

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

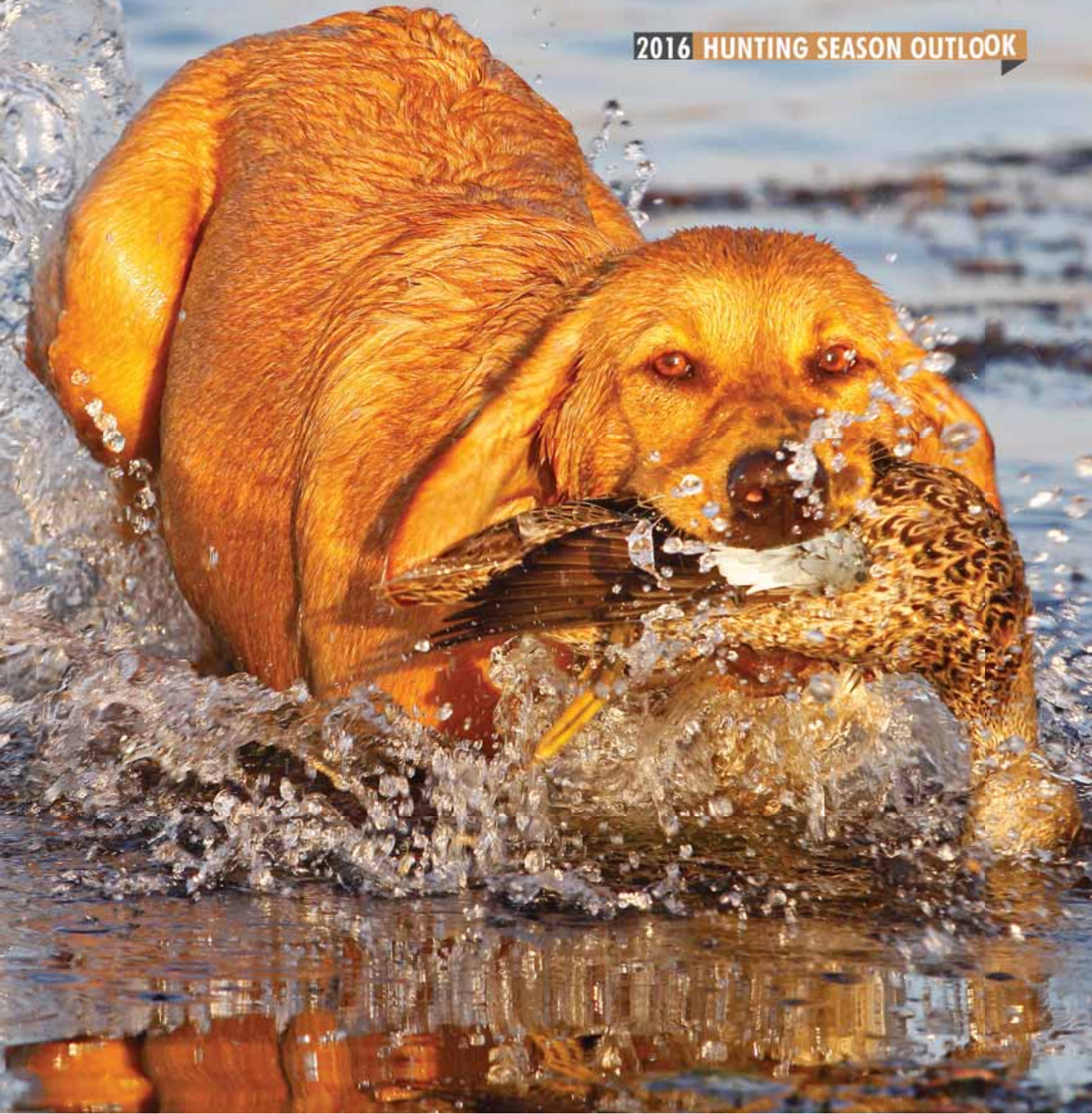
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GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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2016 HUNTING SEASON OUTLOOK





MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

The summer of 2016 was unique to say the least. Coming out of what we would call a nice, mild winter, there was some indication that we might go into a bit of dry spell. The National Weather Service gave a 50:50 chance of being above or below average precipitation.

Fast forward to July and, depending on what part of the state you're located, the prediction was likely true.

I've been in parts of the state that looked so dry that even the promise of some rain wouldn't save the crops. Areas that featured grass up to a cow's belly a couple of years ago now may have grass that's only ankle high. Conversely, other parts of North Dakota were hit with severe thunderstorms, packing large hail that damaged homes, vehicles and crops.

Understanding the kind of energy it takes to damage structures, it's certainly not a stretch to know that wildlife, especially upland game birds, were impacted in some of these storms that produced large hail and winds of 70 miles per hour.

While it's never a good thing where these strong storms hit, we're expecting the influence on pheasants, grouse and partridge to be localized. The fall hunting outlook on the whole still looks pretty good.

I've lived in North Dakota almost my entire life and have seen some dramatic changes during that time. It was a unique opportunity to view a moose in the wild when I was going to college. With some monitoring, research and conservative measures, the Game and Fish Department was able to increase that herd and subsequently held the state's first moose season in 1977.

At that time, the moose stronghold was in the Turtle Mountain and Pembina Hills areas. Fast forward to 2016 and moose have spread west and are doing quite well. This year, for the first time, Game and Fish has

made available more than 200 once-in-a-lifetime moose licenses.

The Department is conducting a moose study in northwestern North Dakota and early findings have shown pregnancy rates that would make a cattle rancher envious and twinning rates that would have them "green at the gills."

Even so, a couple of groups have petitioned to have moose in North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan placed on the Endangered Species list. While we're certainly not pleased with this action, we're confident the information we have that shows expansion of the moose herd in North Dakota does not warrant any action for placement on the list.

Like many other outdoors-minded people across the state, we've enjoyed the summer months, but we're now getting into the fall when opportunities seem endless, with a new hunting season opening almost every weekend, with some great fishing to enjoy as well.

Part of getting ready for the fall is doing some trap shooting, either in a league or on your own. One activity that's growing in popularity is the North Dakota State High School Clay Target League. I was unable to attend the 2016 Clay Target League state tournament in Horace in June due to conflicts, but I understand from those I've talked to it was a tremendous event, with some great shooting by those young adults in attendance. Much like what has happened with the moose population in North Dakota, our agency is hoping to see this clay target league move west across the state to more schools.

There is never a shortage of activities to participate in during all of our seasons. You just have to take the time to do so. So get out this fall and enjoy the great North Dakota outdoors.

Terry Steinwand

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NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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Front Cover

Blue-winged teal are typically the most numerous breeding duck in North Dakota, and the best time for waterfowlers to bring some home for the table is early in the season. It's also a good time for young retrievers to enthusiastically bring in their first bird. (Photo by Craig Bihrl, Bismarck.)



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*An increasing mule deer
population means more hunting
opportunities in the badlands
this fall.*

2016

HUNTING

SEASON OUTLOOK

By Jeb Williams

Partnerships are important. We are blessed to have many partners in North Dakota willing to contribute funds to leverage hunter and angler dollars, maximizing the conservation benefit. But due to our state's land base, which is mainly under private ownership, our most important partners are landowners.

While our goals as an agency and those of landowners sometimes differ, overall the relationship is positive due to a willingness on both sides to work together to identify reasonable solutions.

My thoughts of late have centered on a particular landowner who recently passed away, Con "Buzz" Short. I was fortunate to call him my uncle, but more importantly, my friend.

The Short ranch is located along the Little Missouri River north of Medora. Many people have hunted on the ranch over the years, thanks to the generosity of its stewards. Whether you were looking to hunt for the day, or were connected to a hunting group who fixed up and maintained one of the cabins on the ranch, all were welcome.

And, the generosity I'm talking about wasn't contingent on a payment required to stay or hunt. Free access, free hospitality in exchange for respectful behavior and friendship.

My job takes me to all parts of the state and I'm fortunate to meet and visit with many people about today's outdoor issues. Often, after mentioning my western North Dakota upbringing, people would tell stories about hunting on the Short ranch. I laughed during one of these conversations and sarcastically asked a gentleman if there is a hunter in the state who hasn't hunted on the ranch?

Con Short was a great man to hunt-ers, and many have wonderful hunting memories from the badlands due to his generous nature. He is a good reminder to all of us as hunters to demonstrate our gratitude toward those landowners who willingly open their gates.

This fall, hunters in the western part of the state (Golden Valley County) will notice a new addition to the Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program. It's a big addition, the largest contract the Department has ever signed.

An interested landowner is graciously giving the public a chance to share in the hunting opportunities on his ranch. Yet, without the help of several conservation groups like the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Mule Deer Foundation, National Wild Turkey Federation and Pheasants Forever, the project may not have happened.

Partnerships, once again, at work.

Everyone worked together with the landowner to identify projects, provide funding and volunteer labor, all of which will be beneficial to wildlife and the landowner.

However, just like every acre of land enrolled in the PLOTS program, it comes with a condition. A condition that hunters respect the property and the wishes of the landowner, pick up after themselves, and appreciate an opportunity that isn't guaranteed forever.

