

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

It's officially 2019. We're only two days into the new year as I write this, but it's difficult to argue with the start.

It's a gorgeous winter day here in Bismarck, above freezing, with even warmer temperatures in the forecast for the next several days. While we appreciate this welcoming winter respite from Mother Nature, North Dakota's wildlife certainly benefits even more.

The weather is one of those challenges we must deal with in our business, no matter the time of year. Another challenge is doing what we can to put more wildlife habitat on the landscape.

Controlling the weather is certainly out of our hands, but working with landowners and others to create good, quality habitat to offset our unpredictable weather is something we can influence.

When we talk about wildlife habitat in North Dakota, I think most people envision grasses and other cover that benefit upland game, deer and nesting waterfowl. But water for fish, and many species of birds, is also a critical part of that conversation.

For the most part, we've been water-blessed for a number of years, which has been a good thing for the state's fisheries. Today, we have roughly 450 recreational fishing lakes, many of which were dry 30 years ago.

While fishing – and a growing number of prairie walleye lakes across the state – has been a highlight over the last several years, 2018 included, we do need some precipitation to bolster some fisheries that are in need of a drink to sustain the quality fishing our state's anglers have come to appreciate.

Speaking of good fishing. In 2018, Lake Sakakawea had some great fishing, thanks to a tremendous walleye population. The excellent

fishing in the big lake maybe surprised some people because the rainbow smelt population had rebounded to near record levels. The thinking was that with an abundance of forage that the walleyes wouldn't bite as well for anglers, but that wasn't the case.

The fishing at our other big-name waters – Devils Lake, Lake Oahe and the Missouri River – was also good in 2018, as thousands of anglers would attest.

A record walleye was caught in the Missouri River last spring, breaking a fishing milestone that stood for decades. We are happy for the angler who caught that fantastic fish and happy that his accomplishment promotes the great fisheries we have in North Dakota.

While fishing continues to garner a ton of attention from the men and women in the state, so does North Dakota's deer gun season.

We saw an uptick in the number of deer gun licenses made available to hunters in 2018. Yet, we also had 40,000 people who applied for deer licenses who did not get their first choice.

These hunters are frustrated, and we are frustrated. A mild winter, like we've experienced thus far, will go a long way in helping those animals get through our leanest months in good shape.

While there were a number of things to celebrate in 2018, we've turned our attention to the challenges in 2019. As it is our mission "to protect, conserve and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their habitats for sustained public consumptive and nonconsumptive use," there is much to do.

As we work to succeed in this mission, I encourage everyone to get out and enjoy North Dakota's great outdoors.

Terry Steinwand

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Governor Doug Burgum

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PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FEATURES

Year 2018 in Review	2
2018 Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest	8
Talking Furbearers.....	16

DEPARTMENTS

Buffaloberry Patch.....	20
Back Cast	25



Front Cover

Ice fishing on Sibley Lake in Kidder County. *Photo by Ty Stockton.*



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Website: gf.nd.gov • email: ndgfd@nd.gov

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A photograph of a deer with antlers in a field of tall, dry grass. The deer is positioned on the right side of the frame, facing right. The grass is a mix of brown and tan, suggesting a late autumn or winter setting. The deer's coat is dark and textured. The antlers are visible on the right side of its head.

YEAR IN REVIEW

2018

By Scott Peterson



CRAIG BIRLE

Antlered white-tailed deer licenses increased by 150 in 2018.

North Dakota Game and Fish Department personnel spent a considerable amount of time in 2018 thinking more strategically about agency priorities and how the Department manages the state's fish and wildlife resources.

One of the components of that process is identifying the Department's key drivers and performance indices. Key drivers are those elements that have the most impact on how we deliver services and includes customer base, fish and wildlife populations, access, habitat and so on.

Key performance indices are elements of Game and Fish business that are measurable, such as license sales, hunter and angler success rates and overall hunter and angler satisfaction.

The biggest challenges for state wildlife managers are those things over which we have no control, including weather and the federal farm bill. Knowing this, we will continue to focus on those components we are able to influence to benefit our resources.

Wildlife populations in 2018 covered both ends of the spectrum. Deer populations, particularly mule deer, continued to do fairly well, following some difficult winters and declining numbers. Whitetail numbers, while on an upward trend, are still a bit below Department goals for most hunting units.

North Dakota's pheasant population is still feeling the negative effects of a significant reduction in grassland habitat due to expiring Conservation Reserve Program acres over the past decade and drought in 2017.

While fishing opportunities are still plentiful across the state, the drier weather pattern the last couple of years has had some influence on some of our marginal fishing lakes.

The number of fishing waters managed by Game and Fish personnel in recent years peaked at about 450 lakes, but that number dwindled a bit in the last year due to dropping water levels on some lakes.

North Dakota has several smaller wall-eye lakes managed by the Department that are on the verge of producing some good fishing opportunities if Mother Nature cooperates.

While I, like a lot of North Dakotans, really like mild winters, we will need some meaningful precipitation at some point to replenish our wetland base.

A recent confirmation of chronic wasting disease in a mule deer shot during the 2018 deer gun season in northwestern North Dakota has spurred lots of discussion about what this will ultimately mean for deer management strategies moving forward.

Prior to this, CWD was found only in the southwestern part of the state in deer hunting unit 3F2. However, the disease is rather prevalent in Saskatchewan, so while this news is disappointing to state wildlife managers and hunters in northwestern North Dakota, it is not entirely surprising.

Knowing that CWD has made its way into northwestern North Dakota, we'll likely have to manage that area like we do in the southwestern part of the state. Which means a baiting ban to help keep deer from artificially congregating and potentially spreading the disease.

Game and Fish Department personnel have started preparing for another legislative session in 2019. As in the past, we are hearing about certain bills that have the potential to be introduced and early indications point to a busy session.

We will know soon how many game and fish related bills are introduced and what sort of an impact, be it positive or negative, they may have on the way we deliver services to our customers. As always, we will be tracking bills that affect our agency and our customers and will provide regular updates on the Department's website and other media outlets.

SCOTT PETERSON is the Game and Fish Department's deputy director.

The number of duck broods observed in summer 2018 was up 37 percent from 2017.



