

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA

GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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2018
Hunting
Season Outlook





MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

Last year at this time there were a number of unknowns heading into the fall hunting season.

The unknowns centered around the fall-out for North Dakota's wildlife, pheasants and other upland game birds in particular, following difficult, snowy conditions in early winter and drought in spring and summer.

While residual cover for nesting hens was average in spring 2017, the fear was that drought conditions hurt the production of insects, which are essential to chick survival.

It turned out that those fears were realized to a certain extent.

According to the 2017 upland game season summary, found in the Buffaloberry Patch section in this issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*, harvest numbers fell compared to 2016 for pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian partridge.

Jump to spring and summer of this year, and timely, ample rains changed the face of the landscape over much of the state. North Dakota in 2018 didn't resemble North Dakota of 2017.

That's the good news as nesting, brooding and what remains of wildlife habitat in North Dakota improved. Yet, hunters need to understand that while conditions improved on the ground, upland game birds and other wildlife don't simply rebound overnight. It takes time, considering pheasant reproduction was hampered last summer due to drought and fewer adults than average entered the 2018

breeding season.

If you live on the Northern Plains long enough, the weather extremes tossed our way no matter the season hardly come as a surprise. As humans, we adjust, endure and carry on.

For our state's fish and wildlife, it isn't that simple if what these animals need to survive – quality shelter and food – isn't available.

That being said, we are this close to North Dakota's fall hunting seasons kicking off in full strength. This is a great time of year to live where we live. The hunting and fishing opportunities are many and certainly should be celebrated.

Deer numbers over much of the state are on the rise, more pronghorn hunting units were opened in southwestern North Dakota, and fall waterfowl hunting opportunities should meet the expectations of many, weather permitting.

It's just that upland game bird hunters will likely have to work a little harder this fall, chew up a little more boot leather in the field, but the opportunities to find some birds are there.

Everyone has their preference when it comes to their favorite season in North Dakota. To many, fall on the Northern Plains tops the list.

Knowing this, as we do here at the Game and Fish Department, we encourage you to get outside this fall. Take a kid, take a friend, take a neighbor and sample North Dakota's great outdoors.

Terry Steinwand

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Front Cover

In the fall, male turkeys aren't as colorful as they are in spring, but they still present a striking profile. Fall turkey season begins October 13. *Photo by Craig Bihrl, Bismarck.*



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2018 HUNTING SEASON OUTLOOK

By Jeb Williams

A year ago, and for good reason, talk centered mostly on the return of drought conditions to North Dakota.

While the spigot seemed to turn on a bit in August, it was too late for much of the state's small grains and pastures. The lack of precipitation early in spring and summer left its mark. It was pretty clear what the dry conditions meant for agriculture producers, yet the uncertainty was the influence drought would have on North Dakota's most popular upland game bird, the ring-necked pheasant.

Typically, pheasants do better with warmer, drier conditions versus cooler, wetter conditions during the hatch, which peaks around the third week of June. But the warm and dry in 2017 was a bit extreme.

When the Game and Fish Department's 2017 upland

game survey numbers started rolling in, it was clear there were few young-of-the-year birds on the landscape. This certainly painted an unfortunate picture, as the majority of pheasants harvested each season are those that hatched earlier in summer.

When last fall's pheasant season was all said and done, hunters harvested roughly 300,000 roosters, the lowest tally since 1998. While drought conditions undoubtedly impacted the pheasant population, a reduction in this non-native's numbers has long been influenced by the state's changing landscape.

During North Dakota's peak Conservation Reserve Program years, approximately 3.5 million acres of idle grasses carpeted the state. Today, that once robust figure is closer to 1 million acres.



There are far fewer places today on the landscape for pheasants to successfully nest and raise a brood. With a new farm bill being discussed, there is some hope that North Dakota will see some additional opportunities for landowners willing to enroll some acres into CRP. At this time it doesn't appear to be a significant increase, although every bit will help.

The Game and Fish Department's "Life After CRP" publication was developed by several visionary wildlife professionals, both inside and outside of our agency in 2012, as they could see the projected CRP cuts and the likely fallout of losing quality wildlife habitat. The goal of the publication was to discuss and promote the use of these once CRP acres to identify and provide guidance toward managing for profitable agriculture, while maintaining at least some benefits for pheasants and other wildlife.

Enter Precision Agriculture. An original partnership between Pheasants Forever and AgSolver, the goal of the program is to work with agriculture producers to maximize profitable acres, while identifying less profitable acres that may be better suited to conservation programs.

North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife managers recognized the need to partner with Pheasants Forever to utilize the strategic nature of the Precision Agriculture program, which helps much more than just pheasants.

The Department and others, including four soil conservation districts in Ransom, Sargent, Dickey and LaMoure counties, North Dakota Natural Resources Trust and the state Department of Health's 319 watershed program, started working with Pheasants Forever in 2017.

Working directly with private landowners, more than 34,000 acres have been evaluated under the program. Game and Fish has also provided \$131,000 in cost-share with landowners, the soil conservation districts have contributed \$43,000 in matching funds, and approximately 1,200 Private Land Open To Sportsmen acres have been impacted in this four-county area.

The program has been successful enough that it will be expanding into southwestern North Dakota this fall. We anticipate the program will generate a lot of interest and continue to play a role in a more strategic effort in putting habitat on the landscape to continue our great hunting traditions in North Dakota.

Safe travels and best of luck this fall while you enjoy North Dakota's outdoors.

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

Game and Fish added a new zone structure for hunting Canada geese to increase harvest opportunities in regions where geese are causing more problems and maintain late season opportunities in parts of the state where they are readily available.

Upland and Small Game

Ring-necked Pheasants

Opens: Oct. 6

Closes: Jan. 6, 2019

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Pheasants in North Dakota were treated with below average snowfall and above average temperatures for most of last winter. This should have translated into good body conditions for the hens going into the nesting season.

Results of the spring crowing count survey showed lower numbers of breeding roosters throughout most of the traditional pheasant range. The number of roosters heard calling was down anywhere from 15-38 percent throughout North Dakota's good pheasant range. This was not a surprise, as last summer's drought caused a 60 percent decline in the late summer roadside counts.

Nesting cover for hens was about average in spring thanks to timely spring rains. Those timely rains continued into early summer and all of North Dakota was green through late June. Areas in the southwestern part of the state have had multiple severe weather events, which will likely translate to pockets of low densities of pheasants due to chick mortality.

At the time of this writing, Game and Fish Department biologists are conducting late summer roadside brood counts, but preliminary numbers indicate hunters will see a comparable number of birds this fall as 2017.

The drought last year caused poor production across the state. Thus, pheasants entered the 2018 breeding season with a lower than average adult breeding population. However, most of the state should have good production, while other areas could have poor survival due to severe weather events.

Those hunters willing to be a little more mobile this fall should find some good pheasant hunting opportunities.

A survey in spring indicated lower numbers of breeding roosters throughout most of North Dakota's traditional pheasant range.



SANDRA JOHNSON

Rodney Gross, Upland Game Management Biologist, Bismarck

Wild Turkeys

Opens: Oct. 13

Closes: Jan. 6, 2019

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

The turkey population in many of the state's hunting units was lower than normal the past few years due to cool, wet spring conditions during nesting/brooding.

In 2017, severe drought contributed to poor reproduction in a smaller breeding population, so fall turkey numbers were still relatively low in most areas of the state. In spring 2018, conditions were

favorable for a better hatch. Early reports from brood surveys indicate a good number of turkey broods on the ground, and a small uptick in turkey production compared to 2017 is expected.

Game and Fish has continued to reduce fall licenses for wild turkeys since 2008 to try to turn turkey numbers around and improve hunter success. Last fall, 2,441 hunters harvested 939 birds for a success rate of 39 percent. Hunters had the best success in the western part of the state.

The central and west-central parts of the state along the river corridors will provide some of the better turkey hunting opportunities in the state this fall.

Rodney Gross



CRAIG BIRKLE

| Turkey hunters reported a harvest success rate of 39 percent in fall 2017.



Ruffed Grouse

Opens: Sept. 8

Closes: Jan. 6, 2019

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Although not common in North Dakota, ruffed grouse populations occur in the Turtle Mountains and Pembina Hills. They are typically found in aspen forests with multi-aged stands of trees.

In 2018, spring drumming counts increased for the fourth year in a row. North Dakota's ruffed grouse population continues to be lower than it was in the 1990s, but the hope is that recent increases continue.

Ruffed grouse require a diversity of aspen age classes to meet their seasonal habitat needs. Quaking aspen stands change as they mature from young, "doghair" (or very dense) stands of shoots to thinner stands of large trees. During that progression, the understory also changes, and by the mature stage, the understory flourishes with gaps in the canopy due to aging (and dying) trees.

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department and the North Dakota Forest Service have teamed to work on aspen management in small blocks to create a mosaic of multi-aged aspen stands to benefit the aspen forests and species like ruffed grouse. If hunters observe areas on state lands that appear logged, it is likely that these areas are part of management that is intended to improve aspen productivity in the long-term. Hopefully, hunters will also see the ruffed grouse population respond to these management actions.

Jesse Kolar, Upland Game Management Supervisor, Dickinson

Sharp-tailed Grouse

Opens: Sept. 8

Closes: Jan. 6, 2019

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Sharp-tailed grouse are typically most abundant in the western half of the state. Unfortunately, drought in 2017 was most severe in the west, and hunter reports, as well as Game and Fish Department spring surveys indicated that sharptail numbers are as low as they have been in 20 years.

With that said, hunters can still find pockets with sharp-tails, particularly in the eastern part of the state, which showed a slight increase since 2017. Hunters who head east should be aware of two areas closed to sharptail hunting: an area west of Grand Forks and an area around the Sheyenne National Grasslands. (Maps of areas closed to sharptail hunting are found in the North Dakota 2018-19 Hunting and Trapping Guide and on the Department's website at gf.nd.gov.)

Anecdotally, brood sizes were slightly larger for sharp-tailed grouse in 2018, so barring a harsh winter, an upcycle in sharptail numbers could be in the works. A better estimate of 2018 production will be available after summer roadside surveys are completed, but for now, biologists anticipate that hunters will likely need to walk more and perhaps learn new areas to find grouse this fall.

In addition to roadside surveys, hunters are encouraged to send in grouse and Hungarian partridge wings from harvested birds to help biologists further assess production for 2018. Since it's predicted harvest will be low, it's hoped that hunters who might not have submitted wings in the past would consider helping in

Preliminary survey results indicated sharp-tailed grouse brood sizes increased somewhat in 2018.



TY STOCKTON

the wing collection effort. Hunters can request prepaid wing envelopes on the Department's website at gf.nd.gov.

Jesse Kolar

Hungarian Partridge

Opens: Sept. 8

Closes: Jan. 6, 2019

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

The Hungarian partridge is one of the upland species that appears to be doing better this year. Although they are rare on the landscape, and difficult to target (most hunters harvest them incidentally while pursuing sharp-tailed grouse or pheasants), some larger broods have been spotted on Department summer roadside surveys.

