

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT
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2015 HUNTING SEASON OUTLOOK





MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

For years, *North Dakota OUTDOORS* has taken a look at the upcoming hunting seasons and what fall may hold for hunters and trappers.

Since 2006, the pages in the August-September issue of *OUTDOORS* have been dedicated to this annual insider look.

The fall hunting and trapping forecasts are provided by Game and Fish Department wildlife biologists from around the state. Keep in mind that some of the forecasts are preliminary. For instance, to meet the magazine's deadline, the brood count data for, say, ring-necked pheasants and sharp-tailed grouse weren't complete. Even so, the information provided by biologists does give hunters and trappers a pretty good idea of what they can expect when the seasons open.

Every year at the time of this writing, I have the same feeling that it seems too early to put summer, and the host of outdoor activities we associate with North Dakota's warmer months, to bed. Yet, I understand that the state's hunting heritage is so strong, that many men, women and young hunter education graduates are itching for fall and deeply considering what the upcoming months may hold.

While deer numbers in the state are down, but slowly bouncing back in some areas, the forecast for fall looks bright.

Sharp-tailed grouse numbers look good, or better than last year, pheasant numbers

should be up in those areas of North Dakota with the best wildlife habitat, resident giant Canada goose numbers remain strong, and the fall waterfowl flight, weather permitting, should resemble what hunters experienced in 2013.

While the fickle Northern Plains weather and a host of other factors can throw a curve into our hunting seasons, things are shaping up for a pretty good fall. Understanding that, do what you can to introduce those young (or not so young) hunter education graduates that I mentioned earlier to North Dakota's great outdoors.

Instill in them the values that make our hunting heritage so strong, explain to them that shooting a limit of birds or filling a big game license is not what it's all about, but rather a small slice. What's important is experiencing what North Dakota has to offer with family, friends and outdoor mentors.

We live in a pretty great state that is, when the weather, habitat and stars align, a wonderful place to pursue a host of animals that swim, fly and hunker in grassland cover. Keep that in mind as you are out and about this fall. Respect the land where you hunt and trap, respect the hardworking people who tend to that land, and respect other hunters you encounter in the field.

And without question, enjoy fall in North Dakota. This is a wonderful place to spend what is arguably the best time of year.

Terry Steinwand

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Front Cover

Getting in the last walk of the day before sunset.

(Photo by Craig Bihrl, Bismarck.)



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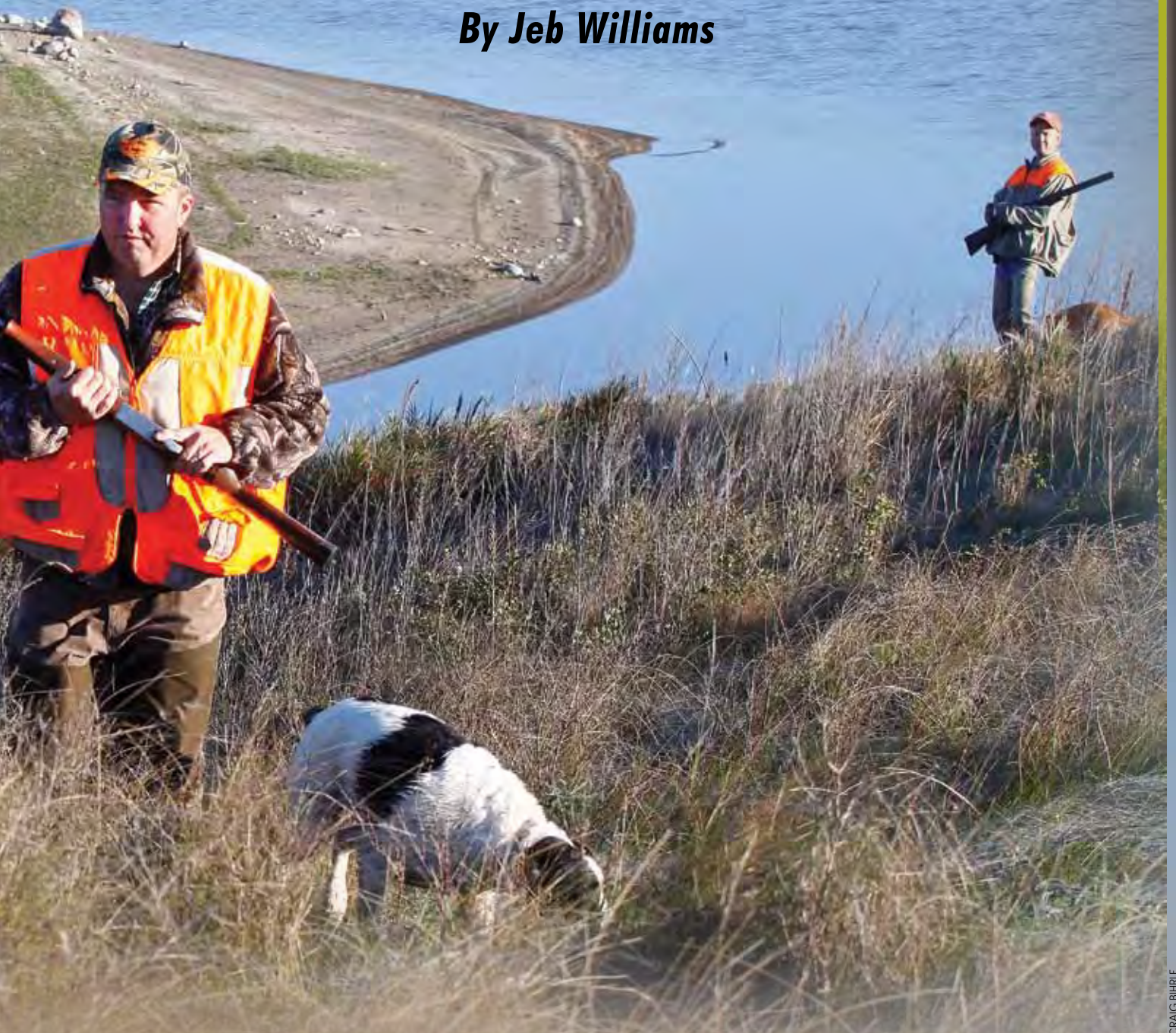
In cooperation with North Dakota Wildlife Federation and North Dakota State Radio.

A scenic landscape photograph showing a large, leafy bush in the foreground on the left. In the background, there is a calm blue lake or reservoir. The shoreline is visible with some rocks and sparse vegetation. The sky is not clearly visible, appearing as a bright blue area at the top. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

While North Dakota's dove season opens September 1, some hunters would argue the fall parade of hunting seasons officially kicks off with the sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian partridge opener on September 12.

2015 HUNTING SEASON OUTLOOK

By Jeb Williams



CRAIG BIRLE

North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife biologists and administrators use the word “partnership” every day. It’s a term synonymous with wildlife management practices across the country and it’s the mechanism by which wildlife conservation is delivered.

The Game and Fish Department’s partner list is a long one, and we value each and every one to ensure hunter and angler dollars are leveraged to the highest extent possible, maximizing fish and wildlife opportunities, and fulfilling the mission of our agency.

North Dakota’s wildlife success stories usually involve successful partnerships, and we routinely seek out partners for projects that benefit fish and wildlife.

Game and Fish has a long history of working with landowners and a variety of U.S. Department of Agriculture conservation programs offered in the farm bill, which benefits both producers and local wildlife populations.

New to the partner list in 2013 was the Outdoor Heritage Fund, which many organizations will lean on frequently as they work to increase conservation practices for a particular region or perhaps statewide.

To date, the Department has received two OHF grants, which has put additional habitat on the ground in the southeastern portion of the state. Sometime this fall a state/federal partnership focusing on the state’s pheasant hunting stronghold in southwestern North Dakota will be announced.

This fall, while you are out enjoying North Dakota’s outdoors, give some thought to future partnership ideas and how your local wildlife club could be a future partner to help wildlife populations in your area.

The upcoming fall hunting seasons could be described with several different adjectives. The pheasant forecast for parts of North Dakota appears good, while

other areas will likely leave hunters hoping the future is brighter. Sharp-tailed grouse and waterfowl hunters will likely have fewer complaints, as numbers once again for these birds are strong heading into the fall months.

Early spring had everyone wondering if a dry year was upon us, but then May came along and brought a lot of rain with it, preventing many ducks from moving north in search of better wetland conditions.

All of North Dakota’s big game lottery license drawings were once again competitive, but for those fortunate enough to receive a license, a reasonable chance exists at filling your freezer with some high protein meat.

All things considered, fall will provide ample opportunities for those willing to get outdoors. Enjoy.

JEB WILLIAMS is the Game and Fish Department’s wildlife division chief.

A couple of canvasbacks taken during a successful morning duck hunt on a North Dakota wetland. The canvasback daily limit is back up to two again this fall.



UPLAND AND SMALL GAME



LARA ANDERSON

of the state, but late spring rains greatly improved brooding cover for all upland nesting birds.

At this writing, summer brood surveys have just started, so it is too early to predict production, but we are receiving reports that pheasant broods are starting to appear in many areas of the state, which is a good sign. If nesting success and brood survival is average, hunters should find pheasants in good numbers throughout traditional areas.

With fingers crossed, and knowing North Dakota now has about half the number of Conservation Reserve Program acres as it did in the mid-2000s, we still hope hunters will find good pheasant hunting in fall in south central, south-western and northwestern North Dakota.

Stan Kohn, Upland Game Management Supervisor, Bismarck

■ WILD TURKEYS

Opens: Oct. 10

Closes: Jan. 3, 2016

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Turkey hunting the last few falls has been tough, with bird populations in many hunting units at lower levels due to cool, wet spring conditions during nesting/brooding.

Turkey production last spring was improved, but from a smaller breeding population, so fall numbers were still relatively low. Consequently, Game and Fish has continued to reduce fall licenses for wild turkeys since 2008 to try to turn turkey numbers around and improve hunter success.

Last fall, 2,580 hunters harvested 1,012 birds for a success of 39 percent. The best hunting success was in the central part of the state.

Even though it is too early in the summer to predict reproductive success for this year, there's hope the fall turkey population shows improvement over last year. The central and west-central parts of the state are expected to provide some of the better turkey hunting opportunities this fall.

Stan Kohn

■ RING-NECKED PHEASANTS

Regular Season Opens: Oct. 10

Delayed Opener: Oct. 17

Regular Season Closes: Jan. 3, 2016

Delayed Season Closes: Jan. 3, 2016

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Finally, after a series of cool, wet springs, 2014 was a much better production year for pheasants in the state. That was followed by a relatively dry winter, with little snow accumulation across the pheasant range, enabling pheasant hens to survive winter in good shape.