And there is a chance if the

experience is a good one, additional opportunities could arise. You can bet that many neighbors will be closely watching to see how things go and may consider enrolling their property if the outcome is positive. It's certainly a wonderful opportunity for the hunting public as access has been a growing concern for the last 20 years.

Writing this article is a bit more enjoyable when you can discuss additional access acres, while at the same time many of the state's game species are on the rise. It appears we are working our way out of a 30-year low in deer license numbers, a total of seven pronghorn units are open this fall, licenses for both moose and elk increased, North Dakota's bighorn sheep season will return, and our four-legged hunting partners will likely stay plenty busy this fall chasing and retrieving upland and migratory birds.

When you are outdoors this fall, stay safe and enjoy North Dakota's wonderful landscape and wildlife opportunities.

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



THE AUTHOR'S UNCLE, CON SHORT, WITH A BIG MULE DEER BUCK HE SHOT WHEN HE WAS JUST A TEENAGER.

UPLAND AND SMALL GAME

Ring-necked Pheasants

Regular Season Opens: Oct. 8

Delayed Season Opens: Oct. 15

Regular Season Closes: Jan. 8, 2017

Delayed Season Closes: Jan. 8, 2017

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Thanks to last winter's noticeably warmer weather, with little snow accumulation across North Dakota's pheasant range, birds got through winter in good shape.

Results of this spring's crowing count survey showed good numbers of breeding roosters throughout most of the state's traditional pheasant range, with numbers up anywhere from 2-7 percent.

However, there was a decrease in the number of roosters heard crowing in southeastern North Dakota. This area has seen an increased number of grassland acres and CRP converted to crop fields. Hunters can still expect to find birds in the southeastern part of the state, but they'll likely have to cover more ground.

Residual cover for nesting hens was average this spring in some areas of the state, with early spring rains improving conditions for upland nesting birds. Eastern and central North Dakota received warm temperatures, along with late spring rain that created good brooding cover for upland birds. The western part of the state was very dry through late July, reducing insect populations necessary for chick survival. There will likely be reduced pheasant numbers throughout those traditional areas in western North Dakota.

As of this writing, preliminary numbers from the Game and Fish Department's late summer roadside brood counts indicate hunters will see fewer birds this fall compared to 2015.



THERE IS LITTLE ARGUMENT THAT THE RING-NECKED PHEASANT IS NORTH DAKOTA'S MOST POPULAR UPLAND GAME BIRD.

If the data holds true, we are anticipating a season similar to 2013. That year hunters harvested roughly 447,000 pheasants, compared to about 590,000 in 2015.

There will be areas that had good

production and other areas that didn't, so hunters need to be mobile and be willing to move to different areas to find hunting opportunities. Knowing North Dakota continues to lose many acres of CRP, and the weather this year was not optimal, the state still supports good pheasant hunting opportunities.

Rodney Gross, Upland Game Management Biologist, Bismarck

Wild Turkeys

Opens: Oct. 8

Closes: Jan. 8, 2017

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Turkey hunting the last few falls has been tough. The bird population in many hunting units was lower than typical the past few years 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



THE GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT ONCE AGAIN REDUCED FALL TURKEY LICENSE NUMBERS.

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.

Rodney Gross

8-10 years. This was observed many years ago in North Dakota, but because of limited and fragmented acreage of native woodlands and low numbers of ruffed grouse, population cycles are seldom seen today.

Spring drumming counts have been up and down – mostly down – in both the Turtle Mountains and Pembina Hills the last several years. North Dakota's ruffed grouse population may still be 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

Ruffed grouse hunting activity nearly ends each year when snow blankets the forest. That can be early in North Dakota, and in some years a couple of months of the season remain with virtually no one hunting these 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.

Aaron Robinson, Upland Game Management Supervisor, Dickinson

Sharp-tailed Grouse

Opens: Sept. 10

Closes: Jan. 8, 2017

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

This year hunters should find fair opportunities to pursue sharp-tailed grouse.

Spring numbers indicated a slight decrease from 2015 as biologists observed a 6 percent decline in the number of males on breeding grounds. Summer roadside counts showed population numbers similar to 2013, which in all respects wasn't a great year. Hunters harvested roughly 48,000 grouse that year, and had a difficult time finding areas with good bird numbers.

Grouse populations respond either negatively or positively to certain types of weather conditions. There is typically a happy medium between too wet/cold and too hot/dry. If the scale is tipped too far on either end of the spectrum, nega-



SHARP-TAILED GROUSE PRODUCTION WAS POOR IN WESTERN NORTH DAKOTA THIS YEAR BECAUSE OF HOT AND DRY WEATHER LAST SPRING.

Ruffed Grouse

Opens: Sept. 10

Closes: Jan. 8, 2017

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 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

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.



A HUNGARIAN PARTRIDGE BROOD LOAFING ROADSIDE IN RURAL NORTH DAKOTA.

tive results occur.

This year the western part of the state had very poor grouse production as a result of hot and dry weather in early spring. Suboptimal habitat conditions and reduced insect production were the result of the drought conditions.

The central and northwestern parts of the state fared a bit better, but data collected in summer from roadside counts indicated only fair grouse reproduction.

There will be localized areas that had good chick survival so hunters need to be willing to travel to different areas, which may necessitate moving to different counties to hunt. In all, hunters will find birds, but it will require more effort this fall.

Additionally, we ask all grouse and partridge hunters to send in wings from harvested grouse and partridge to help us analyze production for 2016. Envelopes can be requested on the NDGF website at gf.nd.gov.

Aaron Robinson

Hungarian Partridge

Opens: Sept. 10

Closes: Jan. 8, 2017

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Hungarian partridge were plentiful in North Dakota, but as farming practices changed and the weather pattern changed from dry to a predominate wet cycle, partridge populations responded negatively.

In the last five years we have seen an increase in the partridge population, but this fall hunters will see fewer birds compared to last year. Biologists observed roughly 30 percent fewer partridge broods this year compared to last summer.

Partridge respond favorably to drier conditions and biologists are hopeful that this is will only be a one year depression as the population continues to rebound.

Partridge have become a bonus bird

for hunters pursuing sharp-tailed grouse or pheasants, so keep a look out for areas such as abandoned farmsteads and native prairie that is on the edge of small grain crops. Pockets of decent hunting may be found in these areas, but hunters will need to spend some time in the mornings scouting.

Aaron Robinson

Tree Squirrels

Opens: Sept. 10

Closes: Jan. 8, 2017

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.

BIG GAME

White-tailed Deer

Archery Opens: Sept. 2

Archery Closes: Jan. 8, 2017

Regular Gun Season Opens: Nov. 4

Regular Gun Season Closes: Nov. 20

Muzzleloader Opens: Nov. 25

Muzzleloader Closes: Dec. 11

For the 2016 hunting season, Game and Fish made 49,000 licenses available to deer gun hunters, 5,725 more than 2015.

The statewide hunter success rate in 2015 was 68 percent, which is higher than 2014 (60 percent), and just below the Department's goal of 70 percent.

No winter aerial surveys were flown last winter due to a lack of snow. Winter of 2015-16 was the mildest since when snow depth records were first kept in the winter of 1949-50. This gave big game biologists optimism for higher overall winter survival rates and more healthy fawns born this past spring.

Based on hunter observations during opening weekend of the 2015 deer gun hunting season, the number of deer sighted per hour of effort was stable to increasing for most of the state. The exception to that trend was hunting unit 3F2.

Unit 3F2 is where chronic wasting disease has been found, and Game and Fish continues to aggressively issue licenses in that unit to reduce the potential spreading of this disease outside the unit.

A summary of white-tailed deer licenses for 2016:

- Any-antlered licenses increased by 3,000.



THE NUMBER OF WHITE-TAILED DEER DOE LICENSES FOR FALL WAS INCREASED FROM LAST SEASON.

LARA ANDERSON

- Any-antlerless licenses increased by 900.
- Antlered white-tailed deer licenses increased by 700.
- Antlerless white-tailed deer licenses increased by 450.
- 928 muzzleloader licenses were available in 2016 – 464 antlered white-tailed deer licenses and 464 antlerless white-tailed deer licenses. This is an increase of 100 muzzleloader licenses from 2015.
- 225 “I” licenses available for the youth deer hunting season, up 38 licenses from 2015. These licenses are limited in number and are valid for any deer, except antlerless mule deer in units 4A, 4B and 4C. There are unlimited “H” youth deer hunting licenses valid for any deer statewide, except mule deer in the above restricted units.
- 281 nonresident any-deer archery licenses available for 2016, 79 more than 2015. The number of nonresident any-deer archery licenses will increase to 382 in 2017.

Bill Jensen, Big Game Management Biologist, Bismarck

Mule Deer

Archery Opens: Sept. 2

Archery Closes: Jan. 8, 2017

Regular Gun Season Opens: Nov. 4

Regular Gun Season Closes: Nov. 20

Mule deer in the North Dakota badlands continue to show signs of recovery following the severe winters from 2008-09 through 2010-11, which resulted in deer numbers declining by nearly 50 percent from 2007.

This spring marked the fourth consecutive year the spring mule deer index was higher than the previous year. The 2016 spring index was 21 percent higher than in 2015, and 38 percent higher than the long-term average.