Partridge flourish with habitat edges and in small, disturbed areas, so some of

the unsuccessful crops and dry weather in 2017 may have benefited this bird. Moreover, unlike grouse and pheasants, partridge chicks can survive on a diet higher in forbs if insects are not as abundant. Partridge, in general, do better than other upland birds in dry cycles.

Partridge numbers have slowly increased in five of the past six years. Biologists will continue to observe broods during late summer roadside counts, with results available in September.

Jesse Kolar

Tree Squirrels

Opens: Sept. 8

Closes: Jan. 6, 2019

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 bows and arrows legal for taking upland game.

Big Game

White-tailed Deer

Archery Opens: Aug. 31

Archery Closes: Jan. 6, 2019

Regular Gun Season Opens: Nov. 9

Regular Gun Season Closes: Nov. 25

Muzzleloader Opens: Nov. 30

Muzzleloader Closes: Dec. 16

Game and Fish made available 55,150 licenses for the 2018 hunting season, an increase of 650 from 2017.

The statewide deer gun hunter success rate in 2017 was 61 percent, a little lower than in 2016 (66 percent), and below the Department goal of 70 percent.

The winter of 2017-18 was a mixed bag. Conditions over much of the state were mild to moderate. However, northeastern North Dakota received some late winter snow causing prolonged winter conditions.

Landowners interested in having more antlerless deer harvested are encouraged to call Game and Fish at 701-328-6300,

and Department personnel will direct the number of doe hunters landowners are comfortable hosting.

Population and harvest data indicate that the state's deer population is stable to increasing, but still well below management goals. Deer numbers remain below objectives in most hunting units due to prolonged effects of severe winters in 2008-09 and 2010-11, which not only increased adult mortality, but also reduced fawn production.

The extreme winter conditions followed nearly a decade of aggressive deer management that featured large numbers of antlerless licenses in most units. In addition, the northeastern part of the state also experienced severe winters during 2012-13 and 2013-14, which continued to impede population recovery.

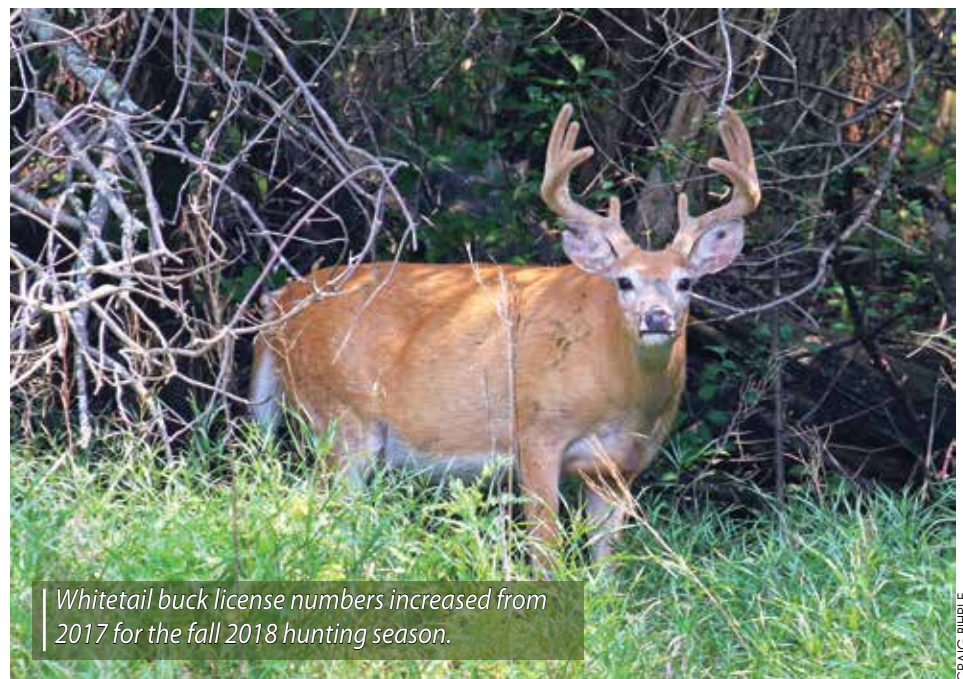
Further, high-quality deer habitat is not as abundant as in the past, which limits the potential for population recovery. For example, deer numbers in hunting units 2E and 2C in northeastern North Dakota have not responded to more favorable winter weather conditions and reduced harvest. These hunting units have lost approximately 60 percent of CRP grass cover and nearly 400 acres of trees.

Conditions for winter aerial surveys

were generally poor throughout the state, so only two of the 32 hunting units with monitoring blocks were flown. Biologists surveyed units 3A1 and 3B3 in March, and deer numbers were stable in 3A1 and increasing in 3B3.

A summary of deer licenses for 2018:

- Any-antlered licenses reduced by 100.
- Any-antlerless licenses reduced by 250.
- Antlered white-tailed deer licenses increased by 150.
- Antlerless white-tailed deer licenses increased by 150.
- Antlered mule deer licenses increased by 150.
- Antlerless mule deer licenses increased by 550.
- Antlerless mule deer licenses issued in hunting units 3B1 (100), 3B2 (100), 4B (200), 4C (250) 4D (300), 4E (250) and 4F (250). No antlerless mule deer licenses were issued in hunting unit 4A.
- 1,022 muzzleloader licenses available in 2018 – 511 antlered white-tailed deer licenses and 511 antlerless white-tailed deer licenses. This is the same number of muzzleloader licenses as 2017.
- 260 "I" licenses available for the youth deer hunting season, up 15 licenses





from 2017. The licenses are limited in number for units 3B1, 3B2 and 4A-4F, and are valid for any deer, except antlerless mule deer in unit 4A. There are unlimited "H" youth deer licenses valid for any deer state-wide, except mule deer in the above restricted units.

- 502 nonresident any-deer archery licenses available for 2018, an increase of 120 from 2017. The number of nonresident any deer archery licenses will increase to 607 in 2019.

Bill Jensen, Big Game Management Biologist, Bismarck

Mule Deer

Archery Opens: Aug. 31

Archery Closes: Jan. 6, 2019

Regular Gun Season Opens: Nov. 9

Regular Gun Season Closes: Nov. 25

Mule deer in North Dakota's badlands continue to show signs of recovery following the severe winters of 2008-10, which resulted in deer numbers declining by nearly 50 percent.

Mule deer densities this year remain high and are similar to last year. The 2018 spring index was 6 percent lower than the 2017 index, but still 45 percent above the long-term average.

The mule deer population increase is attributed to no harvest of antlerless mule deer in the badlands during the 2012-16 seasons, more moderate winter conditions, and improved fawn production in 2013-17. Fawn production was highest in 2014 and 2016, with fawn-to-doe ratios of 95 and 90 fawns per 100 does, respectively.

An increasing mule deer population will mean more hunting opportunities this fall. There were 2,600 antlered mule deer licenses available in 2018, an increase of 150 from 2017. Antlerless mule deer licenses were also increased from 900 to 1,450 in 2018. All mule deer units will have antlerless licenses except 4A, where the population



Both mule deer buck and doe licenses increased from 2017 for the fall 2018 hunting season.

TY STOCKTON

remains below management goals.

A mule deer buck license remains one of the most difficult licenses to draw in the lottery. Those lucky enough to draw a license should expect a high-quality hunt. Hunter success for mule deer buck hunters

was 83 percent in 2017.

While another year of a population increase is encouraging, mule deer in the badlands face many challenges, such as encroachment of juniper in mule deer habitat, direct and indirect habitat loss due to energy development, predators and variable weather conditions.

Bruce Stillings, Big Game Management Supervisor, Dickinson

Pronghorn

Archery Only

Opens: Aug. 31

Archery Only

Closes: Sept. 23

Gun/Archery Season Opens: Oct. 5

Gun/Archery Season Closes: Oct. 21

North Dakota hunters will have more opportunities to hunt pronghorn this year thanks to a large population increase.

Biologists conducted aerial surveys in



North Dakota's pronghorn population continues to rebound following some severe winters in the last 10 years in the western part of the state.

TY STOCKTON

early July and found that the number of pronghorn in the state increased by 57 percent from last year. The population increased to nearly 9,500 animals, which is the highest estimate since 2009.

Pronghorn have been slowly recovering since 2013 following the severe winters of 2008-09 and 2010-11, which resulted in numbers declining by 75 percent. A combination of milder winter conditions since then, closed seasons from 2010-13, and improved fawn production and survival since 2013 have helped the population reach a level that is able to support a higher harvest this fall.

Game and Fish will maintain a conservative harvest strategy to provide hunting opportunities, while encouraging population growth. In 2018, 1,075 licenses were allocated, or 665 more than 2017. Ten hunting units – 1A, 2A, 2B, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4C, 5A, 6A and 7A – are open this fall, five more than in 2017.

Hunters who drew a lottery license can use it during the archery season from August 31-September 23, or during the rifle season October 5-21, using legal firearms or archery equipment.

Last year's limited season was successful, with 366 hunters harvesting 275 pronghorn, for a success rate of 75 percent. The harvest consisted of 247 adult bucks, 10 does and 18 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 2018 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

The Department's spring bighorn sheep survey revealed a minimum of 265 bighorn sheep in western North Dakota, down 11 percent from 2016 and 9 percent below the five-year average.

Biologists counted 91 rams, 149 ewes and 25 lambs. Not included are approximately 20 bighorns in the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

The survey count was the lowest since 2006. The decline in the 2017 count

reflects the spread of bacterial pneumonia to three previously unaffected herds and consequently the adult and lamb mortalities that followed.

The northern badlands population declined 10 percent from 2016, and the southern badlands population was down 21 percent.

The total count of adult rams and ewes was much lower than the record high counts in 2016, but the lamb count and recruitment rate improved slightly in 2017, albeit still much below the long-term averages.

Fortunately, adult mortality was low in previously affected herds, and lamb survival improved as well, which could indicate those herds initially exposed to the deadly pathogens in 2014 are beginning to recover. The next few years will be important in determining if the state's population shows signs of recovering from the disease outbreak, or if the pathogens are likely to persist and cause a long-term population decline.

A bighorn sheep hunting season is tentatively scheduled to open in 2018, unless there is a recurrence of significant adult mortality from bacterial pneumonia. The status of the bighorn sheep season will be determined September 1, after the summer population survey is completed.

Game and Fish issued five licenses in 2017 and all hunters were successful harvesting a ram. In March, a record 14,617 prospective hunters submitted an application for bighorn sheep. The Game and Fish Department does not determine the number of bighorn sheep licenses until completion of its summer population survey, and that was still in progress as this issue went to press.

Brett Wiedmann, Big Game Management Biologist, Dickinson

Moose

For season details, refer to the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2018 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

The 2018 North Dakota moose season will again include another record number of once-in-a-lifetime licenses. The increase in license numbers is primarily for the northwest region of the state in moose management units M9, M10 and M11, with additional any-moose and antlerless licenses.

Moose continue to thrive in northwestern North Dakota, but numbers remain low in historical hunting units in the Turtle Mountains, Pembina Hills and along the Red River corridor. Moose unit M1C, located in the Pembina Hills region,

The number of bighorn sheep licenses to be made available for the 2018 hunting season was undetermined when this issue of OUTDOORS went to press.





has been closed since 2006 and will remain closed again this year. Moose unit M4, which encompasses the Turtle Mountains, was closed in 2013 and will also remain closed this fall.

