NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT
$2.00 OCTOBER 2015

Matters of Opinion

Terry Steinwand
Director

Occasionally, I diverge from the topics in the current issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*. This is one of those times, partially due to a couple of television news reports I've seen within the last month or so that brought back some memories.

As many know, I come from a small, diversified farm, which was common across the central North Dakota countryside at the time. It was a time when the 7 miles to town to get a part for the tractor or combine seemingly took an eternity and the downtime cost money. It was more efficient to call or go to the neighbor's place to see if they had the part, or if they could help plant, harvest or put up hay. The answer was always, without hesitation, yes, with the understanding that the same courtesy would be extended on the other side of the fence when the time came.

While family farms have changed, there are still examples of neighbors helping neighbors, especially when the options are few to nonexistent.

The television news reports I mentioned earlier highlighted the Farm Rescue organization helping those producers who have life-changing injuries or illnesses. Why? Because as North Dakotans, that's what we do. We cross boundaries where it may impact what we want to get done, but also recognize that others may need help and we're willing to do it.

The partnerships Game and Fish enjoys always have a connection with our mission, which is to protect, conserve and create fish and wildlife populations and the habitats they use for the sustained public consumptive and nonconsumptive use.

These are apparent in our Private Land Open To Sportsmen partnerships with private landowners across the state. But the partnerships aren't always on an individual basis.

One of the articles in this month's *OUTDOORS* features a recent dedication on a nice piece of grassland in eastern North Dakota. The dedication marked yet another new partnership for Game and Fish, this one with the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks.

There are many examples of partnerships the Department has formed with individuals and groups across the state. It may not always be perfect but, working together and forging partnerships is something we've always done in North Dakota.

We're a state of great variety from west to east, with a diversity of opinions, but the one thing that binds us is the willingness to work together for the benefit of all North Dakota. By doing so, we'll continue to be good neighbors and prosper.

Think about the partnerships you have and those you could form. While doing so, get out and enjoy the wonderful fall 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.

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

OCTOBER 2015 • NUMBER 3 • VOLUME LXXVIII

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FEATURES

DEPARTMENTS

Front Cover
North Dakota's fall turkey season opens in October and closes January 3, 2016. *(Photo by Craig Bihrle, Bismarck.)*

Official Publication of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department (ISSN 0029-2761)
100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501-5095
Website: gf.nd.gov • email: ndgf@nd.gov
• Information 701-328-6300 • Administration 701-328-6305
• Outdoors Circulation 701-328-6363
• Hunter Education 701-328-6615 • Licensing 701-328-6335
• 24-Hour Licensing by Phone: 800-406-6409
• The TTY/TTD (Relay ND) number for the hearing or speech impaired is 800-366-6888

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

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

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

Report All Poachers (RAP) 800-472-2121
In cooperation with North Dakota Wildlife Federation and North Dakota State Radio.

The Conservation Reserve Program reaches a milestone this year. Down from its peak of 3.4 million acres in 2007, North Dakota has about 1.5 million CRP acres scattered across the state.

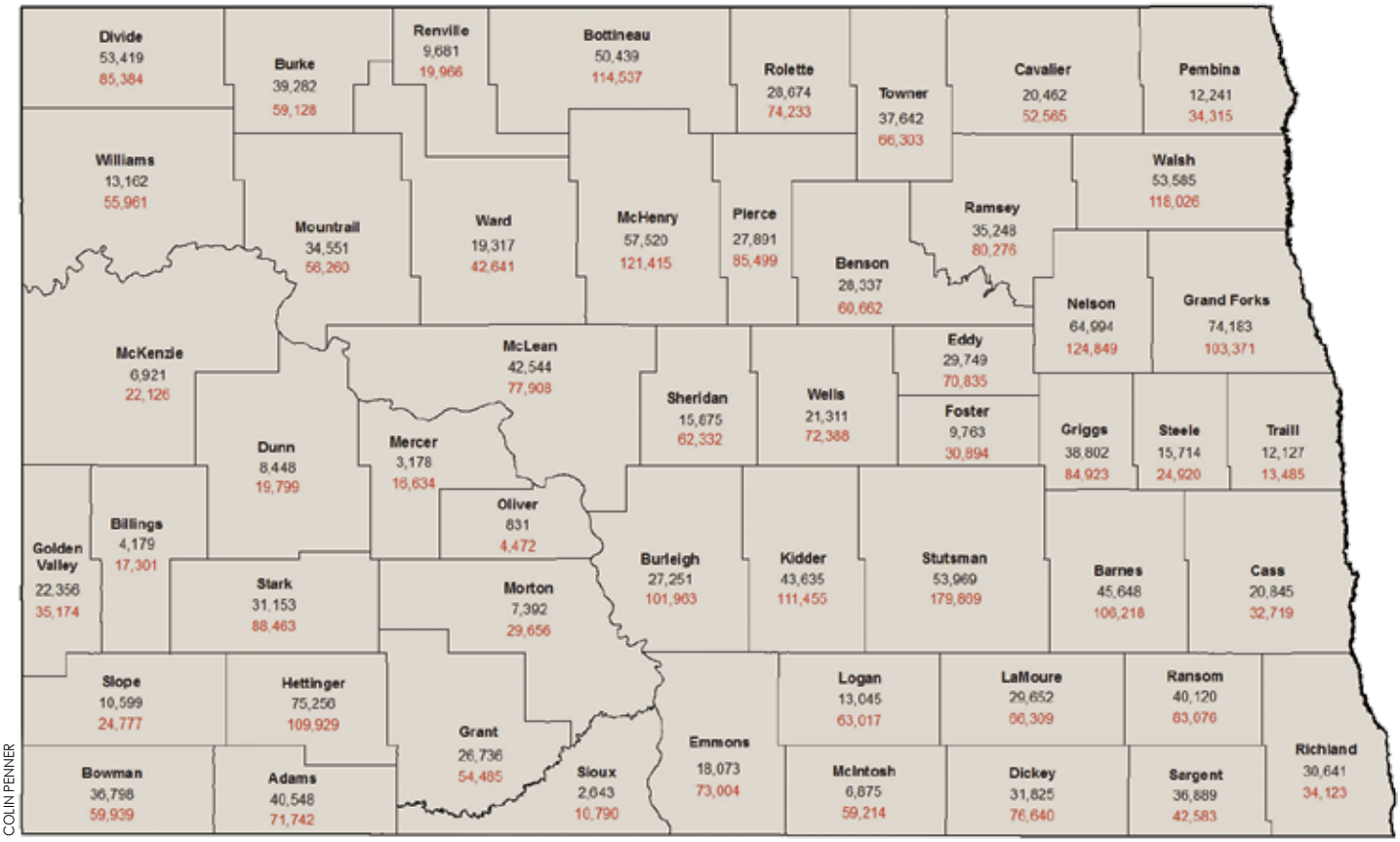
VATION

Success Story

By Ron Wilson

CRAIG BIHRLE

CRP Acres per County



COLIN PENNER

2015 CRP Acres – 1,468,052
2007 CRP Acres – 3,388,553

The largest private-lands conservation program in the United States, and holder of one of the most proverbial acronyms on the Northern Plains, turns 30 this year.

The Conservation Reserve Program, or CRP, was signed into law in 1985, but following some dry years, didn't really take root in North Dakota until the early 1990s.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program was primarily designed to reduce soil erosion on highly erodible cropland, and reduce grain surpluses so commodity prices would increase. Lands enrolled in CRP, planted in grass and left idle for a minimum of 10 years, did all that and more.

Much more.

What acres and acres of idle grasses did for North Dakota wildlife is well documented. High profile animals, such as pheasants, waterfowl and white-tailed deer, used this habitat, sometimes planted in large, expansive blocks, as escape cover from weather and predators during critical junctures in their life cycles.

"The Conservation Reserve Program is one of the biggest success stories in USDA's history," said Kevin Kading, North Dakota Game and Fish Department private land section leader. "CRP is not just a place to flush pheasants in fall. This program, which started out as a soil and water quality program, has had an influence in the life cycles of many animals by providing nesting, brooding and fawning cover."