Results of this spring's crowing count survey showed good numbers of breeding roosters throughout much of the state's traditional pheasant range, with numbers up 9-12 percent.

Residual cover for nesting hens was about average in spring in many areas

To help improve wild turkey numbers and hunter success, the Game and Fish Department has reduced fall license numbers the last several years.



LARA ANDERSON

■ RUFFED GROUSE

Opens: Sept. 12

Closes: Jan. 3, 2016

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

If you want a break from hunting the prairie, spend some time pursuing this neat woodland grouse.

Ruffed grouse are primarily found in the native aspen woodlands of Rolette, Bottineau, Pembina, Walsh, Cavalier and portions of McHenry counties. Census data from heavily forested states like Minnesota and Wisconsin, indicate ruffed grouse numbers cycle about every 8-10 years. This was observed many years ago in North Dakota, but because of limited and fragmented native woodland acreage and low numbers of ruffed grouse, population cycles are seldom seen today.

But the good news for 2015 is that spring drumming counts were up in both the Turtle Mountains and Pembina Hills. Granted, North Dakota's ruffed grouse population is still low compared to states to the east, but with good production, an improved population this fall in both the northeast and north central parts of the state is a possibility.

For ruffed grouse in particular, habitat is the key. A good mixture of young and old aspen trees, with a thick shrub understory of beaked hazel, will improve nesting success and brood survival.

Ruffed grouse hunting pressure is extremely low after snow blankets the forest each year, and that sometimes leaves a couple of months when virtually no one is hunting these superb birds. Regardless of their population status, many hunters do not consider their hunting season complete without at least one trip to the grouse woods in fall.

Stan Kohn

■ SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

Opens: Sept. 12

Closes: Jan. 3, 2016

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

For many hunters, the sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian partridge opener will be the start of a much anticipated 2015 hunting season.

Sharptail hunters have declined over the past decade, but there still remain those hardcore grouse hunters who lose themselves in North Dakota's wide open country, chasing native birds in early fall.

North Dakotans are fortunate to have such a vast resource, as nearly every county has a stable sharp-tailed grouse population. This year hunters should find good opportunities as bird numbers are similar to 2014.

Overwinter survival was high as indicated by the Game and Fish Department's spring dancing ground census. Statewide populations increased by roughly 20 percent. Winter snow cover was minimal, allowing for improved survival. Late fall moisture, combined with ample amounts of early spring rains, produced excellent nesting and brood rearing cover through much of the state.

Sharptail numbers responded favorably to the improved habitat conditions. All areas of the state seem to have similar or improved grouse numbers. Prelimi-

nary brood data indicates brood size is 6.10 chicks per adult, compared to 6.14 in 2014. At the time of this writing, the brood survey was only 50 percent complete.

There will be localized areas that didn't have a good hatch, so if hunters don't find birds, but are willing to travel to a different area, their luck could improve. Hunters should have plenty of opportunities if they cover enough ground.

Aaron Robinson, Upland Game Management Biologist, Dickinson

■ HUNGARIAN PARTRIDGE

Opens: Sept. 12

Closes: Jan. 3, 2016

Daily Limit: 3

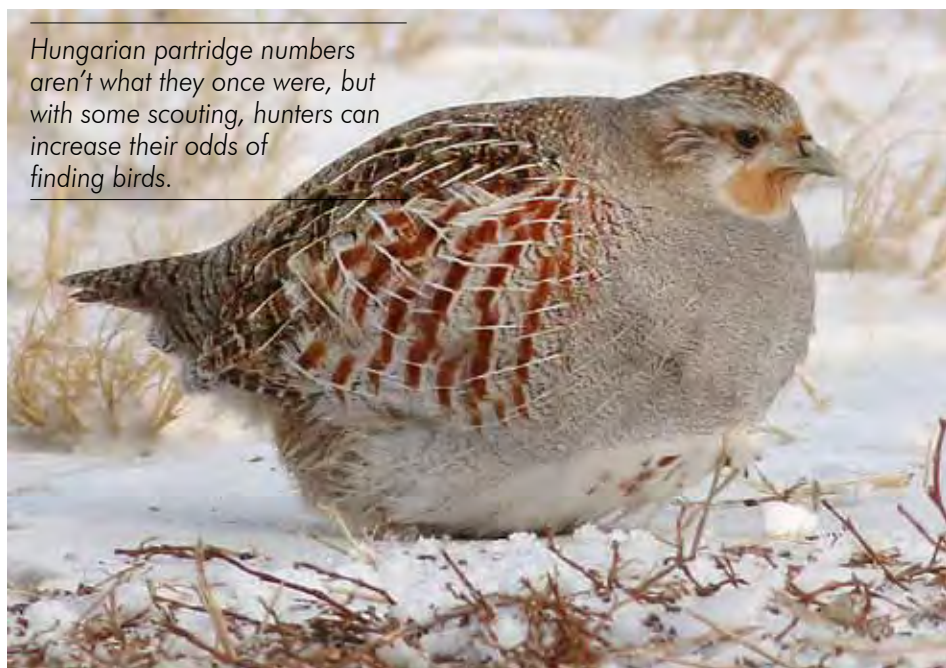
Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Hunters this fall will see similar numbers of Hungarian partridge in the field as last year.

Partridge have become a bird for opportunistic hunters who are after either sharp-tailed grouse or pheasants, so keep a lookout for areas such as abandoned farmsteads and native prairie on the edge of small grain crops. Pockets of decent hunting may be found in these areas, but

Hungarian partridge numbers aren't what they once were, but with some scouting, hunters can increase their odds of finding birds.



CRAIG BIRLE

hunters will need to spend some time in the mornings scouting out potential areas.

Aaron Robinson

■ SAGE GROUSE, PINNATED GROUSE

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

Results from North Dakota's spring sage grouse survey indicated the number of strutting males observed in southwestern North Dakota remained well below management objectives.

Game and Fish Department biologists counted a record low 30 males on six active strutting grounds. Last year, 31 males were counted on six strutting grounds.

This is the eighth year in a row that North Dakota won't have a sage grouse season, and the sixth year in row for a closed season on pinnated grouse, or prairie chickens, in the northeastern and southeastern parts of the state.

Aaron Robinson



LARA ANDERSON

While white-tailed deer show signs of rebounding in some parts of the state, the total number of licenses made available to hunters in 2015 is lower than 2014.



CRAIG BIRHLE

■ TREE SQUIRRELS

Opens: Sept. 12

Closes: Jan. 3, 2016

Daily Limit: 4

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Tree squirrels may be taken statewide with firearms loaded with shot, rimfire rifles, or with bow and arrows legal for taking upland game.

Of the three species of tree squirrels found in North Dakota, fox squirrels are the largest.

BIG GAME

■ WHITE-TAILED DEER

Archery Opens: Sept. 4

Archery Closes: Jan. 3, 2016

Regular Gun Season Opens: Nov. 6

Regular Gun Season Closes: Nov. 22

Muzzleloader Opens: Nov. 27

Muzzleloader Closes: Dec. 13

For the 2015 hunting season, Game and Fish made 43,275 licenses available to deer gun hunters, 4,725 fewer than 2014 and the lowest number since 1978.

The statewide hunter success rate in 2014 was 60 percent, which is slightly higher than 2013 (55 percent), but well below the Department's goal of 70 percent.

Aerial surveys were not flown last winter due to the lack of snow. While

the lack of snow did not allow for winter white-tailed deer surveys, it did give Game and Fish Department biologists optimism for higher overall winter survival rates and more healthy fawns being born in spring.

There are portions of the state, particularly the south central hunting units, that appear to have responded well to milder winters and reduced license numbers for antlerless deer.

The Game and Fish Department is working with the University of North Dakota to develop a survey questionnaire to be sent to a random sample of deer hunters. The intent of this survey is to get a reading of North Dakota deer hunter attitudes and desires, and obtain some background information on demographic characteristics.

The information on hunter make-up will help us avoid sampling biases as we move from paper to electronic harvest survey questionnaires. This hunter survey questionnaire will come out in early 2016.

A summary of white-tailed deer hunting in 2015:

- Any-antlered licenses reduced by 1,150.
- Any-antlerless licenses reduced by 2,650.
- Antlered white-tailed deer licenses reduced by 650.
- Antlerless white-tailed deer licenses reduced by 800.
- Antlered mule deer licenses increased by 525.
- 828 muzzleloader licenses are available in 2015 – 414 antlered white-tailed deer licenses and 414 antlerless white-tailed deer licenses. This is 104 fewer muzzleloader licenses than in 2014.
- 187 “I” licenses available for the youth deer hunting season, up 53 from 2014. These licenses are limited in number and are valid for any deer, except antlerless mule deer, in units 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, 4E, 4F, 3B1 and 3B2. There are unlimited “H” youth deer hunting licenses valid for any deer statewide, except mule deer in the above restricted units.
- 202 nonresident any-deer archery licenses available for 2015, 30 more



Mule deer buck licenses in western North Dakota increased by 525 from last year.

LARA ANDERSON

than 2014. The number of nonresident any-deer archery licenses will increase to 281 in 2016.

Bill Jensen, Big Game Management Biologist, Bismarck

■ MULE DEER

Archery Opens: Sept. 4

Archery Closes: Jan. 3, 2016

Regular Gun Season Opens: Nov. 6

Regular Gun Season Closes: Nov. 22

Mule deer in North Dakota's badlands continue to show signs of recovery following severe winters from 2009 through 2011. During that time, mule deer numbers declined by nearly 50 percent.



For the second consecutive year, the state will hold a limited pronghorn season in western North Dakota.

LARA ANDERSON

Spring 2015 marked the third consecutive year that the mule deer index was higher than the previous year. The 2015 spring index was 24 percent higher than 2014, and 16 percent higher than the long-term average.

The population increase can be attributed to no harvest of antlerless mule deer in the badlands during the 2012-14 hunting seasons, a moderate winter over much of the primary mule deer range, and improved fawn production in 2013-14.

The 2014 fawn-to-doe ratio of 95 fawns per 100 does was the highest since 1999, and above the long-term average of 90 fawns per 100 does.

Mule deer hunting opportunities this fall will be similar to 2014 in an effort to encourage long-term population growth. There are 1,875 antlered mule deer licenses available in 2015, an increase of 525 from 2014. Once again, no antlerless mule deer harvest will be allowed in hunting units 3B1, 3B2, 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, 4E and 4F.

The low number of mule deer licenses available will continue to make this one of the most difficult licenses to draw, but for those lucky few, it should result in a high-quality hunt due to less crowded hunting conditions similar to 2014.

