

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA

GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

We got another shot of rain today in our neck of North Dakota. It was long-awaited and certainly welcomed.

Precipitation plays such a vital role here on the Northern Plains for so many wildlife species. As R.J. Gross, North Dakota Game and Fish Department upland game management biologist, points out later in this issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*, we entered spring with a larger pheasant breeding population than last year, yet a lack of precipitation was a concern for this species so valued by hunters.

There's concern because of drought conditions in the western part of the state, which harbors some of the best pheasant habitat, and its influence on insect populations critical to survival of young pheasants.

The weather in North Dakota is so seldom uniform. Here I am writing about drought conditions in the western part of the state and the hope for a good insect hatch, yet you only have to turn a few pages in this magazine to find a feature story that deals with too much water.

Rice Lake in Emmons County reached a historical high and started its natural, slow flow toward Lake Oahe in spring. Unfortunately, this opened the path for common carp, the state's most common aquatic invasive species to point their noses upstream, as they naturally want to do, and invade Rice Lake.

Fortunately, with the cooperation of a willing landowner, Game and Fish Department crews in spring installed a structure to stop this unwanted upstream carp migration.

Like enhancing and protecting wildlife habitat on land, safeguarding the Rice Lakes of North Dakota is a priority. Anglers have come to appreciate and expect quality fishing in the state, and they ensure their trust in the Game and Fish Department to properly manage their natural resources.

Speaking of fishing. I was happy to read in the back of this issue of NDO about a local angler who caught what is certainly a fish of a lifetime.

The big channel catfish, originally stocked in Harmon Lake as a management tool to trim the black bullhead population, certainly provided one lucky angler with a fishing story he'll never forget.

In the piece found in Buffaloberry Patch, Randall Gienger said that he's not an avid angler and it had been a few years since he last wet a line.

If you're like Gienger and haven't fished in a while, I encourage you to get back on the water. North Dakota is blessed with many quality fisheries and now is a good time to see what your local waters have to offer.

If I'm preaching to the choir and you already fish at every turn, then consider taking someone who doesn't to give them a taste of what North Dakota's great outdoors have to offer.

Terry Steinwand

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NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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Front Cover

A whitetail fawn hides in tall vegetation hoping that passersby don't notice.

Photo by Ashley Salwey.



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D E F E N D I N G
Rice Lake's
F I S H E R Y



By Ron Wilson

Fisheries biologists will be the first to tell you that more water usually means good things for fish.

“But in some cases, the water levels rise too much and can cause some problems by allowing invasive species access to these lakes,” said Paul Bailey, North Dakota Game and Fish Department south central district fisheries supervisor. “So, when Rice Lake met its natural outlet this spring, the lake was connected, via about a 30-mile drainage, to Lake Oahe. And that provided an avenue for a bunch of different fish species in Lake Oahe to make their way into Rice Lake.”

Located in Emmons County, Bailey said Rice Lake has been an outstanding fishery for decades, one of the premier fisheries in south central North Dakota.

“It’s got northern pike, yellow perch, and is especially known for its walleye population in recent years,” he said. “It’s been an outstanding fishery and we’d like to keep it to that small number of species. Lake Oahe itself has over 70 different fish species in it, most of which would probably be a detriment to the Rice Lake fishery.”

Most notably, common carp, which tend to swim longer distances upstream and could easily maneuver into Rice



ASHLEY SALWEY

An elevated view of the drop structure constructed in spring by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department on private land in Emmons County.

Lake, if not for a drop structure built in spring on private land to halt the upstream invasion.

Bailey also noted that carp have long been an issue in the Nieuwsma Dam drainage, located about a half-mile downstream of the construction site.

The Game and Fish Department constructed a culvert drop structure on land owned and operated by Dale Nieuwsma and Duane Nieuwsma downstream of Rice Lake.

"Rice Lake hits its outlet and flows very gently, not losing a lot of elevation for the first several miles," Bailey said. "So, we're fortunate to have this half-mile-or-so stretch that offered a little steeper gradient where we could install a drop structure. We're very fortunate to have Dale and Duane Nieuwsma, who were willing to let us conduct this project on their property. Without landowners like these, these projects simply cannot be done."