Starting in 1993 after a prolonged, tortuous drought, water returned to North Dakota's prairie, fostering a rebound in duck numbers as the birds now had what they needed – water and abundant nesting cover that made it much more difficult for fox and other predators to find their nests.

"CRP has been a tremendous boon to waterfowl hunters in North America, as the U.S. prairies are primary breeding areas for some species like gadwall, shovelers and blue-winged teal," said Mike Szymanski, Game and Fish Department migratory game bird management supervisor. "The eastern Dakotas were always important for blue-winged teal, but once the combination of abundant water and abundant grass occurred, bluewings, gadwall and shoveler populations went off the chart."

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Szymanski said the eastern Dakotas were responsible for producing 42 percent of bluewings harvested in the

Western Hemisphere during that time period.

Szymanski said many people were scratching their heads this spring as many duck species' populations made new highs after the recent loss of so many CRP acres, particularly in North Dakota.

"It is a multi-faceted issue, but the bottom line is that we've gotten lucky. Partly because it has been tremendously wet over the past couple of years, to somewhat dampen the lost production from the loss of CRP acres, but also that practically all of the Prairie Pothole Region has had very good habitat conditions over the past few years, which seldom happens," Szymanski said. "While we still have some CRP left, the effects of losing that good nesting habitat provided by CRP will probably start to show up in a big way once the Prairie Pothole Region runs through some dry years and the tremendous populations of ducks that were built up can no longer sustain themselves."

While a succession of mild winters and sympathetic weather during nesting and rearing benefited pheasant populations now and again over the last 30 years, wildlife biologists will tell you that in 2007, when 3.4 million CRP acres covered the landscape, the pheasant harvest that year of more than 900,000 roosters would have been far less without it.

State wildlife managers for years have said that CRP has repeatedly proven that if you put quality habitat on the landscape, wildlife responds.

Prior to CRP, Scott Peterson, Game and Fish Department deputy director, said if a pheasant was spotted on the family farm, it was something you told your neighbors about, it was a big deal.

"Growing up in southwestern Barnes County, we had some ducks, geese, Hungarian partridge and some whitetails, but darn few of those," Peterson said. "But after CRP was planted and took, we then had huntable numbers of deer, pheasants and sharp-tailed grouse. I never saw a sharptail in that part of the country until CRP came along."

Peterson said 275 acres of the family farm was seeded in 1998, and several neighbors had done the same.

"Before, it was all cropland, and what pasture that was around was being hayed or grazed," he said. "But now we had grass, good winter cover for wildlife."

While game birds and deer garner much of the attention in the wildlife world when celebrating the pluses of CRP, there are other benefits that aren't as noticeable as flushing pheasants.

"The benefits of CRP to, say, pheasants is clear because it's more cause and effect – habitat grows wildlife," said Greg Power, Game and Fish Department fisheries chief. "Yet, when you look at the intended purposes of CRP to reduce grain surpluses and soil erosion, you could say that fishing in North Dakota benefited as much as anything."

Since its inception, scientists say that CRP has prevented billions of tons of soil erosion nationwide. Power said improvement in water quality is not something that happens immediately, but over years. Considering CRP has been around for 30 years, he said, the benefits to some North Dakota fisheries is obvious.

When the Conservation Reserve Program was launched in the 1980s, it was primarily designed to reduce erosion and grain surpluses. Providing habitat for wildlife like ring-necked pheasants, waterfowl and deer was a secondary benefit.

CRAIG BIHRLE

Like pheasants and other grassland-nesting birds, North Dakota's deer herd took to the dense grass cover for food, shelter from the weather and as a hideaway for adult does to birth fawns.

LARA ANDERSON

"Without question, CRP has slowed down the aging process in a lot of lakes in North Dakota by slowing down runoff and keeping nutrients in the idle grass fields, rather than running into a lake," Power said. "The combination of CRP and a lot of water on the landscape have most certainly enhanced fishing opportunities in North Dakota over the last 20-30 years."

Sandra Johnson, Game and Fish Department conservation biologist, said the idle grass plantings have also benefited other wildlife over the years.

"CRP has provided tremendous benefits for an assortment of grassland-nesting birds, from those little birds you see darting around on the tops of grasses, like bobolinks, to larger, odder-looking birds such as American bitterns," she said. "There is a noticeable bump in the long-term trend data of many grassland associated birds when CRP came on the landscape. For some species, such as the Western meadowlark, that bump in the population is gone because of the loss of CRP, and the steady decline continues."

North Dakota had roughly 3.4 million CRP acres in 2007. It never got any better than that. Today, that total stands at about 1.5 million acres, yet that total was going to change September 30, after the time of this writing, as a number of acres were set to expire.

Like the benefits of acres and acres of hip-high grasses to the state's wildlife, the decline of CRP in the state has been well documented.

From a landowner's perspective, some factors include high cash rents, high commodity prices and demands for more cropland.

"In the 2014 Farm Bill, Congress capped the total amount of acres in the United States to not exceed 24 million acres by 2017, so we are experiencing a time when contracts are expiring and general sign-up does not happen every year, causing the total number of acres to go down," said Aaron Krauter, state executive director for USDA Farm Service Agency, Fargo.

The Conservation Reserve Program we once knew, big chunks of private land, sometimes entire sections planted in idle grasses, is no longer. Even so, it's unlikely this year's 30th anniversary will be the last landmark this conservation program will celebrate.

"I don't think CRP is going away, but I do think it's going to continue to transform," Kading said. "The program has been widely accepted by hunters, conservationists, landowners and national and state leaders, and it has wide benefits to society."

Kading sees a shift toward more working lands type programs that afford producers more use of their land, while providing grass cover. He also sees the implementation of more targeted CRP offshoot programs such as the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program and State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement.

"Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, has focused on improving the quality of CRP acres by allowing acres in water quality practices and State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement to be enrolled," Krauter said. "While the overall number of acres may decline in the state, CRP is being targeted toward critical habitat areas and will continue to be an important conservation tool for years to come."

According to the Farm Service Agency, the arm of the USDA that administers CRP, CREP is a voluntary program that helps producers protect environmentally sensitive land, decrease erosion, restore wildlife habitat and safeguard ground and surface water.

Kading said Game and Fish officials submitted

a proposal to FSA to modify the Department's current CREP program, with hopes that it will be approved sometime this fall.

As part of CREP, Kading said, there is a state match required, so the Department submitted a $3 million Outdoor Heritage Fund grant, as well as $3 million of existing Private Land Open To Sportsmen budget to leverage against $34 million of CREP.

"Essentially, this will target riparian areas and their associated uplands in the southwest and central parts of the state," Kading said. "We'll work with producers to enroll grass along streams and waterways to square off fields along these areas, which will improve their operation by reducing input costs, such as fuel, fertilizer and time. They won't have to worry about these areas if they are saline, difficult to farm, wet or they simply want to square off a field. They can farm the best and leave the rest."

According to FSA, the SAFE initiative is designed to address state and regional high-priority wildlife objectives. In North Dakota, some of those objectives include enrolling land for economically significant wildlife, such as upland game birds, waterfowl and deer.

"Interest by producers in the CRP program comes and goes with the commodity program and farm bill, but what we are seeing is more interest in the types of programs like SAFE, duck-nesting habitat, farmable wetlands and wetland restoration," Kading said. "With these, for example, a producer doesn't have to take an entire 160 acres out of production, but rather put a grass buffer around a wetland. There are better incentives for producers with these programs."

Krauter said producers tell him that the economics of commodity prices and CRP rental rates, combined with the conservation practices, are the key components they look for in the CRP program.

"Many of the areas that are categorized as highly erodible land are now farmed successfully with no-till practices, but there are still some fragile lands producers feel are a good fit for CRP," Krauter said. "Production agriculture has seen so many technological advances and we have learned so much in the conservation practices that are used, so really a lot has changed since the start of CRP in 1985. Going forward, the key to a successful future of CRP is the ongoing education of the benefits that CRP has provided for our land and water and will continue to do for future generations."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

An entire generation of hunters has never seen North Dakota's landscape without CRP. Wildlife managers say that this generation will be disappointed in coming years unless the Conservation Reserve Program and other landscape-level programs are not salvaged.