Bruce Stillings, Big Game Management Supervisor, Dickinson

■ PRONGHORN

Archery Opens: Sept. 4

Archery Closes: Sept. 27

Gun Season Opens: Oct. 2

Gun Season Closes: Oct. 18

Aerial survey results from July 2015 indicate recovery of the state's pronghorn population remains a slow process.

The survey, which covered about 10,000 square miles, revealed that the number of pronghorn in the state declined slightly from last year. This was in large part due to poor fawn production this summer.

Overall fawn production this year was 52 fawns per 100 does, which is lower than last year and below the long-term average. Potential causes for the decline include a cold and wet fawning season, with lows at or below freezing, and multiple hail storms

in extreme southwestern North Dakota.

Although overall numbers declined, pronghorn numbers in three units remained the same or increased this year. These units also have high buck-to-doe ratios, allowing for some pronghorn licenses, while still encouraging overall population growth. Statewide pronghorn numbers are 45 percent higher than the low reached in 2012, but nearly 60 percent below near-record numbers in 2008.

Game and Fish is offering a limited season for a second consecutive year, with 410 any pronghorn licenses. Hunting unit 4A will have 250 licenses again this year, while unit 3B will have 100 licenses and unit 4C will have 60.

These are all lottery licenses, which can be used during a bow-only portion of the season from September 4-27, and if the license is unfilled, from October 2-18 when hunters can use legal firearms or archery equipment. Success during last fall's limited season was high, as 235 hunters harvested 210 pronghorn for a success rate of 89 percent. The harvest consisted of 199 adult bucks, five does and six fawns. Hunters should expect similar success this year.

Bruce Stillings

■ MOOSE

For season details, refer to the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2015 elk and moose hunting guide.

Moose numbers remain low in what was once considered traditional habitat in the Turtle Mountains and Pembina Hills. However, numbers statewide remain

stable, with the best densities found in the northwest.

Moose unit M1C, located in the Pembina Hills region, has been closed since 2006 and will remain closed again this year. Moose unit M4, which encompasses the Turtle Mountains, was closed in 2014 and is also closed this fall.

The Department continues to monitor moose that died from causes other than hunting, to determine any effects of disease and to gain a better understanding of why they died.

A three-year research study for moose is ongoing in the Kenmare area and on the Missouri River bottoms southeast of Williston. The research is focusing on annual survival, cause-specific mortality, reproduction rates, annual and seasonal movements and home range use, as well as seasonal habitat selection.

Game and Fish allocated 130 licenses for the 2015 moose season, up slightly from 2014. There was a small reduction in licenses in M6 due to poor hunter success in 2014.

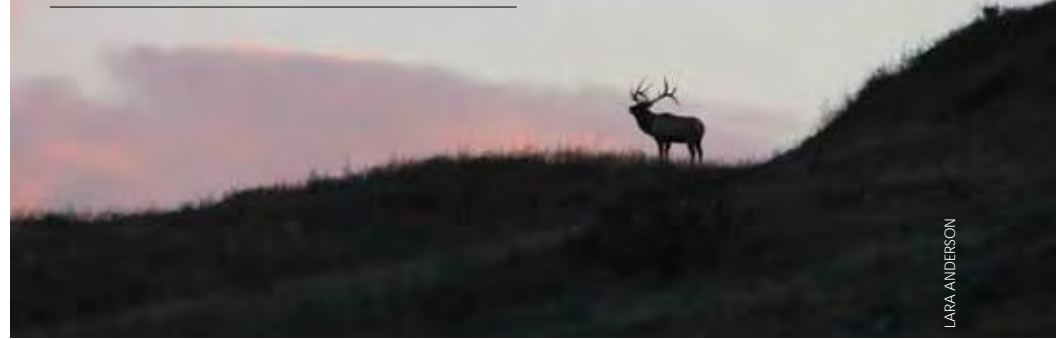
The increase in licenses comes from units M9 and M10, with additional any moose licenses, as well as antlerless licenses. Expectations for the season are high as success for moose historically runs above 90 percent.

Jason Smith, Big Game Management Biologist, Jamestown

■ ELK

For season details, refer to the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2015 elk and moose hunting guide.

Once-in-a-lifetime elk licenses made available to hunters increased in 2015.



LARA ANDERSON

North Dakota's 2015 elk season features 300 licenses, which is an increase from 2014.

Elk numbers in southwestern North Dakota are beginning to stabilize after a successful coordinated volunteer herd reduction effort in Theodore Roosevelt National Park in 2010-11.

Units E3 and E4 will have 70 any-elk licenses this season. This is a slight increase from last year due to an addition of 10 antlerless tags. Elk in unit E2 remain stable and the number of licenses issued is the same as last year.

There is a change in season format for elk unit E1. Elk hunters will now be able to hunt the entire season from October 2 to December 31. In the past, the regular rifle season was split, with all E1 licenses valid from October 4 to October 31, and then antlerless elk could only be harvested from November 22 to December 8. Since elk licenses are once-in-a-lifetime for North Dakota hunters, with the exception of individuals located in the elk landowner preference zone, this change will provide additional hunting opportunities and make the E1 season consistent with other elk units in the state.

The change is in response to a growing elk herd and depredation concerns during late fall when, under the old format, these elk would not be available to hunters.

Making landowner contacts and pre-season scouting prior to the season opener is recommended and is an essential component to a successful hunt.

Jason Smith

■ BIGHORN SHEEP

Because of last fall's pneumonia-related die-off of bighorn sheep in North Dakota, Game and Fish closed the season for 2015.

In last summer's annual survey, Department biologists counted 82 rams, 152 ewes and 36 lambs, the lowest count since 2006.

Rams, ewes and lambs all declined from 2013, with lambs down the most; however, biologists were pleased to see that 69 percent of lambs counted during last summer's survey survived winter, which is about average.

The recruitment rate of lambs per adult

ewes was 26 percent, a bit lower than the long-term average of 30 percent.

Disease testing of 21 bighorns last winter revealed that deadly pathogens were still present, but no animals were observed with clinical signs of disease from January through June.

It remains to be seen if the pathogens are likely to persist and continue to cause long-term consequences for bighorn sheep population recovery in North Dakota.

Brett Wiedmann, Big Game Management Biologist, Dickinson

MIGRATORY BIRDS

■ DUCKS AND GEESE

Good wetland conditions and high waterfowl numbers were noted again during the Game and Fish Department's 68th annual breeding duck survey.

This is perhaps the longest-running operational breeding waterfowl survey in the world, covering nearly 2,000 miles to assess spring wetland conditions and the number of waterfowl in the state.

Winter was cold and generally dry, with below average snowfall in most areas. Waterfowl habitats were drying up as spring progressed, but in early May, rains

improved pond conditions throughout much of the state. The 2015 water index was the 24th highest on record, down 47 percent from 2014, but 21 percent above the 1948-2014 average.

This year's breeding duck index was the 19th highest on record, down 25 percent from last year, but 55 percent above the long-term average.

All species, except green-winged teal (up 12 percent), ruddy ducks (up 21 percent), and wigeon (unchanged) had lower numbers than observed in 2014. Mallards were down 17 percent from 2014 for the 11th highest count on record. Scaup decreased 21 percent, while pintails and shovelers decreased 44 and 49 percent, respectively.

Although populations of most species declined from last year, all species, except pintails (down 13 percent) are above the long-term average, including mallards (up 99 percent); shovelers (up 33 percent); scaup (up 105 percent); gadwall (up 78 percent); canvasbacks (up 16 percent); wigeon (up 93 percent); and blue-winged teal (up 31 percent).

Duck numbers in North Dakota have remained high since 1994 because of exceptional water conditions and abundant nesting cover provided by CRP. However, as CRP acres and native grasslands



*Resident giant
Canada goose
numbers remain high.*

CRAIG EHRLER

continue to decline across the state, biologists expect duck production to decline.

The number of broods observed during the Department's July brood survey was down 28 percent from 2014, but still 28 percent above the long-term average. The average brood size was 7.05 ducklings, up 0.66 ducklings. July water conditions were down 17 percent from 2014, and close to the long-term average.

In addition, because wetland conditions improved later in spring, duck nesting was generally later in 2015, despite an early thaw. There are strong indications of an excellent late hatch. We are predicting that a fall flight of ducks from North Dakota this year will be similar to that observed in 2013.

Numbers of resident Canada geese, Western Prairie Canada geese and arctic nesting Tallgrass Prairie Canada geese, snow geese and Ross's geese all remain high.

Last fall was mild and ended abruptly with strong storms and bitter cold starting the second week in November. Ducks and geese, especially mallards and snow geese, arrived late in the season, moving through the state in a matter of days. Hunting opportunities for ducks and geese should again be good, but as always, weather conditions and migration patterns will dictate waterfowl hunting opportunities come fall.

Mike Szymanski, Migratory Game Bird Supervisor, Bismarck

■ YOUTH WATERFOWL SEASON

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

Opens: Sept. 19

Closes: Sept. 20

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Daily Limit: Ducks and geese – same as regular season.

■ EARLY CANADA GOOSE SEASON

Opens: Aug. 15 (statewide)

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

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Daily Limit: 15

Possession Limit: 45

■ CANADA GEESSE REGULAR SEASON

Opens: Sept. 26 (residents only), Oct. 3 (nonresidents)

Closes: Jan. 1, 2016 (Missouri River zone), Dec. 24 (rest of state)

Daily Limit: 8 (5 in Missouri River zone)

Possession Limit: 24 (15 in Missouri River zone)

■ WHITE-FRONTED GEESSE (STATEWIDE)

Opens: Sept. 26 (residents only), Oct. 3 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 6

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 9

■ LIGHT (SNOW) GEESSE (STATEWIDE)

Opens: Sept. 26 (residents only), Oct. 3 (nonresidents)

Closes: Jan. 3, 2016

Daily Limit: 50, no possession limit

Shooting Hours for all Geese: Half-hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. each day through Oct. 31. Starting Nov. 1, shooting hours are a half-hour before sunrise to 2 p.m. each day.

Exception: Shooting hours are a half-hour before sunrise to sunset on all Saturdays and Wednesdays through the end of each season. Starting Nov. 26, all-day hunting is also allowed on Sundays through the end of each season.

■ REGULAR DUCK SEASON

Low Plains Unit

Opens: Sept. 26 (residents only), Oct. 3 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 6

Shooting Hours: Half-hour

before sunrise to sunset.