CRAIG BIRKLE

Upland Birds and Waterfowl

North Dakota's roadside surveys indicated total pheasant and Hungarian partridge numbers in 2018 were similar to 2017, while sharp-tailed grouse numbers were down.

The survey showed total pheasants observed per 100 miles was down 2 percent from 2017. In addition, broods per 100 miles were unchanged, while the average brood size was up 27 percent. Department biologists said that even though survey data suggested pheasant production was better than 2017, hunters would notice the lack of production from 2017 in the overall population.

The survey indicated that sharptails observed were down 49 percent statewide from 2017, while partridge were up 7 percent.

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.

The number of duck broods observed during the Department's July brood survey was up 37 percent from 2017, and 77 percent above the long-term average. The average brood size of 6.76 ducklings was nearly identical to 2017.

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

Record Walleye

Given the recent history of good water conditions in lakes Sakakawea and Oahe, and the section of the Missouri River sandwiched between, Game and Fish Department fisheries managers weren't surprised that a new state record walleye was caught in the river near Bismarck.

Neal Leier of Bismarck caught the 15-pound, 13-ounce walleye on a rainy Friday near the Fox Island boat ramp. He jigged his plastic bait maybe five times before hooking into what felt like a log when he got the fish on the reel.

Leier's walleye broke the old state record, a 15-pound, 12-ounce walleye from Wood Lake in Benson County, by just an ounce. The Wood Lake walleye record stood for nearly 60 years.

Fall Fish Surveys

The Game and Fish Department's fall fish reproduction survey, which evaluates natural reproduction, stocking success and forage abundance, indicated that most waters fared as good as or better than expected in 2018.

Lake Sakakawea had the eighth highest catch of young-of-the-year walleye on record. There was also good reproduction of most game species in the big lake, as fisheries biologists saw healthy numbers of pike, perch, smallmouth bass, white bass, crappies and walleye. Plus, it was the second year in a row of good walleye reproduction, which wasn't a surprise considering the high water resulted in an abundance of food and habitat for the young fish.

Lake Oahe showed good reproduction of walleye in 2018, which wasn't necessarily a good thing, considering that Oahe is still lacking forage that fish need to grow.

Devils Lake saw fair to good numbers of walleye, with the catch close to average even though Game and Fish didn't stock any walleye in the fishery in 2018. The end result was all from natural reproduction.

Sampling results on smaller lakes generally varied from lake to lake. The common theme mentioned by fisheries personnel across the state in 2018 was that young-of-the-year fish were larger than normal. This is significant because bigger fish generally have a better chance of surviving through the first winter and that's an important step in getting those fish to a catchable size in the future.



Neal Leier of Bismarck with the state's new record walleye.

MIKE ANDERSON

Aquatic Nuisance Species

North Dakota did not have any new aquatic nuisance species discoveries in 2018. That includes movement of ANS that are already in the state, or documentation of new species.

Fisheries managers said that North Dakota is fortunate to this point to have few problems with ANS. Game and Fish ANS educational efforts and cooperation of North Dakota anglers, boaters and hunters has helped in the effort to safeguard the state's waters.

Deer License Numbers Up

The Game and Fish Department made available 55,150 licenses to deer gun hunters in 2018.

That was good news because that was 650 more licenses than 2017 and well above the recent low of 43,275 in 2015.

Some of the increases in deer gun licenses were seen in both antlered mule deer (up 150) and antlered whitetails (up 150).

Deer Gun Apps Go Electronic

For the first time in 2018, all hunters who applied for a deer gun license had to do so electronically.

The Game and Fish Department's plan to move all lottery applications online

was initiated in 2016 after lawmakers passed a law requiring the Department to phase out the old paper license books and develop an all-electronic licensing system.

This all-electronic plan for deer gun hunters wasn't a giant leap as thousands of hunters had already applied electronically for swan, turkey, moose, elk and bighorn sheep licenses prior to the deer gun lottery.

Game and Fish also initiated a concentrated effort in 2018 to remind deer hunters of a state law that required them to purchase a general game and habitat license before they could receive a deer license in the mail.

In 2017, about 5,500 hunters who drew a deer license did not purchase a general game and habitat license. In 2018, that number was cut to about 500, and those potential hunters did not receive their tags in the mail.

Bighorn Sheep Decline, Hunting Licenses Follow

The Game and Fish Department allocated three bighorn sheep licenses for the 2018 hunting season, two fewer than in 2017.

One license, as authorized under North Dakota Century Code, was auctioned in

spring by the Midwest Chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation, from which all proceeds are used to enhance bighorn sheep management in North Dakota.

The number of once-in-a-lifetime licenses allotted to hunters was based on data collected from the Department's summer population survey. Results of the survey showed a total of 77 rams, 12 fewer than 2017 and 27 fewer than 2016.

Big game biologists said the 13 percent decline in ram numbers was likely the result of an ongoing bacterial pneumonia outbreak that was first detected in 2014.

In addition, 2017 had the second lowest lamb recruitment on record so only four yearling rams were observed. Encouragingly, no adult animals within the herds that were exposed to disease in 2014 showed clinical signs of pneumonia, and the summer lamb count in those herds improved.

Sage Grouse Translocation Efforts Continue

Efforts to bolster a declining 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

An outbreak of bacterial pneumonia that was first detected in 2014 continues to negatively influence North Dakota's bighorn sheep population.