CRAIG BIHRLE

Aerial Hunters
OF THE DAKOTAS

By Will Inselman

Will Inselman, South Dakota State University graduate student, with a Swainson's hawk, fitted with radio-telemetry equipment.

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

The Swainson's hawk is bolder than other raptors that nest in the Midwest and is commonly seen perched on fence posts and hay bales.

SANDRA JOHNSON

A recurring theme in the world of wildlife management and conservation in the Dakotas is the continuing loss of grasslands, which provide critical nesting habitat for many species we enjoy to hunt.

However, many other species require grasslands to thrive during the breeding season, yet these species are generally not discussed as much. Raptors, including hawks, eagles, owls and falcons, are critical components of a well-rounded grassland ecosystem.

The photograph on the right shows an adult Swainson's hawk sitting on a nest, while the bottom photograph shows an assortment of prey in a nest, including a garter snake, rodent and a thirteen-lined ground squirrel.

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Over the last 30 years, little research has been conducted to assess the effects of grassland loss on populations of raptors that breed across the Dakotas. With financial assistance from the North Dakota Game and Fish Department and the Agricultural Experiment Station at South Dakota State University, a research project was initiated through SDSU to analyze two raptor species, Swainson's and ferruginous hawks, which reside in North Dakota's grasslands.

Sandra Johnson, Game and Fish Department conservation biologist, said that prior to European settlement, the ferruginous hawk was believed to be one of the most common hawks on the prairie. In 1874, it was reported the "nest is often a very bulky structure, sometimes three or four feet in diameter, built of coarse sticks, mixed with the ribs of antelopes and buffalos."

Robert Stewart, author of "Breeding Birds of North America," wrote in 1975 that the ferruginous hawk "personifies the vast, wild reaches of the original, rolling North Dakota prairie more than any other raptor."

"In 2015, it is sad to report this raptor, along with many other grassland birds, no longer can be used in such celebrated portrayal of the North Dakota landscape," Johnson said. "Today, the ferruginous hawk is one of our least common hawks of the prairie and we need to determine what landscape features are crucial to keeping it and other grassland birds from completely disappearing in North Dakota."

The goal of this study was to evaluate the status of Swainson's and ferruginous populations in Logan, McIntosh and Dickey counties and was conducted during the 2013 and 2014 breeding seasons (April–September). Along with the overall goal of evaluating the status of these raptor populations, the opportunity existed to analyze the diets of these species.

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Swainson's Hawk

Swainson's hawks are medium-sized raptors. They are slightly smaller than the more common red-tailed hawk, and generally nest in areas mixed with grassland and agriculture (e.g., alfalfa).

The Swainson's hawk sports a white throat patch and chocolate-brown bib that usually extends from below the throat to mid-way down its breast, then transitions to a bright white belly. Its under-wing side, which is the most common view you would see, is white from the leading edge of the wing, up until the flight feathers turn black. This bird is easily distinguishable from the red-tailed hawk, which is identified by its namesake red tail, and the common northern harrier, which lacks much of the characteristics previously described.

The Swainson's hawk is bolder than other raptors that nest in the Midwest and is commonly seen perched on fence posts and hay bales. Much of the

time you can easily stop your vehicle next to one of these and snap a few photographs before the bird gets nervous and flies.

Ferruginous Hawk

The ferruginous hawk is the largest hawk in North America. Once abundant throughout the grasslands of North Dakota and South Dakota, this species is slowly disappearing from the plains. This bird is considered a grassland obligate nesting species, which requires large expanses of undisturbed grasslands, which are becoming increasingly rare.

The ferruginous hawk has a broad, white tail, a mostly white head, and a reddish back and shoulders. From the underside, it is distinguished by bright red legs that produce a "V" shape in flight that contrasts with its white belly. This hawk, unlike the Swainson's, is easily spooked and tends to abandon nests when disturbed.

High Definition Nest View

Game camera technology has not only allowed hunters to be one step ahead of the game they pursue, but it is also a valuable research tool for wildlife managers.

High definition video, coupled with large memory cards that allow storage of vast amounts of video, provided us the ability to view the daily life of these raptors. With the use of this technology we were able to get an incredibly accurate picture of exactly what and how much these birds were eating during their summer breeding seasons in the Dakotas.

The game cameras we employed were programmed to take a photograph once every 5 seconds from sunrise to sunset. We installed 26 cameras over the past two summers; 18 on Swainson's hawk nests and eight at ferruginous hawk nests.

Study Diet

Overall, Swainson's hawks took a variety of prey. We recorded 5,091 hours of video and documented 2,221 prey deliveries at nest sites over two years of monitoring. The top five prey items for these birds, in order of most commonly consumed, were voles, northern leopard frogs, thirteen-lined ground squirrels, common garter snakes and mice.

These animals accounted for about 75 percent of the total prey consumed by Swainson's hawks. We observed only 44 juvenile pheasants and 14 juvenile ducks out of 2,221 delivered prey. This equated to only 2.6 percent of the total diet of this species over two summers at 18 nests.

Findings were similar at ferruginous hawk nests. With more than 1,600 hours of video footage, we documented 726 prey deliveries. Ferruginous hawks, known to be specialist predators, prey primarily on Richardson's ground squirrels, thirteen-lined ground squirrels, mice, voles and pocket gophers, which together account for more than 77 percent of their overall diet.

We observed approximately 36 ducks and pheasants consumed at the eight ferruginous hawk nest sites, with more adult ducks and pheasants consumed than at Swainson's hawk nests. This equated to only 5 percent of the ferruginous hawk diet during the two summers.

Even though these raptors prey on pheasants and ducks, on occasion, we only observed this in extremely low quantities. The overall effect of Swainson's and ferruginous hawks on pheasant and duck populations was minimal.

While hawks take pheasants and ducks as prey, they don't target them. This type of prey requires a lot of energy investment from these hawks, making them less desirable. Other prey, such as ground squirrels, provide significantly more "bang for their buck" because they are larger than ducklings and live in areas that are easier to hunt.

Similar to humans, subsistence hunters would not expend the energy to chase rabbits with a shotgun when they can sit in a tree stand and shoot white-tailed deer with a rifle.

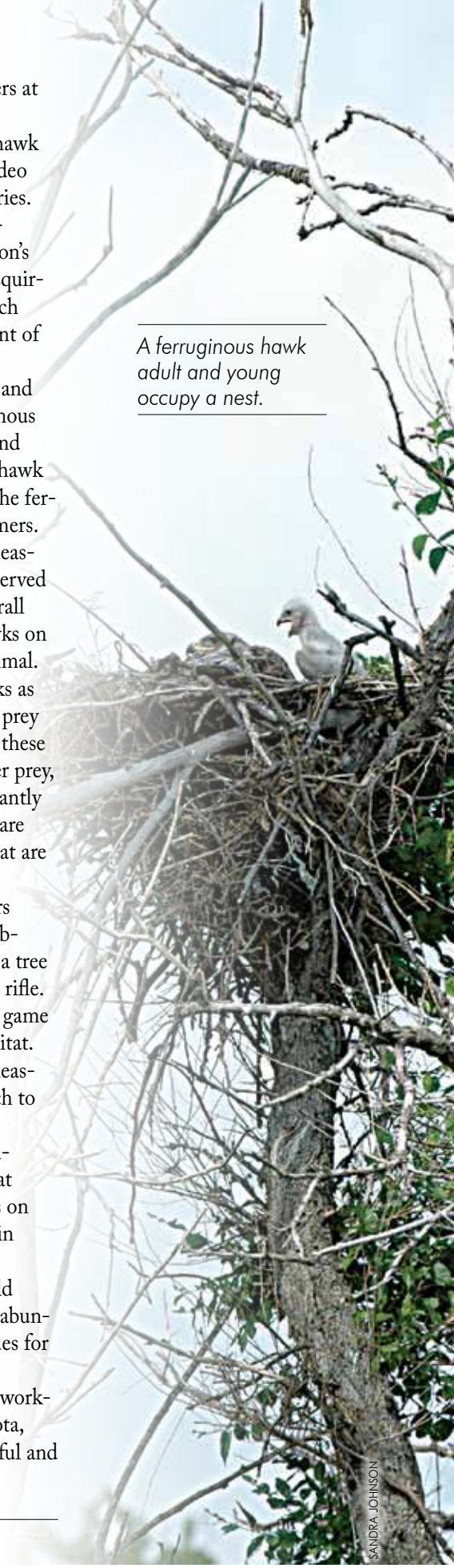
Regardless of the impact of hawks on game birds, the main issue today is quality habitat. Aerial predators are less likely to take pheasants and ducks if they have grass in which to forage and hide.

