most I've seen together in North Dakota is 30-40," Johnson said. "Typically, I'll see three or four here, or three or four there."

The white-faced ibis feeds on insects, crayfish, frogs, small fish and other edible prey. While it's said they'll feed by sight, snapping up whatever is close to the water's surface, they also probe the shallow water and mud with their sensitive, down-curved bills.

When the weather dictates, the white-faced ibis will migrate from the northern portions of its range to

winter as far south as northern South America.

The return of this bird to North Dakota next spring or the one after that is determined by the amount of marsh habitat on the landscape. If the marshes retreat because of a decline in precipitation, the semi-nomadic white-faced ibis will likely do the same. 🐦

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



RESTORING

SAGE GROUSE

HABITAT

By Steve Stuebner



*A male sage grouse in full display on a lek
in southwestern North Dakota.*



On a cool October day, a westerly wind made waves in thrifty, knee-high grasslands as it blew across the rolling hills of the Brooks ranch near Rhame, North Dakota.

Located in the extreme southwestern corner of the state, the Brooks ranch lies on the eastern fringe of native sage grouse range in North America.

Dakota Game and Fish Department, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Pheasants Forever and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. They all were eager to participate in the experimental project to learn how to plant Wyoming big sage in the best way possible in grasslands that historically had sagebrush, as well as in former croplands, and in fields planted with crested wheatgrass.

Sage grouse populations are declining, most recently because of a big hit from West Nile virus. But historically, there were dozens of sage grouse leks (breeding areas) in southwestern North Dakota.

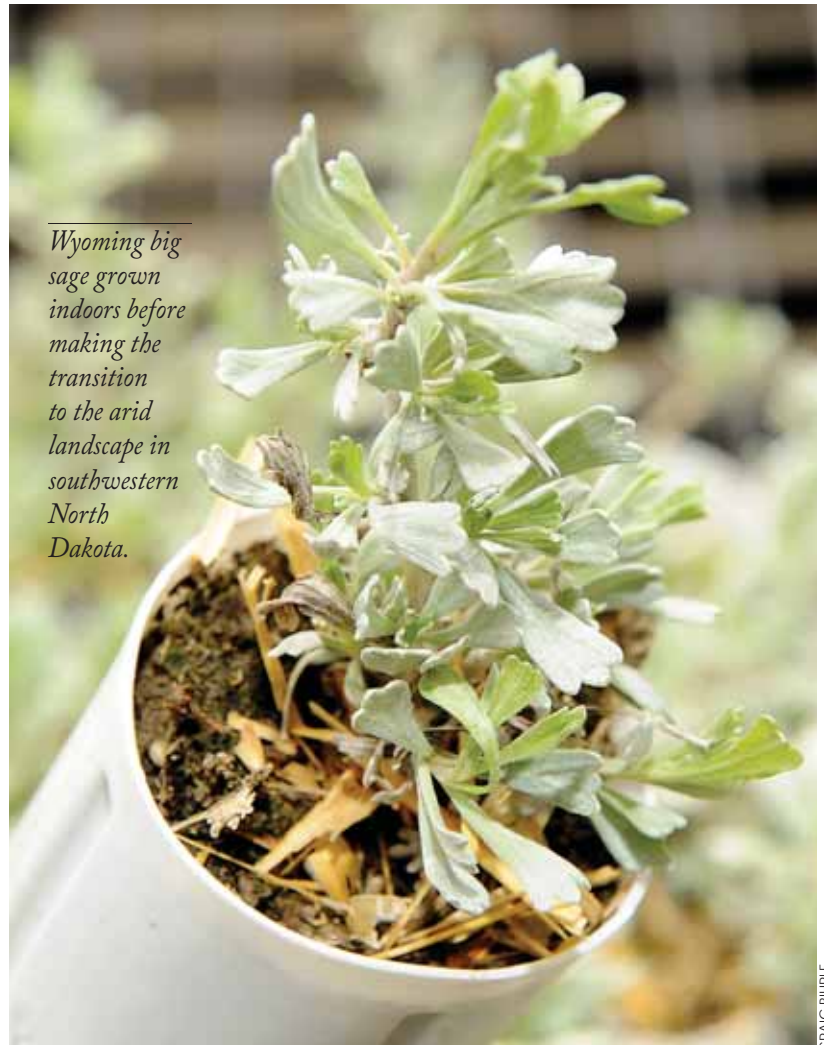
Sage grouse populations are declining, most recently because of a big hit from West Nile virus. But historically, there were dozens of sage grouse leks (breeding areas) in southwestern North Dakota. Another limiting factor is the loss of Wyoming big sagebrush habitat in this region of the mixed-grass prairie, which straddles the nexus between shrub-steppe habitat and the Dakota grasslands.