High Plains Unit

Opens: Sept. 26 (residents only), Oct. 3 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 6

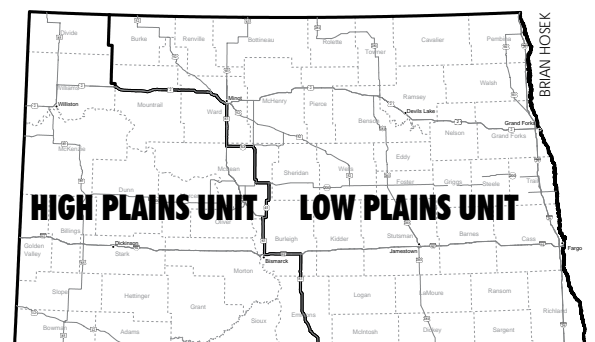
Opens: Dec. 12

Closes: Jan. 3, 2016

Shooting-hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Daily Limit: Six ducks, which may include no more than five mallards (two of which may be hens), two redheads, three wood ducks, two canvasbacks, two pintails, three scaup. In addition to the daily bag limit of ducks, hunters may take an additional two blue-winged teal from Sept. 26 through Oct. 11.

Possession Limit: Three times the daily limit.



■ SANDHILL CRANES

Open Zone 1: Sept. 19

Zone 2: Sept. 19

Closes Zone 1: Nov. 15

Zone 2: Nov. 15

Daily Limit Zone 1: 3

Daily Limit Zone 2: 2

Possession Limit Zone 1: 9

Possession Limit Zone 2: 6

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. daily through Oct. 31; to 2 p.m. Nov. 1 until end of season.

The Mid-continent Sandhill Crane Population is in good shape heading into fall.

This year's spring migration was early due to an open spring with mild temperatures and may have affected the spring survey in Nebraska. Fall staging areas should be abundant as waters recede from early summer's wet weather. Overall, sandhill crane hunting opportunities should be good statewide this fall.

The two zone – Zone 1 west of U.S. Highway 281 and Zone 2 east of U.S. Highway 281 – structure for sandhill cranes continues. The two zones will have the same season lengths (58 days) and dates, but will continue to have different bag limits. Zone 1 has a daily bag limit of three cranes; in Zone 2 the daily bag limit is two. The possession limit in Zone 1 is nine cranes, and six in Zone 2.

Nonresident sandhill crane hunters can pursue sandhill cranes with either a non-resident small game or waterfowl license, in addition to a crane permit. Hunters using a nonresident waterfowl license are reminded that they are required to hunt only in the waterfowl zones designated on their license.

Hunters are also reminded to be sure of their target before shooting, as federally endangered whooping cranes may be present throughout North Dakota during fall. Report all whooping crane sightings to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department in Bismarck at 701-328-6300.

Mike Szymanski

The best dove hunting in North Dakota, which features a good breeding population of birds, is typically during the first two weeks of the season.



CRAIG BIRRE

■ DOVES

Opens: Sept. 1

Closes: Nov. 9

Daily Limit: 15

Possession Limit: 45

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

North Dakota's mourning dove breeding population changes relatively little from year to year. That's good since we generally have a sizeable population of breeding doves.

Challenges for hunters this year will simply be finding the time to get out hunting and finding the right mix of conditions that are conducive to concentrating birds.

Dove hunters should experience good opportunities again during the first two weeks of September. Thus far, mourning dove reproductive efforts look good. North Dakota's early, dry spring allowed for doves to nest successfully early this year and birds nesting later in summer appear to have also done well.

Hunters should look for areas with abundant harvested small grain or oil-seed fields that are also near shelterbelts or other diverse stands of trees.

Eurasian collared doves continue to expand throughout the state and are found in almost every city and small town. However, these birds are not often found outside of municipalities and rarely show up in hunter harvests. Eurasian collared doves and white-winged doves, which are typically found in southern Texas but have expanded their range, are included with mourning doves in the dove bag limit of 15 birds per day and 45 in possession.

Some dove hunters may be contacted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to participate in a wing survey, which involves clipping one wing from each dove shot early in the season to send in for analysis.

Hunters are also reminded to look for banded mourning doves in their bag and report bands directly to the Bird Banding Laboratory at 800-327-BAND (2263), or on the web at www.reportband.gov.

Mike Szymanski

■ CROWS

Fall Season Opens: Aug. 15

Closes: Nov. 2

Spring Season Opens: March 12, 2016

Closes: April 24, 2016

Daily Limit: No limit on crows.

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

In addition to the crow season, crows may be taken when committing or about to commit depredations as specified in federal law.

■ SNIPE

Opens: Sept. 19

Closes: Dec. 6

Daily Limit: 8

Possession Limit: 24

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

■ WOODCOCK

Opens: Sept. 26

Closes: Nov. 9

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 9

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

gf.nd.gov/wildlife/fish-wildlife/wildlife-diseases/other/trichodectes.

Muskrat numbers have finally started to turn around after two years of low numbers, so fur harvesters should see more muskrats this year in most areas. Additionally, beavers, skunks and mink have increased in western North Dakota and fox numbers are up slightly in some eastern regions.

Trappers harvested 38 fishers last season, which was one more than the previous season.

Trappers and hunters harvested 23 bobcats last season, which is 28 percent fewer than the previous season and 63 percent below the 20-year average.

Trend information and research indicate that the mountain lion population in western North Dakota continues to decline. Hunters are reminded that taking kittens or females with kittens is prohibited. Unlike many wildlife species, mountain lions can give birth any time of year.

Even though a female may have dependent kittens during the hunting season, she will spend only about half of the time in a day in the company of her kittens. Therefore, to avoid taking female mountain lions that have dependent kittens, refrain from pursuing mountain lions

where multiple sets of tracks are present.

Mountain lions are solitary, so multiple sets of tracks usually indicate an area frequented by a female and her kittens. Additionally, hunters are encouraged to learn the subtle differences in track size between male and female mountain lions to avoid taking female mountain lions whenever possible. Reducing the number of females taken during the hunting season will help produce a huntable surplus year after year.

Cable device (e.g. snare) users will once again be required to register on the Department's website (gf.nd.gov) prior to going afield. Registration numbers from last year do not carry over, so users need to register again.

Cable devices are effective and efficient for trapping furbearers in North Dakota. However, misuse or careless behavior by trappers can lead to nontarget catches. Therefore, it is important that users are aware of Game and Fish Department cable device requirements and how to be responsible users. Registered users will receive a booklet on the responsible use of cable devices in the mail later this year.

Spring seasons for muskrats and mink have been extended by 10 days to allow for some open-water trapping in the rare years when ice does not melt by the end of

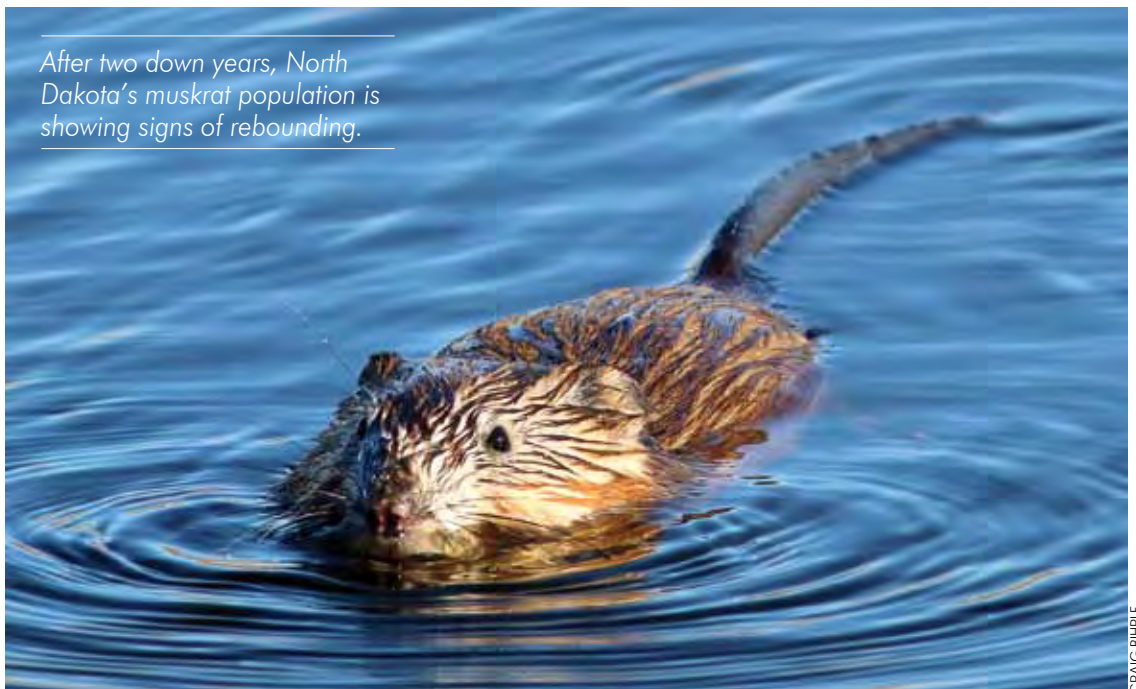
FURBEARERS

For season details, refer to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2015-16 furbearer hunting and trapping guide.

Coyotes should be plentiful again this year, especially in central North Dakota, with statewide numbers being 20 percent higher than last year.

Canine chewing lice is still turning up on coyotes in some areas, which unfortunately devalues the pelts. For more information about lice in coyotes, visit our website at <http://>

After two down years, North Dakota's muskrat population is showing signs of rebounding.



CRAIG BIRLE

April. Additionally, Department research has shown that waterfowl are most vulnerable to floating muskrat trap sets in May. Consequently, covers are now only required on float sets beginning May 1.

*Stephanie Tucker, Furbearer Biologist,
Bismarck*

■ MOUNTAIN LION HUNTING

Zone 1 (early) Opens: Sept. 4

Closes: Nov. 22

Zone 1 (late) Opens: Nov. 23

Closes: March 31, 2016

Zone 2 Opens: Sept. 4

Closes: March 31, 2016

There is a quota of 14 mountain lions in Zone 1 early season. If the quota is reached, the early season in Zone 1 will close immediately. The quota in the late season is seven lions. If that quota is reached, the late season in Zone 1 will close immediately.

There is no mountain lion harvest quota in Zone 2.

Mountain lions may be hunted statewide by residents using legal firearms or archery equipment during regular hunting hours. Beginning Nov. 23, mountain lions may also be hunted by pursuing with dogs. Cable devices and traps are not allowed. The limit is one mountain lion per hunter per season. Kittens (mountain lions with visible spots), or females accompanied by kittens, may not be taken. Any mountain lion taken must be reported to the Department within 12 hours and the entire intact animal must be submitted for analysis and tagging. Legally taken animals will be returned to the hunter following analysis so that the pelt may be removed, but the carcass shall remain property of the Department.

For more information, see the North Dakota 2015-16 furbearer hunting and trapping guide.

■ FISHER TRAPPING OR CABLE DEVICES

Opens: Nov. 23

Closes: Nov. 29

Fishers may be harvested by North Dakota residents only in the open area east



The beaver population in western North Dakota has increased.