In addition, these raptors provide critical ecosystem services in the Dakotas that are often taken for granted, as they focus on rodent pests and keep their populations in check.

The loss of these aerial predators would disrupt the food web and lead to an overabundance of rodents, which could create issues for ranchers and farmers.

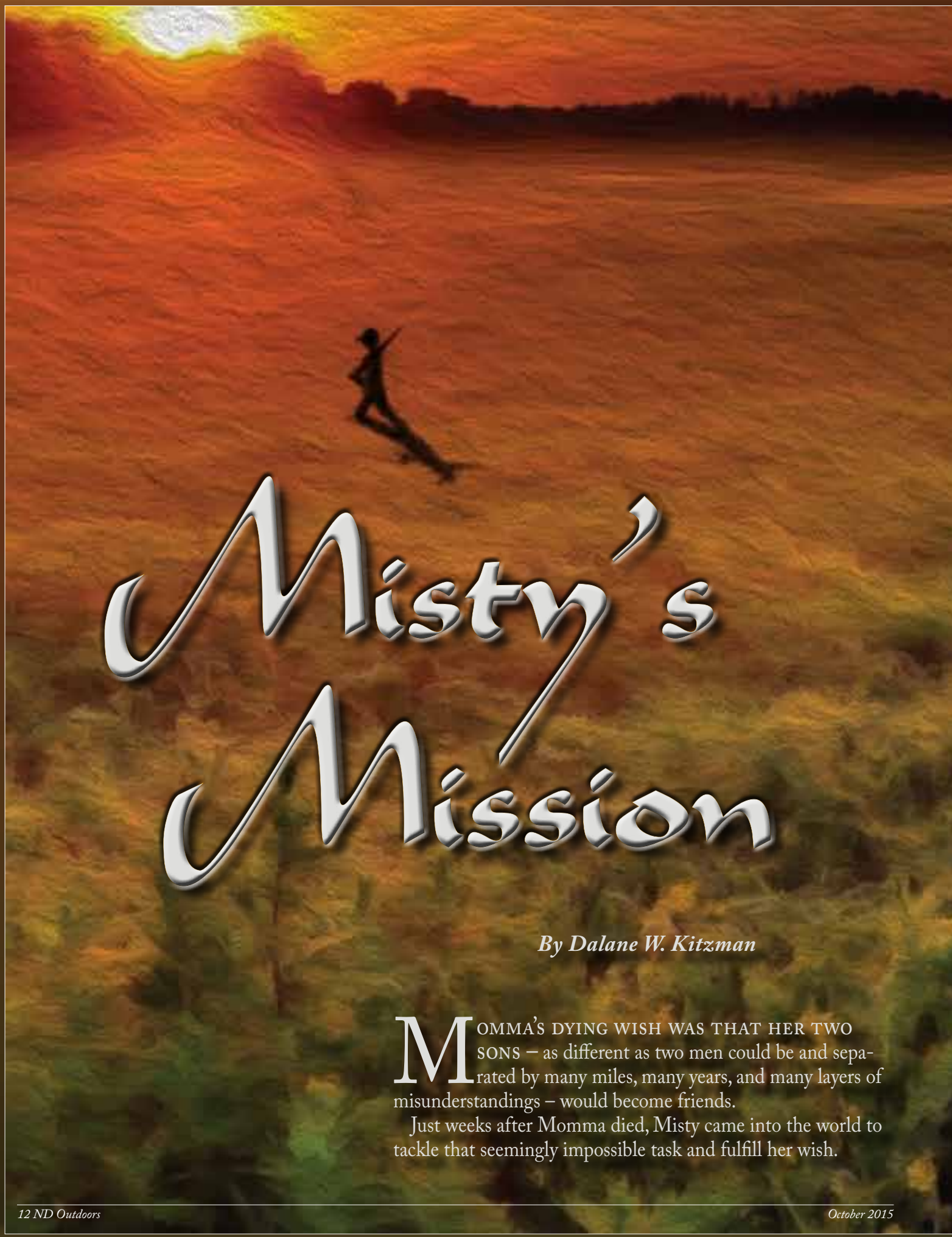
The next time you are out in the field working or driving through rural North Dakota, take some time and observe these beautiful and necessary hunters.

WILL INSELMAN *is a South Dakota State University graduate student.*



A ferruginous hawk adult and young occupy a nest.

SANDRA JOHNSON



Misty's Mission

By Dalane W. Kitzman

MOMMA'S DYING WISH WAS THAT HER TWO SONS – as different as two men could be and separated by many miles, many years, and many layers of misunderstandings – would become friends.

Just weeks after Momma died, Misty came into the world to tackle that seemingly impossible task and fulfill her wish.

ARTWORK BY GARETT ABRAHAM

Misty was a reject. First, by the deeply disappointed owner of her prized springer spaniel mom who was bred by a renegade cocker spaniel, creating a mixed-breed litter of little value. Next, by all who came for free puppies; as the smallest and meekest of the batch, Misty was the last picked. And finally, by her new owners who quickly tired of her.

My brother, who never had a hunting dog, reluctantly took Misty off their hands. So it was that the best bird hunting and companion dog that ever was came to my brother's household.

Our father died when I was 7; my brother was 3. We were both interested in hunting at a young age, but had no one to teach us. In 1972 at age 13, and after passing a gun safety course, a friend of the family took me to the Missouri River bottoms south of Bismarck and taught me the basics of bird hunting. I will be forever grateful to this patient and generous man. After I got my driver's license, I took my brother along and taught him what I learned.

However, my brother and I didn't hunt together for long. Like a lot of sibling relationships, we were opposites – a straight-laced older child and a wilder, rebellious younger brother. We did not get along and there came a point when we avoided each other whenever possible.

Eventually, I left North Dakota for medical school, and my brother stayed and became a truck driver. As the years passed, we rarely talked. After our mother died, my visits to North Dakota ceased.

I would not realize until later, but while I was in college studying to become a doctor, my brother learned a lot from his years on the road dealing with difficult and sometimes dangerous people. He grew into a calm, wise, responsible, honorable, hard-working, God-loving, family man. This was the man who took in the pup nobody wanted.

After several years of minimal interaction with my brother, I was surprised by his call excitedly announcing his new acquisition. When we were growing up, we often lamented not having a hunting dog. We were our own hunting dogs. We'd beat the bushes ourselves, forging through the thickets and merciless briars. One of the few things we'd had in common was an unwillingness to abandon a search for a downed bird; we'd search for hours while a keen-nosed hound would have probably found it right away. We would come home tired, scratched and scraped.

As my brother spoke, we were both captivated by the idea of hunting with a real bird dog. However, my brother confessed that he knew nothing about training a bird dog, and neither did I. But my brother's gentle, understanding spirit born of a difficult life served him well. He asked others and took their best advice. There was certainly no possibility of sending Misty to an expensive training school where the dog comes back fully trained with a framed certificate.

DELANE KITZMAN

Dalane Kitzman (right) and his brother, Dale Kitzman, with Misty.

His job took him on long hauls throughout the state and he got home only twice a week. Even though dead tired, he would take Misty, a training leash, whistle, and feathered decoy and drive out to the country fields for practice. Misty caught on fast.

My brother called me one day and said Misty was ready and surprised me with an invitation to be the first to hunt with them. I was intrigued at the opportunity to hunt with a "real" dog and also felt guilty that I'd not been home to visit my brother and sisters in the years since Mom had passed.

Landing in North Dakota with my brother waiting for me instead of my mom was awkward. We didn't have much to say to each other. But Misty broke the ice. Her tailed wagged furiously as she nuzzled me sweetly. She immediately won me over.