Game and Fish issued 330 licenses for 2018. This is an increase from 245 licenses in 2017. The chance at a moose license also drew 21,042 applications last March, which is a record.

Expectations for the season are high as success for moose historically runs above 90 percent.

Jason Smith, Big Game Management Biologist, Jamestown

Elk

For season details, refer to the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2018 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

North Dakota's 2018 elk season features 404 licenses, which is an increase from 2017. A record 18,047 prospective hunters applied for those licenses.

The primary increase in license numbers was for elk unit E3. This was in response to a growing elk population around Theodore Roosevelt National Park. The season outlook for elk in 2018 is good, with success similar to previous years.

As always, making landowner contacts

and scouting prior to the season opener is recommended and is an essential component to a successful fall hunt.

Jason Smith

Migratory Birds

Ducks and Geese

Declining wetland conditions, but good waterfowl numbers were found during the Game and Fish Department's 71st annual spring breeding duck survey. However, wetland conditions across much of the state made a quick turn-around following abundant late spring and early summer rains.

In early May, waterfowl habitats were drying up as spring progressed, continuing a trend that started the previous spring. The 2018 May water index was the 45th highest on record, down 34 percent from 2017, and 29 percent below the 1948-2017 average. Some areas of the state were quite dry, and few ducks settled in these areas.

Following the survey in May, a lot of rain fell through June and into early July in many important duck producing regions. While wetland conditions are a little spotty due to the nature of heavy rains from isolated storms, the precipitation greatly improved things, and incited

renewing by hens that had failed during earlier nesting attempts.

This year's breeding duck index was the 25th highest on record, down 5 percent from last year, and 17 percent above the long-term average. This is the second year since 1994 that the state's estimated breeding population of ducks (2.81 million) dipped below 3 million birds.

All species, except shoveler (up 10 percent) and wigeon (up 7 percent), had lower numbers than 2017. Mallards were down 1 percent from 2017 for their 21st highest count on record. Green-winged teal declined 20 percent, while all other species declined from 17 percent (redheads) to 4 percent (scaup).

Although most species declined from last year's estimates, all species, except pintail (31 percent below), blue-winged teal (19 percent below), and ruddy ducks (17 percent below) were above the long-term average. Those species above the long-term average include mallards (63 percent above), wigeon (57 percent above), shovelers (42 percent above), redheads (42 percent above), gadwall (28 percent above), scaup (28 percent above), green-winged teal (19 percent above) and canvasbacks (10 percent above).

The number of broods observed during the Department's July brood survey was up



CRAIG BHRLE

| Waterfowl hunting opportunities should be good in fall based on duck production in North Dakota and Saskatchewan.

37 percent from 2017, and 77 percent above the 1965–2017 average. The average brood size was 6.76 ducklings, nearly identical to last year's estimate.

July wetland counts were up 11 percent from 2017, and 7 percent below the long-term average. Wetland conditions were variable across the state, ranging from fair to very good in some smaller localized areas. Much of the state was quite dry to start spring, but most regions were drenched by early summer rains. When duck brood surveys were conducted, wetland conditions in the northwest, central and southeastern regions of the state had benefited most from rainfall, but duck production also appeared to be very good in the northeast part of the state.

Brood rearing wetlands benefited from June rains to provide good habitat for breeding ducks and their young. Many shallow wetlands recovered from drought last summer and upland vegetation is providing thick nesting cover. Some regions are still cycling through some dryness, but this will help maintain productivity within wetland basins when wet conditions return.

The forecast for the fall flight of ducks from North Dakota this year is up about 12 percent from last year, and is similar to 2013, 2015 and 2016.

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.

Game and Fish has added a new zone structure for hunting Canada geese to increase harvest opportunity in regions where geese are causing more problems, and also maintain late season opportunities in parts of the state where they are readily available. The changes mostly affect Canada goose hunters in the eastern half of the state.

North Dakota's waterfowl hunting seasons are always affected by fall weather, and the mix from early to late seasons is usually not consistent from year to year. By producing a lot of birds locally, hunters



| An incredible number of snow geese continue to migrate through North Dakota in fall.

aren't as dependent on good migration weather to bring birds from Canada in a timely manner.

Abundant wetlands in good condition, coupled with abundant, secure nesting cover in the uplands drives duck production. Hunting opportunities for waterfowl should be good this season based on duck production in North Dakota and also reports from Saskatchewan. As always, hunting conditions will be a little variable, but this year hunters might see more localized variability with some areas swinging from being a little dry to very wet in just a matter of miles.

Prospects for a good fall flight from northern breeding areas should also be 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. 15

Closes: Sept. 16

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

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

Early Canada Goose Hunting

Opens: Aug. 15 (statewide)

Closes: Sept. 7 (Missouri River Canada Goose Zone), Sept. 15 (Western Canada Goose Zone), Sept. 21 (Eastern Canada Goose Zone)

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Daily Limit: 15

Possession Limit: 45

Canada Geese Regular Season

Opens: Sept. 22 (residents only), Sept. 29 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 28 (Missouri River Canada Goose Zone), Dec. 21 (Western Canada Goose Zone), Dec. 16 (Eastern Canada Goose Zone)

Daily Limit: 5 (Missouri River zone), 8 (all other zones)

Possession Limit: 15 (Missouri River zone), 24 (all other zones)

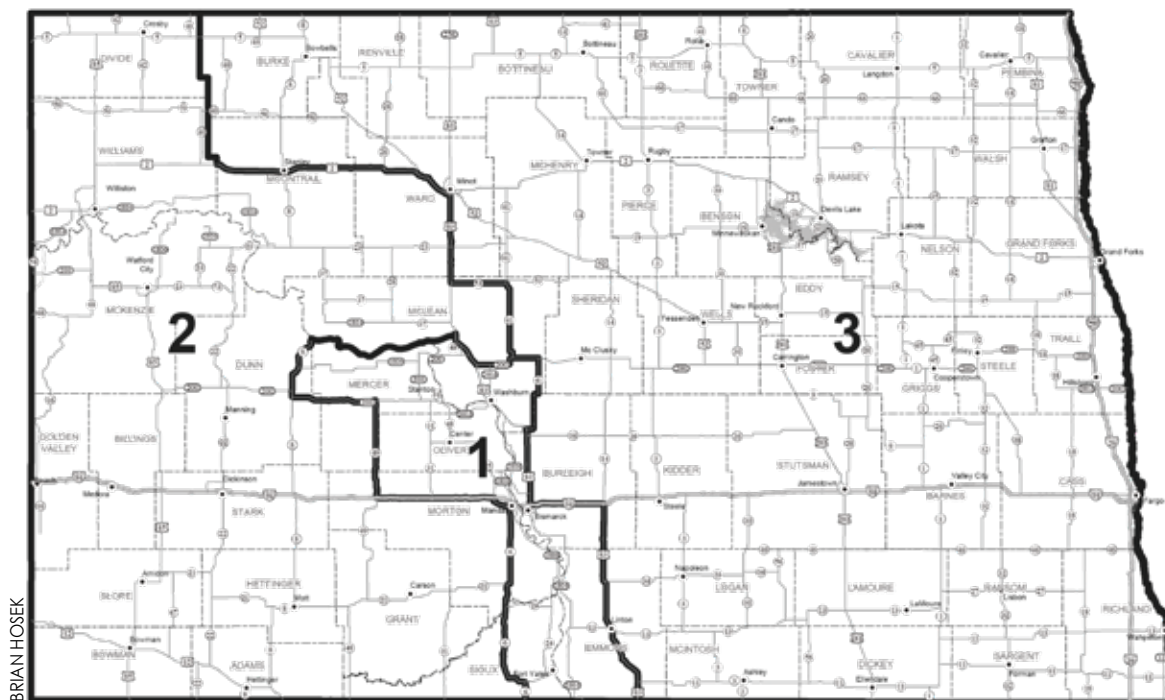
White-fronted Geese (Statewide)

Opens: Sept. 22 (residents only), Sept. 29 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 2



CANADA GOOSE HUNTING ZONES 2018



**ZONE 1: Missouri River
Canada Goose Zone**

**ZONE 2: Western
Canada Goose Zone**

**ZONE 3: Eastern
Canada Goose Zone**

REGULAR DUCK SEASON UNITS

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 9

Light (Snow) Geese (Statewide)

Opens: Sept. 22 (residents only), Sept. 29 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 30

Daily Limit: 50, no possession limit

Shooting Hours for all Geese: Half-hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. each day through Nov. 3. Starting Nov. 4, shooting hours are a half-hour before sunrise to 2 p.m. each day.

Exception: Shooting hours are a half-hour before sunrise to sunset on all Saturdays and Wednesdays through the end of each season. Starting Nov. 22, all-day hunting is also allowed on Sundays through the end of each season.

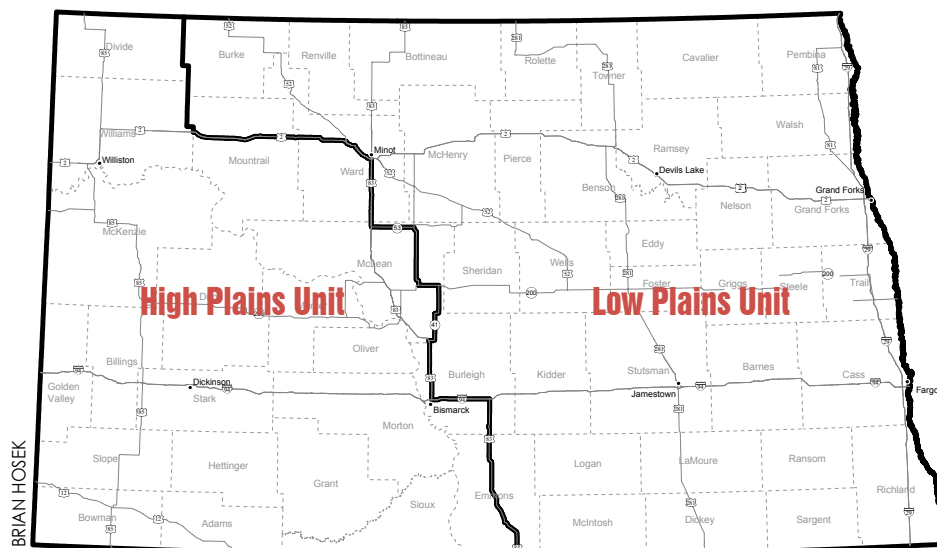
Regular Duck Season

Low Plains Unit

Opens: Sept. 22 (residents only), Sept. 29 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 2

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before



sunrise to sunset.

High Plains Unit

Opens: Sept. 22 (residents only), Sept. 29 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 2

Opens: Dec. 8

Closes: Dec. 30

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 pintails, two redheads, two canvasbacks, three scaup and three wood ducks. In addition to the daily bag limit of ducks, an additional two blue-winged teal may be taken from Sept. 22 through Oct. 7.