Dale Nieuwsma was born on the property in the early 1950s and has never seen the water this high.

"It was just determined a few years ago that Rice Lake would run over this direction, but nobody really knew where it would come," Dale said. "It was actually early spring that Paul (Bailey) contacted me and we knew there was going to be a problem. If not for the structure, my dugout (for the cattle on the property) would've been gone. The drop structure was just a good idea ... it helped us both."

And it certainly arrested the migration of unwanted fish species into Rice Lake.

"The carp are here," Dale said, pointing to the downstream side of the drop structure. "We've physically seen them."

A combination of weather factors forced Rice Lake to reach its natural outlet for the first time since European settlement in North Dakota.

Bailey said Rice Lake hit one of its recent lows in fall of 2008, making it about 20 feet lower than it is today.

"We gained a tremendous amount of water in Rice Lake in the spring of 2009, 2010 and 2011, following terrible winters of snowfall," he said. "From 2012 through 2018, water levels were relatively stable, but then we had an incredibly wet fall in 2019. Couple that with a bit of snowmelt this spring, Rice Lake has risen about 6 feet, which allowed it to reach its natural outlet."

North Dakotans dealing with weather extremes is simply, well, life on the Northern Plains.

"While the amount of water we're seeing on the landscape is fairly unprecedented,

Paul Bailey, Department south central district fisheries supervisor, talks with landowner Dale Nieuwsma. Construction (right) on the drop structure was completed the first week of April.



MIKE ANDERSON



this is North Dakota after all and we could enter a drought period next year,” Bailey said. “In the meantime, however, we know that this structure is essential in keeping a bunch of unwanted species out of Rice Lake.”

Once carp get into a lake, things can go south in a hurry.

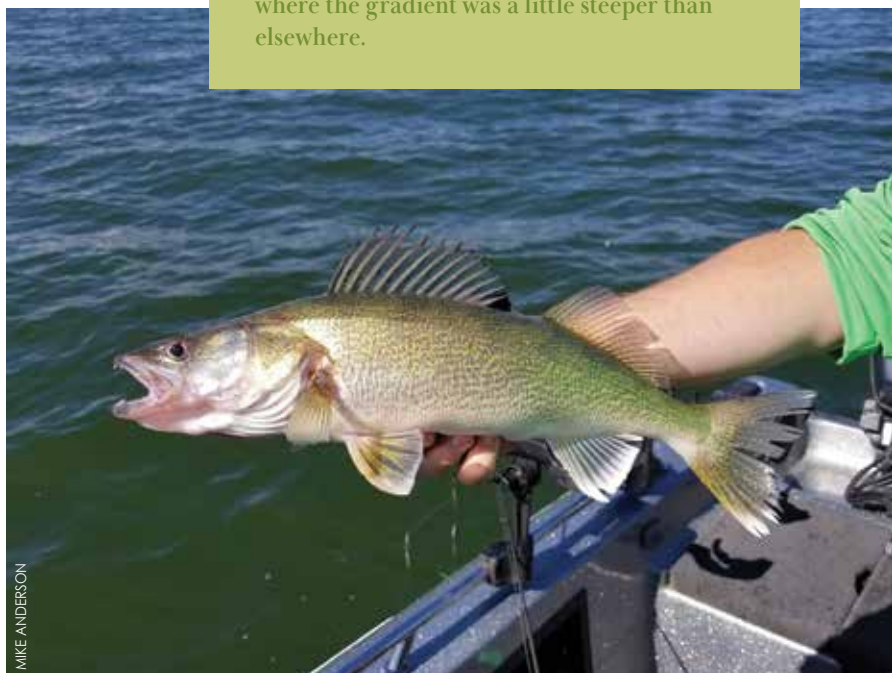
“Basically, a lake can only support so many pounds of fish and when carp enter a lake, they’re often able to outcompete the other fish species,” Bailey said. “So, the walleye, pike and perch populations tend to suffer, which is certainly less desirable from an angling perspective.”