The next day with my brother and Misty was a sublime experience. He had developed connections with farmers throughout the state who respected him and allowed us on their vast fields of grasslands and recently harvested corn and sunflowers, brimming with beautiful, plump, ring-necked pheasants.

It was magnificent to see my brother and Misty work the fields together. He was confident and she was precise. Flushing and tracking birds was in her genes. It was clear that she lived for this; she was exuberant, tireless, and focused. She combined the best traits of the springer and cocker spaniels, and she had a heart bigger than both.

She transcended her humble origins. Sometimes I was so mesmerized from watching her work that I forgot to shoot at the birds she flushed. At those times, she would pause to telegraph a look of dismay and then she'd bound off to find us more.

Misty also had a special way of helping us find downed birds. She would stand near where she knew the bird was, waiting patiently for us to get it. Sometimes the spot where she stood was far from where we believed the bird had fallen.

Irritated that she was not helping us, we would search diligently and exhaustively at our spot. Finding nothing, we would prepare to move on, but Misty would not leave her spot. If we forced her, she would circle back to that spot. When we relented and returned to where Misty insisted on standing and searched carefully, crouching down, separating every clump of grass and little pile of leaves, we would find Misty's bird. Then she was ready to move on.

That evening as we posed with Misty between us and our limit of birds in front of us, the years of misunderstanding and resentment faded away. Later, as my brother and I relaxed on the sofa, rubbing Misty's ears and belly as she sat between us, we became buddies.

Since then, each fall I have looked forward to that invitation to come and relive the thrill of the hunt, the brotherly companionship, and the glory of seeing Misty pursuing her vocation in perfect fashion. Once we hunted with an acquaintance who brought his professionally trained, champion bloodline, purebred bird dog. That dog bungled every perfect setup that Misty had carefully arranged for us. After that, we learned not to hunt behind other dogs. Misty needed no help.

Over the years, my brother and I cemented a relationship as best friends. We relived old times, created new memories, and laughed so hard at each others' jokes that tears streamed freely.

Misty grew old, and recently went on to her great reward. On a sofa in a mansion somewhere in heaven, Momma is cuddling Misty and saying, "Thank you, my girl."

***DALANE W. KITZMAN, MD**, lives in North Carolina and talks nearly daily with his brother Dale in North Dakota.*

Epilogue

After my brother's grieving for Misty abated, he saw an ad from one of the Pheasants Forever chapters in North Dakota. A young mixed-breed spaniel without a collar was found, and nobody in the club wanted her and she was going to be put down if nobody took her. My brother immediately fell in love with the emaciated, mud-encrusted reject. He already has her in good physical shape and feels confident we'll be hunting together with her this coming season. Since she was found wandering, her name is appropriately, "Gypsy."

SAGE GROUSE

AVOID FEDERAL LISTING

By Ron Wilson

A partnership-driven conservation effort across 11 Western states, North Dakota included, to better safeguard sage grouse has convinced federal authorities that this sagebrush-dependent rangeland bird does not need protection under the Endangered Species Act.

News that federal protection of sage grouse is not warranted was announced in late September, years after state and federal agencies, landowners, conservation groups and others joined forces to launch a large landscape-scale conservation effort.

Following troubling declines in grouse numbers across the West, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said threats to sage grouse have since been significantly reduced across 90 percent of the species' breeding habitat.

A U.S. Department of Interior news release said the USFWS in 2010 determined that sage grouse warranted ESA protection because of population declines caused by loss and fragmentation of its sagebrush habitat, coupled with a lack of regulatory mechanisms to control habitat loss. Since that time, actions from state, federal and private partners have added needed protections, increasing certainty that this important habitat will be protected.

Sage grouse are native to southwestern North Dakota, which is the eastern edge of the species' range. The state's sage grouse population has seen a decline in the last decade.

In 2015, State Game and Fish Department biologists counted a record low 30 males on six active strutting grounds. North Dakota hasn't had a sage grouse hunting season in nearly a decade.

Jeb Williams, Department wildlife division chief, said it's unlikely North Dakota will see a sage grouse hunting season anytime soon.

"North Dakota's sage grouse population, even a number of years ago when the birds were at their peak in the state, has never been considered a high population compared to other states, like Wyoming and Montana," Williams said. "Considering that sage grouse in southwestern North Dakota are at the eastern edge of their range, they run out of habitat to have a significant population. As far as foreseeing a hunting season in North Dakota soon, it's not likely going to happen."

The fall in sage grouse numbers in the state is attributed most recently to a hit from West Nile virus. North Dakota's population is struggling to recover from a serious outbreak in 2008.

The Game and Fish Department has over the years funded research to determine species demographics such as survival, nest success, bird movements and reproduction success. Department officials also helped form a working group, in conjunction with a core group of landowners, to provide information to agricultural producers about sage grouse conservation.

Terry Steinwand, Game and Fish Department director, said the sage grouse working group in North Dakota and other stakeholder states has been a collaborative effort.

The Department worked closely with USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service and U.S. Bureau of Land Management on extensive sagebrush plantings designed to connect fragmented areas, and provide incentives for landowners to implement grazing practices that increase residual grass cover that benefits sage grouse.

"We're going to continue our efforts, in cooperation with other agencies, private landowners and energy companies, to work on projects that benefit sage grouse," Steinwand said. "It's in the best interest of all the states in sage grouse range to keep these birds off the endangered species list, so we'll continue to work on issues that affect sage grouse."

In 2014, the Game and Fish Department revised its plan that addresses conservation of sage grouse within the state. The plan lays out a framework that allows public input, with the long-term goal to enhance sage grouse habitat in North Dakota so it will again support a self-sustaining population.

RON WILSON *is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*

MIKE ANDERSON

Buffaloberry Patch

By Greg Freeman, Department News Editor

Pheasant Brood Data Summary

CRAIG BIHRLE

North Dakota's roadside pheasant survey conducted in late summer indicates total birds and number of broods are up statewide from 2014.

Stan Kohn, North Dakota Game and Fish Department upland game management supervisor, said the survey shows total pheasants are up 30 percent from last year. In addition, brood observations were up 23 percent, while the average brood size was up 9 percent. The final summary is based on 259 survey runs made along 105 brood routes across North Dakota.

"Our late summer roadside counts indicate pheasant hunters are going to find more birds in the southern half of the state this fall, with the southwest having the strongest population of young roosters," Kohn said. "Hunters will also find average habitat conditions on the landscape."

Statistics from southwestern North Dakota indicate total pheasants were up 34 percent and broods observed up 31 percent from 2014. Observers counted 25 broods and 207 birds per 100 survey miles. The average brood size was 6.2.

Results from the southeast show birds are up 27 percent from last year, and the number of broods up 21 percent. Observers counted eight broods and 62 birds per 100 miles. The average brood size was 5.5.

Statistics from the northwest indicated pheasants are down 18 percent from last year, with broods down 32 percent. Observers recorded six broods and 46 birds per 100 miles. Average brood size was 6.3.

The northeast district, generally containing secondary pheasant habitat, with much of it lacking good winter cover, showed two broods and 15 birds per 100 miles. Average brood size was 4.3. Number of birds observed was down 17 percent, and the number of broods recorded was down 7 percent.

New WMA at Oakville Prairie

By Brad Dokken

(Reprinted with permission of the Grand Forks Herald)

On a crisp September morning with a hint of fall in the air, they came to celebrate the prairie and the power of partnerships.

More than 100 people – a veritable who's-who of state and local conservation leaders – gathered September 18 at the University of North Dakota Oakville Prairie Field Station west of Grand Forks to celebrate a new era for the campus-owned grassland area.

The new era results from a collaboration between UND and Audubon Dakota, Grand Forks County Prairie Partners, the North Dakota Natural Resources Trust, North Dakota Game and Fish Department, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and Pheasants Forever.

The largest fragment of unplowed prairie in the Red River Valley, the 960-acre site in Oakville and Fairfield townships recently was designated as an Important Bird Area by Audubon Dakota.

It's also the newest wildlife management area in the state, thanks to a partnership between UND and the State Game and Fish Department.