TY STOCKTON

2018 Figures

- 3 – Number of bighorn sheep licenses allocated to hunters, two fewer than 2017.
- 10 – Number of pronghorn hunting units open in 2018, five more than 2017. Pronghorn hunting seasons were closed 2010-13 as animal numbers drastically declined following severe winters.
- 15 pounds, 13 ounces – The weight of the new state record walleye caught May 18 in the Missouri River.
- 24 – Age of the oldest known walleye ever taken from Lake Sakakawea. Department fisheries biologists confirmed its age in 2018 by counting the age rings on a magnified image of an otolith, or ear bone.
- 29 pounds, 2 ounces – Weight of the biggest northern pike fisheries biologists tagged in the Missouri River System in 2018 as part of an ongoing study to determine how anglers utilize trophy fish. The big female pike measured 44.5 inches long.
- 30 – The percentage decline in the state's spring pheasant population index compared to 2017.
- 39 – Number of sage grouse captured in Wyoming, fitted with tracking devices and released in southwestern North Dakota, in an ongoing effort to bolster a fading grouse population in the state.
- 450 – Approximate number of fishing waters in North Dakota that have public access and some degree of management by Department fisheries biologists.
- 600 – Number of student archers who competed in the North Dakota National Archery in the Schools Program in Minot. A record 750 students registered for the event, but a spring snowstorm kept some from attending.
- 2,540 – Number of mule deer counted during the Department's spring survey. Survey results were 45 percent above the long-term average.
- 11,000 – Number of hunters who applied for 1,075 pronghorn licenses in 10 hunting units.
- 55,150 – Number of deer gun licenses made available to hunters, up 650 licenses from 2017.
- 135,000 – Estimated number of Canada geese counted during the Department's annual mid-winter waterfowl survey.
- 762,000 – Approximate number of Private Land Open To Sportsmen acres available for the fall hunting season.
- 2.2 million – Number of salmon eggs collected by fisheries crews. The majority of the eggs were collected from salmon from Lake Sakakawea.
- 10 million – Estimated number of walleye fingerlings stocked in 140 waters across the state.



Brandon Ramsey, Game and Fish Department wildlife technician, with an adult sage grouse captured in Wyoming in 2018.

20 males – from southern Wyoming to Bowman County. Researchers marked all birds with GPS and VHF radio devices to monitor survival, movements and habitats selected.

In spring 2018, 39 sage grouse, with a near equal divide in sexes, were captured in Wyoming, fitted with tracking devices, and released south of Marmarth.

The twist was that 20 additional sage grouse hens were captured in Wyoming and released back into the population, with the aim of recapturing and translocating adults and their young to North Dakota after successful nesting.

The reasoning behind the brood translocations, biologists said, was to see if this method increased recruitment, reduced movements and fostered site fidelity in the new population. While the sample size was small, the results late last summer and early fall were encouraging as the adult hens and young were sticking around the areas at which they were released.

Canada Goose Hunting Zones Restructured

The Game and Fish Department restructured the state's Canada goose hunting zones in 2018.

According to Game and Fish waterfowl managers, the move was made to further help address overabundant Canada geese and provide extra hunting opportunities in September, without taking away quality late-season hunting opportunities.

Under the new structure, there are now three zones – Missouri River, western and eastern – instead of two. Early Canada goose hunting opportunities opened August 15 in all zones, but closed on different dates, the latest being September 21 in the eastern zone.

Also, the regular Canada goose season closed in the eastern zone earlier in December than the other two zones.

Basically, more Canada goose-landowner conflicts are in the eastern half of the state and getting those extra days back in September would put some more harvest pressure on those birds. At the same time, that part of the state doesn't have reliable, consistent hunting opportunities late into December.

Fall Mule Deer Survey

The Department's fall mule deer survey indicated fawn production in 2018 was better than in 2017.

Biologists counted 2,446 mule deer in the aerial survey in October. The buck-to-doe ratio of 43 bucks per 100 does was higher than last year and the same as the long-term average. The mule deer fawn-to-doe ratio was 84 fawns per 100 does, which was higher than 2017, but slightly lower than the long-term average of 89 fawns per 100 does.

Big game biologists said mule deer fawn production has been on a positive trend since 2013, following record low fawn production after the winters of 2008-09 through 2010-11. Mule deer fawn-to-doe and buck-to-doe ratios were at or near their long-term averages in all management regions except the northern badlands, which includes hunting unit 4A.

Walleye Stocking

Fisheries personnel stocked nearly 10 million walleye fingerlings in more than 140 waters across the state in 2018.

Considering not many went into Lake Sakakawea, 2018 featured one of the largest stockings of more than 8 million fingerlings into smaller fishing waters.

With more than 50 new walleye lakes in North Dakota, the demand to stock those waters, along with the larger, traditional fisheries, greatly increased the demand from the hatcheries.

Conditions at the lakes were very good, with cool water temperatures and in some cases, newly flooded vegetation from rainfall. It was expected that the fingerlings should have found lots of food and good survival conditions.

CWD Surveillance Continued

The Game and Fish Department continued its Hunter-Harvested Surveillance program during the 2018 hunting season, by sampling deer for chronic wasting disease and bovine tuberculosis from 17 units in the western portion of the state. In addition, all moose and elk harvested in the state were eligible for testing.

Samples from hunter-harvested deer were tested from units 3A1, 3A2, 3A3, 3B1, 3B2, 3D1, 3D2, 3E1, 3E2, 3F1, 3F2, 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, 4E and 4F.

Test results indicated that two deer tested positive for CWD in hunting unit 3F2 and one deer tested positive in hunting unit 3A1.

The results in 3F2 weren't surprising to biologists as deer have tested positive in that hunting unit in the past. The same could be said for 3A1 in northwestern North Dakota where deer across the border in Canada have tested positive with the disease.

2017-18 LICENSES AND PERMITS ISSUED		
	RESIDENT	NONRESIDENT
Individual Fishing	53,821	19,093
Husband/Wife Fishing	14,676	5,277
Senior Citizen Fishing	12,501	
Disabled Fishing	285	
Short-Term Fishing		
10-Day		7,649
3-Day		25,702
Paddlefish Tags	2,719	707
Commercial Tags	17	
Retail Bait Vendor	302	
Wholesale Bait Vendor	36	8
Fish Hatchery	4	
2017 Boat Registrations (First year of 3-year decal)	59,048	
General Hunting	37,995	37,243
Small Game Hunting	15,243	19,255
Combination License	55,954	
Waterfowl Hunting		20,770
Furbearer Hunting/Trapping	10,721	3,153
Fur Buyer	36	9
Deer Gun Hunting	40,438	300
Deer Gun Hunting (Gratis)	13,402	264
Deer Bowhunting	26,109	2,367
Moose Hunting	210	
Moose Hunting (Preferential Landowner)	35	
Elk Hunting	328	
Elk Hunting (Preferential Landowner)	71	
Turkey Hunting (Spring)	5,457	
Turkey Hunting (Fall)	3,303	26
Turkey Hunting (Gratis Spring)	324	
Turkey Hunting (Gratis Fall)	195	
Habitat Stamp	75,039	
Shooting Preserve	10	
Fishing/Hunting Guide	273	31
Taxidermist	226	9
Falconry	8	
Scientific Collector	34	18
Swan	1,601	1,099
Sandhill Crane	2,262	1,745