Water started flowing out of Rice Lake’s natural outlet the last week of March and the drop structure was put in place the first week of April.

“Time was of the essence to get the work done before the carp were able to make their way up into this area,” Bailey said. “We’re fortunate to have some very skilled folks – Wes Erdle, Kyle Hoge and Justen Barstad – within Game and Fish, who have the skills and equipment to conduct these projects in-house. That allowed us to quickly mobilize this spring and get the drop structure in place.”

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota *OUTDOORS*.

Fisheries biologists say that Rice Lake has been an outstanding fishery (top photo) for years. It was important for Department staff (lower photo) to complete the project before carp started their upstream migration. The drop structure was constructed on private land where the gradient was a little steeper than elsewhere.



MIKE ANDERSON



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT PHOTO



ASHLEY SALWEY

CHANGING ELK PROMPTS

A COLLARED COW ELK AND
MATURE BULL IN THE BADLANDS.
THE BATTERY IN A COLLAR
LASTS THREE YEARS.



ELK DYNAMICS STUDY

STORY BY RON WILSON
PHOTOS BY JESSE KOLAR

Dozens of GPS-collared elk in western North Dakota are providing big game biologists and researchers a revealing peek into the lives of a mostly reclusive animal that often goes unnoticed in the rugged badlands.

In February 2019, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, in cooperation with the University of Montana, captured and fit 90 elk – 70 cows and 20 bulls – to better understand elk distribution and movements, and to identify a population monitoring technique to assess annual abundance.

Elk dynamics in the badlands changed significantly after nearly 900 animals were removed from the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park about a decade ago.

“Prior to 2010, it was pretty much a park elk system, where elk would leave the park periodically. We established a

hunting season in the late 1990s to take advantage of these hunting opportunities and to address elk depredation issues with landowners,” said Bruce Stillings, Game and Fish Department big game management supervisor. “But at the end of the day, those elk would all end up back in the park for winter.”

That’s not the case nowadays.

“After the large elk reduction in the South Unit in 2010 and 2011, we’ve had herds establish outside the park, both north and south of Medora, so the dynamics have completely changed,” Stillings said. “So now, you have elk that are starting to establish on the outside and you just keep getting more and more years that elk don’t know the South Unit of the park from Yellowstone National Park.”

The batteries in the GPS collars last three years, yet when they die, the study


doesn’t fade with them. Stillings said what follows is a year to analyze the data and a year to write and complete the project.

“The GPS collars are collecting a location via satellite every two hours,” he said. “At this point in time, 16 months into the project, we’ve collected over 400,000 elk locations. So, we have a tremendous amount of information regarding elk movements and distribution.”

With more than 400,000 locations thus far, Stillings said they’ve identified four different sub-herds within hunting unit E2 and likewise for hunting unit E3.

“And we’ve also seen some pretty neat dispersal movements that kind of gives us a better idea how our western badlands elk are fitting into the population dynamics regionally,” Stillings said.

One young bull, for instance, that was collared east of Keene and was later tracked by GPS crossing the Missouri



**ELK, WITHOUT HESITATION,
CAN COVER SEVERAL MILES
IN A DAY IN THE RUGGED
BADLANDS TERRAIN IN
WESTERN NORTH DAKOTA.**

River into McLean County, is now located in South Dakota.

"He's covered about 200 miles and he's located in an area just north of Reva, S.D.," Stillings said. "He certainly took the long way around to get there. He's a young male that's looking to disperse, find new elk and share his genetics elsewhere within the elk population regionally."

Stillings said big game biologists and researchers haven't analyzed the data just yet to specifically identify the types of habitat the elk are using throughout the year, but just knowing the areas the GPS locations are coming from, it's a mix of badlands and agriculture lands.

"They most definitely like to find those areas away from roads, away from disturbance and spend most of their time there," he said. "If you're lucky enough to draw a once-in-a-lifetime tag in North Dakota, you'll have to get into the backcountry because that's where you'll find them."