LARA ANDERSON

of U.S. Highway 281 and ND Highway 4. The limit is one animal per trapper per season. Any fisher taken must be reported to the Department within 12 hours. The pelt must be removed from the carcass prior to presenting the animal to the Department for tagging. The carcass shall remain with the Department.

For more information, see the North Dakota 2015-16 furbearer hunting and trapping guide.

■ BEAVER AND RACCOON HUNTING, TRAPPING OR UNDERWATER CABLE DEVICES

Open year-round – officially from April 1, 2015-March 31, 2016.

For more information, see the North Dakota 2015-16 furbearer hunting and trapping guide.

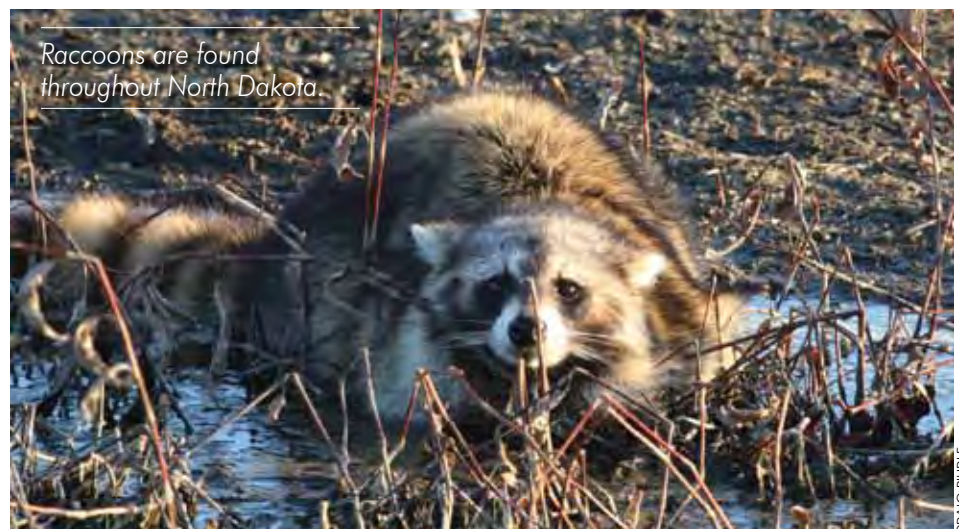
■ BEAVER AND RACCOON CABLE DEVICES ON LAND

Opens: Nov. 23

Closes: May 10, 2016

From March 16, 2016, through May 10, 2016, cable devices must be within 50 feet of water; they must be no more than 4 inches off the ground and must have a stop restricting loop size to 12 inches or less in diameter.

Beaver dams may be dismantled when their presence causes property damage.



Raccoons are found throughout North Dakota.

CRAIG BIRLE

■ WEASEL TRAPPING

Opens: Oct. 24

Closes: March 15, 2016

■ WEASEL HUNTING OR CABLE DEVICES

Opens: Nov. 23

Closes: March 15, 2016

Weasels may be hunted statewide with .22 caliber rimfire rifles or pistols, muzzleloaders of .45 caliber or smaller, longbows and crossbows.

■ MUSKRAT AND MINK TRAPPING OR CABLE DEVICES

Trapping Opens: Oct. 24

Cable Devices Opens: Nov. 23

Closes: May 10, 2016

Muskrat huts may be opened for insertion of traps or cable devices; however, the huts must be restored to their approximate original condition to prevent freeze-up.

Beginning March 16, 2016, colony traps must be under at least 2 inches of water, and trapping or using cable devices on the outside of any muskrat house or structure of any size is prohibited. Traps may be placed completely inside a muskrat house or structure of any size; foothold traps must have at least 2 inches of water over the entire trap pan or must have a protective covering; body-gripping traps used in water can have no more than 2 inches of the trap above the water or must have a protective covering.

Beginning May 1, 2016, float sets must have a protective covering.

■ MUSKRAT AND MINK HUNTING

Opens: Nov. 23

Closes: May 10, 2016

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

■ BOBCAT HUNTING OR TRAPPING

Opens: Nov. 7

Closes: March 15, 2016

Beginning Nov. 23, bobcats may also be hunted by pursuing with dogs.

Open only in the area south and west of

the Missouri River.

The pelt and carcass of each bobcat must be presented to Department personnel for inspection and tagging prior to sale or transfer of possession, but no later than 14 days after the close of the season. No bobcat pelt will be tagged until the animal is skinned and presented with the intact carcass. The carcass shall remain property of the Department. No fur dealer shall possess or purchase an untagged bobcat.

For more information, see the North Dakota 2015-16 furbearer hunting and trapping guide.

■ BOBCAT CABLE DEVICES

Opens: Nov. 23

Closes: March 15, 2016

Open only in the area south and west of the Missouri River.

The pelt and carcass of each bobcat must be presented to Department personnel for inspection and tagging prior to sale or transfer of possession, but no later than 14 days after the close of the season. No bobcat pelt will be tagged until the animal is skinned and presented with the intact carcass. The carcass shall remain property of the Department. No fur dealer shall possess or purchase an untagged bobcat.

For more information, see the North Dakota 2015-16 furbearer hunting and trapping guide.

■ RED FOX, GRAY FOX, COYOTE AND BADGER HUNTING OR TRAPPING

Open year-round – officially from April 1, 2015-March 31, 2016.

In addition, red fox, gray fox and coyote may be hunted at any hour from Nov. 23 through March 15, 2016. Any hunter who engages in the hunting of red fox, gray fox or coyote during the time from half-hour after sunset to half-hour before sunrise, must hunt exclusively on foot and use a predator call. The use of a spotlight or any other artificial light is prohibited.

■ RED FOX, GRAY FOX, COYOTE AND BADGER CABLE DEVICES

Opens: Nov. 23

Closes: March 15, 2016



Red fox.

CRAIG BIRLE



Coyote hunting and trapping is open year-round in North Dakota.

LARA ANDERSON

The Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program, which allows walking-access-only, remains widely popular with hunters.

PLOTS Questions, PLOTS Answers

By Ron Wilson

It's closing in on 20 years since lawmakers authorized the Game and Fish Department to create programs for landowner assistance that encouraged public access to private lands for hunting.

The result of that legislative go-ahead in 1997 is the Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program.

A Northern Plains staple for years, the walking-access-only hunting program remains widely popular

and features an acronym and a triangular, yellow sign that are unmistakable to hunters statewide.

Understanding the program's appeal, *North Dakota OUTDOORS* uses this space annually to update hunters on the state of the PLOTS program.

In the text that follows, Kevin Kading, Game and Fish Department private land section leader, answers several questions regarding the program's status.

CRAIG BIRLE

Q: In 2013 there were about 760,000 PLOTS acres and about 735,000 in 2014. What is the acreage forecast for 2015?

A: Around 730,000 acres ... not a big change from last fall. The change is largely due to a shift away from lower quality PLOTS tracts to higher quality tracts. We've made some decisions over the past few years to focus more on enrolling higher quality tracts, rather than marginal tracts. The upside is that we see higher quality acres in the program, while the downside is that it takes more money to enroll those acres. Another factor is that with fewer CRP acres on the landscape, the Game and Fish Department has had to make up for some of that. Making rental payments with PLOTS does not go very far, so we need to be targeted and focused.

Q: Are landowners still interested in the PLOTS program?

A: Overall, there is still a lot of interest; however, the offers are not as high quality as they were during the peak CRP years. Obviously, less habitat on the landscape results in less opportunity and fewer quality PLOTS acres.

Q: The PLOTS program was awarded \$1.5 million from the Outdoor Heritage Fund last year. How have those funds been put to use?

A: Those funds have been obligated for new habitat establishment and to retain some expiring CRP. A portion was also used for the Department's Save Our Lakes program to address resource concerns in high priority watersheds. About 600 acres of sensitive riparian areas were enrolled in 10- to 20-year agreements and another 3,100 acres of new habitat and expired CRP were enrolled in PLOTS agreements for up to 10 years. These will be some high quality tracts, and will be distinguished in the field with a sign indicating that OHF funds were used.

Q: Any new awards for 2015 from the Outdoor Heritage Fund?

A: The Department received an Outdoor Heritage Fund grant totaling \$3 million to leverage with approximately \$34 million in U.S. Department of Agriculture funding and \$3 million in existing PLOTS funding. This program will be focused in southwestern North Dakota, primarily targeting riparian areas and associated uplands. While the program will provide maximum benefits for water quality and habitat conservation, landowners will be allowed to enroll the most sensitive areas into the program, while still retaining farming and grazing rights on the remainder. Landowners will receive rental payments; cost-share, habitat and public access incentives for implementing these voluntary conservation practices on their land. Because of some delays on the USDA's side, rollout of this program will likely happen late this year.

CONSERVATION PLOTS GUIDE



PLOTS Guide Available Online

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen Guide for 2015 is available online at the Department's website, gf.nd.gov. In addition, PLOTS Guides will be available at most license vendors throughout the state by early September.

The guide will feature about 730,000 PLOTS acres. Because the guide is printed in mid-August, some PLOTS tracts highlighted in the guide may have been removed from the program since the time of printing. There will also be some PLOTS tracts where the habitat and condition of the tract will have changed significantly. Conversely, Game and Fish may have added new tracts to the program after the guide went to press.

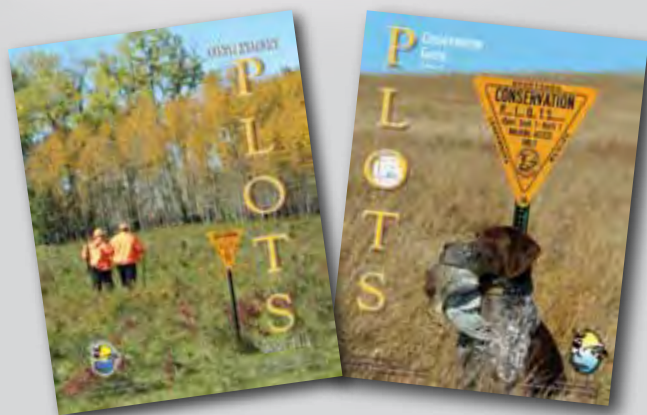
To minimize possible confusion, Game and Fish will update PLOTS map sheets weekly on its website.

The PLOTS Guide features maps highlighting these walk-in areas, identified in the field by inverted triangular yellow signs, as well as other public lands.

PLOTS Guides are free, and available at county auditor offices and license vendors in the state; by walk-in at the Game and Fish Department's Bismarck office; and at district offices in Riverdale, Harvey (Lonetree), Williston, Dickinson, Jamestown and Devils Lake.

The guides are not available to mail, so hunters will have to pick one up at a local vendor, or print individual map sheets from the website.