Area ranchers like Rob Brooks are working together with local, state and federal agencies to restore sage grouse habitat by planting Wyoming big sage on private lands.

It's all part of the Sage Grouse Initiative, launched by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service in 2010. The initiative is a national partnership that aims to proactively conserve sage grouse and habitat on private ranches in 11 western states in hopes that the federal government won't have to list the bird under the Endangered Species Act. A proposed decision on the listing is expected in 2015.

That fall morning was a planting day. Brooks and David Dewald, an NRCS biologist (now retired) who organized the project, led a convoy of vehicles across the ranch to preselected planting sites amid native grasses such as green needle grass, western wheatgrass and little bluestem.

A diverse group of agency professionals and volunteers tagged along to help. The planters came from several NRCS offices and from the North



Wyoming big sage grown indoors before making the transition to the arid landscape in southwestern North Dakota.

CRAIG BIRKLE



Rob Brooks (center with stick) enjoyed participating in the planting of big sage on his private land to benefit sage grouse and his rangeland health.

Area ranchers like Rob Brooks are working together with local, state and federal agencies to restore sage grouse habitat by planting Wyoming big sage on private lands.

“Everyone was enthusiastic about being out there, working on something that wasn’t totally proven,” said Wayne Duckwitz, manager of the NRCS’s Bismarck Plant Materials Center. “It strengthened our partnerships working together in the field, and we all had a common goal of improving the habitat.”

Duckwitz credits Dewald with pulling together the partners for the planting project.

“He had all of the connections, his heart was in it, and it was good PR to work with all of the other agencies,” Duckwitz said.

Prior to setting up the planting projects, Dewald and Duckwitz searched for information about the best practices for planting Wyoming big sage.

“There wasn’t much in the literature about planting sagebrush, so we were kind of leery about what we’d get accomplished – at the least at the outset,” said Dewald, who recently retired from NRCS and works as a wetlands mitigation specialist for the North Dakota Department of Transportation.

“One thing we knew is that it’s very labor-intensive,” Duckwitz added.



It’s labor-intensive to strip sagebrush seeds from plants and gather them to plant later in greenhouses.

Part of the sage grouse conservation strategy in western North Dakota is to improve habitat for sage grouse near existing and historic leks. Wildlife experts know that sage grouse prefer Wyoming big sage plants for nesting, brooding and winter cover. The shrubs also provide habitat for other wildlife such as songbirds and deer.

The plan for that day was to plant about 600 Wyoming big sage seedlings at four sites on the Brooks ranch. At some sites, the planting crew dug holes by hand with narrow spades. Where they had access, they used a Giddings probe with a 4-inch hydraulic auger attachment that made fast work of the digging.

"We liked using that auger as much as possible," Dewald said. "It made it go really fast."

Rancher Supports Project

Cattle rancher Rob Brooks was supportive of the project after participating in a workshop presented by the NRCS in cooperation with partner agencies about the need to improve sage grouse habitat in western North Dakota.

"I told the guys whenever you'd like to try it, let's try it," Brooks said. "I gave them the green light."

The big-picture strategy of restoring sage grouse populations in the area by enhancing habitat – a strategy recommended by NRCS and the North Dakota Game and Fish Department – made sense, he added.

"We're trying to establish habitat seed sources to create larger areas of quality habitat in the sage grouse core areas," said Aaron Robinson, Game and Fish Department upland game management biologist, who explained the strategy during a workshop that Brooks attended several years ago.

Brooks, whose father purchased the ranch in 1961, remembers hunting sage grouse as a kid when the birds were more numerous. In addition to improving sage grouse habitat, he likes the idea of adding more Wyoming big sage to his property to help trap snow, provide cover for his calves in spring, and provide benefits for other wildlife.

Brooks participated in the sage-planting day, and enjoyed it. "I love being out there, trying to make improvements to our land," he said.

So far, preliminary results show that on Brooks' property, as well as at a half-dozen other participating ranches in the vicinity, the Wyoming big sage seedlings are doing well, with a high degree of survival – about 60-70 percent. Approximately 5,000 shrubs were planted over a three-year period between 2009 and 2011. The seedlings are still young and emerging, standing about 4-6 inches tall.

"They're still really small above ground, but I'm hoping that they're putting some roots down," Duckwitz said. "Usually that's what happens with a plant like this before you see that much growth above ground."