The mule deer population is increasing because of several factors, including no antlerless mule deer harvest in the badlands units during the 2012-2015 hunting seasons, another moderate

winter in 2015-16, and improved fawn production in 2013, 2014, and 2015. Fawn production in 2015 was good and indicative of a growing population, with a fawn-to-doe ratio of 84 fawns per 100 does.

An increasing mule deer population means more hunting opportunities this fall. There were 2,250 antlered mule deer licenses available in 2016, an increase of 375 from 2015.

A limited number of mule deer doe licenses were also made available in hunting units 4D, 4E and 4F. A mule deer buck license remains one of the most difficult licenses to draw, but for those lucky few, it should result in a very high-quality hunt. Mule deer buck hunter success was 86 percent in 2015.

Bruce Stillings, Big Game Management Supervisor, Dickinson

Pronghorn

Archery Only Opens: Sept. 2

Archery Only Closes: Sept. 25

Gun and Archery Season Opens:

Sept. 30

Gun and Archery Season Closes:

Oct. 16

Pronghorn continue to show signs

of recovery following the severe winters from 2008-09 through 2010-11, which resulted in numbers declining by 75 percent.

Biologists conducted aerial surveys in early July and determined the number of pronghorn in the state increased by 34 percent from last year, primarily due to a mild winter in 2015-16, and higher fawn production in 2016, with a fawn-to-doe ratio of 66 fawns per 100 does, which is slightly higher than the long-term average.

Pronghorn have reached levels that can support higher harvest in 2016, though Game and Fish will maintain a conservative harvest strategy designed to provide hunting opportunities while still encouraging population growth.

Statewide pronghorn numbers are 94 percent higher than the low reached in 2012, but still nearly 50 percent below near record high numbers in 2007.

In 2016, 730 licenses were available, 320 more than in 2015. Hunting units 1A, 2A, 2B and 3A are open to hunting this fall, and more licenses were allocated to hunting units 3B, 4A and 4C.

Hunters who draw a pronghorn lottery license can use it during an early



WHILE THE MULE DEER POPULATION CONTINUES TO REBOUND IN WESTERN NORTH DAKOTA, A BUCK LICENSE IN THE BADLANDS CONTINUES TO BE A TOUGH DRAW FOR HUNTERS.

archery only portion of the season, from September 2-25, and anyone with a valid tag remaining after that can hunt during the rifle portion of the season from September 30 - October 16, using legal firearms or archery equipment.

Another moderate winter could provide conditions needed for continued pronghorn population growth, which could support additional hunting opportunities in 2017.

Hunters who held licenses for last year's limited season were mostly successful, with 385 hunters harvesting 312 pronghorn for a success rate of 81 percent. The harvest consisted of 286 adult bucks, 15 does and 11 fawns.

Hunters should expect similar success this year.

Bruce Stillings

Bighorn Sheep

For season details, refer to the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2016 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

Following a pneumonia-related die-off in 2014, Game and Fish closed the bighorn sheep hunting season in 2015 to allow biologists to assess the status of the state's population.

Although bighorns continued to succumb to pneumonia in 2015, mortalities occurred at a lower rate.

The 2015 survey revealed a minimum of 292 bighorn sheep in western North Dakota – 88 rams, 160 ewes and 44 lambs. Not included are approximately 30 bighorns in the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

Rams, ewes and lambs all increased from 2014. The northern badlands population, which was hit the hardest from the die-off, increased 13 percent, whereas the southern badlands population was down 19 percent. Biologists were pleased to see that 76 percent of lambs counted during last summer's survey survived winter, which is above average.

The recruitment rate of lambs per adult ewes was 31 percent,

equal to the long-term average.

Adult mortality slowed significantly in 2015 and a good number of lambs survived in 2014 and 2015 to compensate for most of the adult losses. Unfortunately, bighorns are still showing signs of pneumonia, so this year's summer survey is important in determining if the state's population is continuing to recover from the disease outbreak, or if the pathogens are likely to persist and cause a long-term population decline.

Disease testing during winter 2015 revealed that 16 of 22 bighorns were positive for the deadly pathogens.

A bighorn sheep hunting season is scheduled for 2016, with eight licenses allocated.

Brett Wiedmann, Big Game Management Biologist, Dickinson

Moose

For season details, refer to the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2016 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

The 2016 moose season is highlighted by a record number of once-in-a-lifetime licenses issued for this highly valued big game animal. The increase in license numbers is primarily in the northwest region of the state, in moose management units M9 and M10, with additional "any" and antlerless licenses.

There is also a slight increase in licenses in moose unit M6, and the boundary for this unit was expanded west to the east banks of the Missouri River to account for an increase in observations and crop depredation concerns over the past few years.

While moose continue to thrive in the state in what is considered nontraditional habitat, numbers remain low in what was once considered traditional habitat in the Turtle Mountains and Pembina Hills. Moose unit M1C, located in the Pembina Hills region of the state, has been closed since 2006 and will remain closed this year. Moose unit M4, which encompasses the Turtle



A BOWHUNTER TAKES AIM BEFORE SUNSET.

Mountains, was closed in 2013 and will also remain closed this fall.

The Department continues to monitor moose that die from nonhunting related reasons, to determine any effects of disease and to gain a better understanding of cause specific mortality. A three-year research study for moose in the Kenmare area and on the Missouri River bottoms southeast of Williston is nearing completion and is moving on to analysis of collected data. The focus of the research was annual survival, cause-specific mortality, reproduction rates, annual and seasonal movements and home range use, as well as seasonal habitat selection. Preliminary results from collared cow moose in this study indicate high adult survival, high pregnancy rates and excellent calf production and recruitment.

Game and Fish has issued 200 licenses for the 2016 fall moose season. This is an increase from 130 licenses in 2015. Expectations for the season are high, as hunter 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 2016 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

North Dakota's 2016 elk season features 335 licenses, which is a slight increase from 2015. The season outlook is good, with expectations for hunter success similar to last year.

The number of elk licenses in Unit E1 is unchanged, at 100 licenses with 30 any elk and 70 antlerless licenses. 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 and 2011.

Units E3 and E4 have 95 licenses this season, a slight increase from last year that includes of 10 more "any" elk licenses and 15 more antlerless licenses.

Unit E2 elk numbers remain stable and the number of licenses issued is up 10 from last year.

Jason Smith

MIGRATORY BIRDS

Ducks and Geese

Good wetland conditions and high waterfowl numbers were found again during the Game and Fish Department's 69th annual breeding duck survey in 2016.

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 and early spring conditions were mild and generally dry, with below average precipitation in many areas. Waterfowl habitats were drying up as spring progressed, but early summer rains improved pond conditions throughout much of the state.

The 2016 May water index was the 48th highest on record, down 50 percent

from 2015, and 40 percent below the 1948-2015 average.

This year's breeding duck index was the 12th highest on record, down 5 percent from last year, but 45 percent above the long-term average.

All species, except ruddy ducks (up 19 percent), gadwall (up 4 percent), and northern shoveler (unchanged) had lower numbers than 2015.

Mallards were down 10 percent from 2015 for their 18th highest count on record. Scaup declined 13 percent, while canvasbacks and pintails declined 18 and 17 percent, respectively.

Although counts for most species declined from last year, all species, except pintails and canvasbacks (28 and 6 percent below the average, respectively) were still above the long-term average. Gadwall were 84 percent above average, mallards 78 percent, scaup 76 percent, wigeon 78 percent, redheads 72 percent, shovelers 31 percent, and blue-winged teal 28 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 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 up 10 percent from 2015, and 36 percent above the 1965-2015 average. However, the average brood size was 6.32 ducklings, down 0.73 ducklings.

July wetland counts were up 35 percent from 2015, and 37 percent above the long-term average. However,



wetland conditions were quite variable across the state, with some areas receiving considerable rainfall in late June and into July.

It appears that just enough late spring and early summer rains fell to promote a good nesting effort by breeding ducks in the state. We are predicting the fall flight of ducks from North Dakota this year will be similar to last year and 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.

Mild fall weather can negatively affect North Dakota's waterfowl hunt-

ing seasons, which was the case last year. Ducks and geese, especially mallards and snow geese, arrived late in the season and moved through the state in a matter of days.

Prospects for duck and goose hunting are again good, but as always, weather conditions and migration patterns will dictate waterfowl hunting opportunities come fall.

Mike Szymanski, Migratory Game Bird Management Supervisor, Bismarck

Youth Waterfowl Season

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

Opens: Sept. 17

Closes: Sept. 18

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

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

Exception: Additional two blue-winged teal not allowed during youth season.

Early Canada Goose Season

Opens: Aug. 15 (statewide)

Closes: Sept. 7 (Missouri River zone), Sept. 15 (rest of state)

Daily Limit: 15

Possession Limit: 45

Shooting Hours:

Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Canada Geese Regular Season

Opens: Sept. 24 (residents only), Oct. 1 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 30 (Missouri River zone), Dec. 22 (statewide)

Daily Limit: 5 (Missouri River zone), 8 (rest of state)

Possession Limit: 15 (Missouri River zone), 24 (rest of state)

White-fronted Geese (Statewide)

Opens: Sept. 24 (residents only), Oct. 1 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 4

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 9

Light (Snow) Geese (Statewide)

Opens: Sept. 24 (residents only), Oct. 1 (nonresidents)

Closes: Jan. 1, 2017

Daily Limit: 50, no possession limit

Shooting Hours for all

Geese: Half-hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. each day through Nov. 5. Starting Nov. 6, 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 Wednesday through the end of each season. Starting Nov. 24, all-day hunting is also allowed on Sundays through the end of each season.