NATE HARLING



**Contest submission deadline
is April 30, 2016**
Submit photos via email to:
plotsphotos@nd.gov

Log on to the Game and Fish website at
gf.nd.gov for more information.

PLOTS Photo Contest

A photo contest will again decide the cover of the 2016 Private Land Open To Sportsmen Guide.

Shelly Zumbaum of Minot won the contest for the 2015 cover.

From end-of-day hunting shots, to scenic action or landscape shots, the Game and Fish Department wants to feature hunter photos on the 2016 PLOTS cover and elsewhere that showcase North Dakota's strong hunting heritage.

The Department's free PLOTS Guide, which highlights walk-in hunting areas across the state, was first published in 1999.

Contest photos should include a PLOTS sign, front-facing or silhouette.

The contest deadline is April 30, 2016. Log on to the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, to learn more about contest prizes, rules and entry information.

Q: Do you get feedback from hunters and landowners on the importance they put on a strong PLOTS program in North Dakota?

A: There still seems to be strong support from both hunters and landowners. I think hunters have come to realize that there can be more to these areas than what may first appear. Driving to the next corner or walking to the backside of an area may surprise some hunters. We used to get more calls about this issue, but now we hear from hunters about the little "sweet spots" they find while exploring a particular PLOTS. Landowners are still interested and we have seen quite a shift again in interest in planting grass. A few years ago, many acres of CRP were expiring and some producers did not have the option to keep them in CRP or to reenroll their contract. Many of those acres were farmed and some of those folks now want to put it back into grass, either with CRP or as a stand-alone PLOTS contract. Another thing we've seen is more interest in trying to use cover crops and other methods to improve soil health and utilize excess moisture. These can provide benefits to wildlife and hunters if established correctly.

Q: In these same pages last year, you said the PLOTS program was in the midst of a work-over year. What are some of the things that came of the work-over?

A: Much of the work-over came in the form of administration and policy changes in response to the state auditor's office performance audit. We made several improvements to our operations, our work flow and developed more consistent policies and agreements. While it may seem like a lot of work, and it was, the end result will be a better program that will benefit PLOTS in the long run. While in overhaul mode, we also made some adjustments to cost-share and other payment rates.

Q: What kind of shape is the PLOTS program in today?

A: Coming off of last year, the program is in good shape. The administration and policy changes had to be done. It's like the racecar that needs to take a pit stop now and again. By doing so, we may lose some ground, but we'll make it up by ensuring that we have a good running program. I believe these changes will make us more effective and more efficient and we can deliver a better program to landowners and hunters. We have some challenges, though, as we always have and always will. With challenges come opportunities. Now is the time for agriculture and conservation groups to come to the table and find some common ground to do what is right for the resource and North Dakota's hunting heritage.

Q: Any new developments to the PLOTS program that are in the works?

A: Lawmakers last winter passed a bill that, beginning in 2016, allows unsuccessful applicants for the deer gun lottery to donate their refund to the Department's PLOTS program.



COMING IN 2016

The 2015 North Dakota Legislature passed a law that provides an opportunity for deer hunters, if they are unsuccessful in drawing a lottery license, to donate their refund to the Game and Fish Department's PLOTS program. This option will be available for the 2016 season. All donations contributed by deer hunters will go toward PLOTS tracts or projects that include deer habitat.



CRAIG BIRLE

Renae Heinle, Department private land biologist in Jamestown, updates a PLOTS sign with a new sticker.

PLOTS Signs Updates

Hunters this fall will occasionally come across recognizable yellow PLOTS signs that indicate the land is open only from September 1 – April 1. These are older signs that were placed on the property prior to current administrative rules going into effect.

Kevin Kading, North Dakota Game and Fish Department private lake section leader, said the September 1 – April 1 dates are no longer valid, and the Department continues to phase out the older signs and replace them with signs, or stickers over the old wording, that read "Open To Hunting," which better reflects the new administrative rule that defines PLOTS areas as open to walk-in access for hunting during any open season.

Nate Harling, Department private land field operations coordinator, said updating the signs won't happen overnight, considering there are thousands of PLOTS signs scattered around the state.

"Our field staff is working really hard on this, and they are each able to do 50-100 signs on a good day, but that all depends on how many signs have fallen over or are damaged and need to be replaced," Harling said. "The big push started in summer and we'll know where we are at by the end of the year."

Harling said the goal is to have new signage on all the PLOTS acres across the state by September 2016.

Sharptails

By Ron Wilson

*T*imes change.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, northern pike were top-drawer, the fish of choice for North Dakota anglers.

Then, sometime in the early to mid-1970s, the walleye population in the Missouri River System began to flourish, evermore changing the focus of more than 80 percent of the angling public.

From 2001 through 2011, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department made available more than 100,000 deer licenses per season, giving hunters the unprecedented opportunity to take advantage of an unmatched deer population. Yet, following tough winters and a continued loss of wildlife habitat, deer license numbers have fallen considerably, this year nearly mirroring those (about 43,000) of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Like we said, times change.

While sharp-tailed grouse in recent memory were never the upland bird of choice with the state's hunters – that title falls in the colorful lap of the nonnative ring-necked pheasant – there was a time sharptails, especially in early fall, garnered more attention.

“Participation in sharp-tailed grouse hunting is down today, compared to 20 years ago,” said Stan Kohn, Game and Fish Department upland game

management supervisor. “While it’s just a casual observation, I would think it’s down significantly.”

Before we go any further, let’s first consider the bird.

Sharp-tailed grouse are native to North Dakota and, according to scientists, were here for thousands of years before European settlement. Feathered from head to toe, sharptails are hardy, surviving during the leanest of times by tunneling beneath an insulating blanket of snow to roost out of the wind.

In spring, male sharptails collect on dancing grounds, or leks, to perform ritualized displays for on-looking females for the sake of breeding. This foot-stomping, tail-quivering display is age-old, yet remains electric.

Like little bluestem, which colors the prairie reddish when the native prairie grass matures, sharp-tailed grouse belong here, they are icons of the Northern Plains.

Tim Johnson, Bismarck, and his bird dog, Cady, seemingly have the countryside to themselves while hunting sharp-tailed grouse in Emmons County last fall.



SANDRA JOHNSON

A lone sharp-tailed grouse in western North Dakota..



LARA ANDERSON

While some beautiful weather can be found hunting sharp-tailed grouse in mid-September, it can be hot work at times for bird dogs covering big chunks of prairie.



SANDRA JOHNSON

"The sharp-tailed grouse is a splendid game bird, if properly hunted strictly in accord with regulations and with an ever-present sense of responsibility for its survival. At the same time, a sharptail is a thing of beauty in form and color – a superb example of creative adaptation to the rigorous demands of its environment. It is not difficult, on reflection, to experience a feeling akin to awe in its presence. It seems remote and wistful in demeanor, as if dreaming of its long, long past. And it is the fervent wish of us all that the future of the sharptail may be long, very long in the land of its origin," wrote the late Dr. S. O. Kolstoe in North Dakota OUTDOORS in 1984.

To announce with certainty why participation in sharp-tailed grouse hunting is down today compared to year's past is difficult. The reasons likely vary and maybe are many.

"Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, we used to do random, opening weekend hunter checks in western North Dakota and hand out wing envelopes, and it was easy to stumble into hunters in camps," Kohn said. "Many would be doing combo hunts, bowhunting for deer in the morning and evenings and hunting sharptails during the day."

Yet, when the Conservation Reserve Program firmly took root and pheasants numbers increased in the mid-1990s, Kohn said Department biologists were seeing fewer and fewer hunters out during the grouse opener like they once did.

"It got to the point that it didn't justify us being out doing random checks and handing out wing envelopes," he said. "We were just failing to see the number of folks out in the field over the opening weekend hunting grouse."

Pat Lothspeich, Department outreach biologist, was a game warden in southwestern North Dakota from 1983 to 2009. He patrolled good sharptail country and bumping into hunters wasn't a problem.

"There was a time when I could check grouse hunters all day no matter if I went north or south," he said. "For many of the hunters it was an annual trip, an opportunity to get that yearly badlands and grasslands experience and shoot some birds out on the wide open landscape."

While sharp-tailed grouse are found in every county in the state, it's uncertain if the same can be said for hunters who harbor a soft spot for the native grouse. Yet, does it matter?

"I appreciate sharp-tailed grouse because, to me, they represent the open spaces, prairie grasslands and the history of North Dakota," Kohn said. "Plus, you hunt them during the time in early fall when the weather just doesn't get any nicer."

"I know there remain some diehard grouse hunters out there, hunters who don't feel that the fall hunting season is officially underway unless they've been out grouse hunting," he added.

Randy Kreil, retired Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief, is one of them.

"I can't imagine going through hunting season without spending multiple days in mid- to late September walking the prairie looking for sharptails," he said. "My wife, Karen, and I have spent 20 of 35 wedding anniversaries camping and hunting sharptails in mid-September. That's just what we do."

Kreil has lived in Bismarck for years, but grew up hunting grouse in the Sheyenne River Valley south of Devils Lake. "I've always liked to walk, so I spent a lot of time as a teen chasing grouse in the native prairie," he said. "No one really hunted sharptails in that part of the country back then and I had the world to myself."

Kreil said there is just something about hunting birds that evolved over centuries with the native prairie.

"Thousands of years ago there were sharptails in North Dakota and they remain today," he said. "Considering that, and considering the places you find them, hunting sharptails is pretty special if you stop and think about it, which we do."

While he doesn't feel like he has the world to himself when sharptail hunting today, he certainly doesn't feel crowded, noting a noticeable drop in grouse hunters over the years.

"If we see another sharptail hunter out, I ask my wife the odds of us knowing who it is," he said. "And we usually do. It's a small community of hunters."

In time, maybe, that might change.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



Upland Wing Survey Help

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is again encouraging hunters this fall to help in the effort to manage upland game birds, by collecting feathers from harvested birds and sending in wing envelopes.

Birds included in the upland game wing survey, which has been in practice for decades, are ring-necked pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian (gray) partridge, turkeys and ruffed grouse.

Collecting enough pheasant samples is typically never a problem, but securing enough sharptail and partridge feathers can be.

In 2014, the Game and Fish Department sought the help from upland hunters via the Department's website and elsewhere, and the response was much improved.

Aaron Robinson, Department upland game management biologist, said Game and Fish received 1,400 sharp-tailed grouse wing envelopes from hunters in 2014. That was about 1,000 more than 2013.

"We typically struggle getting sharptail and Hun samples, but not last year," Robinson said. "I've said that we'll take as many as we can get because the more we have, the better the data."

Robinson said biologists can determine sex and age ratios from wings and tail feathers, survival, nesting success, hatch dates and overall production.