Possession Limit: Three times the daily limit.

Sandhill Cranes

Opens: Zone 1 and 2: Sept. 15

Closes: Zone 1 and 2: Nov. 11

Daily Limit Zone 1: 3

Daily Limit Zone 2: 2

Possession Limit Zone 1: 9

Possession Limit Zone 2: 6

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. daily through Nov. 3; to 2 p.m. Nov. 4 until end of season.

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

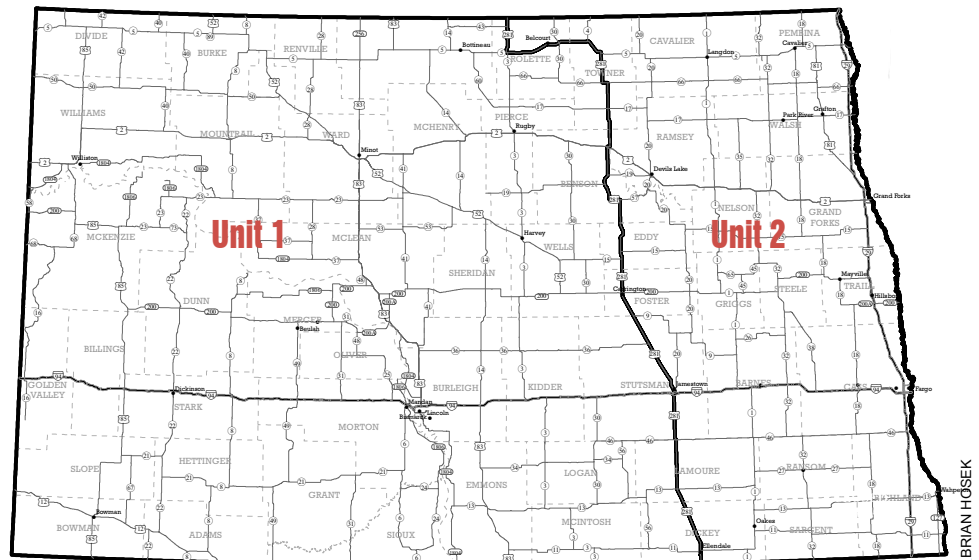
Cold weather lingered into March and April during 2018 on the Northern Plains, which greatly slowed spring migration. As a result, few birds made it north of the central Platte River Valley of Nebraska where the annual spring survey is conducted. Given these conditions, a large proportion of the population was likely captured during the survey. Initial survey reports are quite promising, but survey numbers are not yet finalized.

In addition, the three-year population index used for guiding hunting season regulations has been stable to slightly increasing for several years now. Although North Dakota has received ample rainfall in summer, it has not been enough to completely replenish drying wetland basins. However, these lower water levels should lead to abundant staging areas throughout the state by providing more open shorelines suitable for roosting cranes.

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

Nonresident sandhill crane hunters can pursue sandhill cranes with either a valid nonresident small game or waterfowl license, in addition to a crane permit.

SANDHILL CRANE MAP



Nonresident sandhill crane permits are valid for use within the dates and zones of nonresident waterfowl or small game licenses selected during purchase.

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

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 observations, production in the state has been good to fair this year.

The relatively late spring did not seem to affect later nesting species, and since mid-May, conditions were suitable for mourning doves to nest often. Age ratios of juvenile to adult birds captured at

banding stations throughout the state are also indicative of good production this year.

Dove hunters should experience good opportunities during early September before cooler weather pushes doves south. Hunters are encouraged to scout before the season to find the right mix of conditions conducive to concentrating birds. Hunters should look for areas with abundant harvested small grain or oilseed fields that are also near shelterbelts or other diverse stands of trees. Doves also need to be within a few miles of water sources. Harvest of small grains and oilseed crops got a fairly early start, 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 are rarely harvested by hunters. Nonetheless, Eurasian collared doves can be pursued during the dove season and are included with mourning doves in the daily bag and possession limit if harvested.

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



early in the season to send in for analysis. Hunters are also reminded to look for banded mourning doves in their bag and report bands directly to the Bird Banding Laboratory website at reportband.gov.

Andrew Dinges

Crows

Fall Season Opens: Aug. 18

Closes: Nov. 5

Spring Season Opens: March 9, 2019

Closes: April 21, 2019

Daily Limit: No limit on crows.

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

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

Snipe

Opens: Sept. 15

Closes: Dec. 2

Daily Limit: 8

Possession Limit: 24

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Woodcock

Opens: Sept. 22

Closes: Nov. 5

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 North Dakota 2018-19 Hunting and Trapping Guide.

Last year's inaugural river otter season was popular with trappers, as the harvest limit of 15 river otters was met in only eight days. River otters were taken by trappers along the Red River and its tributaries.

This year's trapping season for river otters will be the same as last season. It is

important for trappers to report incidental capture of otters outside of the open season, as the biological information collected from those animals is used to accurately monitor population trends.

Trappers and hunters who like to pursue the state's most popular furbearer, the coyote, should have plenty of opportunities again this fur season. After trending slightly downward last year, coyote numbers have rebounded in most regions of the state. Game and Fish surveys indicated the highest densities this spring were in the Prairie Pothole Region and Red River Valley. Consequently, fox numbers are down from last year.

Muskrats have not rebounded after their numbers dipped in 2013. Last year's drought was likely a significant factor in keeping their numbers low. In contrast, spring surveys indicated an increase in badgers, beavers and skunks throughout several regions of the state. And although mink, raccoon and weasel numbers are up slightly in some regions compared to last year, these species remain well below their long-term averages on a statewide level.

The seasons for bobcats, fishers and mountain lions will also be the same as

last year. Last year, hunters and/or trappers took 76 bobcats, 38 fishers, 12 mountain lions in Zone 1 (six in the early season and six in the late season) and six in Zone 2.

Trappers are reminded that Game and Fish recommends checking all traps and snares by visually inspecting them and removing all captured animals at no greater than 48-hour intervals, and that rubber gloves be worn for skinning and handling of all furbearers.

Stephanie Tucker, Game Management Section Leader, Bismarck

Mountain Lion Hunting

Zone 1 (early) Opens: Aug. 31

Closes: Nov. 25

Zone 1 (late) Opens: Nov. 26

Closes: March 31, 2019

Zone 2 Opens: Aug. 31

Closes: March 31, 2019

The overall harvest limit on mountain lions in Zone 1 is once again 15, with an early season limit of eight, and a late season limit of seven (or three females, whichever comes first). If the early season ends before eight mountain lions are taken, a conditional season could reopen



| An adult mountain lion.

TY STOCKTON



The mink trapping season in North Dakota opens October 27.

after the late season, if the late season limit is reached prior to March 25.

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. 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.

River Otter Trapping or Cable Devices

Opens: Nov. 26

Closes: March 15, 2019

Limit of one per person. Total harvest limit of 15 statewide.

Trappers must contact the local game warden or Department field office to report their harvest within 12 hours and make arrangements to have their river

otter tagged. For more information, see the North Dakota 2018-19 hunting and trapping guide.

Fisher Trapping or Cable Devices

Opens: Nov. 26

Closes: Dec. 2

Only open east of U.S. Highway 281 and ND Highway 4. Limit one per person. Trappers must contact the local game warden or Department field office to report their harvest within 12 hours and make arrangements to have their fisher tagged. For more information, see the North Dakota 2018-19 Hunting and Trapping Guide.

Beaver and Raccoon Hunting, Trapping or Underwater Cable Devices

Open: Year-round.

For more information, see the North Dakota 2018-19 Hunting and Trapping Guide.

Beaver and Raccoon Cable Devices on Land

Opens: Nov. 26

Closes: March 15, 2019

From March 16, 2019, through May 10, 2019, 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, Hunting or Cable Devices

Trapping Opens: Oct. 27

Hunting and Cable Devices

Opens: Nov. 26

Closes: March 15, 2019

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, Hunting or Cable Devices

Trapping Opens: Oct. 27
Hunting and Cable Devices

Opens: Nov. 26

Closes: May 10, 2019

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, 2019, 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.

Beginning May 1, 2019, float sets must have a protective covering.

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 Trapping, Hunting or Cable Devices

Hunting and Trapping

Opens: Nov. 10

Cable Devices Opens:

Nov. 26

Closes: March 15, 2019

Open only in the area south and west of the Missouri River. Beginning Nov. 26, bobcats may also be hunted by



Musk rats have not rebounded after their numbers dipped in 2013.

TY STOCKTON

pursuing with dogs.

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.

For more information, see the 2018-19 Hunting and Trapping Guide.

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

Open: Year-round.

In addition, red fox, gray fox and coyote may be hunted at any hour from Nov. 26 through March 15, 2019. 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.

Hunters can use night vision and thermal imaging equipment during this portion of the season. Use of spotlights or any other artificial light, including infrared lights, are prohibited.