Regular Duck Season

LOW PLAINS UNIT

Opens: Sept. 24 (residents only), Oct. 1 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 4

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

HIGH PLAINS UNIT

Opens: Sept. 24 (residents only), Oct. 1 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 4

Opens: Dec. 10

Closes: Jan. 1, 2017

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, two canvasbacks, two pintails, three scaup, and three wood ducks. In addition to the daily bag limit of ducks, hunters may take an additional two blue-winged teal from Sept. 24 through Oct. 9.

Possession Limit: Three times the daily limit.

Sandhill Cranes

Opens: Zone 1 and 2 – Sept. 17

Closes: Zone 1 and 2 – Nov. 13

Daily Limit Zone 1: 3

Zone 2: 2

Possession Limit Zone 1: 9

Zone 2: 6

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. daily through Nov. 5; to 2 p.m. Nov. 6 until end of season.

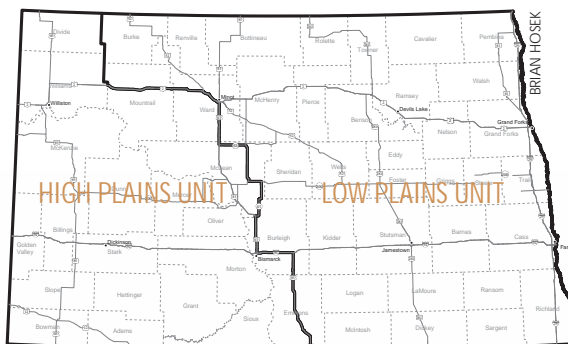
The Mid-Continent Sandhill Crane Population is in good shape heading into fall. Spring migration occurred early this year due to light snow cover and warm temperatures, and may have affected the number of birds counted during the spring survey in Nebraska.

Spring survey numbers were not yet finalized as this is written, but the three-year index used for guiding hunting season regulations has been stable to slightly increasing for several years.



NUMBERS OF RESIDENT CANADA GEESE AND OTHER GOOSE SPECIES REMAIN HIGH.

REGULAR DUCK SEASON UNITS



Drier conditions this fall should lead to abundant staging areas throughout the state, with receding water levels providing more open shorelines suitable for roosting cranes.

The two zone structure for sandhill cranes continues. Zone 1 west of U.S. Highway 281 and Zone 2 east of U.S. Highway 281 will have the same season lengths (58 days) and dates, but will again 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 hunters can pursue sandhill cranes with either a nonresident small game or waterfowl license, in addition to a crane permit. Hunters using a nonresident waterfowl license are reminded that they can only hunt cranes in the waterfowl zones designated on their license.

Hunters are also reminded to make 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.

Andrew Dinges, Migratory Game Bird Biologist, Bismarck

Doves

Opens: Sept. 1

Closes: Nov. 29

Daily Limit: 15

Possession Limit: 45

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

North Dakota has a sizeable population of breeding mourning doves. Based on casual observation, production in the state has been good this year. The relatively early spring and dry summer allowed birds to nest early and often. Age ratios of juvenile to adult birds captured at banding stations throughout the state thus far also indicate good production.

Dove hunters should experience good opportunities again during early September before cooler weather sets in and pushes birds south. Hunters are encouraged to scout before the season to find the right mix of conditions that are conducive to concentrating birds.

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. Doves also need water sources within a few miles. An early harvest of small grains and oil-seed crops is projected, so hunters should have plenty of places to choose from.

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-wing 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.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service may contact some dove hunters 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.report-band.gov.

Andrew Dinges

Crows

Fall Season Opens: Aug. 20

Closes: Nov. 7

Spring Season Opens: March 11, 2017

Closes: April 23, 2017

Daily Limit: No limit on crows. In addition to the crow season, crows may be taken when committing or about to depredate as specified in federal law.

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Snipe

Opens: Sept. 17

Closes: Dec. 4

Daily Limit: 8

Possession Limit: 24

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Woodcock

Opens: Sept. 24

Closes: Nov. 7

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 9

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

FURBEARERS

For more season details, refer to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2016-17 furbearer hunting and trapping guide.

Coyotes are the most sought after furbearer in North Dakota because of their valuable pelts, widespread distribution, and challenging pursuit. Traditionally, coyotes were most prevalent in western North Dakota, but over the past decade their numbers have increased in

eastern North Dakota as well.

According to spring surveys, coyote numbers remain strong in eastern North Dakota this year, but are trending downward in the west.

Muskrats, another highly desirable furbearer, will likely be found at numbers comparable to last year, with the Prairie Pothole Region having the highest densities.

Surveys also indicate an increase in badgers, beavers and raccoons throughout much of the state. And although fox and mink numbers are up slightly in some regions compared to last year, both species remain well below their long term averages.

Trappers harvested 32 fishers last season, which was similar to the previous two seasons. A similar framework is set for the upcoming season in November.

Trappers and hunters harvested 21 bobcats last season, which was similar to the previous season, but 63 percent below the 20-year average.

The hunting season for mountain lions is slightly different this year, so be sure to read the regulations carefully and check the progress of the harvest limit on our website before going afield.

Last year, hunters took 13 mountain lions in Zone 1 (six in the early season and seven in the late season) and one mountain lion in Zone 2.

Cable device (e.g. snare) users no longer need to register with the Department this year. There are more than 70,000 licensed fur harvesters in the state annually, but we know only a small portion of those license holders are active cable device users. Therefore, the primary purpose for the registration system the past two seasons was to formulate a mailing list of cable device users in North Dakota.

Cable devices are an effective and efficient tool for trapping furbearers in North Dakota. However, misuse of cable devices or careless behavior by trappers can lead to nontarget catches, so it is important that users are aware of the cable device requirements and use them responsibly.

Over 1,100 registered cable device

users received a copy of the “Using Cable Devices in North Dakota: A Guide to Responsible Use” booklet in the mail. Anyone who did not receive a copy of this booklet, and would like one, can download it from the Game and Fish website at gf.nd.gov, or call the Department at 701-328-6300.

Game and Fish also has free, 16-hour fur harvester education classes. Again, check the website for available classes near you.

Stephanie Tucker, Game Management Section Leader, Bismarck

Mountain Lion Hunting

Zone 1 (early) Opens: Sept. 2

Closes: Nov. 20

Zone 1 (late) Opens: Nov. 21

Closes: March 31, 2017

Zone 2 Opens: Sept. 2

Closes: March 31, 2017

The overall harvest limit on mountain lions is reduced from 21 to 15, and the early season limit is reduced from 14 to eight. If the early season ends before the season limit is reached, the season could reopen if the late season limit is reached prior to March 25. The late season limit is seven total lions, or three female lions, whichever comes first.

There is no mountain lion harvest limit in Zone 2.

Mountain lions may be hunted statewide by residents using legal firearms or archery equipment during regular hunting hours. Beginning Nov. 21, mountain lions may also be hunted by pursuing with dogs. Cable devices and traps are not allowed. The limit is one lion per hunter per season. Kittens (lions with visible spots), or females accompanied by kittens, may not be taken. Any 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.



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT SURVEYS INDICATE AN INCREASE IN NOT ONLY BEAVERS, BUT ALSO BADGERS AND RACCOONS THROUGHOUT MUCH OF THE STATE.

Fisher Trapping or Cable Devices

Opens: Nov. 21

Closes: Nov. 27

For more information, see the North Dakota 2016-17 furbearer hunting and trapping guide.

Beaver and Raccoon Hunting, Trapping or Underwater Cable Devices

Open year-round, officially from April 1, 2016 - March 31, 2017.

For more information, see the North Dakota 2016-17 furbearer hunting and trapping guide.

Beaver and Raccoon Cable Devices on Land

Opens: Nov. 21

Closes: May 10, 2017

From March 16, 2017, through May 10, 2017, 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.

Weasel Trapping

Opens: Oct. 22

Closes: March 15, 2017

Weasel Hunting or Cable Devices

Opens: Nov. 21

Closes: March 15, 2017

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

Muskrat and Mink Trapping or Cable Devices

Trapping Opens: Oct. 22

Cable Devices Opens: Nov. 21

Closes: May 10, 2017

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, 2017, 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, except when used on float sets; foothold traps must be submerged under water at all times 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.



THE HIGHEST DENSITIES OF MUSKRATS WILL LIKELY BE FOUND IN THE STATE'S PRAIRIE POTHOLE REGION.

Beginning May 1, 2017, float sets must have a protective covering.

Muskrat and Mink Hunting

Opens: Nov. 21

Closes: May 10, 2017

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

Bobcat Hunting or Trapping

Opens: Nov. 5

Closes: March 15, 2017

Beginning Nov. 21, bobcats may also be hunted by pursuing with dogs.