What biologists learn from the samples, Robinson said, is vital to helping manage North Dakota's upland game birds.

Hunters interested in receiving wing envelopes should visit the Game and Fish website (gf.nd.gov), or contact the Department's main office in Bismarck by phone (701-328-6300) or email (ndgf@nd.gov).

Hunters can also get wing envelopes at Game and Fish district offices in Devils Lake, Jamestown, Riverdale, Dickinson, Williston and Lonetree Wildlife Management Area near Harvey.



BUFFALOBERRY PATCH

By Greg Freeman, Department News Editor



CRAIG BIRHLE

Another Year of Record Fishing License Sales

The number of anglers buying fishing licenses during the 2014-15 season established a new record in license sales for the third consecutive year.

Statistics compiled by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department revealed more than 222,000 fishing licenses were sold last year, an increase of 3,000 from 2013-14.

Resident license sales were down slightly from last year's record, but the

number of nonresident licenses issued grew by 5,000, establishing a new mark of nearly 65,000.

More than 201,000 anglers actively participated, and ice fishing accounted for 25 percent of all fishing activity.

A record number of fishing lakes and aggressive fish management in North Dakota have helped produce record fishing license sales.

Lake Sakakawea, Devils Lake and Lake Oahe/Missouri River remain the top three fisheries in the state, as has been the case for decades.



LARA ANDERSON

Electronic License Reminder for Bowhunters

Bowhunters are reminded that deer bow licenses and accompanying tags are only available through electronic purchase.

Licenses can be purchased online at the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov; by calling 800-406-6409; or at license vendors in counties that are linked to the Game and Fish Department's online licensing system.

In counties that are not on the Game and Fish system, deer bow licenses are not available at the usual license vendors. In addition, hunters who purchase bow licenses online from a personal computer should allow for several days to receive their tag in the mail.

County auditors and all their authorized license vendors that are part of the Game and Fish Department electronic licensing system are listed on the Department's website.

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS
PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

WILLISTON KUMV - Tuesday - 10 pm KXMD - Sunday - 10 pm; Monday - Noon	MINOT KMOT - Tuesday - 10 pm KXMC - Saturday - 10 pm; Monday - Noon	GRAND FORKS WDAZ - Wednesday - 5 pm
DICKINSON KOCD - Tuesday - 9 pm (MT) KXMA - Sunday - 9 pm (MT)	BISMARCK KFYR - Tuesday - 10 pm KXMB - Sunday - 10 pm CATV - Saturday - 9:30 am	FARGO KVRR - Sunday - 9 pm

on Television

Agencies Prohibit Hunting over Bait

Hunters are reminded that hunting big game over bait is prohibited on all state owned or managed wildlife management areas, all U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service national wildlife refuges and waterfowl production areas, U.S. Forest Service national grasslands, and all North Dakota state school, state park and state forest service lands.

The governor's proclamation relating to chronic wasting disease also includes a provision that prohibits hunting big game over bait on both public and private land in deer unit 3C west of the Missouri River, and all of units 3E1, 3E2, 3F1 and 3F2.

In addition, any firearms, equipment or accessories used by hunters on Private Land Open To Sportsmen acreage may not be left unattended and must be removed when the hunter leaves the area. This includes, but is not limited to, guns, blinds, stands, baits, scents and decoys. This means a hunter cannot place bait on PLOTS prior to or during the season and leave it there. Any bait would have to be brought to the PLOTS with the hunter the same day and taken out with the hunter the same day he/she leaves.

Hunting over bait is defined as the placement and/or use of baits for attracting big game and other wildlife to a specific location for the purpose of hunting. Bait, in this case, includes grain, seed, mineral, salt, fruit, vegetable, nut, hay, any naturally derived scent or lure, or any other natural or manufactured food placed by an individual. Bait does not include agricultural practices, gardens, wildlife food plots, agricultural crops, livestock feeds, fruit or vegetables in their natural location such as apples on or under an apple tree, or unharvested food or vegetables in a garden.



Jennifer Miller of Olean, New York, is the artist for the 2015-16, Federal Duck Stamp featuring ruddy ducks.

Federal Duck Stamps Available Electronically

This year's 2015-16 federal duck stamp is available for electronic purchase by visiting the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov.

In addition, license vendors that are registered with the Game and Fish Department's licensing system can sell the electronic duck stamp, as does the Department's instant licensing telephone number, 800-406-6409. Physical stamps are not available at North Dakota license vendors this year, but they can still be purchased at many U.S. Postal Service offices.

Game and Fish licensing manager Randy Meissner said the electronic stamp is a purchase item like any other hunting or fishing license.

"When the purchase is completed the electronic stamp is valid immediately," Meissner said. "The words 'Federal Duck

Stamp' will be printed on the license certificate, along with an expiration date 45 days from the date of purchase. The actual physical stamp will be sent by postal mail."

Meissner said the physical stamp is processed and sent by the official duck stamp vendor in Texas, and should arrive to the individual buyer well before the expiration date printed on the electronic license. The physical stamp must remain in possession of the hunter after the 45-day electronic stamp has expired. Individuals who have questions regarding the status of their physical stamp can contact the federal duck stamp vendor customer service number at 800-852-4897.

This year's federal duck stamp has a fee of \$25, up from \$15 last year. In addition, there is another \$1.50 added to cover shipping and handling costs of the actual physical stamp. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said the duck stamp price increase is the first in 24 years, the longest single period without an increase in the program's history.



CRAIG BIRHLE

Big Game Transport Rules

Requirements for transporting deer, elk and moose carcasses and carcass parts into and within North Dakota remain as a precaution against the possible spread of chronic wasting disease.

Hunters harvesting a big game animal this fall in North Dakota deer unit 3F2 cannot transport a carcass containing the head and spinal column outside of the unit unless it's taken directly to a meat processor. The head can be removed from the carcass and transported outside of the unit if it is to be submitted to a State Game and Fish Department district office, CWD surveillance drop-off location or a licensed taxidermist.

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

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

Hunters are prohibited from transporting into North Dakota the whole carcass, or certain carcass parts, of deer, elk, moose or other members of the cervid family from areas within states and provinces with documented

occurrences of CWD in wild populations, or from farmed cervid operations within states and provinces that have had farmed cervids diagnosed with CWD. Only the following portions of the carcass can be transported:

- Meat that is cut and wrapped either commercially or privately.
- Quarters or other portions of meat with no part of the spinal column or head attached.
- Meat that has been boned out.
- Hides with no heads attached.
- Clean (no meat or tissue attached) skull plates with antlers attached.
- Antlers with no meat or tissue attached.
- Upper canine teeth, also known as buglers, whistlers or ivories.
- Finished taxidermy heads.

Hunters should refer to the 2015-16 CWD proclamation on the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, for game management units, equivalent wildlife management units, or counties in other states that have had free-ranging deer, moose or elk diagnosed with CWD. Importation of harvested elk, white-tailed deer, mule deer, moose or other cervids from listed areas is restricted.



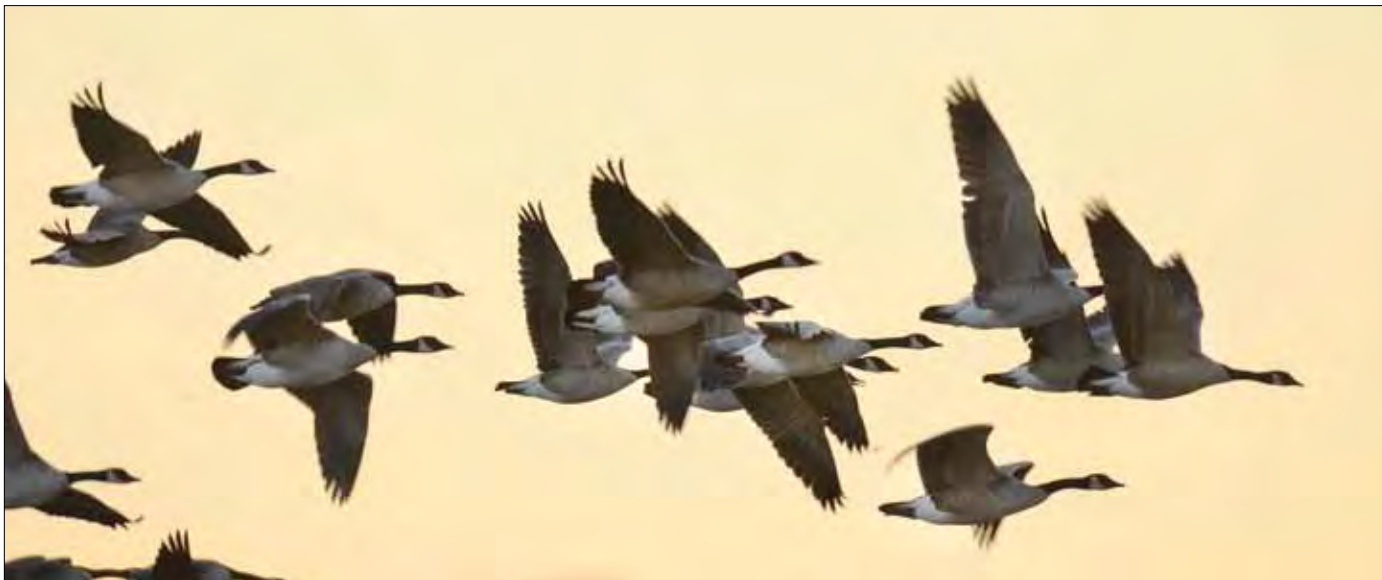
CRAIG BIRHLE

Sandhill Crane Permits

North Dakota's sandhill crane season opens September 19 and continues through November 15.

In addition to other licenses required, resident hunters need a \$10 crane permit, while nonresidents need a \$30 permit. Hunters can apply online, or print out a resident or nonresident application for mailing at the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov. Harvest Information Program certification is required.

Hunters can also send the permit fee, along with personal information, including height, weight, social security number, date of birth, color of hair and eyes, and hunter education number and state issued, to Crane Permit, NDGF, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.



HIP Certification Required

All migratory game bird hunters, regardless of age, are reminded that Harvest Information Program registration is required September 1.

HIP certification is required for hunting ducks, geese, swans, mergansers, coots, cranes, snipe, doves or woodcock. Registration provides the Game and Fish Department with a database of names and addresses of migratory bird hunters, and a sample of these hunters will receive a

questionnaire regarding hunting activity and number of birds harvested. Hunter compliance is essential in order to obtain reliable estimates of the annual harvest of all migratory game bird species.

Hunters who purchase a license through the Department's electronic licensing system (gf.nd.gov) or instant licensing telephone number at 800-406-6409 can easily get HIP certified.

Otherwise, hunters can access the Game

and Fish website, or call 888-634-4798 and record the HIP number on their fishing, hunting and furbearer certificate.