2018 SPECIAL BIG GAME LICENSES		
	LICENSES AVAILABLE	APPLICATIONS RECEIVED
Moose	330	21,041
Elk	404	18,082
Bighorn Sheep	3	14,615

FINANCIAL STATEMENT JULY 1, 2017 TO JUNE 30, 2018	
Income	\$ 30,885,096
Expenses	\$ 32,817,645

FUND BALANCES, FIXED ASSETS AND LONG-TERM DEBT	
Game and Fish General Fund	\$ 32,775,223
Habitat and Depredation Fund	\$ 1,421,698
Nongame Wildlife Fund	\$ 149,968
Total All Funds	\$ 34,346,889
Fixed Assets	\$ 49,687,065
Department Net Worth	\$ 84,033,954



2018 Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest

By Patrick T. Isakson

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest is a staple. For nearly three decades, images captured by photographers from all walks have appeared in these pages.

And, considering the quality of many of the photos and the growing number of participants, the contest still has pretty fresh legs.

The overall winning photograph in the 2018 contest, chosen from three categories – game, nongame and plants and insects – is a Western grebe taken by Dale Rehder of West Fargo.

Considering the time of year, January on the Northern Plains, this bird is far from here, wintering along the Pacific and Gulf coasts.

Come spring, this water bird that is common across North Dakota during our warmer months, will return to the open-water prairie marshes where it feeds on fish, crustaceans and insects.

While the Western grebe's long neck and brilliant red eyes make it easily distinguishable, it's the grebe's courtship display that gets the most notice.

Although the mating display has more than one move, and involves the birds diving under water, what draws the most attention is when the male and female paddle vigorously across the water's surface in elegant, upright postures.

As the days lengthen and North Dakota's frozen wetlands turn soft, Western grebes and their unmistakable springtime ritual will return.

PATRICK T. ISAKSON is a Game and Fish Department conservation biologist.



Overall Winner

Western grebe
Dale Rehder, West Fargo
Canon 7D Mark II
Photo taken near Valley City





Game 1st Place
Elk
Lisa Buchweitz, Langdon
Canon 7D Mark II
Photo taken in Cavalier
County



Game Runner-up
Sharp-tailed grouse
Levi Rummel, Loveland, Colorado
Sony A7RIII
Photo taken near Gladstone



Game Runner-up
 Badger
 Nels Kilpela, Dickinson
 Nikon D500
 Photo taken near Fryburg



Game Runner-up
 Ring-necked pheasant
 Steve Oehlenschlager, Elk River, Minnesota
 Nikon D500
 Photo taken near Oakes



Game Runner-up
 Mallard duck
 Michael Ranum, Bismarck
 Nikon D500
 Photo taken near Mandan





Nongame 1st Place
Golden eagle
Nels Kilpela, Dickinson
Nikon D500
Photo taken near Sentinel
Butte



Nongame Runner-up
Tree sparrow
Sharon Watson, Buxton
Canon 7D
Photo taken near Buxton



Nongame Runner-up

Ruby-throated hummingbird

Brad Starry, Fargo

Nikon D500

Photo taken in Fargo



Nongame Runner-up

Northern saw-whet owl

Daniel Mason, Fargo

Canon REBEL

Photo taken at Forest River Nature Park
near Fargo



Nongame Runner-up

Short-horned lizard

Michael Ranum, Bismarck

Nikon D850

Photo taken near Fairfield





**Plant and Insect
1st Place**

Grasshoppers
Rich Barrios, Lincoln
Nikon D500
Photo taken near
Lincoln



Plant and Insect Runner-up

Fly on willow
Karen Seginak, New England
Olympus TG-4
Photo taken near Crocus



Plant and Insect Runner-up
Sweat bee on willow
Karen Seginak, New England
Olympus TG-4
Photo taken near Crocus



Plant and Insect Runner-up
Painted lady butterfly
Rich Barrios, Lincoln
Nikon D500
Photo taken near Lincoln



Plant and Insect Runner-up
Bee on purple coneflower
Kelly Krabbenhoft, West Fargo
Canon 1DX
Photo taken near Washburn

TALKING FURBEARERS



Coyotes are without question the most popularly pursued furbearer by hunters and trappers in the state.

North Dakota **OUTDOORS** staff sat down with Stephanie Tucker, Game and Fish Department game management section leader, to talk about North Dakota's furbearers, the focus of many hunters and trappers this time of year. Tucker is a furbearer biologist who, when time allows, actively hunts and traps those animals she helps manage.



TY STOCKTON



CRAIG BIERLE

Stephanie Tucker, Game and Fish Department game management section leader, is also the agency's furbearer biologist.

NDO: While mountain lions, animals once believed extirpated from the state but which have since established a breeding population in western North Dakota, often garner much of the furbearer spotlight, let's talk about coyotes.

Tucker: Coyotes are by far our most popularly pursued furbearer by hunters and those individuals who use both traps and cable devices. There is a lot of predator calling going on with coyotes in the state. Coyotes are also our most valuable furbearer these days. The fur market is an international market, it is a worldwide market that waxes and wanes. But really the last couple of years the only furbearer that has had decent value is the coyote, and that has garnered a lot of interest from people in North Dakota because we have a really good coyote population.

Coyotes are found statewide, their numbers are abundant, and I think most hunters and trappers can expect to see similar numbers this year compared to previous years. By any means, the population did not go up by drastic numbers anywhere in the state. When someone tells me they want to hunt coyotes, but don't know where to go, I tell them anywhere. And if they don't find a coyote on their first stop, drive 5 miles in any direction and try again.

NDO: Considering the popularity of hunting coyotes, we're guessing questions from hunters arise about pursuing these furbearers at night.