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

Bobcat Cable Devices

Opens: Nov. 21

Closes: March 15, 2017

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 2016-17 furbearer hunting and trapping guide.

Red Fox, Gray Fox, Coyote and Badger Hunting or Trapping

Open year-round, officially from April 1, 2016 - March 31, 2017.

In addition, red fox, gray fox and coyote may be hunted at any hour from Nov. 21 through March 15, 2017. Any hunter who engages in the hunting of red fox, gray fox or coyote during the time from a half-hour after sunset to a half-hour before sunrise, must hunt exclusively on foot.

Starting this year, hunters can use night vision, electronically enhanced light gathering optics and thermal imaging equipment during this portion of the season.

Red Fox, Gray Fox, Coyote and Badger Cable Devices

Opens: Nov. 21

Closes: March 15, 2017



THERE WAS A TIME COYOTES WERE FOUND PREDOMINANTLY IN WESTERN NORTH DAKOTA, BUT THEIR NUMBERS HAVE INCREASED IN THE EASTERN PART OF THE STATE IN THE LAST DECADE.



ASSESSING THE **PLOTS Program**

By Ron Wilson

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program, which will turn 20 in 2017, remains one of the agency's most recognized programs.



CRAIG BIRNLE

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

Q: *In 2015 there were about 730,000 PLOTS acres. What is the acreage forecast for 2016?*

A: It looks like we'll be very similar to last year. We didn't make any huge acreage gains this year, but we were able to maintain stable acreage in the program. This is the first time in several years this has happened. There is more interest in conservation programs right now so hopefully we'll see an increase in acres if the trend continues.

Q: *Are landowners still interested in the PLOTS program?*

A: Yes. There is always interest in the program, it just fluctuates depending on outside factors such as commodity prices, weather, farm bill programs and so on. Generally speaking, producers are always looking for conservation program options and PLOTS is something that has been around for almost 20 years so they are familiar with the program. We're anticipating interest will remain and we're hopeful that we'll be able to increase acreage over the next several years.

Q: *The PLOTS program was awarded \$1.5 million (\$1.9 million if you include the \$400,000 for the Department's Save Our Lakes program) from the Outdoor Heritage Fund in 2014. How have those funds been put to use?*

A: The 2014 OHF grant funds were fully obligated and we'll have some very nice tracts of habitat developed or maintained as a result. While it may not sound like a lot of acres, the Department enrolled more than 3,000 acres into PLOTS using these funds. These agreements are a blend of expired CRP and newly established habitat, with the agreements ranging from 6-10 years. Additionally, the Department utilized some of the OHF grant funds to enroll and manage nearly 500 acres of sensitive riparian systems and important watersheds in the Save Our Lakes program. The habitat management provided by these agreements not only benefits species like deer and pheasants, it also helps our fisheries by reducing nutrients and sediments from entering lakes and streams.

While the landscape continues to change in North Dakota, the Game and Fish Department's popular Private Land Open To Sportsmen program remains a staple across the state.

Like a favorite shotgun, loyal bird dog or hunting partner, the familiarity of this walk-in access program is important to hunters. Many depend on it to identify places to hunt, and understand what the many PLOTS acres also mean to wildlife and landowners.

Hunters will discover about the same number of PLOTS acres on the landscape this year as compared to 2015.



CRAIG BHRLE

Q: What kind of feedback are you getting from landowners and hunters on the PLOTS program?

A: One thing we've learned over the years is we need to have a flexible and reasonable program that works for producers. Without that, we simply wouldn't have a program. Overall, we get good feedback from producers about the program, which is evident by some producers who have remained in the program since its inception. Hunters continually provide positive feedback about PLOTS. Of course, we get a few negative comments, but there is usually a logical explanation for what the hunter is concerned about. With a program of this size,

there is bound to be a few hiccups each year. If there is one comment we hear from the public and in many surveys, it is that hunters would like to see more acres in the program.

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

A: Funding for PLOTS is in good shape and interest is solid. Our biggest challenge is trying to keep high quality habitat in the program. There are a lot of pressures on the habitat resource in parts of the state, which makes it difficult to maintain or grow the program to meet the expectations of the hunting public. We've dedicated a lot of time and energy to ensuring we have a wide menu of options available under PLOTS, from working lands to idled habitat. There is tremendous interest in working lands PLOTS, and we could enroll a lot of acres into the program this way, but it's not always the highest quality habitat so we need to balance that interest. The Department's goal is still to get back to 1 million PLOTS acres, but from what we know and what our hunters are telling us, they don't want 1 million acres of marginal PLOTS. They want quality habitat and they want it in the right locations.

Q: Can you provide an update on the Conservation Reserve Program in North Dakota?

A: By now, most people are familiar with the success story of CRP and how it helped grow the habitat base in North Dakota over the past 25 years. When the state was at its peak for CRP acres around 2007, we had about 3.3 million acres. We also had a series of relatively mild winters and good wildlife production. That recipe resulted in some fantastic opportunities for hunters, producers, wildlife and PLOTS. High quality habitat was readily available for wildlife and hunters, and many of those acres found their way into the PLOTS program. Producers also had many opportunities for their marginal lands by enrolling those acres into CRP, using the program to help them manage their operation. Fast forward a few years when a big jump in commodity prices, combined with a scaled back Conservation Reserve Program, resulted in many acres of CRP and other habitat being converted to agricultural production. In the 2014 Farm Bill, Congress made changes that reduced the amount of CRP acreage available nationwide. Since that time, we've experienced a downward swing in commodity prices and land

values, which has once again generated interest in conservation programs.

However, producers with expiring CRP, or those submitting offers for new land, have little chance of being accepted into CRP now because of a much smaller program and fewer acres to go around. In the latest 2016 CRP signup, only 8 percent of the acres offered in North Dakota were accepted. While there are many farmers who chose not to renew their CRP contract, or maybe even terminated a contract early, many others have tried to keep their land in CRP but simply weren't accepted. No matter the reason, the reduction of habitat – CRP, native prairie, wetland conversion and shelterbelts – has had an impact on the PLOTS program and wildlife like pheasants and deer. It's hard to know

what CRP will look like in the next farm bill, but we're hopeful there will be more opportunities for producers who want to enroll into conservation programs.

There are a few new developments that came out of the last farm bill that could provide some benefits and generate renewed interest in conservation such as improved haying and grazing provisions for CRP, special allocations of CRP acres for state-specific projects, opportunities for conservation partnerships, special initiatives for at-risk species, and more opportunities for conservation on working lands. We're also hopeful the North Dakota Outdoor Heritage Fund will continue to provide opportunities for conservation as well, and that those funds could be used as leverage with other funds to expand the amount of conservation opportunities.

PLOTS Donations

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. All donations contributed by deer hunters will go toward PLOTS tracts or projects that include deer habitat. Deer hunters were able to use this option for the first time this year.

Private Land Initiative

The Private Land Initiative is the Game and Fish Department's overall program for working with private landowners.

The PLI has three main goals:

- Conserve habitat for fish and wildlife populations.
- Provide landowners interested in wildlife conservation with cost-sharing assistance for developing and protecting wildlife habitat.
- Provide public opportunities to access fish and wildlife resources on private land.

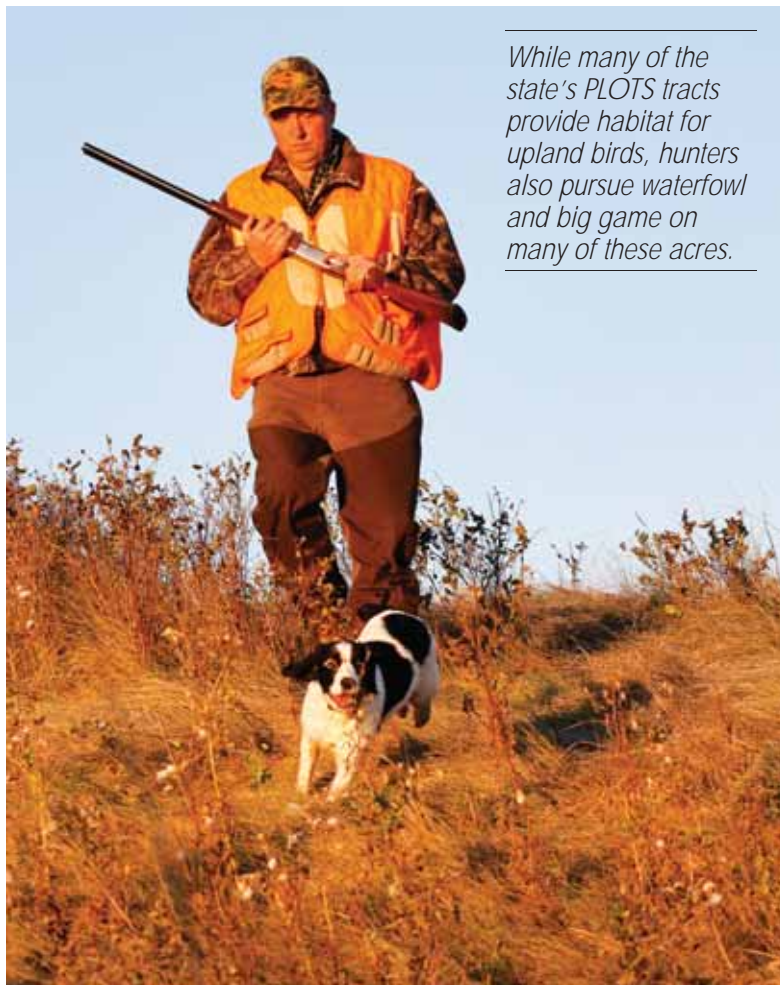
The PLI gives producers/landowners several options for working with Game and Fish through the Private Land Open To Sportsmen program.