Interestingly, the study has also shown that several adult cows that dispersed west are using the Blue Mountain area in Montana from spring to late fall, and then

head back to North Dakota before winter sets in.

For a young bull to take the scenic route to South Dakota or for adult cows to migrate back and forth between North Dakota and Montana isn't unusual.

"Just on a normal feeding outing for a day, they can put on 5 to 6 miles pretty effortlessly," Stillings said. "Putting on 10 to 20 miles in a short period is pretty commonplace for elk."

Some of the study elk have been taken during North Dakota's elk season, which Stillings said was expected.

"We had three collared cows that were harvested during the 2019 season, one collared bull that was legally taken, and another young bull that was lost due to wounding," he said. "Hunting-related mortality at this point is the only source of mortality that we've identified. So, we've had very, very high survival rates, at least through one year."

Stillings said having elk in western North Dakota is a unique big game resource that isn't lost on the public and the thousands of hunters who apply for once-in-a-lifetime licenses each year.

"And it sure looks like we're going to have elk on the landscape for the foreseeable future and we'll not just be relying on elk exiting the park now and again," he said. "Which is why we are looking at identifying a population monitoring technique that's going to help us better manage and determine abundance each year to provide as many hunting opportunities as we can to the general public."

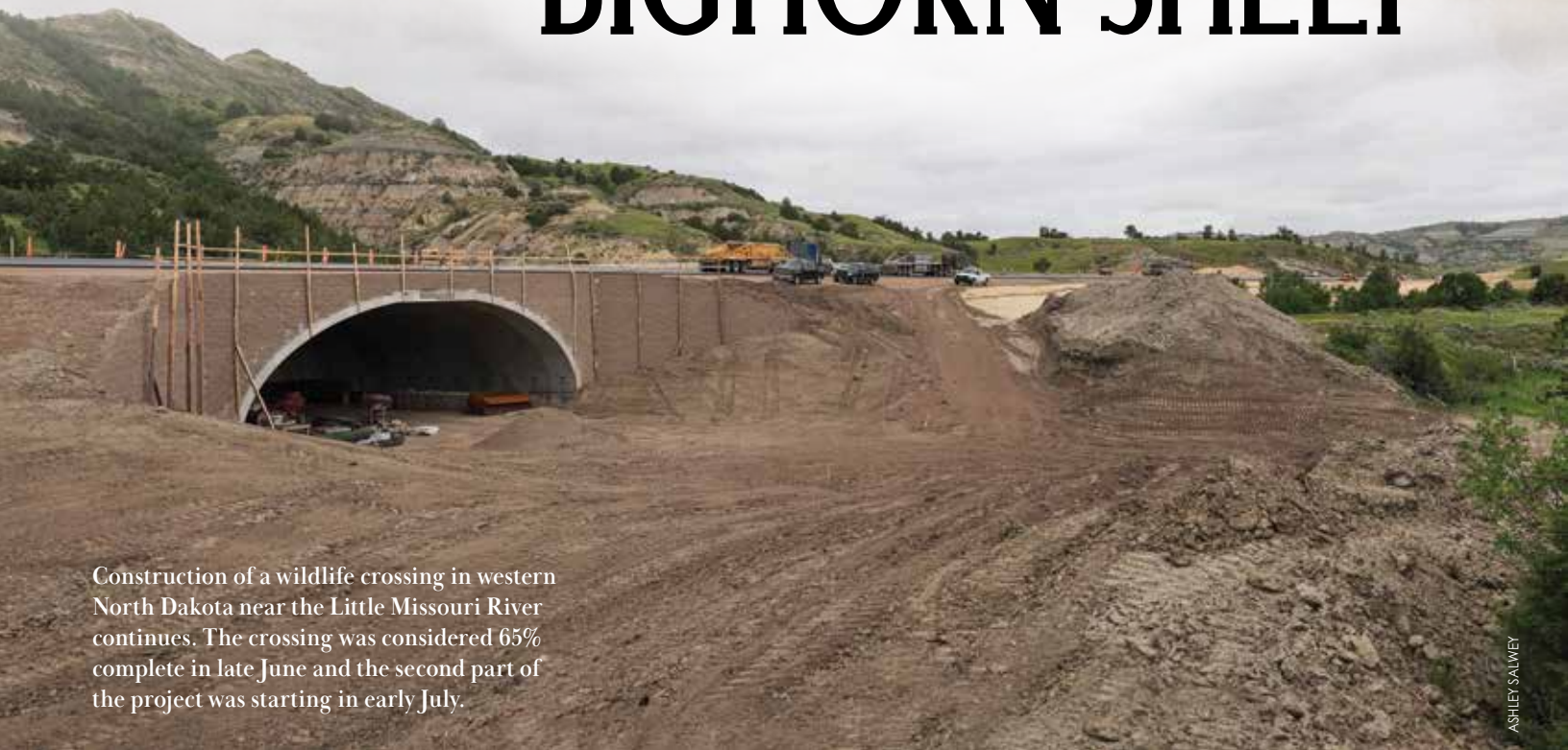
"North Dakota's elk herd is very, very healthy ... this western half of the state as you get west of the Little Missouri River, you're getting into some pretty healthy elk numbers," he added. "We realize that there are landowner tolerance issues, so we are trying to strike that balance of a healthy elk herd, but within the tolerance of landowners."