Initially, planters placed biodegradable cones around the seedlings, and some planting sites were spot-sprayed with herbicide to prevent grass species from out-competing the seedlings. Over time, the Plant Materials Center dropped the use of herbicides and cones because those practices didn't seem

to enhance survival, compared to seedlings planted without those measures.

They found that the best time to plant was in spring, when rain is most apt to fall in western North Dakota. October or November, before the onset of winter and snow, proved to work well, too. They also tried broadcasting some seeds in the snow. Southwestern North Dakota receives about 16 inches of precipitation annually, the majority in spring.

Plantings in loamy or sandy soils did better than plantings in clay. Surprisingly, wildlife hasn't caused any problems with the seedlings as yet, Duckwitz said. They anticipated that pronghorn, deer and livestock might eat the seedlings, and they expected rodents might cause trouble, too.

"We noticed that the voles were girdling the mature silver sage plants, but we didn't notice any problems with our Wyoming big sage seedlings," Duckwitz said. Girdling means cutting a ring around the circumference of a tree or shrub, piercing the cambium layer, killing the plant.

NRCS has produced a summary report detailing the sagebrush planting field trials at the Brooks ranch and others, explaining which practices worked best.

Collecting Seeds, Raising Sagebrush

Before the sagebrush planting could begin, officials with the NRCS Plant Materials Center in Bismarck had to collect seeds from native Wyoming big sage on BLM lands in shrub-steppe habitat in Bowman County, about an hour south of Theodore Roosevelt National Park.



Wayne Duckwitz, NRCS Plant Materials Center, plants sagebrush on the Brooks ranch.

Dave Dewald (left), retired NRCS biologist, and Wayne Duckwitz, manager of the NRCS's Bismarck Plant Materials Center, inspect big sage grown in a greenhouse.



CRAG BIRRIE

BLM officials researched the best seed-collection sites for NRCS. Nancy Jensen, Plant Materials Center agronomist, gathered seeds along with several people from BLM and NRCS state offices. They hand-picked seeds in late fall when sagebrush branches were drooping under the weight of seeds. They also waited until the temperature dropped below freezing, making it easier to strip seeds from ends of sagebrush branches.

"It only took us a couple of hours," Jensen said. "After the seeds freeze, it makes them dry, and they're easier to strip off the branch."

They placed the tiny seeds in bags and transported them to the Plant Materials Center. Jensen started the plants in January and raised them until May, when it was time to plant them in the ground. The Plant Materials Center didn't have any experience with raising Wyoming big sage seedlings, but they knew the plant grew in a dry environment in a natural setting, so they didn't want to overwater them or raise them in humid conditions. The plants germinated nicely, Jensen said, and she placed them in long, narrow tubes where they could grow into "plugs" for planting.

"We didn't want to get them too wet," she said. "Those plants like it dry. So you don't water them as much. They came out fine; they had nice long roots."

Seeing the sagebrush project's success so far,

Dewald, Duckwitz and Brooks all felt a good sense of accomplishment.

"The Plant Material Center did a great job collecting the seed and growing the seedlings in the greenhouse," Dewald says.

Duckwitz liked working with the partner agency people on the project.

"It was a good way of showcasing the importance of working together to save a species that's been native to this area for a long, long time," he said. "It was kind of neat to get to meet all of the other agency people and learn something about sage grouse, too."

Landowner Partners Key to Success

It was important to find ranchers who were willing to plant wildlife habitat on their private land to help an imperiled species.

"Mr. Brooks is one of our top landowner partners," Robinson said. "He understands this project will benefit his ranch, sage grouse and other wildlife species."

The Brooks family, which raises Black Angus cattle in a cow-calf operation, is accustomed to doing a variety of projects to improve the land, said Wendy Bartholomay, NRCS district conservationist in Bowman.

"If you took a walk on his property, you'd be able to see that he does a lot for the protection of the land and the resources. Rob really believes that whatever improvements he makes for his operations are also

good for wildlife. He practices what he preaches,” she said.

Wildlife thrive on the Brooks ranch, Bartholomay said, adding that on a given day, one might see pronghorn, deer, songbirds, sharp-tailed grouse, pheasants and wild turkeys. The family manages its cattle herd with a prescribed grazing management plan to ensure that the pastures are not overused, she said.

Rob Brooks hopes that the habitat improvement project will help bring back sage grouse in western North Dakota. Aaron Robinson, Game and Fish biologist, thinks it will, along with other projects to return big sage that was lost over the past century for a variety of reasons.