Red Fox, Gray Fox, Coyote and Badger Cable Devices

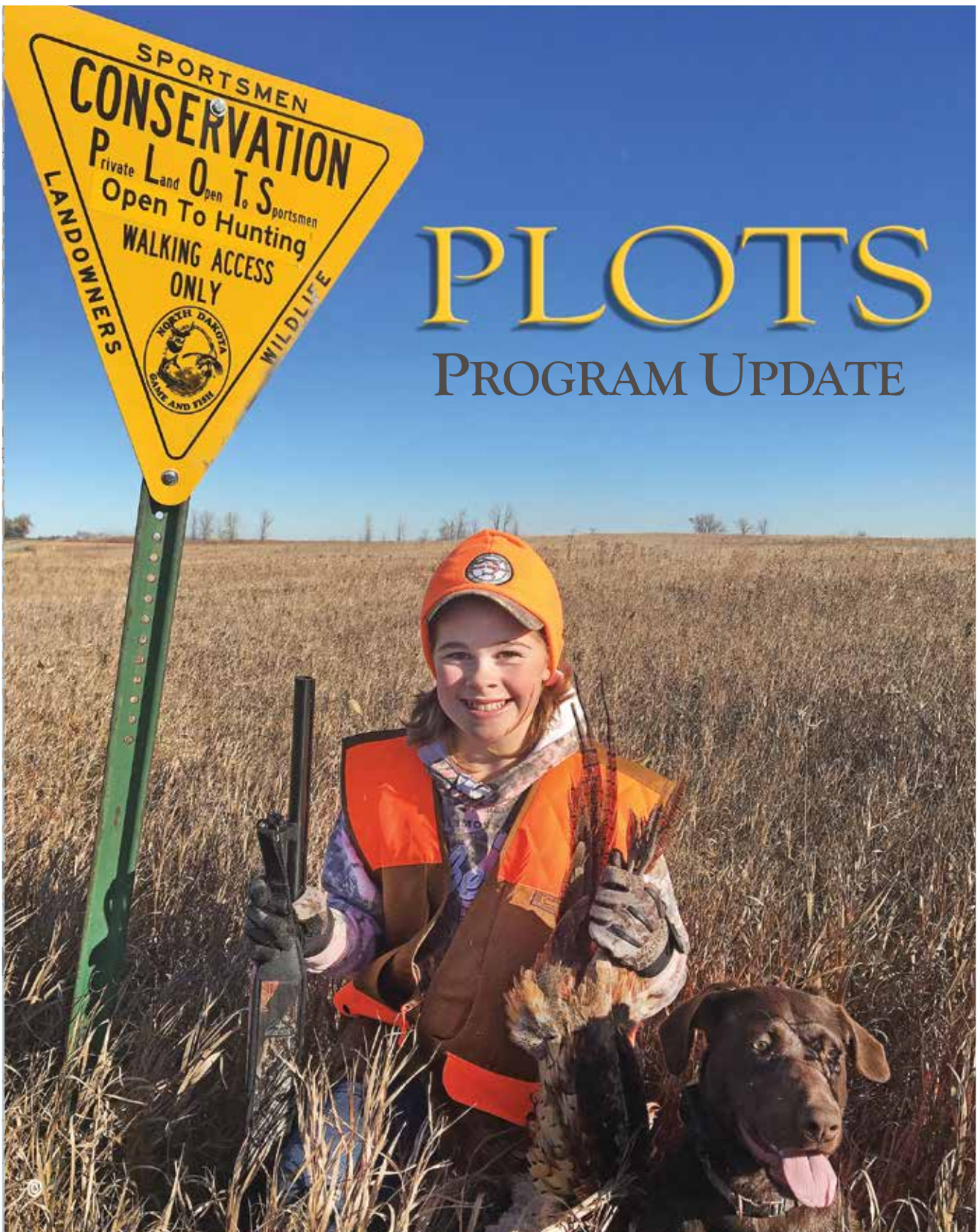
Opens: Nov. 26

Closes: March 15, 2019



CRAIG BIHRLE

Spring surveys indicated an increase in badgers, as well as beavers and skunks throughout several regions of the state.



The cover of the Game and Fish Department's PLOTS Guide features Emma Gullicks and her dog, Runa, with a pheasant harvested on PLOTS land.

By Ron Wilson

Private Land Open To Sportsmen, the Game and Fish Department's well-known walk-in access program turned 20 in 2017. With that considerable milestone in the rearview mirror, Kevin Kading, Game and Fish private land section leader, addresses the status of the program today, and possible changes to make the program more attractive to landowners and hunters in the future.

Q: The acreage in the PLOTS program has remained somewhat stable for the last few years. Where does the program stand this year?

A: Game and Fish Department private land biologists increased acreage in the program by 25,000 acres. The program will have approximately 762,000 acres available for the 2018 fall hunting season. The reason for the increased acres was an effort to work with producers who had Conservation Reserve Program contracts set to expire. With very few options to get back into CRP, many producers were looking for other alternatives. We also worked with landowners to plant more new habitat, including about 1,600 acres of new grass in 2018. The Department also made an effort to utilize funds generated from unsuccessful deer lottery applicants who chose to donate their fees to the PLOTS program. We were able to enroll some very nice tracts of land, and plant some new acres of habitat using these funds, putting those dollars to work developing deer habitat. These efforts still can't replace the amount of habitat that was available when CRP was at its peak, but it's a start.

Q: The PLOTS acreage goal at one time was 1 million acres. After carrying more than 700,000 acres for the last three or four years, is there a more realistic goal?

A: The Department still has a goal of 1

million acres in the program, however, the objective is to maintain the highest amount of quality habitat in the program as possible. In 2017, the Department hired a consulting firm to do an extensive evaluation of the PLOTS program to evaluate opinions of hunters and landowners to determine if the program meets hunter expectations, what can be done to improve the program and where we should focus our efforts. The evaluation also looked at what landowners like or dislike about the program, what they think could be improved and what we could do differently to make enrollment more appealing. The survey consisted of more than 1,300 telephone surveys to hunters and landowners, and six in-person focus groups moderated by the consultant were held across the state with hunters and landowners. One of the questions in the survey presented hunters with a hypothetical choice regarding the PLOTS program: More areas available to hunt, with a potential sacrifice in wildlife or habitat quality, or fewer areas available to hunt, with better wildlife habitat? By more than a 2-to-1 ratio, hunters selected fewer areas, with higher quality habitat. This was consistent across all hunter groups (PLOTS or non-PLOTS hunters; residents or nonresidents). This supports the Department's objective to maintain higher quality habitat, versus simply enrolling acres just to hit that 1 million acre goal. We've been more selective in lands being enrolled and will be doing more to promote habitat enhancements and developments in the program.

Q: The weather being what it is here on the Northern Plains, what are you hearing about how enrolled acres are looking this year compared to 2017 when the state was hit hard by drought?

A: 2017 was a difficult year for all three pillars of the PLOTS program – landowners, wildlife and hunters. When you think about it, the 2017 drought had

impacts to nesting cover, brood rearing cover, fall hunting cover and winter cover. A lot of areas simply did not even green up in 2017, which made it different than other drought years, where we had some green-up in spring and early summer providing good nesting and brood rearing cover, but things dried up later in the summer. In addition to hurting crops, hay and pastures, the lack of rain made establishing new habitat difficult. For example, Todd Buckley, Department private land biologist in Williston, said a new grass planting seeded in mid-May on a PLOTS tract in Williams County only received about 2 inches of rain all year. The lack of rain on the new grass set it back significantly. In 2017, PLOTS biologists received calls daily from landowners seeking to hay or graze on PLOTS. Most PLOTS agreements have management plans to allow some haying or grazing. During times of drought, requests for PLOTS haying or grazing outside of the normal prescribed management increases. Landowners may adjust their management plans, but their payments will also be adjusted to reflect the change as well. This is one reason landowners like the program, because of its flexibility. 2018 is shaping up to be a much better year.

Q: In 2017, the PLOTS program turned 20. That's a nice milestone for a program that is widely recognized by hunters across the state. What is the status of the program today as it marches in the direction of another milestone?

A: The program remains popular with hunters and landowners. As we found out from the recent survey, participants, overall, are satisfied with the Department and with the program. During the last 20 years there was a very close association between the Conservation Reserve Program and PLOTS. Sometimes the association is so close that hunters and landowners think they are the same program. This association was made in the early years of CRP

when PLOTS first came on the scene in the mid-1990s, offering cost-share assistance to landowners enrolling into CRP. As the demand for PLOTS from hunters grew, and CRP acres in the state began to level off, PLOTS added other components to the program, in addition to cost-share for CRP. Programs designed for working lands have become a bigger component of PLOTS and will likely continue to be. Private land biologists like Renae Schultz, Jamestown, and Curt Francis, Dickinson, are hopeful that programs like the new Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program and partnerships such as Pheasants Forever's Precision Agriculture program that provide options for marginal and sensitive soils, while still farming the most productive soils, will become more attractive in their districts.

Q: In 2017, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department conducted a survey with resident and nonresident hunters, landowners currently in the PLOTS program, and landowners who have never been in the program, to see if the program meets their expectations and find ways to improve. What did you learn?

A: Here are some statements from the survey:

- Awareness of PLOTS is high – 82 percent of hunters and 65 percent of non-PLOTS landowners reported having some knowledge about the program. Despite high awareness of PLOTS in general, there is less awareness of some aspects of the program. Of hunters who indicated awareness of PLOTS, only 25 percent knew how the program is funded.
- Both hunters and landowners view the PLOTS program favorably. Given the difficulty in contacting landowners, the hunting access provided by PLOTS was discussed among hunters as being one of the program's greatest assets.
- Despite their overall satisfaction,

The Game and Fish Department's PLOTS program will have approximately 762,000 acres available for the 2018 fall hunting season.



CRAIG BIRLE

focus group participants perceived there to be a decline in the quality of habitat and wildlife on PLOTS land. Several focus group participants indicated that habitat and wildlife started to decline about 10 years ago. Focus group participants most frequently stated that the loss of CRP acreage was the primary reason for the decrease in wildlife and habitat quality. Other reasons cited were harsh winters, drought and coyotes.

- When asked what they like least about hunting on PLOTS land, hunters replied that the land is too crowded, there is a lack of game, or the land is overhunted, and the land is barren or the habitat is poor.
- When asked in an open-ended question what could be done to improve the quality of PLOTS tracts, responses given by at least 10 percent of hunters include protecting native grassland, restoring or enhancing native grassland, protecting or enhancing wetlands, planting trees and shrubs along stream corridors, and rotating grazing systems.
- When asked to rate the importance of wildlife to their land, on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all important and 10 is extremely important, PLOTS landowners gave a mean rating of 7.76, which is well above the

midpoint of 5.00. Even non-PLOTS landowners gave relatively robust ratings, with a mean rating of 6.76.

- Among PLOTS landowners, the top motivations for enrolling their land are that they wanted to have their land open to hunting, and the land-use payments.
- A majority (60 percent) of current PLOTS landowners and 45 percent of former PLOTS landowners agree that the Department is offering attractive program options.
- A majority (64 percent) of current PLOTS landowners and 33 percent of former PLOTS landowners agree that the Department is offering attractive payment rates.
- Of non-PLOTS landowners who knew about the program, the top reasons that they are not enrolled are that they are just not interested (20 percent), they want privacy or control over who is on the property (13 percent), they already allow others to hunt the property (11 percent), the Department declared the property ineligible or did not want to enroll it (8 percent), and they are not familiar enough with the program (7 percent).
- Several landowners in the focus groups were not interested in enrolling. Some simply do not want strangers on their land, or they have had

negative experiences with hunters. For others, the payments are not enough to compete with other financial incentives such as farming the land, producing livestock, renting the land to tenants, or renting the land to outfitters or other hunting parties.

- Half of non-PLOTS landowners in the survey who knew about the program said nothing would interest them in enrolling their land.
- Most landowners enrolled in PLOTS (90 percent) are interested in continuing with the program when their current agreements expire.
- Satisfaction is high among PLOTS hunters. They were asked about four aspects of the program. The percentages who were satisfied were nearly identical (82-84 percent) for the quality of habitat, the PLOTS opportunities available to them, and the opportunities to encounter wildlife. Slightly behind, but still favorable, was the amount of acreage available (73 percent satisfied with it).
- Hunter satisfaction with PLOTS has remained stable. A solid majority of PLOTS hunters (72 percent) said their satisfaction has remained about the same over the past 10 years, whereas there is a nearly even split between those whose satisfaction has increased (12 percent) and decreased (11 percent).
- Most current PLOTS landowners (91 percent) are satisfied with their experiences participating in the program. Most (88 percent) are satisfied with the terms of agreement (4 percent are dissatisfied) and a majority (78 percent) are satisfied with the payment rate (12 percent are dissatisfied). When asked what they dislike about the program in an open-ended question, only 5 percent said the payments are too low.
- Of landowners who received assistance from the Department on enhancing their land through PLOTS, 90 percent are satisfied with the assistance.
- There are substantial differences between resident and nonresident

hunters regarding the species hunted on PLOTS land. Only 5 percent of nonresident PLOTS hunters travel to North Dakota to hunt deer or other big game, while 58 percent of resident PLOTS hunters hunt big game. In contrast, 44 percent of nonresident PLOTS hunters hunt waterfowl, compared to just 27 percent of resident PLOTS hunters. Consistent with the latter finding, nonresident PLOTS hunters are much more likely than resident PLOTS hunters to hunt on wetlands. The top species type targeted by both hunter groups, however, is upland game birds.