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.





FOR BIGHORN SHEEP



Construction of a wildlife crossing in western North Dakota near the Little Missouri River continues. The crossing was considered 65% complete in late June and the second part of the project was starting in early July.

ASHLEY SALWEY

By Ron Wilson

Life is difficult for bighorn sheep in western North Dakota, a population of about 350 animals that live in the most rugged and head-turning terrain the state has to offer.

Brett Wiedmann, North Dakota Game and Fish Department big game biologist, said biologists have been radio-tracking bighorn sheep for about 20 years and what they've found is that these animals die from a number of causes, including predators, traps, snares, barbwire fences, disease and getting hit on roadways.

"It's 365 out here for these animals," Wiedmann said. "Nature can be pretty tough on them, so anything we can do to minimize that mortality, we'll do it."

A project to alleviate vehicle-animal mortality

in an area that harbors some of the best bighorn sheep habitat is underway near the Long X Bridge, just south of the entrance to the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. It's there, where a number of bighorns have been killed on U.S. Highway 85 over time, that a large and impressive wildlife crossing is being constructed to safely funnel bighorns, and other wild ungulates, from one side of the highway to the other.

The wildlife crossing, and construction of a new Long X Bridge, is part of a long-term effort of the North Dakota Department of Transportation to widen U.S. Highway 85 from two to four lanes from Watford City to Belfield.

"When you compare bighorn sheep to mule



A number of bighorn sheep have been killed by vehicles over the years on U.S. Highway 85 in western North Dakota.

BRUCE STILLINGS

deer and white-tailed deer, they are just a tiny fraction of our other ungulates,” Wiedmann said. “So, every time you lose a bighorn, especially a bighorn ewe, that’s a big hit to the population. A pregnant ewe killed on the highway means you’ve potentially lost two animals, which is significant.”

Greg Schonert, North Dakota DOT biologist, said widening the highway through high-quality wildlife habitat means that animals, bighorns and others, will have to spend more time on the roadway when crossing, which could be a safety issue for animals and motorists.

“Historically, with all the oilfield traffic and agriculture traffic, there have been a lot of animal-vehicle collisions,” Schonert said. “One way to reduce that is to install a wildlife crossing to funnel them through and help maintain that habitat connectivity and reduce the number of collisions to make it safer.”

In 2019, Wiedmann said Game and

Fish deployed GPS collars on some bighorn sheep in the area and learned that the animals crossed U.S. Highway 85 more than originally thought.

“We thought it was pretty rare for the ewes to be crossing, but as soon as we deployed GPS collars that collect daily locations, we learned that they were crossing quite a bit,” he said. “They’ve even been crossing during the construction project itself. So, this wildlife crossing, I think, is going to do wonders to reduce mortality.”