Brooks hopes that the habitat improvement project will help bring back sage grouse in western North Dakota. Robinson thinks it will, along with other projects to return big sage that was lost over the past century for a variety of reasons.

“Eventually, the habitat will increase and establish in areas that have supported sage grouse in the past,” Robinson said.

For now, however, Game and Fish Department officials are watching sage grouse populations closely. Grouse numbers have dropped significantly since the onset of West Nile virus in 2007-08. Brooks remembers when that occurred.

“The birds really took a hit from that,” he said. “I’ll never forget driving around the ranch and seeing songbirds lying dead all over the place. The local biologists said it took a big hit on sage grouse, too.”

Since that time, Robinson said the stars have not aligned for a really productive brood year for sage grouse. Populations have been declining about 5 percent per year until 2012, when they increased about 15 percent.

“Our sage grouse populations are at a critical juncture,” he said. “We may not be able to recover the population without augmentation.”

While Game and Fish Department biologists monitor the situation, Brooks hopes that the habitat improvement work on his property will show federal wildlife authorities that he is trying to do his part.

“My biggest fear is I’d hate to see them listed as an endangered species and have to deal with that,” he said. “There could be new restrictions that limit how I use my land. There are a lot of unknowns associated with that. But I feel real strong that there’s nothing we’re doing as ranchers that’s detrimental to sage grouse.”

At the very least, the NRCS Plant Materials Center and NRCS field offices are learning how to raise Wyoming big sagebrush in the field with solid success rates so far, and the best practices that came out of the experimental habitat improvement projects can be shared with agency professionals who might have a similar goal elsewhere in sage grouse range.

“We did it at a large enough scale to know that it works, and it could be applied at a bigger scale,”

Dewald said. “It was a fun project – one of the most-rewarding things I did in the tail end of my career with the NRCS.” 🌿

STEVE STUEBNER is a writer specializing in natural resources issues, based in Boise, Idaho. This article first appeared in the Sage Grouse Initiative’s April 2014 newsletter.



State Sage Grouse Management Plan

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department recently finalized the state’s long-term sage grouse management plan.

The plan provides for long-term conservation and enhancement of big sagebrush steppe/mixed-grass prairie habitats in North Dakota in a manner that will support a self-sustaining sage grouse population and a diversity and abundance of other wildlife species.

Each state in the sage grouse range is completing a similar conservation plan that could help preclude the need for listing sage grouse as an endangered or threatened species.

North Dakota’s sage grouse plan is available on the Game and Fish Department’s website at gf.nd.gov; by calling 701-328-6300; or by email request at ndgf@nd.gov. 🌿



BUFFALOBERRY PATCH

By Greg Freeman, Department News Editor

Spring Breeding Duck Numbers

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual spring breeding duck survey showed an index of 4.9 million birds, up 23 percent from last year and 110 percent above the long-term average (1948-2013).

Mike Szymanski, Department waterfowl biologist, said all species increased from their 2013 estimates, except canvasbacks (down 7.9 percent, but still 41 percent above long-term) and ruddy ducks (down 1.2 percent).

Redheads (plus 64 percent), green-winged teal (plus 42 percent), blue-winged teal (plus 34 percent), wigeon (plus 33 percent) and scaup (plus 28 percent) showed the largest increases. Mallards and blue-wings were the most abundant ducks on the survey, combining for 48 percent of the total.

"Some of the later nesting dabbling duck species, such as blue-wings and shovelers, were just settling into breeding areas so their counts may have been biased slightly high this year, simply because of a cold spring and their migration lagging behind other birds," Szymanski said. "Mallards, an early nesting species, were well into nesting and settled on breeding areas. Diving ducks pushed through the state well ahead of the survey, so we feel good about those numbers."

Duck numbers during the last two decades are the highest since survey records began in 1948. Szymanski said abundant water and good nesting cover have kept breeding duck numbers high.

"It's pretty amazing to see the top 20 breeding duck indices have all come in the



Scaup (foreground) and blue-winged teal (background) both had notable increases in North Dakota's 2014 breeding duck survey.

CRAIG BHIRLE

past 20 years," he added. "We had Conservation Reserve Program acres on the landscape, and then water came in a big way. It's safe to say we are still riding abundant populations stemming from near perfect conditions. It's hard to say how they will fair in the future now that a large portion of their nesting cover has disappeared through CRP expirations."

The spring water index increased 110 percent from 2013. The water index is based on basins with water, and does not necessarily represent the amount of water contained in wetlands or the type of wetlands represented.

"This year's water index was strongly influenced by small ephemeral waters and an abundance of ditches with water," Szymanski said. "Water conditions were good in most wetlands that ducks will use for brood rearing."