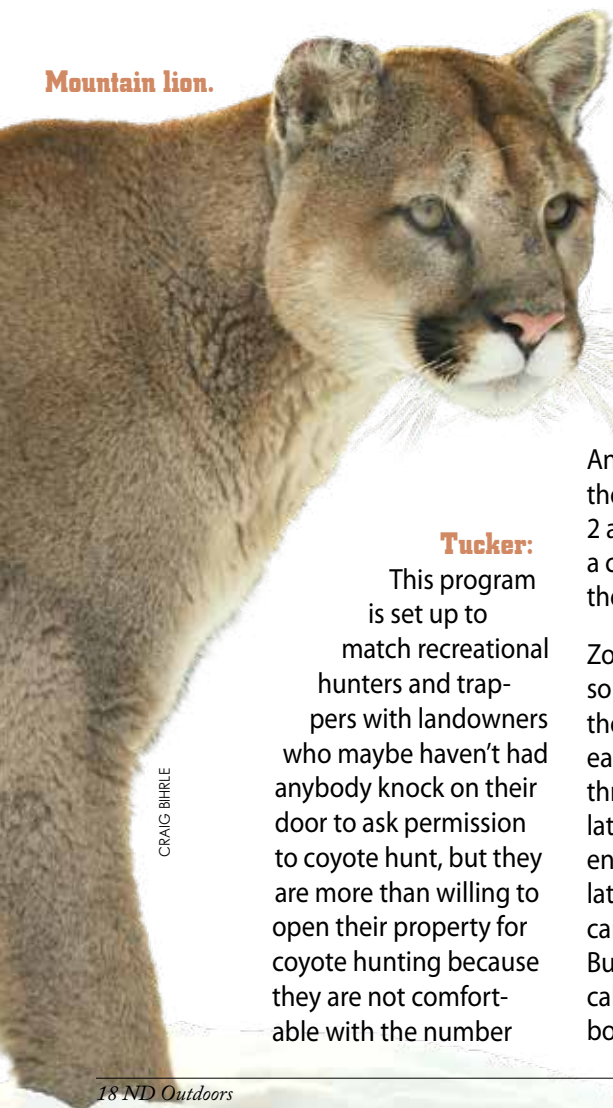
Tucker: Yeah, they do. Our night hunting season for coyotes in North Dakota opens the Monday after deer gun season closes and runs to, generally, March 15. In the past, night hunting was just something you would do during a full moon, with lots of snow on the ground because you could see the animal without any artificial light. More recently, in the last couple of years, we have allowed the use of night vision equipment, or thermal imaging equipment, for hunting coyotes at night, which is gaining in popularity.

We remind hunters, though, that while we allow night vision and thermal imaging, artificial lights are still illegal for hunting coyotes at night. So, hunters cannot use any type of artificial light, red or green.

We also field a number of questions about using infrared illuminators that come with a lot of the night vision equipment. Unfortunately, the way state law is currently written, hunters cannot use infrared illuminators, which amplifies what little bit of light is out there so that hunters can better see their target. North Dakota law prohibits the use of artificial light, visible to the naked eye or not, for hunting coyotes at night.

NDO: Tell us about the Coyote Catalog, a joint effort between the Game and Fish Department and North Dakota Department of Agriculture to connect coyote hunters and trappers with landowners.

Mountain lion.



CRAIG BIRLE

Tucker:

This program is set up to match recreational hunters and trappers with landowners who maybe haven't had anybody knock on their door to ask permission to coyote hunt, but they are more than willing to open their property for coyote hunting because they are not comfortable with the number

of coyotes they are seeing or hearing on their property.

Landowners who are willing to open their property up to coyote hunting or trapping, go on the Department of Agriculture's website and provide their name, address and the county where their property is located, and then hunters and trappers can sign up on the Game and Fish Department website and indicate the counties they are interested in hunting or trapping.

It's important to note that those livestock producers who are experiencing livestock loss or damage from coyotes should first contact the U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services. Wildlife Services provides assistance to producers to help remove coyotes that are causing problems and killing livestock, and they do that at no charge. The Coyote Catalog program is more just for hunters and landowners willing to work with each other for hunting, for recreation.

NDO: Let's talk mountain lions. But first, give us some general background on mountain lion hunting in North Dakota.

Tucker: It's a hunting season only, no trapping, for mountain lions in North Dakota. We have two hunting zones. Zone 1 in the badlands, where we have our primary population of mountain lions. And Zone 2, which is the remainder of the state. Mountain lions found in Zone 2 are those animals that have reached a certain age and have dispersed from their natal home ranges.

Zone 1 is split into an early and late season, with the early season starting with the deer archery season in late August or early September. The early season runs through the deer gun season, then the late season opens. Really, the only difference between the early season and the late season is that in the late season you can pursue mountain lions with hounds. But otherwise, there is a lot of predator calling going on or just boot hunting for both seasons.

In Zone 2, the season also starts with the deer archery season and ends in late March.

NDO: At the time of this writing in mid-December, update us on how the mountain lion hunting season has shaken out so far.

Tucker: We had a harvest limit of eight mountain lions for the early season and only two were taken. That was the lowest harvest we've had in our early mountain lion hunting season since it opened over 10 years ago.

We are not surprised that there has been a lower number of mountain lions taken this year, as our trends show the population has been going down since 2011. From research, we know that hunters are the primary driver of population trends in mountain lions in North Dakota. Other forms of mortality we documented for mountain lions were also human-caused and included automobile collisions and poaching. And although we are trying to manage mountain lions at a low level, we are going to have to look at backing off on the harvest limit in future years to sustain our breeding population.

Zone 2 does not have a quota. The mountain lions that turn up in Zone 2 are kind of these dispersal, subadult mountain lions that have already effectively removed themselves from the breeding population in the badlands. We do not limit the take in Zone 2 because there is not a breeding population we are trying to protect.

The late season harvest limit in Zone 1 is seven mountain lions, or three females, whichever comes first. We have this female subquota to try and limit the number of females taken during the late season to protect that part of the breeding population.

Generally speaking, you cannot tell the difference between male and female mountain lions when you are out boot hunting or predator calling. But hound hunters, on the other hand, might have an opportunity to differentiate between a male and a female, especially if the

animal has been treed.

Note: As of January 6, five mountain lions had been taken in Zone 1 late season.

NDO: Let's move from the rugged ambush cover in the badlands favored by mountain lions to some of North Dakota's aquatic habitat favored by river otters.

Tucker: The river otter is kind of a big deal. This is our second regulated trapping season for river otters in North Dakota, last year was our first season in nearly 100 years, and it went over very well.

It is a trapping only season and river otters can be taken anywhere in the state, but most of our river otters are found in the Red River Valley and its tributaries. And, not surprisingly, that is where most of the river otter harvest was last year.