Wiedmann said there are a number of reasons why bighorns gravitate toward the highway. In fall during the rut, for instance, with ewes navigating the rugged terrain on both sides of U.S. 85, mature rams will cross often to check on adult females. And in spring, ewes will ease out of the hills to pick at the alfalfa adjacent to the highway.

“They’ve habituated to the road traffic, so they don’t really fear vehicles,” he said.

Bighorn mortality on U.S. Highway 85 got to be such an issue years ago north of Long X Bridge that the Game and Fish Department had to step in.

“There were bighorns north and south of Long X and the mortality got so intense on the north side that we actually had to go in and trap all those animals and move them out of there because they were getting killed at such a high rate,” Wiedmann said.

Because the road-widening effort from Watford City to Belfield is such a big project, especially when the safety of motorists and the safeguarding of the state’s natural resources must be taken into consideration, there were several obstacles to overcome.

“It’s all been a big hurdle, quite honestly,” said Bruce Kreft, Game and Fish Department conservation biologist. “This project is running right through some of the most sensitive, critical habitat areas in the state. On top of that, you’ve got



Several players, the Game and Fish Department and the North Dakota Department of Transportation, to name two, work in coordination to complete the wildlife crossing near the Long X Bridge.

ASHLEY SALWEY

multiple groups – federal landowners, private landowners, different state and federal agencies – that had to come together to try and identify solutions to some of the impacts that were foreseen.”

Roger Hille, an engineer with AECOM, the consultant construction

engineering company hired by North Dakota DOT for the project, said the wildlife crossing, which to the pedestrian looks like a giant culvert, is one of a kind in North Dakota.

“The first phase you can see is complete and that’s about 65 percent of the structure ... the second part will be

starting right after the Fourth of July,” Hille said. “When it’s all done and the animals are coming downhill, it’s going to look even more enticing for them, and I think they’ll funnel in there.”

Hille said that while some fill dirt will be added, the wildlife crossing will be about 19 feet tall from top to bottom.



"Every animal species has a minimum threshold for them to use these structures," said Kreft, who also worked on a wildlife crossing near Williston that was designed to accommodate moose. "When people wonder why this structure is so big, we tell them that we want an openness factor. When an animal approaches the structure, we want it to look safe for them to go through. We don't want an unsuccessful crossing nor does DOT. So, we put these wildlife crossings in locations and size them properly for the species we are trying to accommodate."

Schonert agreed.

"It's an arch type structure so when bighorn sheep are walking up to it, they can see through a little better than if it was a rectangle-shaped structure," he said. "And then the new Long X Bridge will actually serve as a crossing as well. There will be open areas underneath the bridge span to facilitate wildlife movement."

Wiedmann said a lot of time went into the design of the wildlife cross-

ing, taking into consideration that bighorn sheep don't like enclosed spaces.

"That's why we had this unique design," he said. "Open it up so those bighorns can see through. The key will be the fencing to funnel them to the crossing where they don't have an option to cross the highway."

After bighorns were removed north of Long X, what remains is a herd of about 50 animals in the area.

"That's a pretty big herd," Wiedmann said. "Typically, it's 10-15 ewes east of the highway and 30 west, and the rams will migrate to this area during the rut. There is a lot of bighorn activity around here and because they don't fear vehicles, it just makes it worse."

Signs warning motorists that bighorn sheep frequently cross the highway in this area were put in place about a decade ago, but Wiedmann said the signs could only do so much.

"I've been here and watched big

rigs lock up their brakes, smoke flying, because bighorns are crossing, or simply popped up out of nowhere," Wiedmann said. "Another issue is when people see bighorns right off the highway and they stop right on Highway 85. I came down here once and there were like seven, eight vehicles stopped on the highway taking pictures. I actually fired a cracker shell to chase the bighorns away. That's a real hazard if you have a big truck coming down the steep grade with people taking pictures of bighorns from their vehicles."

Wiedmann said seeing an end in sight for the project is appreciated and long-awaited.