- Newer hunters in the focus groups indicated that they primarily hunt on land enrolled in PLOTS, as newer hunters are less likely to have established relationships with private landowners. Conversely, several long-time hunters indicated that they hunt on posted private land much more frequently than PLOTS land.
- The focus group discussion found that hunters have noted an increase in recent years in the number of landowners who rent their land to outfitters or hunting parties, closing it off to local hunters.
- Most landowners in the focus groups (PLOTS and non-PLOTS landowners alike) are also hunters, and most hunt their own land. They are generally willing to allow others on the land. However, their own hunting or that of friends and family takes precedence.
- Among all hunters, 73 percent have sought permission to hunt on posted

property in North Dakota over the past 10 years. A substantially higher percentage of PLOTS hunters (82 percent) than non-PLOTS hunters (66 percent) have sought permission.

- Two-thirds (66 percent) of all hunters who sought permission were successful in obtaining permission or were granted permission more often than not. Nonetheless, other hunters were not as fortunate as 23 percent received about an equal number of permissions and denials, and 10 percent were denied permission or were denied more often than not.
- PLOTS hunters travel a median of 50 miles (one-way) to hunt on property enrolled in the program and are willing to travel a median of 150 miles to hunt anywhere, not just on PLOTS land. Nonresident PLOTS hunters travel a median of 200 miles to hunt on PLOTS land and are willing to travel a median of 400 miles to hunt anywhere.
- Regarding access and travel distances, 77 percent of hunters who knew that the amount of PLOTS acreage had decreased over the past 10 years indicated that they would hunt more often if more acreage were available to them within an acceptable travel distance.
- PLOTS has particular value to hunters who live in cities as it reduces their travel distance to find land to hunt.
- PLOTS hunters with children like the ease of going to PLOTS land and hunting immediately without having to contact a landowner.



PLOTS
are private lands.
Please **ENJOY** this opportunity
and **RESPECT** the land as if it were your own.

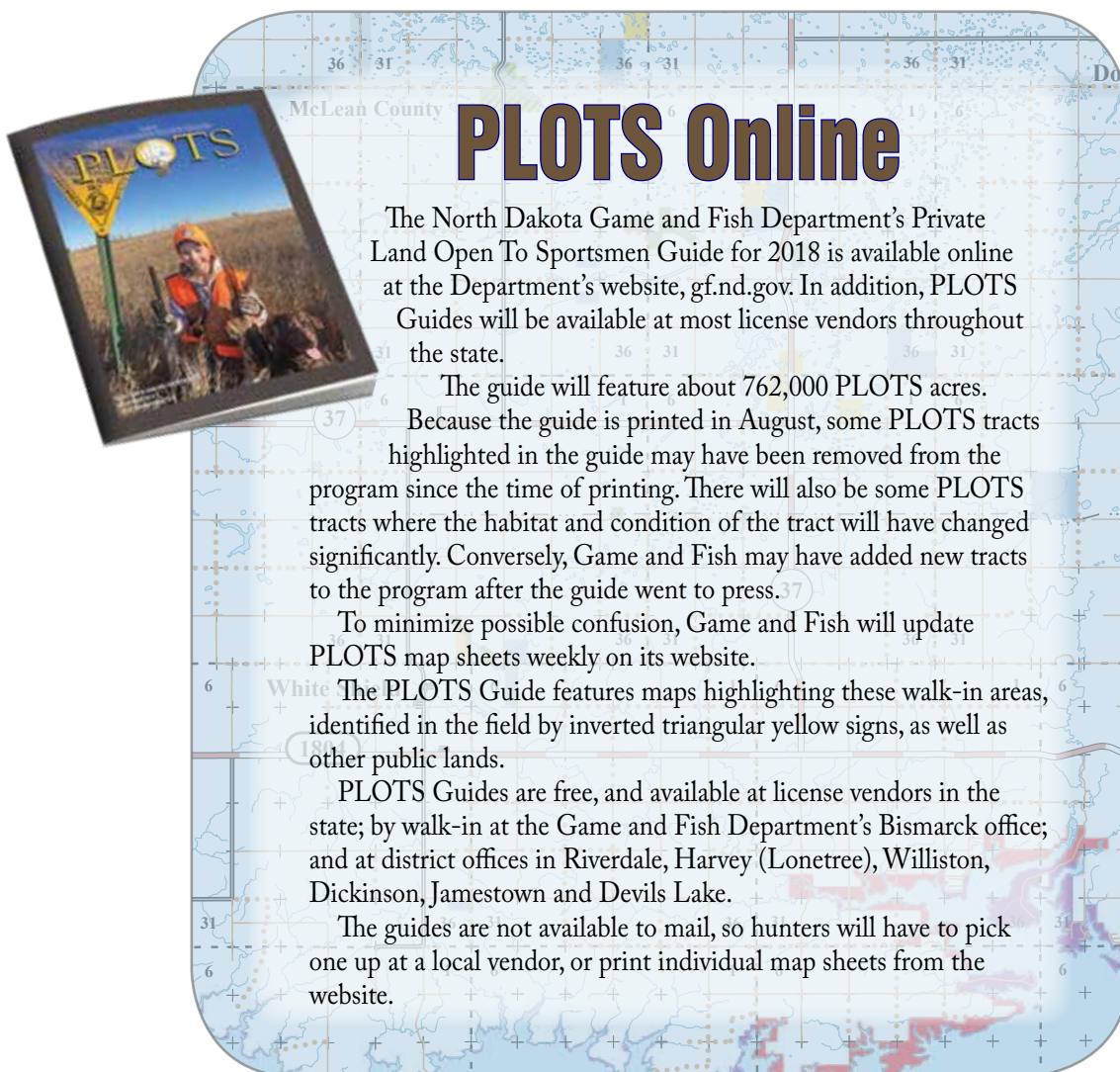
Q: While we understand that the Department's PLOTS is landowner driven, what role do hunters play in making sure this program remains on the landscape?

A: Hunters play a role by making sure they treat the PLOTS tracts they hunt with respect. It goes without saying that a "few bad apples" can ruin a good PLOTS tract. Landowners are generously enrolling their land into this voluntary program. We receive calls every year about litter, off-trail travel, dumping of carcasses and so on from owners of PLOTS lands. Our wardens can't be everywhere they need to be so we ask hunters to look out for poor behavior from others and contact the

Department if they witness something. Another way hunters can help ensure the program remains on the landscape is to buy a hunting license, even if they don't plan to hunt a particular year or if they don't plan to hunt on PLOTS. Interestingly, the survey pointed out that many hunters don't understand how PLOTS is funded. PLOTS is funded from the sales of hunting licenses and interest accrued from the Department's operating fund. No state tax dollars go into the program. Hunters can also elect to have fees for the deer gun lottery application donated to the PLOTS program if they are unsuccessful in the drawing. Funds generated from this process go directly

into habitat enhancement, development and public access. Funds generated from the sales of hunting licenses are leveraged with federal Pittman-Robertson funds, which come from excise taxes from the sale of sporting arms and ammunition. Collectively, these funds help the Department manage species and their habitats and keep programs like PLOTS on the landscape. It's a user-funded system. Without the hunting license sales, the Department has less funding available for habitat management, research and programs like PLOTS.

Ron Wilson is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



PLOTS Online

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen Guide for 2018 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.

The guide will feature about 762,000 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.

NEW!

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A Conservation Reserve Enhancement Project

The North Dakota Riparian Project **CREP** helps landowners identify resource concerns and design custom built CRP along riparian areas, with special focus areas, additional incentives and added flexibility within practices that can fit most qualifying operations.

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Adams, Billings,
Bowman, Burleigh,
Dunn, Emmons, Grant,
Golden Valley,
Hettinger, McKenzie,
Mercer, Morton, Oliver,
Sioux, Slope and Stark
counties.

For more information, contact a private land biologist at the Dickinson or Bismarck district offices, or visit the Game and Fish website at gf.nd.gov.



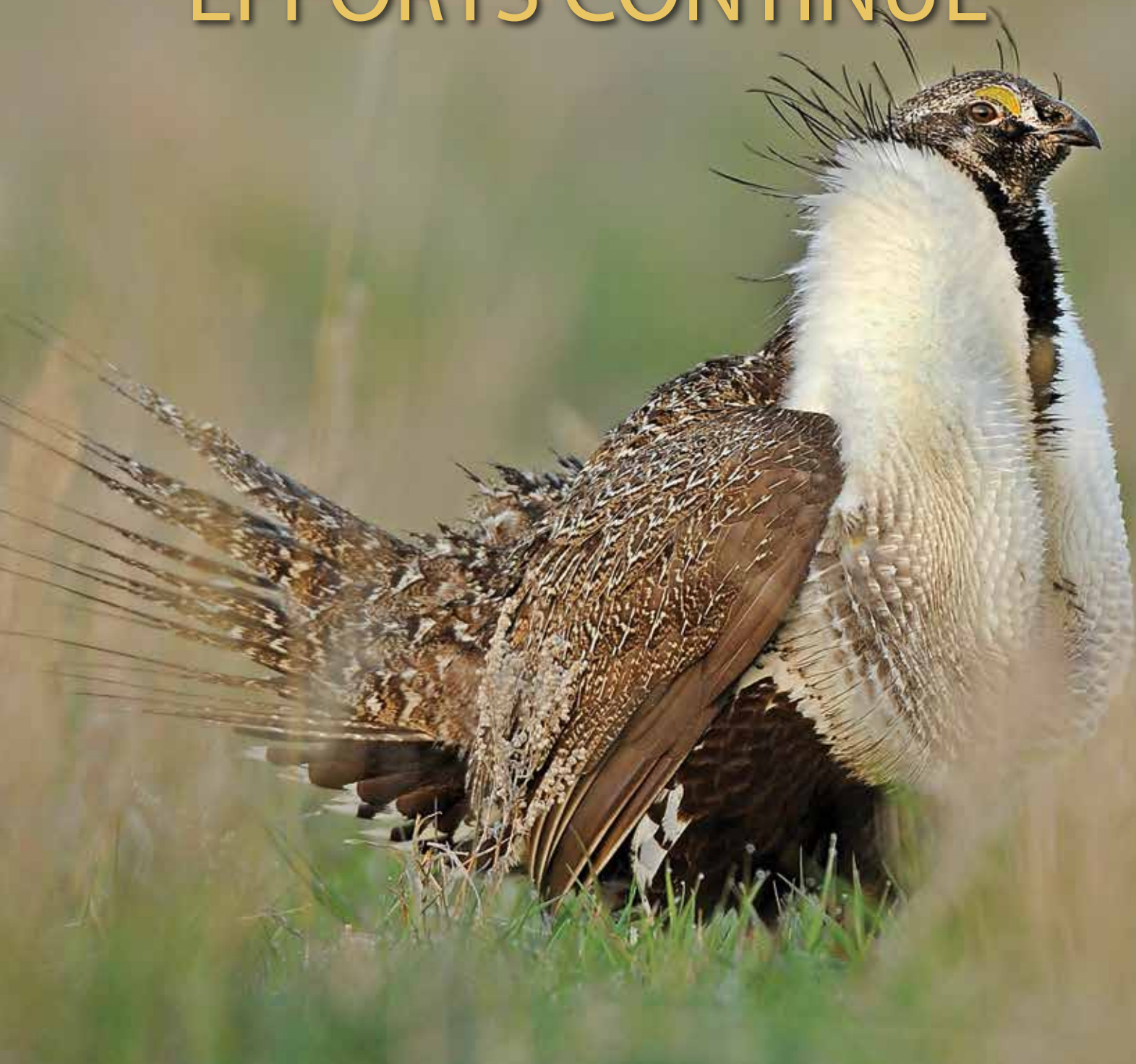
NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT
100 N. Bismarck Expressway
Bismarck, ND 58501-5095
gf.nd.gov – 701-328-6300


CRAIG BRIDLE

SAGE GROUSE

recovery measured,

EFFORTS CONTINUE





The number of male sage grouse gathering on leks in southwestern North Dakota in spring has declined significantly in recent years.