Last year and this year the harvest limit for river otters was 15, one per trapper. In 2017, the harvest limit was met in just eight days. This year, the harvest limit was again reached in about a week's time.

For those who harvest a river otter, they have 12 hours to report it to their local game warden or district Game and Fish office. They must let somebody in the Department know that they took a river otter and then we will make arrangements to have it tagged. Tagging river otters and fishers, for that matter, is mandatory.

After someone traps an otter and reports it to Game and Fish, they remove the pelt, tag it and then we collect the carcass, which will provide biologists with a lot of really good biological information, including population trends. So, all the information we need on the how the population is doing comes from those dead animals, and that is why we require trappers to turn in the carcasses.

NDO: You mentioned fishers. While the river otter trapping season is still new, the second season just wrapped up, the trapping-only season on fishers has been going on for a while.

Tucker: We opened the first regulated, modern fisher season in 2011. While we do not have a harvest limit, the season is pretty short, only a week long. Last year, trappers took 38 fishers in a week, so there is quite a bit of harvest going on in a short period of time. We've been at that approximate harvest level for the last five or six years, so the harvest keeps the population stable.

The fisher season is only open east of ND Highway 281 and the primary reason for that open and closed zone is we want to allow harvest of fishers where we have most of our fisher population. But in the Turtle Mountains we also have a population of American marten and we do not want trappers trying to target fishers in the Turtle Mountains because they will probably catch a marten in the process ... we do not know enough about our marten population to allow a harvest up there yet.

NDO: The North Dakota Game and Fish has more than 200 wildlife management areas, right around 220,000 acres of land. Individuals can trap on these WMAs, but there are some rules.

Tucker: Probably the biggest rule for trapping on wildlife management areas that trappers need to be aware of is that all of their equipment needs to be tagged with either their name, address and telephone number, or their equipment registration number.

To get your equipment registration number, you log on to your account on the Game and Fish website at gf.nd.gov. That registration number stays with you for life, it will never change, so you can use that tag number year after year. That registration number is also good for ground blinds or tree stands you might leave on WMAs, trail cameras, fish houses that you leave on the ice overnight ... things like that. This year the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also adopted these rules for tagging equipment used on waterfowl production areas.

Also, as a reminder, we do not allow trappers to set cable devices on our WMAs until the upland game hunting season closes in early January. We enforce this restriction during the upland season because a lot of hunters are hunting with bird dogs.



TY STOCKTON



BUFFALOBERRY PATCH

By Greg Freeman, Department News Editor



Keep Fish Caught Deep

A push to encourage open-water anglers to keep fish caught from deep waters should carry over into the ice fishing season, state fisheries biologists say.

Catch-and-release fishing, no matter the time of year, is discouraged for fish caught in 25 feet or more of water because fish reeled in from those depths have a greater chance of dying if released.

Fish caught in deep water won't likely survive because of the extreme change in water pressure, which causes the swim bladder to expand. Fish can no longer control their balance in the water column when this

happens. Other internal injuries, such as rupturing of organs and bleeding, are also likely for fish hauled from deep waters.

Devils Lake ice anglers commonly catch yellow perch in 30-45 feet of water during the winter months. Of course, this practice also translates to other deep water bodies around the state.

Anglers targeting fish at 25 feet or more should make the commitment to keep what they catch. And once they reach their limit, anglers should stop fishing at that depth to avoid killing more than their limit of fish.

Tentative 2019 Season Opening Dates

To help North Dakota hunters prepare for hunting seasons in 2019, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department annually provides its best estimate for opening dates for the coming year.

Dates become official when approved by governor's proclamation. Tentative opening dates for 2019 include:

- Spring Turkey – April 13
- Deer and Pronghorn Bow, Mountain Lion – August 30
- Dove – September 1
- Youth Deer – September 13
- Grouse, Partridge, Squirrel – September 14
- Youth Waterfowl – September 14
- Early Resident Waterfowl – September 21
- Regular Waterfowl – September 28
- Pronghorn Gun – October 4
- Youth Pheasant – October 5
- Pheasant, Fall Turkey – October 12
- Mink, Muskrat, Weasel Trapping – October 26
- Deer Gun – November 8
- Deer Muzzleloader – November 29



CRAIG BIRRE

Aquatic Bait Regulations

Anglers are reminded that it is illegal to import minnows and other forms of live aquatic bait into North Dakota.

Anglers should buy bait from a licensed North Dakota retail bait vendor. Bait vendors can properly identify species and have taken steps to ensure all bait is clean of any aquatic nuisance species.

For more information, refer to the 2018-20 North Dakota Fishing Guide, available at license vendors or online at the state Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov.



Sampling Data Available

Anglers seeking a more in-depth look into many of North Dakota's fisheries now have that chance at the state Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov.

Jerry Weigel, fisheries production/development section supervisor, said anglers can now view the most recent fisheries sampling data on those waters surveyed, which is the same data biologists use to make management decisions.

The various sampling surveys, for example, provide some insight into the sizes of fish in a lake and general population trends.

This most recent data is available for those lakes surveyed. Weigel said Game and Fish doesn't have the personnel to survey all of the nearly 450 active lakes every year, but the majority of the better fishing waters are monitored annually.

Weigel said sampling data complements the other information – driving directions, contour maps, fish species and boat ramp availability – already provided on the website for all active fisheries.



Ice Awareness for Anglers

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department advises winter anglers to exercise extreme caution when venturing out on ice.

Ice thickness is never consistent, especially early in winter, and can vary significantly on the same body of water. Edges become firm before the center.

A few reminders include:

- Snow insulates ice, which in turn inhibits solid ice formation, and hides cracks, weak and open water areas.
- Avoid cracks, pressure ridges, slushy or darker areas that signal thinner ice. The same goes for ice that forms around partially submerged trees, brush, embankments or other structures.
- Ice thickness is not consistent and can vary significantly even in a small area. Ice shouldn't be judged by appearance alone.
- Daily temperature changes cause ice to expand and contract, affecting its strength.

The following minimums are recommended for travel on clear-blue lake ice

formed under ideal conditions. However, early in the winter it's a good idea to double these figures to be safe: 4 inches for a group walking single file; 6 inches for a snowmobile or all-terrain vehicle; 8-12 inches for an automobile; and 12-15 inches for a pickup/truck.