Those who registered to hunt the spring light goose season in North Dakota do not have to register with HIP again, as it is required only once per year. However, hunters must HIP register in each state in which they are licensed before hunting migratory game birds.



SAH Accepting Goose Meat

The North Dakota Community Action Sportsmen Against Hunger program is accepting goose meat taken during the early Canada goose season. In addition, the program will accept Canada and light (snow, blue and Ross's) goose donations during the regular waterfowl season.

Similar to last year, hunters can bring in their goose meat to participating processors. However, hunters must remove the breast meat from the birds before processors can accept them.

Hunters can clean their geese at home prior to delivery to a processor, but breast

meat brought from home without a wing or head attached to the meat, must be accompanied by written information that includes the hunter's name, address, signature, hunting license number, date taken and species and number taken.

Hunters may also deliver geese directly from the field to a processor, but identification must remain attached to the bird until in possession of the processor.

Since no goose carcasses or feathers are allowed inside processing plants, hunters must be able to ensure proper disposal and clean-up of carcasses.

The list of participating processors will be updated as permits are received, and is available on the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website at gf.nd.gov.

Hunters interested in donating are encouraged to call processors before dropping off geese, to have a clear understanding of how goose breasts will be accepted and the processor's hours of operation.

For more information, visit the CAPND website at www.capnd.org, or contact Sarah Hasbargen at 701-232-2452.



Teddy Roosevelt Day

Families looking for a fun afternoon filled with outdoor activities are invited to attend Teddy Roosevelt Family Day on September 27 at McDowell Dam, just east of Bismarck.

The free event runs from 1-4 p.m. and families can come and go at any time. It features many hands-on activities including archery, BB gun shooting, fishing, animal identification, prizes and more.

The first 750 kids who attend also receive a free Teddy Roosevelt patch.

Organized by area Boy Scout, Girl Scout and 4-H organizations, Teddy Roosevelt Family Day is sponsored by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, North Dakota Chapter of the Wildlife Society, Ducks Unlimited, Delta Waterfowl and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

McDowell Dam is 3.5 miles east of Bismarck on ND Highway 10, then 1 mile north.



2015 Watchable Wildlife Contest
Plant and Insect Runner-up
Monarch butterfly
Brad Starry, Fargo

Watchable Wildlife PHOTO CONTEST

Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest

The deadline for submitting photos to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest 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.





CRAIG BIRRE

Use Caution on Rural Roads

North Dakota hunters are reminded to be cautious of farm, ranch and other traffic when traveling on rural roads.

Fall is a busy time in the state as farmers and ranchers are harvesting crops, moving cattle, hauling bales and moving heavy

machinery. Knowing this, hunters driving around on country roads should slow down when meeting another vehicle and pull well to the right when topping a hill.

To maintain positive landowner/hunter relations, Game and Fish Department

officials said hunters should move to the right side of the road to allow wide farm vehicles to pass, park vehicles in a place that will not block a roadway, field approach or gate, pick up trash and empty shells, and not clean game in the road ditch or approach.

Youth Waterfowl Trailer Available

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department and Ducks Unlimited co-sponsor a trailer full of waterfowl hunting gear that is available to families with young hunters.

Purchased by the Game and Fish Department's Encouraging Tomorrow's Hunters Grant Program, the trailer is designed for families who don't have the appropriate gear for their young hunters to hunt waterfowl. The equipment is donated by Avery Outdoors.

Use of the trailer is free, and it is equipped with goose and duck decoys for field hunting, and two bags of floating duck decoys and marsh seats for hunting a wetland.

For more information, or to reserve equipment, contact the Ducks Unlimited office in Bismarck at 701-355-3500.



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT PHOTO



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



R.A.P.

REPORT ALL POACHERS

1-800-472-2121

Poachers Steal Your Wildlife – Make the Call!



PUBLIC ASKED TO REPORT VIOLATIONS

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department encourages hunters, anglers and landowners who witness a fish or wildlife violation to file a report with the Report All Poachers program.

RAP is a cooperative project between the Game and Fish Department, State Radio Communications and the North Dakota Wildlife Federation. The RAP

line offers rewards – from \$100 to \$1,000 depending on the nature and seriousness of the crime – for information that leads to conviction of fish and wildlife law violators. Reports can also go directly to game wardens or other law enforcement agencies. Callers can remain anonymous.

Witnesses should note vehicle description, including make, color, license plate

number and state issued. Description of the violator should also be considered.

Witnesses should report a violation by calling the RAP telephone number at 800-472-2121. RAP will then contact the local game warden immediately. If the witness gives the RAP operator a phone number, the witness will be contacted right away.

NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH ONLINE

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

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Staff Notes



Peter Miley

Miley Fills Rugby Post

Peter Miley has filled the district game warden post in Rugby, following longtime warden Randy Knain's retirement.

Miley, a Wadena, Minnesota native, has a criminal justice degree from Bemidji State University in Minnesota.



Nick Bundermann

Williston Wildlife Technician

Nick Bundermann has filled the wildlife technician position in the Williston district office. He has previously worked for the wildlife division in the Devils Lake district office. Longtime Williston wildlife technician Alan Roller retired in June.

Tollefson Fills Riverdale Post

Amy Tollefson has been selected to fill the administrative assistant position at the district office in Riverdale. Longtime employee Clare Renner announced her retirement earlier this spring.



Amy Tollefson

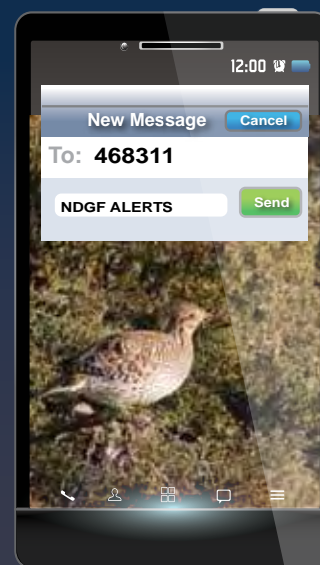
Wolf Accepts Position

Jan Wolf has accepted a full-time position with the Department as the conservation and communications division administrative assistant. This position was created during the 2015 legislative session.



Jan Wolf

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back cast



By Ron Wilson

There's talk that this could be a pretty good year for sharp-tailed grouse.

While there's solid evidence birds got through winter in good shape, what was being said in early August was a little premature because biologists warned that the grouse brood data wasn't final at the time.

Nonetheless, the news is encouraging enough for those who marked the September 12 opener on their calendars weeks ago.

Sharp-tailed grouse, especially those early season birds that oftentimes allow hunter and dog to draw comfortably within shotgun range before flushing with the civility that is lost on late-season grouse, are something of a milestone bird.

At least that's the way we see it.

Time and again, blood of this native grouse is the first to dirty our pocketknives in fall. Despite enthusiastic, but mostly dubious promises to get in a dove hunt before that, to clamp plastic decoys to dead, pencil-thin branches to tempt passing birds, typically our first taste of wild meat for the season is feathered from head to toe before we clean it.

While I don't remember shooting my first sharp-tailed grouse nearly three decades ago, I remember clearly when and where my two sons, born 10 years apart, shot their first birds. It was a big deal for both because they knew it meant something, a milestone marked by a frustrating number of empty shotgun shells.

I had to thumb through back issues of this magazine to find a piece I'd written years ago to confirm what I thought I already knew, that this year marks my oldest dog's 10th hunting season.

Merle has slowed since 2005 when he was an enthusiastic tangle of legs and adolescent folly. He doesn't hear nearly as well as he once did and his eyes look a little milky, something that is especially noticeable when you get nose-to-nose and double-rub his ears. He also has some curious lumps here and there that, we've been assured, are not dangerous, but simply the fallout of old age and being a little overweight.

Merle's first sharp-tailed grouse, his first bird of any species, came on an overcast, mid-September day a decade ago. We were hunting close to home because there was a soccer game that I needed to attend later that morning. A hurried hunt while looking at my watch to time our return to town was not how I wanted to open the season, but our leash was understandably short.

I parked next to some public land, dropped the tailgate and released Merle from his wire box, dumped a handful of 20 gauge shells into a pocket, slipped a water bottle into an empty game pouch, and with noses pointed into the wind, we headed uphill.

Later that day around a soccer field, I retold the story of Merle's first hunt to family and anyone who'd listen. I'm certain I gushed, exaggerated a bit.

Truth is we simply bumped into a covey of sharptails that played along like they so often do that time of year, flushing within shotgun range in staggered bursts of beating wings and clucks.

The dead sharptail rode in my game pouch, bouncing against a water bottle as we hiked downhill.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



RON WILSON



A Look Back

By Ron Wilson

North Dakota and Hungarian partridge go way back.

Native to northern Europe, these upland game birds were stocked in the state as early as 1923. Yet, biologists believe the majority of the ancestors of North Dakota's Huns likely dispersed into the state sometime in the 1920s from the Canadian prairies of Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

The first open season for Huns in North Dakota was held in 1934. The bag limit was three birds, with a possession limit of six.

According to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 1935 annual report, "... the Hungarian partridge is second only to the grouse in being able to combat severe winter conditions and find protection from the elements. Observations show that these birds have readily adapted themselves to all sections of the state and are now well on the way to becoming North Dakota's leading game bird."

While partridge never quite reached that lofty status in this

pheasant-happy state, it was apparent with wildlife managers early on that Hungarian partridge were becoming more and more popular with the state's upland game bird hunters.

"Because of this, the Department has begun a trapping and marking study to determine management techniques which will enable us to aid this bird in maintaining its status and to combat adverse factors which operate on the population," wrote Ted Upgren in the late 1960s when he was a Department upland game biologist in Rugby.

In the black and white photograph provided, Upgren is seen holding a Hungarian partridge that was trapped, tagged and later released for study purposes.

Some of the study birds, including the Hun Upgren is holding, were fitted with a numerical "bib" so researchers could individually observe the behaviors of marked birds from a distance.

Looking back, Upgren said winter studies of Hungarian partridge bring

an appreciation for these gutsy birds' knack for handling the harshest of deep winter.

"Based on limited marked and otherwise known Hun groups from our studies during the winters of 1967-72 on the Pierce County study area, we recorded about a 6 percent Hun mortality for the period of December to mid-February," Upgren said. "This might suggest that Huns are more stubborn than most of our winters are mean. It also suggests that other seasons may be more important to the Hun's life cycle."

It's been years since Hungarian partridge could seemingly be found most anywhere in good numbers, utilizing the edge cover at abandoned farmsteads.

Today, the Hungarian partridge is considered a bonus bird to hunters chasing sharp-tailed grouse and pheasants. Even so, its tie to North Dakota remains.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota *OUTDOORS*.