By Ron Wilson

Efforts to bolster a fading sage grouse population in southwestern North Dakota continued in 2018, but with a twist.

In 2017, state wildlife managers translocated 60 sage grouse – 40 females and 20 males – from southern Wyoming to Bowman County. Unlike historical upland bird translocations, where landowners, biologists or sportsmen simply dumped birds haphazardly on the landscape, recent translocations include monitoring to evaluate effectiveness. Researchers marked all birds with GPS or VHF radio devices to monitor survival, movements and habitats selected.



CRAIG BIRHLE

An adult sage grouse translocated from Wyoming in 2017 leaves a release box in southwestern North Dakota

This spring, 39 sage grouse, with a near equal divide in sexes, were captured in Wyoming, fitted with tracking devices, and released south of Marmarth.

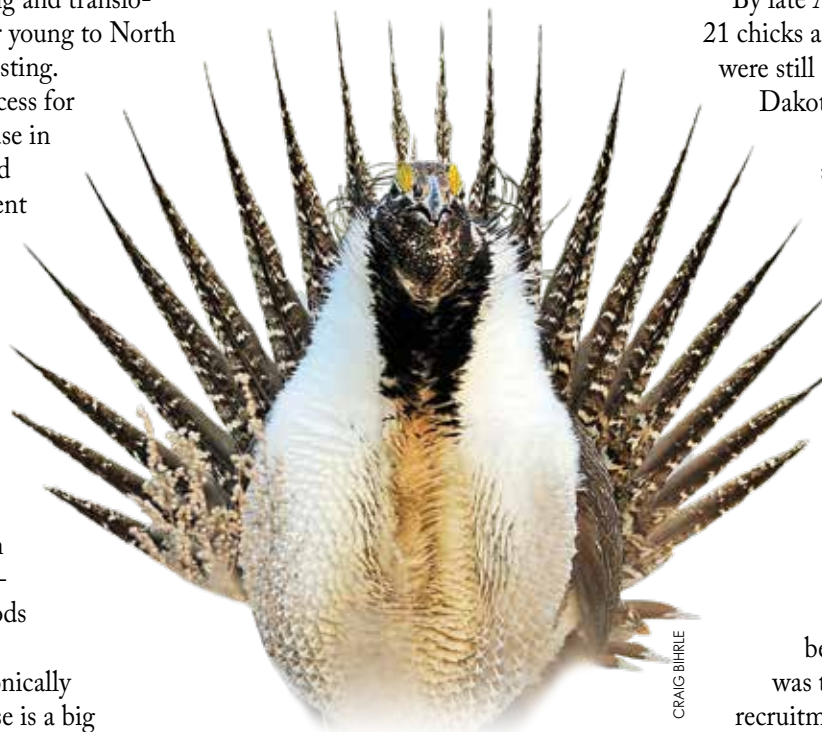
Here's the twist. Twenty additional sage grouse hens were captured in Wyoming and released back into the population, with the aim of recapturing and translocating the adults and their young to North Dakota after successful nesting.

Unfortunately, nest success for the adult female sage grouse in Wyoming wasn't great, and Game and Fish Department biologists translocated fewer adults and broods to North Dakota than hoped.

"A lot of those nests in Wyoming began to fail ... it wasn't looking good," said Jesse Kolar, Department upland game management supervisor in Dickinson. "We were hoping to get up to eight broods translocated."

Efforts to move, electronically track and study sage grouse is a big

undertaking and requires many hands. Players in North Dakota's attempt to improve the grouse population in the southwestern part of the state include Game and Fish, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Utah State University and the U.S. Geological Survey.



CRAIG BIRHLE

In the end, Kolar said, six hens and their broods (21 chicks) were moved to North Dakota, placed in a release pen and later liberated.

Biologists have long said that sage grouse in southwestern North Dakota are on the eastern edge of their range, where habitat and weather limit their success and expansion.

There are other difficulties, too, a lack of luck included, in an adult hen raising a successful brood. This goes for birds ushered in from Wyoming or hatched and reared in North Dakota.

"Unfortunately, the first brood we brought up from Wyoming, we found several of those chicks in a really small burrow, which we assumed was weasel predation," Kolar said.

Another brood was found dead, with zero signs pointing to predation.

"During that time, we had a lot of spring moisture, including some hail, so we're assuming the cause of mortality was exposure," Kolar said.

By late August, Kolar said four of the 21 chicks and four of the six adult hens were still alive in southwestern North Dakota.

Kolar said biologists consider a brood successful if they reach 50 days after hatching.

"For me as a biologist, as a manager, I am more interested if they make it until next summer and the females initiate a nest," he said.

Of the 39 adult sage grouse translocated before the hens and broods, Kolar said 28 of those birds were alive in late August.

Kolar said the reasoning behind the brood translocations was to see if this method increased recruitment, reduced movements and

fostered site fidelity in the new population. While the sample size is small, he said the results so far are encouraging as the adult hens and young are sticking around the areas at which they were released.

Biologists also continue to electronically track the whereabouts of those adult grouse that were released in Bowman County in 2017. In late August, fewer than half were still on air. Yet, four of the adult hens in that group did initiate nests in spring.

"We weren't happy seeing many of those birds take off after being released in southwestern North Dakota in 2017, but where they ended up settling down wasn't as far away as we initially perceived," Kolar said. "A lot of them settled a few miles into Montana and some into South Dakota, which is still part of our regional sage grouse population. Those birds that have been around a while are seemingly becoming a little more adapted to this habitat and are finding ways to survive."

North Dakota had its first sage grouse season in 1964. The season, which was typically a three-day hunt most of those years, was shut down indefinitely in 2008. The population today is nowhere near where it needs to be to open it up to hunting, and it's uncertain if sage grouse numbers will ever reach huntable numbers in southwestern North Dakota.

"I try to be optimistic about it ... Sage grouse are upland birds and upland birds can have boom years when the conditions are right," Kolar said. "But today, I would say that the prospect of reopening the season soon doesn't look good."

Even so, Kolar said the Game and Fish Department has the responsibility to manage North Dakota's wildlife and sometimes that includes trying to maintain struggling populations.

"Our job now is to see what works, what is possible in helping the sage grouse population," he said. "We need to be able to say that we made really good efforts to try and identify what works, what doesn't work and pass that information along to other states working with these birds."

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



Brandon Ramsey, North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife technician, with an adult sage grouse captured in Wyoming.



Researchers and biologists used spotlights to help locate and capture sage grouse at night.



BUFFALOBERRY PATCH

By Greg Freeman, Department News Editor



CRAIG BIRKLE

Governor Proclaims Hunting and Fishing Day

Governor Doug Burgum signed a proclamation establishing September 22 as Hunting and Fishing Day in North Dakota.

Governor Burgum's proclamation highlights the rich and storied tradition of hunting and angling in North Dakota, and that hunters and anglers, through their license fees, have helped fund state efforts to provide for healthy and sustainable natural resources.

The proclamation highlights a "user pays – public benefits" approach – widely recognized as the most successful model of fish and wildlife management in the world – which shows that last year in North Dakota hunters and anglers generated more than \$30 million to support the conservation efforts of the Game and Fish Department.

The Hunting and Fishing Day Proclamation is published on the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov.

North Dakota's Hunting and Fishing Day coincides with National Hunting and Fishing Day, an event held for more than 40 years to highlight the role hunters and anglers play in supporting conservation and scientific wildlife management.

2017 Upland Game Seasons Summarized

Drought conditions, and not as many hunters in the field last fall meant fewer pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian partridge in the bag, according to statistics compiled by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

Last year, more than 58,300 pheasant hunters (down 24 percent) harvested 309,400 roosters (down 38 percent), compared to 76,600 hunters and 501,100 roosters in 2016.

Counties with the highest percentage of pheasants taken by resident hunters in 2017 were McLean, 6.7; Burleigh, 6.6; Williams, 5.9; Sargent, 5.6; and Divide, 5.5.

Top counties for nonresident hunters were Hettinger, 18.2 percent; Bowman, 10.2; Divide, 7.1; Emmons, 5.6; and Dickey, 5.5.

In 2017, 13,600 grouse hunters (down 28 percent) harvested 46,900 sharp-tailed grouse (down 28 percent). In 2016, nearly 18,900 hunters took 65,500 sharptails.

Counties with the highest percentage of sharptails taken by resident hunters in 2017 were Slope, 8.6; Walsh, 6.6; Mountrail, 6.4; Kidder, 6.3; and Benson, 4.8. Top counties for nonresident hunters were Bowman, 11.3; Hettinger, 7.4; Divide, 7; Mountrail, 6.8; and Ward, 6.4.

Last year, nearly 13,800 hunters (down 18 percent) harvested 32,800 Hungarian partridge (down 40 percent). In 2016, 16,900 hunters harvested 54,200 Huns.

Counties with the highest percentage of Huns taken by resident hunters in 2017 were Mountrail, 10.8; Ward, 8.3; Stark, 5.8; Williams, 5.4; and Adams, 4.4. Top counties for nonresident hunters were Divide, 15; McLean, 12.3; Golden Valley, 7.3; Stutsman, 7.3; and Grant, 6.3.



2018-2019
Federal
Duck Stamp
featuring
mallards by
Bob Hautman
of Delano,
MN. Credit:
USFWS.

Federal Duck Stamp Required

Waterfowl hunters age 16 and older are reminded a federal duck stamp is required beginning September 1. Waterfowl includes ducks, geese, swans, mergansers and coots.

This year's 2018-19 federal duck stamp is available for electronic purchase through the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, instant licensing telephone number, 800-406-6409, or at license vendors registered with the Department's licensing system.

Physical stamps are not available at North Dakota license vendors, but they can still be purchased 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 physical stamp will be sent by postal mail.

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

The federal duck stamp has a fee of \$25. An additional \$1.50 fee is added to cover shipping and handling costs of the actual physical stamp.



CRAIG BIRKLE

Wings Need for Agency Survey

Hunters can help in the effort to manage upland game birds in the state, by collecting feathers from harvested birds and sending in wing envelopes.