These tips could help save a life:

- Wear a personal flotation device and carry a cell phone.
- Carry ice picks or a set of screwdrivers to pull yourself back on the ice if you fall through.
- If someone breaks through the ice, call 911 immediately. Rescue attempts should employ a long pole, board, rope, blanket or snowmobile suit. If that's not possible, throw the victim a life jacket, empty water jug or other buoyant object. Go to the victim as a last resort by forming a human chain where rescuers lie on the ice with each person holding the feet of the person in front.

To treat hypothermia, replace wet clothing with dry clothing and immediately transport victim to a hospital.



Winter Fishing Regulations

North Dakota anglers are encouraged to refer to the 2018-20 North Dakota Fishing Guide or the state Game and Fish Department's website for winter fishing regulations.

In addition, anglers can visit the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov, for an extensive list of fishing questions and answers.

Some winter fishing regulations include:

- A maximum of four poles is legal for ice fishing.
- Tip-ups are legal, and each tip-up is considered a single pole.
- Mechanical devices that set the hook are legal; however, the use of any device that automatically retrieves the fish is illegal.
- There is no restriction on the size of the hole in the ice while fishing. Materials used to mark holes must be in possession of anglers and spearers as soon as a hole larger than 10 inches in diameter is made in the ice.
- It is only legal to release fish back into the water immediately after they are caught. Once a fish is held in a bucket or on a

stringer, they can no longer be legally released in any water.

- It is illegal to catch fish and transport them in water.
- It is illegal to leave fish, including bait, behind on the ice.



- All aquatic bait, such as fathead minnows, must be purchased or

trapped in North Dakota.

- Depositing or leaving any litter or other waste material on the ice or shore is illegal.
- The packaging of fish (including parts thereof) away from one's permanent residence must be done in such a manner that the number of fish in each package may be easily determined.
- The daily limit is a limit of fish taken from midnight to midnight. No person may possess more than one day's limit of fish while on the ice or actively engaged in fishing.
- If a situation occurs when an angler fishes overnight, the first daily limit must be removed from the ice by midnight prior to continuing to fish.
- The possession limit is the maximum number of fish that an angler may have in his or her possession during a fishing trip of more than one day.
- It is illegal to introduce anything into the water for the purpose of attempting to attract fish (chumming, artificial light, etc.) that is not attached or applied to a lure.

2017-18 Darkhouse Spearfishing Stats

The 2017-18 North Dakota darkhouse spearfishing season set records for total participants and northern pike speared, according to statistics compiled by the state Game and Fish Department.

A total of 3,717 participants speared 28,138 pike last winter, besting the totals established during the 2015-16 season of 3,289 participants and 17,269 harvested pike. Average weight of harvested pike was 7 pounds.

The number of anglers who registered was 5,387, and 3,772 of those were from North Dakota. Minnesotans accounted for 1,197. The average age was 45, and 90 percent were male.

Devils Lake and Lake Sakakawea accounted for 30 percent of the spearing harvest in the state.

All individuals who participate in

darkhouse spearfishing must first register online at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov. In addition, spearers age 16 and older must possess a valid fishing license.

When a hole greater than 10 inches in diameter is left in the ice when a darkhouse is moved, the area in the immediate vicinity of the hole must be adequately marked by the spearer with a natural object or a brightly painted or colored wooden lath.



TY STOCKTON

Fish House Regulations

Winter anglers are reminded that any fish house left unoccupied on North Dakota waters must be made from materials that will allow it to float.

A popular question this time of year is if campers qualify as legal fish houses. The answer is the same for any structure taken on the ice – if it's left unattended, it must be able to float; if it's not able to float, it must be removed when the angler leaves the ice.

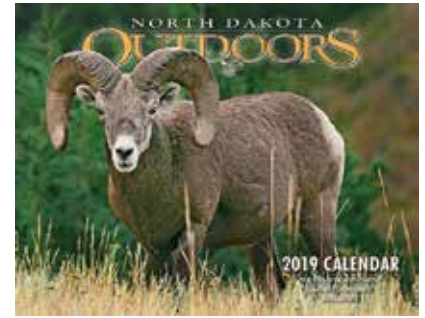
Other fish house regulations include:

- Fish houses do not require a license.
- Occupied structures do not require identification. However, any unoccupied fish house must have an equipment registration number

issued by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, or the owner's name, and either address or telephone number, displayed on its outside in readily distinguishable characters at least three inches high.

- Fish houses may not be placed closer than 50 feet in any direction to another house without consent of the occupant of the other fish house.
- All unoccupied fish houses must be removed from all waters after midnight, March 15.

Anglers should refer to the 2018-20 North Dakota Fishing Guide for other winter fishing regulations.



Order 2019 OUTDOORS Calendars

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is still taking orders for its *North Dakota OUTDOORS* calendar, the source for all hunting season and application dates for 2019.

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

STAFF NOTES



CRAIG BIRLE

Sandra Johnson (left), 2018 Game and Fish Employee of the Year along with Terry Steinwand, director.

Johnson Named Game and Fish Employee of the Year

Sandra Johnson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department conservation biologist in Bismarck, received the agency's Director's Award for professional excellence during the Department's annual winter meeting.

Terry Steinwand, Game and Fish director, said Johnson was instrumental in the development and implementation of North Dakota's state wildlife action plan; in determining and providing technical advice on the status of the state's nongame species, including the rare and declining species of conservation priority and federally listed threatened and endangered species; and in coordinating select projects that have been awarded state wildlife grants funding.

"Sandra accomplishes these roles in an effective, efficient, comprehensive and professional manner," Steinwand said. "She continually looks for new and innovative ways and opportunities to fulfill her duties."



STAFF NOTES



Jerad Bluem (left), 2018 Wildlife Officer of the Year along with Terry Steinwand, director.

Bluem Named Wildlife Officer of the Year

Jerad Bluem, North Dakota Game and Fish Department district game warden stationed in Steele, is the state's 2018 Wildlife Officer of the Year. Bluem was honored in December by the Shikar-Safari Club International, a private conservation organization that annually recognizes outstanding wildlife officers in each state.