"In the past, UND would have looked at this property and said we're going to conserve this. In fact, I've taken down 10 or 12 signs that say 'Keep Off. No Trespassing,'" said Isaac Schlosser, UND biology professor and director of the UND Biology Field Station. "We've done that, and we're going to put up a sign saying this is for public use. We obviously have to control how it's used to some degree, but you'll see that's coming with Game and Fish."

Part of Heritage

In opening remarks, Schlosser said the Oakville site is a "unique part" of North Dakota's heritage, supporting more than 230 species of plants and a "tremendous diversity" of birds, mammals and insects.

Schlosser said partner-driven management efforts will further enhance the prairie habitat. A prescribed burn was conducted on part of the site in October 2014, and another burn is on tap this fall. Down the road, plans call for opening portions of the prairie to cattle grazing, as well.

Fires and grazing historically were natural occurrences on prairie landscapes.

"There's a perfect example of where you can benefit biological diversity because both of those things are important for biological diversity," Schlosser said. "And you can give advantage to the cattle ranchers in the area and we can learn more about it – hopefully better manage all these landscapes."

PHOTO COURTESY OF GRAND FORKS HERALD

Game and Fish Director Terry Steinwand helped unveil the new sign at the Oakville Prairie Wildlife Management Area dedication on September 18.

Partners Speak

The dedication featured speakers from several partner groups, including Karen Kreil of the Grand Forks County Prairie Project, Game and Fish Director Terry Steinwand, Sarah Wilson of the Audubon Society and Mary Podoll, state conservationist for the NRCS.

Kreil, a UND graduate from Bismarck whose career included positions with the Fish and Wildlife Service and North Dakota Natural Resources Trust, said the Oakville Prairie is an "incredible resource," and the collaboration between partners will ensure it stays that way.

"It's hard sometimes to appreciate our prairie because it's so subtle – the beauty of it's so subtle," Kreil said. "To me, grasslands define North Dakota and provide incredible outdoor opportunities."

Steinwand, the Game and Fish director, said partnering with UND on the new WMA offers outdoor opportunities the agency couldn't provide on its own.

"We partner with a whole lot of people and you can't do it by yourself," Steinwand said. "We can always do more together than you can do separately. Look at out here with the educational opportunities. We have hunting out here, which of course we're extremely interested in. We just have to keep those kinds of partnerships going."

Wilson, conservation programs coordinator for Audubon Dakota, said the designation of Oakville and Fairfield prairies as Important Bird Areas reflects their significance to the multitude of species that depend on the habitat. "IBA dedications are a successful conservation tool," she said. "Without the partnerships we see today and the community involvement, the protection of these lands would be extremely difficult."

Podoll, the state conservationist for NRCS, echoed that theme. Conservation, she said, doesn't mean "no use." Instead, it's about wise use of numerous land practices. Whether farming, ranching or wildlife habitat, everything has a place, she said.

"Partnerships are imperative; we would not be here celebrating this without the vision of UND staff and researchers, local landowners and the partners that come together," Podoll said.

BRAD DOKKEN is the outdoors editor for the Grand Forks Herald.

BIGHORN SHEEP SURVEY SHOWS MIXED RESULTS

Results from this summer's bighorn sheep survey indicate North Dakota's bighorn population has increased from last year, despite the ongoing presence of pneumonia.

Brett Wiedmann, North Dakota Game and Fish Department big game biologist, said the survey showed a minimum of 304 bighorn sheep, an increase of 6 percent from 2014. Results revealed 87 rams, 159 ewes and 58 lambs. The Department's survey does not include approximately 30 bighorn sheep that live in the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

"This year's slight increase can be attributed to better-than-expected lamb recruitment over the past couple years, prior to the disease outbreak of 2014," Wiedmann said.

However, the pneumonia-related die-off that occurred in 2014 appears to have resurfaced again this summer.

"Despite no documented pneumonia-related mortalities since last January, the disease reoccurred in late summer," Wiedmann said. "Similar to last year, we were pleased with the initial results of the survey as high lamb numbers were recorded, coupled with no signs of clinical disease among the adult segment of the population. However, significant signs of disease began to occur in mid-August as the survey was nearing its completion."

Wiedmann noted that the bighorns showing evidence of disease this summer were from the same herds that were most affected last year.

"Unfortunately, these are three of our core herds in the northern badlands, so we'll have to once again closely monitor the impacts of pneumonia, as many adults and lambs showing signs of disease in August likely will not survive winter," he said.

Those herds in the northern badlands that were not affected by last summer's die-off appeared healthy again this summer, and achieved high female-to-lamb ratios.

Dr. Dan Grove, Game and Fish wildlife veterinarian, said it is too early to tell the severity. "Since summer 2014, mortalities have not yet been catastrophic," he said. "However, the outbreak is ongoing, and we detected a virulent strain of bacteria last year that was collected from both dead and live-sampled bighorns. Consequently, the recurrence of pneumonia this summer may be more apparent when females and lambs are recounted next March."

The Midwest Chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation pledged $20,000 to the Department to help monitor effects of the die-offs.

LARA ANDERSON

Motorists Warned to Watch for Deer

Motorists are reminded to watch for deer along roadways. November through early December is a peak period for deer-vehicle accidents.

Motorists are advised to slow down and exercise caution after dark to reduce the likelihood of encounters with deer along roadways. Most deer-vehicle accidents occur primarily at dawn and dusk when deer are most often moving around.

Motorists should be aware of warning signs signaling deer are in the area. When you see one deer cross the road, look for a second or third to follow. Also, pay attention on roadways posted with deer crossing area caution signs.

Deer-vehicle accidents are at times unavoidable. If an accident does happen, motorists are reminded that a law passed in 2013 eliminates the need for the driver involved in an accident to notify law enforcement authorities, if only the vehicle is damaged. Deer-vehicle accidents that involve injury or other property damage still must be reported.

In addition, a permit is still required to take parts or the whole carcass of a road-killed deer. Permits are free and available from game wardens and local law enforcement offices.

A few precautions can minimize chances of injury or property damage in a deer-vehicle crash.

- Always wear your seat belt.
- Don't swerve or take the ditch to avoid hitting a deer. Try to brake as much as possible and stay on the roadway. Don't lose control of your vehicle or slam into something else to miss the deer. You risk less injury by hitting the deer.
- If you spot deer ahead, slow down immediately and honk your horn.