Szymanski said water was more abundant in the northwest and northeast portions of the state. In addition, he said western North Dakota was wetter than

average.

"Breeding conditions on the prairies can always change in a hurry," Szymanski said. "Last year, conditions were looking OK when we conducted the survey, but there was some question as to whether it would dry out prior to brood rearing. Then several inches of rain fell and wetlands used for brood rearing improved. This year, conditions are looking better in those wetlands, but a hot and dry spell could change that."

The loss of CRP acres was evident during the survey, Szymanski said, as large stretches of land conversion to cropland were obvious.

"The loss of grass will hurt production of ducks and other grassland nesting birds," he said. "However, the recent overly wet conditions are helping bridge the gap a little bit for ducks."

Szymanski said having a lot of pairs present in May is a good thing. However, the July brood survey will provide a better idea of duck production and insight into expectations for this fall.



ASHLEY SALWEY

STOCKING REQUESTS GROW AS PUBLIC WATERS INCREASE

North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel will stock a record number of walleye lakes this summer.

Jerry Weigel, Department fisheries production and development supervisor, said 20 years ago approximately 50-70 waters were stocked annually with walleye fingerlings, with the number of waters growing to 100 in the early 2000s. This year, 156 waters were scheduled to receive a share

of 9 million fingerlings in late June and early July.

“The growth in walleye waters is directly correlated to the number of public fishing waters we manage,” Weigel said.

In 1988, Game and Fish managed 160 public fishing waters totaling 99,098 acres, not including the Missouri River System. Today, Weigel said the Department manages 415 waters and 345,988 acres, excluding the Missouri River System.

“This has put a lot of pressure on the two federal hatcheries in the state, Garrison Dam

and Valley City,” Weigel added. “We need every available pond to meet a 9 million walleye fingerling request. In the last four years we have stocked more than 38 million walleyes in the state, in addition to salmon, trout, pike, bass and panfish.”

To help offset the reduced role the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has with recreational fish production in recent years, Game and Fish provides seasonal staffing at both hatcheries and pays for half the operational costs at Garrison Dam.

According to Weigel, this

is in addition to both collecting all the eggs each spring and transporting all fish from both hatcheries.

“There is no question the hatcheries play a vital role in the growth of the state’s fisheries and will continue to be needed to sustain this growth,” he added. “The federal hatchery staff strives to operate at 100 percent efficiency, and thankfully that has been the case. Even at that, there is growing demand, thus Game and Fish has increased its assistance when possible.”

Violations up During Paddlefish Season

More snagging days led to a slightly higher number of citations during the state’s paddlefish season in May.

From opening day May 1 until the season closed May 22, North Dakota Game and Fish Department game wardens issued a record 190 citations as part of an annual saturation effort in Williams and McKenzie counties, according to Robert Timian, Department enforcement chief. Last year the citation total

was 177.

The most prevalent violation was fishing without a license, involving 36 nonresidents and 13 residents. Only 14 violations were directly related to paddlefish snagging.

Wardens also patrol several thousand acres of state wildlife management areas in the two counties. Altogether, wardens issued 53 citations for WMA rule violations, with 27 for possession of glass beverage containers.

In addition, wardens also cited numerous individuals with minor in possession of alcohol, littering and possession of non-prescription drugs and/or paraphernalia. Enforcement saturation efforts also occur in other parts of the state besides the northwest during paddlefish season. Timian said wardens are brought in from across the state for additional support for short-term, specific operations where needed.



CRAIG BIHRLE

Summer Safety on the Water

July is prime time for summer recreation and the Game and Fish Department reminds boaters, anglers and others to be alert and safe near water.

Boat and water safety coordinator Nancy Boldt said safety on the water begins with wearing a personal flotation device.

“Failure to wear a personal flotation device is the main reason people lose their lives in water recreation accidents,” Boldt said.

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

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

Water skiers and tubers should wear a life jacket with four nylon straps rather than one with a zipper, because straps are stronger than zippers upon impact with water. Anglers or persons paddling a canoe should opt for a PFD that is comfortable enough

to wear for an entire outing.

Water skiers and tubers are reminded it takes three to ski and tube. When a person is towed on water skis or a similar device, an observer other than the operator is required on the vessel.

In addition, it is important for swimmers to know water depth before diving into water, Boldt emphasized. “Large objects hidden below the water’s surface can lead to significant injury,” she said.

North Dakota boaters also are reminded that marine VHF radios are an important part of boat safety that should not be improperly used by operators. These radios are intended for boat operators who are in distress and facing an emergency situation.