- CRP Access Program – Provides assistance with establishment and management costs associated with Conservation Reserve Program grasslands, and includes public access.
- Working Lands Program – Short-term program based on the wildlife value of actively farmed or ranched land, which also includes public access. Biologists evaluate current farming or ranching management based on conservation practices, good stewardship and quality of hunting habitat. This program also includes public access.
- Habitat Plot Program – Multi-year rental program with

agreements that help create, enhance or protect wildlife habitat, and include public access.

- Food Plot Program – Short-term program that provides a wildlife food source and public access.
- Private Forest Conservation Program – Multi-year rental program that provides protection and enhancement of unique forested systems, and includes public access.
- Wetlands Reserve Program – A partnership program between the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and Game and Fish, providing incentives to producers who enroll land in WRP. The primary purpose is to restore, protect or enhance wetlands and associated uplands, as well as provide public access.
- Tree Planting Cost-Sharing Program – Provides assistance with establishment costs of tree plantings. The goal is to enhance wildlife habitat and conservation on private land and provide public access.

Game and Fish also works with other state and federal agencies, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, North Dakota Natural Resources Trust, Mule Deer Foundation, Pheasants for the Future and other local wildlife clubs to carry out wildlife habitat projects on some PLOTS tracts.



While many of the state's PLOTS tracts provide habitat for upland birds, hunters also pursue waterfowl and big game on many of these acres.

CRAIG BIRLE

Q: Any new focus in the PLOTS program?

A: With less habitat on the landscape, Game and Fish will be targeting its PLOTS efforts more. We'll be looking at specific priorities for each region of the state and promoting different components of the PLOTS program to address them. For example, we may target season-long cover crops and food plots in one region of the state, with grass plantings and winter cover in another. One region of the state may have more focus on waterfowl hunting while another region focuses on developing deer habitat, or access for deer hunting, using funds from the donation of unsuccessful deer gun applications.

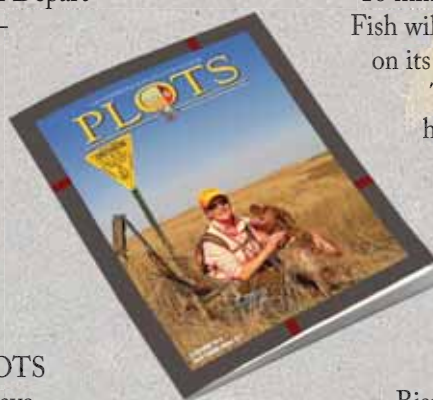
Also, the Department is in the process of planning some future focus groups with producers and hunters to help gather more input for the PLOTS program. The more information and ideas we have, the more we'll know what works for our producers and our hunters. We're hoping to get the process underway in 2017.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

PLOTS Guide Available Online

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen Guide for 2016 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 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 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.

WATERFOWL HUNTERS

Aquatic Nuisance Species can severely degrade
waterfowl habitat and reduce
hunting opportunity.

Follow North Dakota regulations to protect waterfowl hunting for the future.

BEFORE leaving a water area or access:

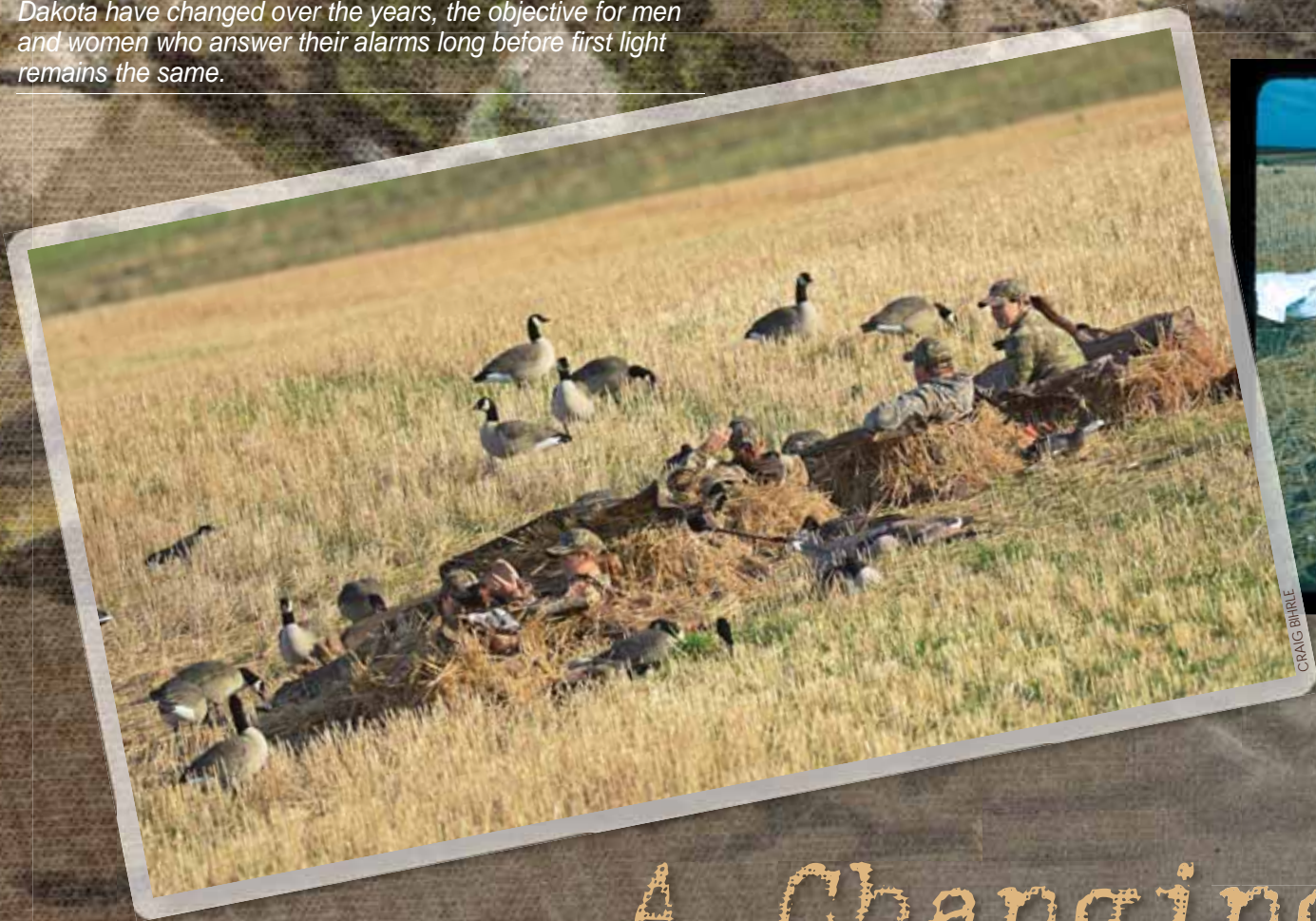
DRAIN ALL WATER • REMOVE VEGETATION • PULL DRAIN PLUGS

ALL EQUIPMENT. EVERY TIME.

For complete regulations visit gf.nd.gov



While times and tactics for hunting ducks and geese in North Dakota have changed over the years, the objective for men and women who answer their alarms long before first light remains the same.



CRAIG BIRRE

A Changing WATERFOWL

AS a waterfowl biologist, I often get asked about the prospects for upcoming hunting seasons for ducks or geese.

The answer really depends on the perspective and expectations of the person asking it. Even more complicating is that waterfowl hunting is never really the same on a year-to-year, area-to-area basis.

Cropping patterns, wetland conditions, upland nesting potential, and weather patterns that affect migration are always changing the numbers and types of waterfowl people encounter in an area.

Hunter numbers are also a factor, and while the Game and Fish Department fields a lot of concerns about too many hunters in certain areas, not enough hunters in some areas can also reduce potential.

Changes in North Dakota Waterfowling

As with most things, change in waterfowl abundance and hunting tactics is inevitable. In the 1960s and 1970s, North Dakota had more active waterfowl hunters than at any other time. In 1975, more than 73,000 hunters took to the field in pursuit of waterfowl.

This peak in hunter numbers also took place during a time when just about all waterfowl populations were lower – and in some cases much



NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT ARCHIVE PHOTOS



NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT ARCHIVE PHOTOS

LANDSCAPE

By Mike Szymanski

lower – than they are now. Daily bag limits 40 years ago were generally more restrictive than they are now and seasons were shorter, especially for geese.

Back then, snow geese in North Dakota were a much larger part of the show, comprising almost 80 percent of the state's total goose harvest. The birds were mostly harvested north of U.S. Highway 2 in the north central and northeastern parts of the state. Pass shooting along firing lines was

popular and many other hunters took to the countryside to hunt in decoy spreads.