In a nomination letter sent to Shikar-Safari, chief warden Robert Timian said Bluem's district has many lakes, wetlands and public use areas that draw hunters, anglers and water recreationists to the area.

"Warden Bluem's communication efforts with landowners, hunters and anglers is outstanding," Timian said. "He is often mentioned for assisting those in need, whether it is helping load an angler's boat in less than ideal weather conditions, to providing a helping hand to a rancher in search of escaped cattle. He has a caring attitude and consistently makes a positive impression on others."

Game and Fish Recognizes Employee Efforts

North Dakota Game and Fish Department Director Terry Steinwand honored a number of employees with performance-based awards. Steinwand presented the following employees with special recognition awards at the Department's annual winter meeting.

- Levi Jacobson, private land biologist, Bismarck, was recognized for his work ethic and leadership efforts. He is the first Game and Fish employee to participate in the North Dakota Rural Leadership program, an 18-month program offered through North Dakota State University Extension.
- Brandon Diehl, administrative assistant, Bismarck, was recognized for his administration, correspondence and coordination efforts that are required to meet the needs and demands of the hunter education program and its volunteers.
- Dale Repnow, administrative officer, Bismarck, was recognized for his team-first approach, and for his friendly, calm and polite demeanor when working on his assigned duties and when presented with contentious issues.

In addition to special recognition recipients, Corey Erck, district game warden, Bismarck, was named North Dakota's Boating Officer of the Year. His district includes the Missouri River, which is one of the most highly used and congested areas for boaters and water recreationists in the state. Chief game warden Robert Timian said warden Erck is extremely skilled in the detection, apprehension and prosecution of boaters who may be operating while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.



Levi Jacobson



Brandon Diehl



Dale Repnow



Corey Erck

back cast



By Ron Wilson

We've never bumped into anyone wearing camo and carrying a bow in this chunk of Missouri River bottom, but the number of tree stands we see most years suggest that we certainly could.

Which is why we often drag our feet at home, drink black coffee, collect and load hunting gear before leaving, instead of doing it the night before. While this doesn't make positive our stumbling through the woods won't mess up someone's morning hunt when the deer are most active, I think it helps.

On this morning, though, seeing other hunters isn't much of a worry. It's Christmas Eve – a day we've hunted in the past and one that I've written about before – and we think most everyone will be home with family, doing some last-minute shopping, driving to grandma's house, those sorts of things.

While North Dakota's hunting season for pheasants, grouse and squirrels doesn't close for roughly two weeks, our odds of getting in another hunt after this aren't good. Holiday gatherings, school, basketball practice, work – those everyday things that eat so much of a person's time – are going to make it darn tough to get outdoors before the start of the new year.

It's overcast, several degrees south of freezing and there is a bit of a breeze that works its way through layers of wool and flannel as we hike the prairie bench before dropping down in the wooded river bottom.

It's different down here. Quiet. The tops of the naked cottonwoods and bur oaks move in the wind, but you don't hear it. Dozens of Canada geese loafing on a sandbar nearly a quarter-mile east of us sound much, much closer than they really are.

Big birds making big noise.

I'm not armed, unless you count the folding knife in my right front pocket or the metal, travel coffee mug that I hold in my gloved hand.

Jack is carrying a scoped .22-caliber rifle, which hangs from a sling over his right shoulder. We both lean against a towering tree that is too big to hug and join your fingers on the other side.

Sometimes the biggest mistake you make in these woods hunting fox squirrels is walking and hoping that you run into an animal rummaging around on the forest floor.

Leaning against a tree or sitting on a log looking for the fluttering of a rusty colored tail blowing in the breeze 30 feet up works often enough.

On this morning, patience isn't paying off. Finally, we move, slowly, to get the blood flowing and warm up a bit. We follow a deer trail that snakes through brush, over fallen logs and crosses a frozen creek that heads in the direction of the Missouri River, but peters out before getting there.

Guide books tell you the five-toed hind print of a fox squirrel measures about 2.5 inches and that the fore print is rounder, smaller. They are easily recognizable and are seemingly wherever we look in the snow. Jack gets tired of me whispering, pointing out the abundant sign. I get it and decide to stay quiet unless I spot the animal making the tracks.

I never do.

On the hike out, we're not as careful, certainly not as quiet, as we semi-hustle to get back to town in time for Christmas Eve plans.

While our freezer at home isn't to-the-top full, it does hold venison from a couple deer and a pronghorn. There's some pheasants and grouse in there, too, if you move stuff around and look for them. There's also a couple of squirrels, frozen hard, shot sometime before deer season.

Not a bad fall that ends with a walk in the woods. Hard to argue with that.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



A LOOK BACK

By Ron Wilson

This black and white image might ring a bell.

We ran this photograph in the November 2014 issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS* as part of an ice fishing feature. It also appeared on the back cover of a late 1960s issue of *OUTDOORS*.

According to Department records, the stark black and white image was originally taken in the early to mid-1950s on the east end of Lake Sakakawea, and likely ran in the pages of NDO around that time.

Even so, this photo still feels as if it has some tread left on it and is fitting for this time of year on the Northern Plains when men, women and children cheat winter by drilling holes through the ice in search of fish.

You can look at the photo and

imagine what you want. Yet, it's easy to envision a lone angler, befitting of the lonesome landscape captured by the photographer, fishing unaccompanied, warming his hands next to the stove, waiting for the fish to bite.

Then again, the ice house could be crammed with the unknown number of people who could fit in the car for the ride out.

While you could wander North Dakota's landscape today and likely find an equally lonely ice fishing scene – of course, it might take some doing – what you'll typically find, especially if the fish are biting and the word has spread, are tracked ATVs, dozens of four-wheel drive vehicles, ice houses of all shapes and sizes, many of which are built to the hilt, enabling their occupants to sleep overnight on the ice.

Unlike in the early to mid-1950s when ice fishing was just gaining in popularity, and the use of ice houses was finally deemed legal, the interest in ice fishing today is at an all-time high.

Today, if you team early freeze-up and easy access to North Dakota's waters, tens of thousands of people eagerly participate across the state. In those years when it all comes together weather-wise, ice fishing can account for 25 percent of the overall fishing effort for the year in North Dakota.

Nowadays, having the ice to yourself is a lot like the provided black-and-white photo – a thing of the past.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.