Regulations to help ensure safe boating this summer are found in the 2014-16 North Dakota Fishing Guide. A more comprehensive listing is available in the North Dakota Boat and Water Safety Guide or the Boat North Dakota education book. These guides are available online at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov, by email at ndgf@nd.gov, or at a local Game and Fish Department office.

SWAN APPLICATION DEADLINE

Swan hunting permit applications will be online and at vendors throughout the state in late July. The application deadline is August 13.



CRAIG BIHRLE

Hunters are encouraged to apply at the Game and Fish Department’s website, gf.nd.gov. The website also contains application forms that can be printed and mailed. Regular license fees apply and no service charge is added.

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

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

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

Swan season details are not yet finalized, but the probable opening date is October 4.



CRAIG BIRHLE

GAME AND FISH AT STATE FAIR

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department will host thousands of visitors to its Conservation and Outdoors Skills Park July 18-26 at the State Fair in Minot.

Visitors will be treated to an array of activities, exhibits and useful information as the park will be staffed from 1-7 p.m. daily. Pathways to Hunting, Fishing and Trapping are major attractions where fishing, shooting, archery and furtaking are taught to interested kids and adults. Of course, the opportunity to catch a fish brings excitement to the littlest angler.

Don't forget to check out the live fish display, or stop by the furbearer exhibit and discuss trapping with the experts, or relax and enjoy native prairie plantings.

An added incentive – it's all free.

The Conservation and Outdoors Skills Park is located on the north end of the grounds near the State Fair Center.

Put Garbage Where it Belongs

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department reminds citizens who use any recreational area to keep it clean by packing out all trash.

All garbage should be placed in proper trash receptacles. If trash cans aren't available, or are full, take the trash and dispose of it at home.

It is not uncommon to see garbage piling up around trash containers after they become full. Styrofoam containers are not biodegradable, but yet are often found wedged in cattails, drifting or washed up on shore.

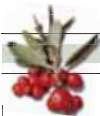
Worn tires, old mattresses and kitchen appliances have found their way to public use areas. This illegal dumping is costly to clean up and takes a significant toll on the environment. Not only does it spoil



CHRIS GRONDAHL

the beauty of the land, it destroys habitat, has the potential to pollute North Dakota waters and can injure wildlife.

Littering violations should be reported by calling the Report All Poachers telephone number at 800-472-2121.



Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest

The 2014 Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest is now underway. The deadline for submitting photos is September 30.

The contest has categories for nongame and game species, as well as plants/insects. An overall winning photograph will be chosen, with the number of place winners in each category determined by the number of qualified entries.

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

By submitting an entry, photographers grant permission to Game and Fish to publish winning photographs in *North Dakota OUTDOORS* magazine, and on the Department's website, gf.nd.gov.

Photo disks should be sent to Watchable



Wildlife Photo Contest, C/O Patrick T. Isakson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501-5095.

Send emailed digital photos to photocontest@nd.gov. Photographers will need to supply the original image if needed for

publication.

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

GAME AND FISH PAYS PROPERTY TAXES

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department recently paid more than \$481,000 in taxes to counties in which the Department owns or leases land. The 2013 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	\$ 159.93	Grand Forks	\$13,677.20	Pierce	\$ 2,462.99
Barnes	4,498.29	Grant	760.55	Ramsey	13,319.73
Benson	3,733.27	Griggs	94.47	Ransom	1,200.62
Billings	0.00	Hettinger	3,238.83	Richland	13,377.25
Bottineau	4,625.51	Kidder	6,702.47	Rolette	30,328.98
Bowman	1,252.33	LaMoure	7,437.76	Sargent	14,681.78
Burke	916.16	Logan	1,443.58	Sheridan	52,356.81
Burleigh	25,365.00	McHenry	1,552.81	Sioux	245.27
Cass	6,302.19	McIntosh	6,771.80	Slope	1,108.77
Cavalier	22,402.93	McKenzie	24,771.20	Stark	182.49
Dickey	12,838.10	McLean	46,584.62	Steele	9,059.31
Divide	1,522.44	Mercer	12,741.08	Stutsman	3,721.00
Dunn	5,695.77	Morton	17,060.51	Towner	2,080.31
Eddy	4,104.66	Mountrail	8,806.71	Walsh	10,051.22
Emmons	3,532.65	Nelson	5,303.69	Ward	87.56
Foster	3,420.05	Oliver	2,357.02	Wells	48,677.99
Golden Valley	245.40	Pembina	13,467.93	Williams	4,846.26

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And Much
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Phone: 701-328-6300 • Email: ndgf@nd.gov • Website: gf.nd.gov



AQUATIC NUISANCE SPECIES

DRAIN YOUR LIVEWELL



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

OTHER ANS PREVENTION LAWS



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



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



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

KEEP ANS OUT OF OUR WATER

NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT
100 North Bismarck Expressway
Bismarck, ND 58501-5095
701-328-6300
Email: ndgf@nd.gov
Web: gf.nd.gov





back cast

By Ron Wilson



RON WILSON

T

he fishing is silly-good and we've run out of live bait, save for a box of crawlers that goes mostly untouched.