What has changed? Interestingly, I conducted an analysis of band data from snow and Ross's geese that shows the average recovery date of a band in North Dakota in recent years is 20 days later than it was in 1975. In other words, for every two years that has gone by, the average date of a light goose band recovery is a day later in the season.

How can that be? It seems like we are so confined by a short window of hunting days in North Dakota, you'd think there's not that much room for change. Several factors, however, have contributed to changes in migration that are influencing goose and duck harvest.

Perhaps the most important change is that cropping patterns are much different than they were 40-50 years ago. In 1975, North Dakota farmers planted a little more than 6

million acres of durum and barley, while at the same time they planted less than 200,000 acres each of corn and soybeans.

This spring, almost 6 million acres of soybeans and 3.5 million acres of corn were planted in North Dakota, while less than 2 million acres of barley and durum were planted.

Why the comparison between these two groups of crops? It all comes down to fueling the migration. During many years, corn isn't harvested until late in fall, sometimes after the snow flies in North Dakota. That is usually too late to attract large numbers of staging birds, and it's not always dependable enough if you're a migrating fowl hoping to find good fuel.

Soybeans are also harvested later than small grains, and they pose another, more significant problem. Unlike young, growing soybean plants, raw soybeans actually contain a metabolic inhibitor that prevents waterfowl from digesting them properly. Basically, waterfowl can eat as many raw soybeans as they want, but they never get fatter, and storing up fat for the long migration ahead is important. Sometimes birds that continue to eat soybeans wind up dying from causes related to near-starvation, but sometimes they also die from impaction of the beans in their crops and digestive tracts. That's not a good plan if you're fueling a migration, and the birds know it.

Cropping patterns have also changed in other places. The western prairies of Canada have added almost 5 million acres of pulse crops, such as peas and lentils. Seasoned waterfowlers know how these fields can attract birds, and they are usually some of the first crops harvested. What all of this

means is that birds coming from the arctic, or right out of the Canadian prairie, have better resources available right away in early fall, and they can stay farther north until freezing temperatures move them along later in the migration.

Temperature may also have an influence on the timing of birds migrating into and out of North Dakota. In recent years, the average September temperature in central North Dakota has been a little more than four degrees Fahrenheit warmer than it was in 1950. It doesn't sound like much, but it can really change where waterfowl want to be in the fall; mostly that they can probably stay north longer than before. In most years that means migrating geese spend less time in North Dakota before the harsh hand of winter swings its first blow across the Northern Plains.

Another factor is hunting pressure. Prairie Canada has about the

same number of waterfowl hunters as North Dakota in an area that is much, much larger. When birds are not pressured, and they have plenty of food to eat, they often tend to stay where they're at until weather pushes them out, so the decision for birds to stage farther north prior to departing for Kansas is pretty easy.

These changes in migration patterns might mean that hunters will have to adjust their expectations for what it is they are trying to accomplish.

A trend that I've seen the past 10-15 years is that more and more waterfowlers in the Great Plains are using tactics that employ large decoy spreads in fields. That kind of hunt can be a ton of fun, especially if you are set at the "end of the rainbow."

However, those situations are few and far between and are



Dressed in drab gear favored by duck hunters some time ago, a hunter hides in the slough-side vegetation from the curious eyes of passing waterfowl.

NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT ARCHIVE PHOTOS

getting more difficult to find in North Dakota. And when you do find one, there are often two or three other groups in the same area searching for that same kind of experience.

The bottom line is, hunters who want to have successful hunts on a more consistent basis may need to look at diversifying their tactics,

the areas they hunt, and even the types of waterfowling they pursue.

It is sometimes hard to reconcile that North Dakota in recent years has experienced changes in attracting and staging waterfowl in the state when, on a continental scale, duck and goose hunting opportunities look so good. We've

had about 45,000-50,000 regular season waterfowl hunters each year in North Dakota since about 2006, and most waterfowl populations are at or near historic highs, especially geese.

On one hand, some areas have too many nesting geese, while other areas struggle to maintain quality habitat for nesting ducks. As a result, harvest opportunities for geese have become ultra-liberalized, going from limited opportunities for Canada geese to hunting them for parts of five or even six months in some years, with large daily bag limits.

While duck hunting in the state has remained good and limits have remained liberal for the past two decades, we have become more reliant on our own locally produced birds due to changes in migration patterns. It makes it even more important to ensure that North Dakota continues to produce ducks.

So when someone asks, "Will it be good this year?" I usually need to ask more questions to figure out if they are expecting to wind up with 30 greenheads and a row of geese laid out across several layout blinds, or if they are generally asking if there are good numbers of birds and decent hunting conditions.

We can set the stage for expectations on habitat and populations, but hunters almost need to think about what they're really expecting. North Dakota will have good duck and goose populations this fall, and plenty of hunting opportunities. Whether that leads to a successful season for each individual, we'll know in a couple of months.

MIKE SZYMANSKI is the Game and Fish Department's migratory game bird management supervisor.



CRAIG BIRRE

With certainly more options in hunting equipment today, many waterfowlers leave little to chance and dress from head to toe in camouflage.



BUFFALOBERRY PATCH

By Greg Freeman, Department News Editor



CRAIG BIRLE

A hunter participates in the Game and Fish Department's wing survey by depositing an envelope in a drop box at Lonetree Wildlife Management Area near Harvey.

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 recent years, 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 supervisor, said Game and Fish biologists will take

as many sharptail and partridge feathers as they can get because the more collected, the better the data.

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

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 ndgff@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.

Electronic License Reminder for Bowhunters

Bowhunters are reminded that deer bow licenses and accompanying tags are only available through electronic purchase at the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov; by calling 800-406-6409; or at license vendors linked to the Game and Fish Department's online licensing system.

In addition, hunters who

purchase bow licenses online from a personal computer should allow for several days to receive their tag in the mail.

A listing of all current license vendors is available on the Game and Fish website at gf.nd.gov.



LARA ANDERSON

HIP, FEDERAL DUCK STAMP REQUIREMENTS

Harvest Information Program registration for all migratory game bird hunters, regardless of age, and a federal duck stamp for waterfowl hunters age 16 and older, are required beginning September 1.

Migratory game birds include ducks, geese, swans, mergansers, coots, cranes, snipe, doves and woodcock. Waterfowl includes ducks, geese, swans, mergansers and coots.

Hunters can HIP certify when they buy a North Dakota license, or add it later through the Game and Fish website at gf.nd.gov, or by calling 888-634-4798 and recording the HIP number on their printed license.

Those who registered to hunt the spring light goose season or early Canada 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 for which they are licensed before hunting migratory game birds.

This year's 2016-17 federal duck stamp is available for electronic purchase through the Department's website and instant licensing telephone number, or at license vendors registered with the Department's licensing system. Physical stamps are not available at North Dakota license vendors, but they are available at many U.S. Postal Service offices.

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. 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 stamp is then sent by postal mail 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. Hunters must possess the physical stamp 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.

The federal duck stamp has a fee of \$25. In addition, there is another \$1.50 added to cover shipping and handling costs of the actual physical stamp.



LARA ANDERSON

SAH Accepting Goose Meat

The North Dakota Community Action Sportsmen Against Hunger program is accepting donations of goose meat taken during the early Canada goose and regular waterfowl seasons. 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 after removing the breast meat from birds at home. Or, hunters may also deliver geese directly from the field to a processor, but identification such as the wing or head must remain attached to the bird until in possession of the processor.

For a list of participating processors in North Dakota, visit the North Dakota Community Action website at www.capnd.org.

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. Information forms are also available at the Game and Fish website at gf.nd.gov/sah.

Hunters will also fill out a brief form so that processors can keep a record on donated goose meat, the same as is required for processing any other type of wild game meat.

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





CRAIG BIRLE

Landowners Seek Doe Hunters

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is currently working with landowners in 10 hunting units across the state who would like to host hunters with antlerless deer licenses in 2016.

Participating landowners are located in hunting units 2I, 2J2, 2K1, 2K2, 3A4, 3B3, 3D2, 3F1, 3F2 and 4E.

The program is not intended for buck hunters, but designed to direct hunters with antlerless licenses to specific areas to reduce deer populations.

Interested hunters can get their name on a list of possible participants by accessing the Game and Fish Department's website at gf.nd.gov. Hunters who do not have internet access can call the Department's main office in Bismarck at 701-328-6300.

Hunters will provide their

address, hunting unit(s) where they hold valid antlerless licenses, and if using rifle, muzzleloader or bow. From this list the Department will select the number of hunters landowners have agreed to host. These hunters will be sent the landowner's name, phone number and any information relating to the landowner's specific situation.

Hunters must have a valid 2016 deer gun license – the Game and Fish Department does not provide a hunting license with this program.

Not everyone who signs up will end up with a new place to hunt, because not everyone's schedule will match up with a landowner's, and more people will likely put their name on the list than there are openings. Participating landowners currently have openings for about 100 doe hunters.

Plan Ahead To Protect Hay and Winter Feed Supplies

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is encouraging farmers and ranchers to plan ahead to protect hay, grain and winter feed supplies from wildlife, according to Kevin Kading, Department private land section supervisor.