Birds included in the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's upland game wing survey, which has been in practice for decades, are ring-necked pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian 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.

Game and Fish biologists will take as many sharptail and partridge feathers as they can get because the more collected, the better the data.

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

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

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

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



Agencies Prohibit Hunting over Bait

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

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

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 hunting. Bait, in this case, includes grain, seed, minerals, salt, fruit, vegetables, nuts, 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.



CRAIG BIRHLE

HIP Registration Required

Migratory bird hunters of all ages are reminded to register with the Harvest Information Program prior to hunting ducks, geese, swans, mergansers, coots, cranes, snipe, doves and woodcock. Hunters must register in each state in which they are licensed to hunt.

Hunters can HIP certify when purchasing a license – or by clicking the Migratory Bird HIP link – at the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov. In addition, hunters can call 888-634-4798 and record the HIP number on their printed license.

Those who registered to hunt the spring light goose season in North Dakota do not have to register with HIP again, as it is required only once per year.

HIP registration is a cooperative program designed to determine a sample of hunters from which to measure the harvest of migratory birds for management purposes.



CRAIG BIRHLE

Report Banded Migratory Birds

Hunters are reminded to check harvested migratory birds for bands this fall and report federal bands at reportband.gov.

In addition, the bird banding lab has a mobile friendly reporting site that will aid hunters to report bands via mobile devices.

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.

Big Game Transport Rules

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 are prohibited from transporting into or within North Dakota the whole carcass 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 in captive cervids.

In addition, hunters harvesting a big game animal in unit 3F2 in North Dakota cannot transport the whole carcass, including the head and spinal column, outside of the unit.

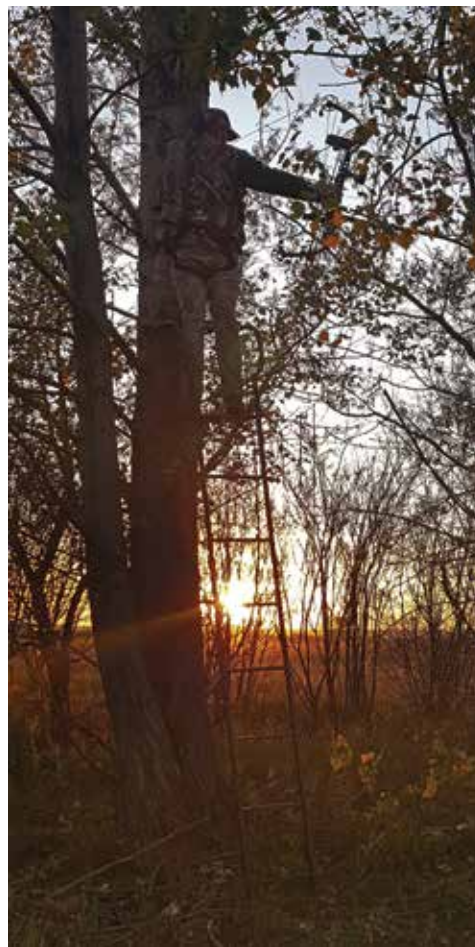
Only the following portions of the carcass can be transported:

- Meat that has been boned out.
- Quarters or other portions of meat with no part of the spinal column or head attached.
- Hides with no heads attached.

- Meat that is cut and wrapped either commercially or privately.
- 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 also note that hunting big game over bait, or placing bait to attract big game for the purpose of hunting, is prohibited in deer units 3C west of the Missouri River, 3E1, 3E2, 3F1 and 3F2.

Hunters should refer to the 2018-19 CWD proclamation on the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, for other states that have had 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.



LARA ANDERSON



CRAIG BIRKLE

Sandhill Crane Permits

North Dakota's sandhill crane season opens September 15 and continues through November 11.

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

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

Equipment on Wildlife Management Areas

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department reminds hunters that an equipment registration number, or the owner's name, address and telephone number, must be displayed on all equipment requiring identification that is placed on state wildlife management areas.

Some of the equipment that falls under this requirement includes tree stands, ground blinds and game cameras.

Owners can generate an equipment registration number by visiting My Account at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov. One registration number will be issued that can be used on all equipment that requires identification.

Equipment set out prior to August 20, or left on a WMA after January 31, is considered abandoned property and is subject to removal.



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.



Hunting and Trapping Guide

The state's waterfowl, small game and furbearer regulations has a new look this fall.

No longer printed as separate documents, North Dakota's 2018-19 Hunting and Trapping Guide includes three main sections – upland game, migratory game birds and furbearers/trapping.

The 52-page document offers much of the same information hunters and trappers rely on, but in a much more user-friendly format. In addition, the guide also features a four-page colored duck identification guide, aquatic nuisance species information, boating safety for hunters and Tom Roster's Nontoxic Shot Lethality Table.

Hunters and trappers can find the guide on the Department's website, gf.nd.gov, Game and Fish district offices and at the usual license vendor locations.



2017 Watchable Wildlife Contest
Plant and Insect Runner-up
Praying mantis
Lacey Patzer, Martin

Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest Deadline

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest is now open, and the deadline for submissions is October 1.

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

Contest entries are limited to digital files submitted via email only. 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*, and on the Department's website, gf.nd.gov.

Photographers can send emailed digital photos to photocontest@nd.gov, with individual photo file sizes limited to 5 MB or less. Game and Fish may contact photographers for original full resolution images if needed for publication.

All entries must be accompanied by the photographer's name, address, phone number and email address. Other information such as photo site location and month taken are also useful.

For more information contact contest coordinator Pat Isakson at 701-328-6300, or email Pat at ndgf@nd.gov.



2017 Watchable Wildlife Contest
Nongame 1st Place
Greater yellowlegs
Kelly Krabbenhoft, West Fargo

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- GIS map creation
- Review important season dates and regulations
- Register for hunter education classes

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Weekly Video News Broadcast

BISMARCK

KFYR - Saturday - 6 pm
KXMB - Sunday - 10 pm
CATV - Saturday - 9:30 am

DICKINSON

KQCD - Saturday - 5 pm (MT)
KXMA - Sunday - 9 pm (MT)

FARGO

KVRR - Saturday - 9 pm

GRAND FORKS

KVRR - Saturday - 9 pm

MINOT

KMOT - Saturday - 6 pm
KXMC - Sunday - 10 pm

WILLISTON

KUMV - Saturday - 6 pm
KXMD - Sunday - 10 pm

MAGAZINE



**NORTH DAKOTA
GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT**
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701-328-6300
Email: ndgf@nd.gov





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.

CLEAN - DRAIN - DRY

DRAIN ALL WATER
REMOVE VEGETATION
PULL DRAIN PLUGS

ALL EQUIPMENT. EVERY TIME.



**STOP AQUATIC
HITCHHIKERS!**

Be A Good Steward. Clean, Drain, Dry.

For complete regulations visit gf.nd.gov



back cast



By Ron Wilson

An adult dog has 42 teeth.

I know this because the veterinarian who pulled 34 of my dog's teeth told me.

When I give Merle, my 13-year-old Brittany, a soft treat, the odds of a finger getting pinched between two of them is low.

When he falls asleep on the couch, favorite chair or dog bed, his tongue often slips between his gums and hangs out the side of his mouth like a too-long leather belt.

Merle likes it when I grab him by the ears and rub his jaws with the heels of my hands. Nose to nose, I look into once brown eyes that are slowly clouding, turning the color of a weathered shed antler.

While we joke at home that Merle can hear the refrigerator door open from the next room, basic voice commands – come, go, sit, stay – are lost on his mostly deaf ears.

Getting old sucks, I tell him often while scratch-
ing where
it itches. If
he could hear
me, I'm guessing
he'd agree.

Still, Merle will hunt this fall because loading the pickup with gear the night before and sneaking out when he's sleeping or looking the other way is not an option.

"Oh, he'll never know," I've been told.

But I believe he will.

There's a piece of state school land that we hit most sharp-tailed grouse openers, and I'm guessing that's where we'll start this fall.

It's wide open pastureland that the birds favor, especially early in the season when we've yet to be pushed into hunting in long sleeves.

To say that it's nondescript looking land wouldn't be correct, because it features what the birds are looking for – rolling terrain, grass that comes to about the tops of my boots and patches of brush for shade and shelter.

It's just that I'll never understand why these native birds favor this piece of property because so much of what surrounds it for a mile or more, depending which way you're facing, looks mostly the same.

Like a lot of things, we don't overthink it. This unbroken land is mostly public, open to anyone willing to hike it. It's just that we're the lucky ones who found this place that sharp-tailed grouse frequently haunt, no matter the time of year, and have likely been doing so long before we ever showed up.

Like in past years, we'll leave the vehicle shortly after sunup, negotiate a barbed wire fence, pull up the bottom strand for the dogs, and walk south in the direction of a series of prairie hilltops.

I'd like to say that no matter the year that the birds are always there. Yet, there have been times, but not many, where we've kept our end of the deal and made the half-mile hike and were stood up.

If that happens this opener, I'll get it. That's hunting. But I'd love to see Merle get his nose into just one more covey, get a whiff of a scent that must be so tantalizing and familiar, but lost on us.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



~ George Woodward and Lytton Taylor ~
1944

NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT PHOTO

A LOOK BACK

By Ron Wilson

It's difficult to wrap your head around the numbers.

Coming off a drought year that hurt pheasant reproduction and altered hunter success (2017 saw the lowest estimated pheasant harvest in nearly two decades in the state), the gaudy pheasant numbers in North Dakota during the 1940s are that much more difficult to comprehend.

It's been estimated the pheasant harvest in the state was in the millions from 1940-46, and was underscored by the nearly 2.5 million birds that were taken in both 1944 and 1945.

These harvest numbers during what was called the Golden Forties, are even more impressive, considering shotgun shells were not readily available, gasoline was rationed, and many would-be hunters were fighting in World War II.

"The shortage of shells is what kept many hunters from taking to the

field on the opening day. Only a small percentage of hunters were able to replenish their dwindling supply of ammunition ... The War Production Board has promised Minnesota, South and North Dakota 12 (million) more shells, but they might not arrive until after the hunting season has been concluded," reported the October 1944 issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

Pheasants and other upland game birds flourished back then as weather and an amazing abundance of wildlife habitat conspired to create ideal conditions.

Game and Fish Department wildlife managers reported at the time in *North Dakota OUTDOORS* that "we have never seen so many upland game birds ... With an estimated upland game bird population of 15 million, it is going to be impossible to harvest the necessary number of birds ... The state could stand to

harvest 7.5 million birds."

To help with this effort, nonresidents were encouraged to travel to North Dakota to help in the effort. Some, like W.L. McLallen of Canada, who couldn't get over the number of birds he saw between Hebron and Bismarck from a train taking him to Chicago, decided he had to hunt, even though he didn't have any gear.

According to the December 1944 issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*, "Bismarck friends pitched in and fitted him out with odds and ends of hunting togs, shells and gun."

"I've hit the jackpot," McLallen said in that dated issue of NDO. When he eventually boarded the train to Chicago, the nonresident hunter said he still couldn't believe that there were that many birds anyplace in the world.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.