One of the guys in the stern of the boat is picking chunks of used, chewed-up minnows off the carpet, threading what he can onto his pink jig and then casts.

Fish on.

It's another 12- to 13-inch walleye that makes the tip of his rod dance. There are bigger fish – 16-17 inches – in the livewell, so this one, like many others of the same length, is released.

I've never experienced walleye fishing like this, seemingly one fish after another. It's nothing new to my hosts, but I'm fascinated. Being the one fishing nearest the bait bucket, and happy to be anywhere onboard, I spend the first two hours or so handing out fathead minnows to anglers in the stern and bow like a blackjack dealer doling out cards.

The cold chicken and potato chips I packed in a cooler go untouched. We'll rinse our hands of minnow and walleye gunk at the boat ramp and eat on the drive home.

The name of the lake isn't important because there are 49 or so "new" prairie walleye lakes nearly like it scattered around the state within walking distance of crop fields, grazing cattle and farm-to-market roads. It's hard to imagine that any of them are secrets.

While many of the waters are two-decade fixtures on the landscape, many didn't become walleye fisheries until the last five years or so. Some were initially yellow perch fisheries before exploratory northern pike riding flood waters arrived and changed things.

When the perch populations flagged, walleye were stocked to add some diversity. Today, these "new" prairie walleye fisheries cover about 45,000 acres. Ten of the lakes are more than 1,000 acres each, and 18 feet or deeper in places.

A decade or so ago, Game and Fish Department fisheries biologists called these sloughs and meadows filled in by abundant precipitation "opportunistic lakes" because they were expected to dry sooner than later.

They don't call them that anymore as the waters haven't dried and some have gotten even bigger. In many lakes, water levels are as high as they've ever been, higher than even what your great-grandparents remember.

While access to some of these "new" prairie walleye lakes isn't great – yet – they still see their fair share of fishing pressure. Even so, it's not as crowded as it could be because half of the fishing effort expended by the 220,000 or so licensed anglers occurs on Devils Lake, Sakakawea, Missouri River and Lake Oahe.