TOM ROSTER'S 2016 NONTOXIC SHOT LETHALITY TABLE©

Proven Nontoxic Loads For Waterfowl, Doves, & Upland Game Birds[1] *Vel. Range Tested: 1,225 – 1,700 FPS* ACTIVITY	Observed Hunters' Typical Shooting Range During Activity (Yards)	Most Effective Nontoxic Shot Size(s) For Birds Listed Under ACTIVITY At The Distances Listed In The Second Column	Minimum Load Weight (Ounces)	Minimum Pellet Hits Needed on Lethal Areas for Clean Kills	Minimum Pattern Count Needed at Any Distance for Clean Kills (# of Pellets in 30" Circle)	Most Effective Choke(s) at Distance (Given in Lead Shot Choke Designations)	NOTE: The pellets in the steel shot loads listed in this table were traditional, highly spherical ball-shaped pellets of ~ 7.86 g/cc density and 90-95 DPH hardness. The HEVI-Shot pellets were of 12.0 g/cc density and are harder than traditional steel pellets.
Large Geese At Long Range	50-65	Steel BBB to T	1-1/4	1-2	50-55	Improved Modified	
Giant, Western, Atlantic and Interior Canadas	50-70	HEVI-Shot 2 to B	1-1/2	1-2	50-55	Improved Modified, Full	
Large Geese Over Decoys	35-50	Steel BB to BBB	1-1/4	1-2	50-55	Improved Cylinder, Modified	
	35-50	HEVI-Shot 2 to B	1-1/2	1-2	50-55	Improved Cylinder, Modified	
Medium/Small Geese Long Range	50-65	Steel BB to BBB	1-1/4	1-2	60-65	Improved Modified	
Snow, White-fronted, Lesser Canadas	50-65	HEVI-Shot 2	1-1/2	1-2	60-65	Improved Modified, Full	
Medium/Small Geese Over Decoys	35-50	Steel 2 to BB	1-1/8	1-2	60-65	Light Modified, Modified	
	35-50	HEVI-Shot 4 to 2	1-1/4	1-2	60-65	Improved Cylinder, Modified	
Large Ducks At Long Range	45-65	Steel 2 to 1	1-1/8	1-2	85-90	Improved Modified, Full	
Mallard, Black, Pintail, Goldeneye, Gadwal	45-65	HEVI-Shot 4	1-1/4	1-2	85-90	Improved Modified, Full	
Large Ducks Over Decoys	20-45	Steel 6 to 2	¾ - 1	1-2	85-90	I.C. (20-35 Yds), Mod. (35-45 Yds)	
	20-45	HEVI-Shot 6 to 4	1-1/8	1-2	85-90	I.C. (20-35 Yds), Mod. (35-45 Yds)	
Medium Ducks Over Decoys	20-45	Steel 6 to 3	1	1-2	115-120	I.C. (20-35 Yds), Mod. (35-45 Yds)	
Wigeon, Scaup, Shoveler	20-45	HEVI-Shot 6 to 4	1-1/8	1-2	115-120	I.C. (20-35 Yds), Mod. (35-45 Yds)	
Small Ducks Over Decoys	20-45	Steel 6 to 4	1	1-2	135-145	Mod. (20-35 Yds), Full (35-45 Yds)	
Teal, Ruddy, Bufflehead	20-45	HEVI-Shot 6	1-1/8	1-2	135-145	Mod. (20-35 Yds), Full (35-45 Yds)	
Ring-Necked Pheasants	20-50	Steel 3 to 2	1	2-3	90-95	I.C. (20-30 Yds), Mod. (30-50 Yds)	
	20-50	HEVI-Shot 6 to 4	1-1/8	2-3	90-95	I.C. (20-30 Yds), Mod. (30-50 Yds)	
Turkeys (Head and Neck Shots)	20-40	Steel 4; HEVI-Shot 6	1-1/4	3-4	210-230	Full or Extra Full	
Mourning Doves	20-45	Steel 8 to 7	⅞ -¾	1-2	200-210	IC-8's/LM-7's (20-30 Yds); Mod>30 Yd	
	20-45	HEVI-Shot 7½	3/4	1-2	200-210	I.C. (20-30 Yds); Light Mod (30-45 Yd)	
Northern Bobwhite Quail	20-30	Steel 8 to 7	⅞ -¾	1-2	200-210	Imp. Cyl., Light Modified	
Swatter Load For Wounded Birds	20-30	Steel 7 to 6	1	1	175	Improved Modified, Full	

This table summarizes Tom Roster's analyses to date of the lethality data bases for certain of the 16 U.S. steel vs lead waterfowl & dove shooting tests published between 1968 & 2014 & one steel-only pheasant shooting test (1995) plus lethality data bases owned by ammunition companies for birds taken with nontoxic shotshell loads Roster tested for them & the CONSEP Org.
Note: Steel #BBB (.190") & HEVI-Shot #2 (.150") have exhibited the best all-around performance for taking geese; steel #3 (.140") & HEVI-Shot #4 (.130") the best all-around performance for taking ducks; steel #2 & HEVI-Shot #4 (.130") the best all-around performance for taking ring-necked pheasants; & steel 7's (.100") the best all-around performance for taking doves.
[1]These findings are derived from testing 2¾" 28 gauge; 3" 20 ga.; 2¾", 3" & 3½" 12 ga.; & 3½" 10 ga. steel loads; plus 2¾" 28 ga.; 2¾" & 3" 20 ga.; and 2¾" & 3" 12 ga. HEVI-Shot loads.
 For answers to questions on this table contact: Tom Roster, 1190 Lynnewood, Klamath Falls, OR, USA 97601. tomroster@charter.net

Whooping Crane Migration

Whooping cranes are in the midst of their fall migration and sightings will increase as they make their way through North Dakota over the next several weeks.

Anyone seeing these birds as they move through the state is asked to report sightings so the birds can be tracked.

Whoopers stand about 5 feet tall and have a wingspan of about 7 feet from tip to tip. They are bright white with black wing tips, which are visible only when the wings are outspread. In flight they extend their long necks straight out, while their long, slender legs extend out behind the tail.

Whooping cranes typically migrate singly, or in groups of two to three birds, and may be associated with sandhill cranes.

Other white birds such as snow geese, swans and egrets are often mistaken for whooping cranes. The most common misidentification is pelicans, because their wingspan is similar and they tuck their pouch in flight, leaving a silhouette similar to a crane when viewed from below.

Anyone sighting whoopers should not disturb them, but record the date, time, location and the birds' activity. Observers should also look closely for and report colored bands which may occur on one or both legs. Whooping cranes have been marked with colored leg bands to help determine their identity.

Whooping crane sightings should be reported to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office at Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge, 701-848-2466, or Long Lake NWR, 701-387-4397, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department in Bismarck, 701-328-6300, or to local game wardens across the state.

Reports help biologists locate important whooping crane habitat areas, monitor marked birds, determine survival and population numbers, and identify times and migration routes.


WATERFOWL HUNTERS
ANS
AQUATIC NUISANCE SPECIES
LAWS NOW IN PLACE
Remove plants and plant fragments from decoys, strings and anchors.
Remove plant seeds and plant fragments from waders,other equipment and dogs before leaving hunting areas.
Remove all aquatic plants from boats and trailers before leaving a marsh or lake. (Does not include cattails or bulrushes used for camouflaging boats.)
Remove all water from decoys, boats, motors, trailers and other watercraft.
ANS CAN SEVERELY DEGRADE WATERFOWL HABITAT AND FISHING WATERS
NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT
100 North Bismarck Expressway
Bismarck, ND 58501-5095
(701) 328-6300
Email: ndgf@nd.gov
Web: gf.nd.gov

Check Your Deer License Today

Now is the time to locate your deer license and check it for accuracy.

Every year the Game and Fish Department's licensing section receives last-minute inquiries from hunters who can't find their license. When that happens, it's difficult to try to get a replacement license in time for the season opener.

Another reason to check the license now is to make sure the unit and species is what was intended.

Deer hunters in need of a replacement license can print out a duplicate (replacement) license application from the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov, or can call 701-328-6300 to have an application mailed or faxed.

The form must be completely filled out and notarized, and sent back in to the Department with a fee.

PERMIT REQUIRED TO POSSESS DEAD DEER

North Dakota Game and Fish Department enforcement personnel are issuing a reminder that a permit is required before taking possession of a dead deer, or any part of a dead deer, such as a skull and antlers, found near a road or in a field. Only shed antlers can be possessed without a permit.

Permits to possess are free and available from game wardens and local law enforcement offices.

In addition, hunters are reminded to properly dispose of dead deer. Harvested deer cannot be left on the side of a roadway or in a ditch, and deer parts cannot be discarded in commercial dumpsters.

ORDER 2016 OUTDOORS CALENDARS

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is taking orders for its *North Dakota OUTDOORS* calendar, the source for hunting season and application dates for 2016. Along with outstanding color photographs of North Dakota wildlife and scenery, it also includes sunrise-sunset times and moon phases.

To order, send $3 for each, plus $1 postage, to: Calendar, North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501-5095. Be sure to include a three-line return address with your order, or the post office may not deliver our return mailing.

The calendar is the *North Dakota OUTDOORS* magazine's December issue, so current subscribers will automatically receive it in the mail.

Tewaukon Rod and Gun Club member, Bob Fust (left) and club president, Don Dathe (center) receive the 2015 award presented by Brandon Kratz, Game and Fish Department southeast district fisheries supervisor, Jamestown.

Tewaukon Rod and Gun Club Recognized

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has honored the Tewaukon Rod and Gun Club for its ongoing efforts to develop and improve public use facilities at numerous lakes in Richland and Sargent counties.

Each year the Department's fisheries division presents a certificate of appreciation to an organization that has signed on as a cooperating partner in local projects. Brandon Kratz, Department district fisheries supervisor, said the Tewaukon group is a great example of the role a local entity has in assisting the Department and hunters and anglers of North Dakota.

Tewaukon Rod and Gun Club members have helped with lake access, boat ramps, restrooms, courtesy docks and fishing piers.

"Without their help, public water access in North Dakota would be vastly different, and even absent in many situations," Kratz said.