Even with today's low deer populations, severe winter conditions can result in wildlife depredation to livestock feed supplies, Kading said.

Producers are encouraged to store hay in a manner and location that prevents or reduces damage by wildlife. For example, stacking bales rather than leaving them scattered across a field can help reduce damage and make the bales

easier to protect. Stacking bales inside a fence, if possible, can prevent wildlife from gaining access to them. Ranchers have also used a protective barrier of round straw bales surrounding their higher quality bales to prevent wildlife damage, Kading said, and a number of other options are available to producers to minimize or reduce wildlife depredation, including allowing hunters access to land to ensure a proper harvest of animals.

Kading said any type of livestock feed supplies left in an open field

are difficult for Game and Fish to address. "There are very few options available," Kading added, "this is why we stress the importance of being as proactive as possible."

Planning early is the best way to reduce problems, Kading said. "If producers wait too long, snow and deteriorating weather conditions could make it difficult to store hay and feed supplies properly," he said.

The Department will assist producers with wildlife depredation problems, but cannot compensate producers for losses. The Department has temporary and permanent fencing options available for livestock producers experiencing chronic depredation problems.

For help or more information on how to protect hay, grain and winter feed supplies, contact the Game and Fish Department at 701-328-6300.



LARA ANDERSON

Big Game Transport Rules Reminder

Big game hunters are reminded of requirements for transporting deer, elk and moose carcasses and carcass parts into and within North Dakota 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 to a meat processor within five days of the harvest date. The head can be removed from the carcass and transported outside the unit to submit to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department for CWD surveillance purposes, or to 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 or within 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 2016-17 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.

Report Banded Migratory Birds

Hunters are reminded to check harvested migratory birds for bands this fall, and report federal bands at www.report-band.gov.

In addition, the bird banding lab has a new, mobile friendly reporting site that will aid hunters to report bands via mobile devices. Those without access to the internet can report bands by calling 800-327-2263.

The band number, date and location of each recovery are needed. After the band information is processed, hunters can request a certificate of appreciation, and information about the bird will be returned in an email. Hunters can keep all bands they recover.

Information received from hunters is critical for management of migratory game birds.



CRAIG BIRLE



Hunters Advised to Check Water Conditions

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department advises hunters to be cautious with their dogs around water this time of year, due to potential health hazards associated with blue-green algae.

Late summer and early fall offer prime conditions for blue-green algae growth in many state waters. Ingestion by a hunting dog while perhaps retrieving a bird during the early goose season, or just practicing retrieving, can lead to severe illness and potential death.

Potentially toxic algae blooms occur under conditions of hot, dry weather. Shallow, stagnant water with moderate to high nutrient content provides an optimum environment for algal growth. Water or wind movements often concentrate the algae, and eventually the bloom appears as a blue-green "scum" floating on the water's surface. The threat diminishes once the weather turns colder.

Hunting dogs shouldn't drink or swim in discolored water or where algal blooms are apparent. If dogs retrieve in these conditions, they should be rinsed off immediately and shouldn't be allowed to lick their coat.

For additional information about the effects of blue-green algae blooms on hunting dogs, contact the Animal Health Division, North Dakota Department of Agriculture, at 701-328-2655; or a local veterinarian.

Sandhill Crane Permits

North Dakota's sandhill crane season opens September 17 and continues through November 13.

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 non-resident 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.



ASHLEY SALWEY

TEDDY ROOSEVELT FAMILY DAY SCHEDULED

Families looking for a fun afternoon filled with outdoor activities are invited to attend Teddy Roosevelt Family Day on Sunday, September 25 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 900 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, Mule Deer Foundation, Scheels All Sports, Ducks Unlimited, Delta Waterfowl and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

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

Agencies Prohibit Hunting over Bait

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.



Past winners from the Watchable Wildlife 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 non-game 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.

Practice 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.



RAP REPORT ALL POACHERS 800-472-2121

Poachers Steal Your Wildlife – Make the Call!

701-328-9921 if Out-of-state Cell Caller

Report All Poachers

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. Calls can remain anonymous.

Witnesses should note vehicle description, including make, color, license plate number and state issued, as well as any description of the violator if possible.

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 provides the RAP operator a phone number, the witness will be contacted right away.



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT PHOTO

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 was 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.

STAFF NOTES



Dan Halstead

Halstead Receives Honor

Dan Halstead, Game and Fish Department wildlife resource management supervisor in Riverdale, was named Wildlife Biologist of the Year by the Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. He was recognized in part for his professional networking, project creativity and resourcefulness.

"Dan's unwavering commitment to the Game and Fish Department and to the fish and wildlife resources he is entrusted to manage are to be commended," said Jeb Williams, Game and Fish wildlife division chief. "His professional dedication, eye for detail, and commitment make him a worthy recipient of this award."



Dale Repnow



Raymond Parsons

Repnow Fills Position, Parsons Retires

Dale Repnow has been named the Game and Fish Department's procurement officer in the wildlife division. He has worked within the division since 2003.

Repnow replaces longtime employee Raymond Parsons, who retired this summer after 42 years with the agency.

back cast



By Ron Wilson

I know what I'm doing, sitting on a prairie hill-top before sunrise in late August, with binoculars hanging around my neck, is not wholly unique.

Bowhunters do it often this time of year, with the archery season just days away.

It's just that I haven't carried a bow into the field in years and have forgotten what it's like to scout for deer in this time of plenty, when the animals' options are many.

While the corn and bean fields that are about a five-minute hike from here are undisturbed, harvest has started on the grain field behind me. The three combines parked side-by-side below the hill signal that work will continue sometime soon, maybe later today when the deer are bedded and I'm back at work.

The deer I see are scattered. A doe and a fawn slowly weave through an L-shaped stand of evergreens where, in seasons past with the landowner leading the way, we've hunted pheasants with mixed success.

In a CRP field south of there, three deer, maybe four, it's hard to tell, move slowly through a fold in the idle

grassland. The animals are undisturbed, likely doing exactly what they've been doing all summer without interruption. Not one head pops up from curiosity or alarm at the passing vehicles carrying folks to work.

It's a good start – five, maybe six, deer – for the first morning of scouting.

I'll be back in an evening or two to see what the deer are doing then, which is likely the reverse of what they are doing this morning.

Sitting here in shorts, T-shirt and a flannel over that, and a travel mug of coffee between my legs is easy duty, enjoyable. The hard part is deciding if my

youngest is ready for this. Ready to pull the trigger on an animal that he's never hunted or squatted over in the tall grass to field dress. We won't be dealing with what he's used to – pheasants, grouse, partridge and fox squirrels. This is different.

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department decided some time ago to give kids an opportunity to hunt deer in September when the majority of hunters are elsewhere, counting the days until November.

Since then, it's been up to parents to decide if their kids were mentally and physically prepared for the opportunity to hunt the state's most popular big game animal.

The camp I'm sitting in is clear, which is why I'm slowly trying to unravel the movement patterns of a handful of deer.

The youth season is short, just 9 1/2 days. It gets even shorter when you mix in school, cross country and football practices, and two weekend cross country meets.

Finding time to hunt, it may turn out, could be more difficult than deciding which rock pile to hide behind to ambush a doe.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



RON WILSON



A Look Back

By Ron Wilson

"The hunter and his dog symbolize fall hunting. This month our game birds will offer us many delightful hours afield. Enjoy the sport, but keep in mind the basic rules of safety and observe the rights of others. Ask permission to hunt on private land and you'll seldom be refused."

This caption described the cover photograph for the October 1955 issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*. The hunter and his pointer were not identified.

What's interesting about the photograph that dates back more than 60 years, but would certainly not register a second thought if the photograph was shot today, is the dog's attendance in the image.

While it's difficult to wrap your head around it today, there was a time (starting in 1919) when North Dakota lawmakers outlawed the use of dogs for hunting upland game birds.

According to an article in *OUTDOORS* in 2007, following the deci-

mation of big game populations by the late 1880s, prairie chickens, sharp-tailed grouse and waterfowl were about the only things left to hunt in North Dakota. Up until 1910 or so, prairie chickens seemed an inexhaustible resource, but later in the decade their numbers had dwindled to a point where people demanded action.

The article continued, saying that this same sense of urgency also led to the introduction of ring-necked pheasants and Hungarian partridge, but legislators felt eliminating the use of dogs would reduce harvest and give upland birds more of a chance. The law did not apply to waterfowl hunting.

Following the formation of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, as we know it today, in 1930, wildlife officials ultimately convinced legislators and citizens that the loss of wildlife habitat was the reason for game bird population declines and that dogs were a conservation benefit because of the wounded birds they

could recover.

In 1933 state law changed to allow spaniels or retrievers to retrieve, but not point or flush, upland game birds for hunters. Pointers and setters were still not allowed in the field.

J.E. Campbell, Game and Fish deputy commissioner, wrote in *North Dakota OUTDOORS* in December 1942:

"... will any right-minded individual put forth just one good and sufficient reason why any sportsman should be deprived of the use of his dog in helping him secure his daily bag limit?"

The answer must have been "no."

In 1943, when pheasant and partridge populations were impressive and hunting opportunities were plentiful, the prohibition against hunting dogs in North Dakota was lifted.

Doggone right.

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