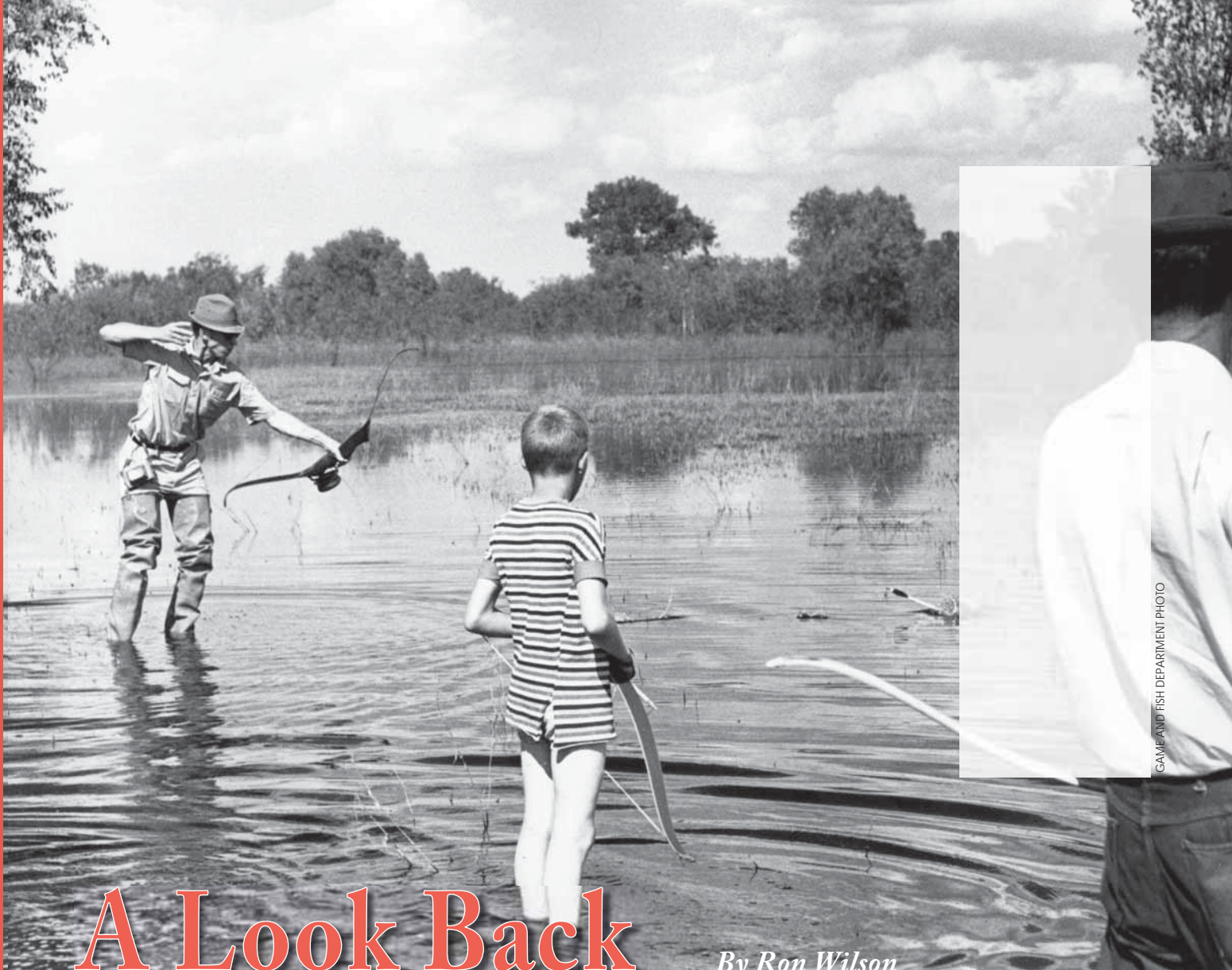
The mid-June day that we fished, we saw just two boats. The low turnout might have had something to do with the stiff wind out of the north, or because it was a Thursday. It's hard to say.

If you talk to a fisheries biologist, they'll tell you in some detail why these prairie lakes are providing some great fishing. In short, it has to do with these nutrient-rich waters, many of which were initially shallow, fertile wetlands, kicking the food chain into overdrive. Plus, now that these lakes are bigger and deeper, fish are able to survive over winter.

They'll also tell you that, in some cases, it takes just two years to grow a keeper-sized walleye in these waters, while it takes at least three years in the more traditional walleye lakes in North Dakota.

What they'll leave out, however, is where to fish. Rumor spreads fast enough about the latest hot bite that they don't have to.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



A Look Back

By Ron Wilson

North Dakotans have been shooting nongame fish, mostly carp and buffalo, with bow and arrow for nearly 60 years.

The first bowfishing season was held in 1956. "*Cyprinus carpio*, better known to fishermen as the carp is in store for a bad time this summer. On June 1st it became legal to shoot carp in North Dakota with the bow and arrow," read the June 1956 issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

The archery season for nongame fish in the state has run uninterrupted since. Today, bowfishing is legal from April 1 through November 30. It's illegal to return fish to the water after they are shot, and all fish must be used and/or disposed of properly and not left in the water or on land.

The black and white photograph above was taken in 1969 on a Missouri River backwater. The caption

that accompanied the photo in *North Dakota OUTDOORS* more than four decades ago read: "The archer at left has just driven his arrow into the mud ... another carp missed. They are hard to approach to easy range. Often the carp will leave hurriedly with a splash when an archer is spotted, frightening all the carp in an area."

While the equipment choices have adjusted since 1969 from recurve bows to mostly compound bows today, the pursuit of nongame fish has changed little. Back in the day, bowfishing participants shot from boats, shore, or slowly negotiated the shallows in waders or old sneakers.

"So if you are looking for some summer action, ready your archery gear and go looking for the carp. You may receive some pleasure by

knowing you are helping rid our waters of a nuisance, but the sport you receive will be the greatest benefit, as carp are far too numerous and prolific for archers to control," reported the author in 1969.

That sentiment still rings true today as many people would vouch for the worthiness of the pursuit. And, considering carp top the state's short list of aquatic nuisance species, there remain plenty of targets swimming in the shallows to shoot at.

Even so, there remains the regulation to take what you shoot home and properly dispose of it. Whether fishing with hook and line or bowfishing, you can't throw your catch on shore and walk away.

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