The club was specifically mentioned for their work at Alkali Lake, Bisek Slough, Grass Lake and Tosse Slough.

Staff Notes

Andy Dinges

Tana Bentz

WATERFOWL BIOLOGIST NAMED

Andy Dinges, a Nebraska native, is the Game and Fish Department's new migratory game bird biologist in Bismarck.

Dinges obtained his undergraduate and Master's degrees in fish and wildlife from the University of Nebraska and the University of Missouri. He has also worked on several waterfowl related projects in the Prairie Pothole Region of North Dakota and South Dakota.

LICENSING AGENT HIRED

Tana Bentz, Bismarck, was hired in August as a licensing clerk in the Game and Fish Department's main office in Bismarck.

back cast

By Ron Wilson

On a drizzly, September morning in southwestern North Dakota we release our dogs, cross a fence and hike south with loaded shotguns and a flimsy game plan.

We know little about hunting sage grouse, other than to point our collection of noses into the wind and weave through the aromatic vegetation for which the birds are named.

For the last couple days, while waiting for the short sage grouse season to open, we hunted sharp-tailed grouse not far from here, following our dogs from buffaloberry patch to buffaloberry patch, flushing birds from what little shade this country offers when the sun is big and relentless.

We shot our share and ate a few under lantern light in a small camper parked on a flat spot. We've camped here before, following pretty much the same routine of eating sharptails and wondering if this is the year we'll shoot a sage grouse.

It doesn't feel right to be hunting this hard, arid land in the rain. Pulling the occasional cactus thorn from a dog's paw with needle-nose pliers should be done with sweat dripping off your nose, not rain running down your back.

The first sage grouse I flushed in this country was sometime in the 1990s on a too-hot, cloudless morning about 2 miles from camp. When the big, lumbering bird flushed, I thought it was a hawk abandoning its cottontail rabbit breakfast.

It wasn't until the grouse was well out of shotgun range that its hesitant wing beat and straight-line flight gave it away. I wanted to shoot so I could say that at least I'd missed a sage grouse, but my shotgun never left my shoulder.

Historically, sage grouse have never been big in the state. Like pronghorn and bighorn sheep, these birds are on the edge of their range where habitat and climate limit their success and expansion.

The smallish assemblies of hunters who travel to this neck of North Dakota understand this. They surrender hope of a sure thing, a dead grouse in the bag, and fill up on an abundance of good-looking country.

At times, it feels like a fair trade. Other times, it doesn't.

The first legal, open sage grouse season in the state was in 1964, not long after I was born. I'm late to the game, long past the birds' hey day in the early 1950s when Game and Fish Department biologists counted a record high 542 male sage grouse on southwestern North Dakota leks.

It's still raining, not hard, but just enough to make me wonder if pulling our camper over dirt roads that can turn to crud in a hurry will be an issue. We'll figure it out tomorrow, or the next, when the three-day sage grouse season ends.

With nothing to show for our hike, but sodden dogs, clothes and shotguns that need to be wiped dry and oiled, we unload, manage the fence and head to our parked vehicle.

When the handful of sage grouse flush from the roadside ditch we don't shoulder empty shotguns out of reflex, but watch as they fly over scattered sagebrush, top a rise and disappear.

Those birds, likely a hen and her young, were the last I hunted in North Dakota. Years later, in 2008, Game and Fish Department officials closed the season on a drastically declining sage grouse population for the first time in nearly a half-century.

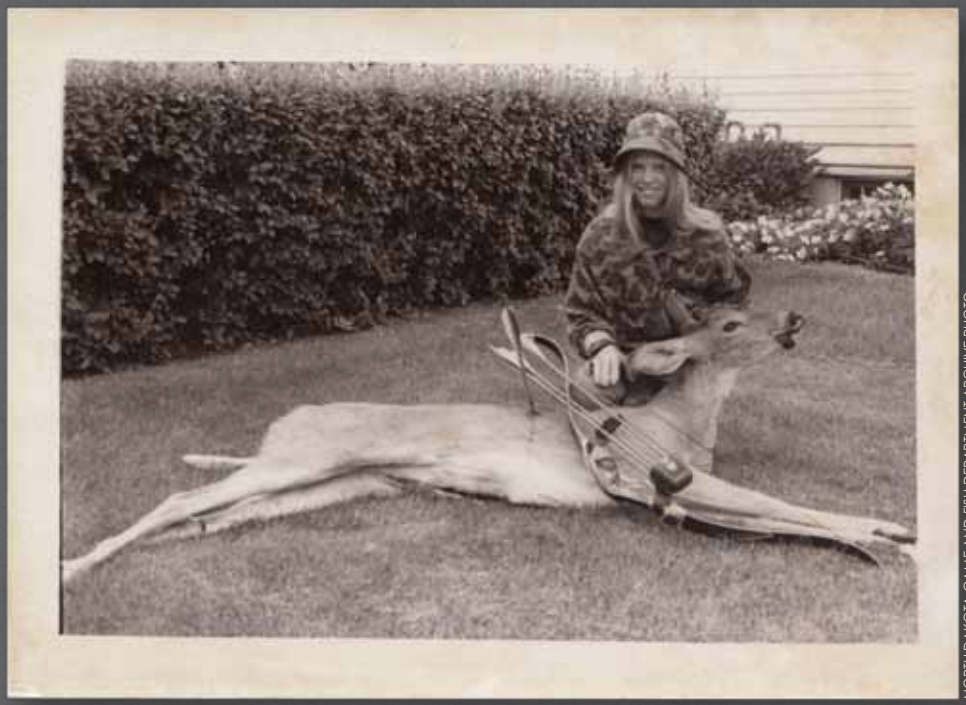
While the season closure has run uninterrupted since, it's too early to bury the possibility of hunting sage grouse in North Dakota again one day.

What fosters this notion is the continued collective effort to improve sage grouse habitat in southwestern North Dakota, with the aim of building a self-sustaining population.

I cheer the undertaking and wish the birds luck, not because I want to hunt sage grouse in North Dakota again someday, but I'd like to know that I could.

RON WILSON *is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*

MIKE ANDERSON



NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT ARCHIVE PHOTO

A Look Back

By Ron Wilson

While we chose this dated black and white photograph as a way to talk about camouflage, it's impossible to ignore the young archer.

The photograph, which ran in *North Dakota OUTDOORS* in August 1973, was used at the time to announce the start of the deer and pronghorn archery seasons.

"The young archer in the photo, 12-year-old Jill Larson, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. James Larson of Valley City, was successful in bagging a deer. She shot her whitetail on Labor Day (1972) while hunting southwest of Valley City … It was her first year of hunting – you can safely bet her second year of hunting will soon be here," according to *North Dakota OUTDOORS.*

Turns out, after some digging through *OUTDOORS* files, we found another photograph of Jill and her second whitetail doe taken with a bow in 1973.

In 1972, Jill was one of about 4,700 residents and nonresidents combined who purchased deer bow licenses in North Dakota. Since its inception in the early 1950s, North Dakota's statewide deer bow season has gained considerable momentum. In 2013-14, for example, about 23,500 archers bought deer bow licenses in the state.

Jill, whose last name is now Christensen, still lives in Valley City, and buys a North Dakota bow license every fall. Her hunting partners include her mom and a friend of her mom's.

Now, let's consider camouflage.

While Jill and thousands of bowhunters since have worn camouflage to blend into their surroundings and thought nothing of it, it wasn't always that way.

Interestingly, it wasn't until 1963 that bow hunters were allowed to use camouflage while bowhunting for deer in the state.

"The 10th statewide archery deer season this fall should find archers taking between 200-300 deer unless the new law – that does not require archers to wear red, yellow or orange – will give a boost to archery, resulting in more deer taken," according to the August 1963 issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS.* "More bowmen may take to the field and woods because they rightfully feel they will have a better opportunity to bag game because of the chance to wear camouflage clothing."

Similarly, while some deer gun hunters of a certain age remember being able to choose from red, yellow or orange safety colors to wear in the field, it wasn't until 1981 that state lawmakers mandated fluorescent orange as the only option for deer hunting with a firearm.

RON WILSON *is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*