"It's kind of eye-opening to me all the different agencies and individuals involved in this ... it's been quite a collaboration," he said. "I know I've been working on it for about 10 years and it's nice to finally see something happening."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota **OUTDOORS**.



The view in the distance from U.S. Highway 85 near Long X Bridge. Quality bighorn sheep habitat is found on both sides of the highway.

ASHLEY SALWEY

HIDDEN HABITATS

BRINGING NATURE TO THE CITY



Atkinson Nature Park in Bismarck is open from sunrise to sunset and sees its share of pedestrians and people on horseback.

By Alicia Underlee Nelson

"Listen," my son says breathlessly, holding a small hand in the air as he scans the treetops. "It's a woodpecker!"

Then he's off, trotting down the trail with all the stealth a first-grader can muster. We never do spot the woodpecker, but we stand for a while

longer, listening. The woodpecker's rhythmic tapping weaves through a croaky chorus of frogs, the wind in the trees and the soaring trill of a bird that I'm certain I've never heard, despite a childhood spent tramping along riverbanks much like this one.

We spot a sleek, silvery bird crowned with a flash of blue and wonder if that's what's been calling us. Our pursuit takes us away from the bottomland forest and past anglers spread out on the bank, the murmur of their radio adding another soft melody. The man on the end reaches toward the can of corn at his feet and silently baits his hook. It lands in the clay-tinted waters of the Red River with a delicate plunk.

The path rises and circles through an orchard, where pink blossoms wait, clenched tight, ready to unfurl into one of the most fleeting and fragrant pleasures of a North Dakota spring. We nod to three generations of one family out for an afternoon stroll. The baby and the grandmother sport identical floppy sun hats. Nearby, a woman sits quietly under a tree. Her hands rest on her lap. The sense of perfect calm radiating from her is as tangible as the sun on my shoulders. The stress of the city feels far away.

But it's not. We're standing in Orchard Glen, just off South University Drive, one of Fargo's main thoroughfares. Until just a few years ago, this was a neighborhood. Now this land, along with dozens of other new nature parks across North Dakota, is slowly and deliberately being reclaimed by native species – with a little help from Dakota Audubon and a host of partners through the Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative.

This unique project is the result of collaboration between outdoor enthusiasts, park districts, government agencies, non-profit organizations, corporate donors, birders, business leaders, philanthropists, families, conservationists, farmers and ranchers across the state. It channels grants from resources like the North Dakota Outdoor Heritage Fund into con-

verting land that's difficult to graze, farm or build upon into thousands of acres of reclaimed prairie, wetland and woodland habitat. This habitat supports native species and adds accessible recreation opportunities for residents and visitors across the state.

It all started when a series of natural disasters presented an opportunity to think about the riverfront landscape in a different way. Marshall Johnson had just arrived in Fargo as the executive director of Audubon Dakota, an organization that conserves and restores natural ecosystems for birds and other wildlife in the Dakotas.

"Within three or four years, a number of cities, including Minot, Bismarck, Grand Forks and Fargo had experienced historic flooding and my organization launched our Bird-Friendly Communities," Johnson said. "Urban conversation was a place that we could really build out that program. I thought that land that was previously flood buy-out properties would be a good place to start."

Audubon Dakota selected 500 acres along the Red River to convert into nature parks once the homes were removed. Organizers connected with several players, including the county, Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Fargo Park District, which would eventually come to own the land. Audubon Dakota proposed a long-term partnership.

Prairie Restorations, Inc., a company that specializes in maintaining natural habitat in the region, would do the initial site tests, remove nonnative species and plant appropriate grasses and flowers for each location. The Fargo Park District would provide ongoing maintenance. In return, Audubon Dakota would manage the nature parks, monitor the habitat, conduct plant and animal counts and install several miles of mixed-use trails for hiking and biking. The project broke ground in 2015.

"We said, 'Instead of just dabbling here and there, let's go grand and put



ASHLEY SALWEY

enough areas around town that people are able to get to them if they can't drive," said Fargo Park District director Dave Leker. "They (Audubon Dakota) had enough good ideas and enough sites."

The Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative expanded to include 30 new nature parks in Fargo, Moorhead, Minn., Grand Forks, Valley City, Minot and Bismarck. The Fargo-Moorhead metro is home to 21 of them. Nearly 1,000 acres of natural habitat follows the Red River from Heritage Hills in the south to Cassel Woods well north of Hector International Airport.

There are dozens of access points on both sides of the river. Cyclists, runners and parents pushing strollers navigate paved trails through the grasslands of Unicorn Park and Pontes Prairie, while birders explore the wetlands within Briarwood Prairie. Even Frisbee golfers can get in on the action at Iwen Park. It's located just off Hole 8 at a popular course. These extra amenities attract new users, but Leker said nature parks serve a greater purpose for the next generation.

"The biggest benefit is just kind of trying to bring some of the country and the native prairie into an urban setting," he said. "While a lot of kids get out and hunt birds and pheasants, you can bring some of that into a part of town where kids can't see that. We've got enough around town where they're pretty accessible to everyone."

Since native prairie typically takes three to five years to get established, the first five Fargo nature parks (Orchard Glen, Forest River, Heritage Hills, Unicorn Park and Briarwood Prairie) are now bursting into bloom. The return to a natural landscape is surprisingly colorful.

"Some of the pioneer species would be flowers like black-eyed Susan, rough vervain, and oxeye and coneflower," said Blaine Keller, site manager at Prairie Restorations, Inc. Then dramatic purple blazing stars and a host of native grasses take over. "It can help educate the public to see that these types of areas can be beautiful and still be productive. They have a lot of diversity, a lot of flowers, a

lot of grass species."

A prairie in full bloom is a welcome sight for visitors, but it's also a constant, sustainable buffet that benefits the entire ecosystem.

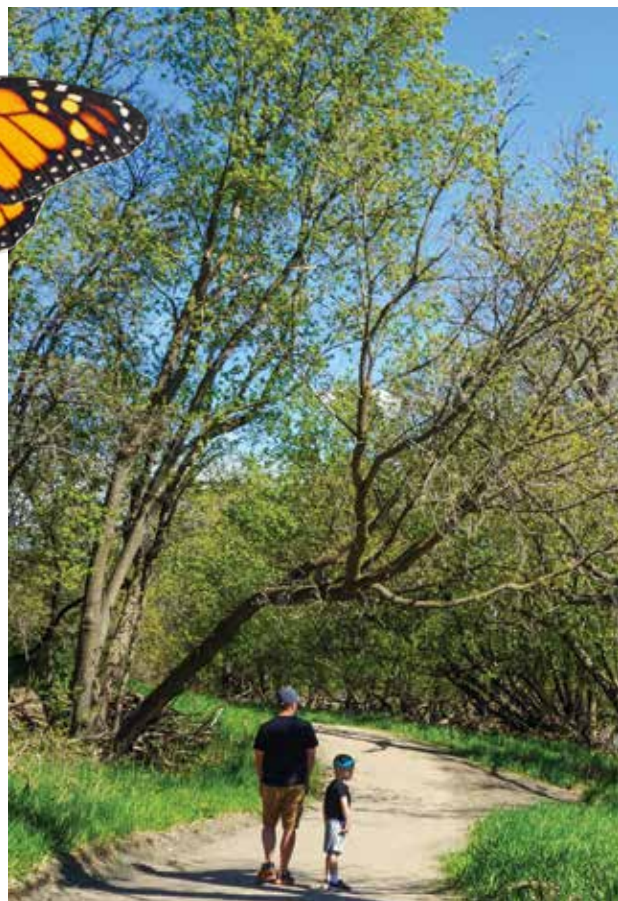
"Songbirds and butterflies have food sources throughout the season, so it allows them to thrive," Keller said. "Projects like this are so important to add to the habitat for pollinators, since everything we grow needs these pollinators. Everything is intertwined."

Flourishing bees and butterflies benefit the state's farmers, ranchers and backyard gardeners. The healthy habitats that pollinators favor also support birds long absent from urban areas in large numbers, like waterfowl in wetlands and a resurgence of grassland birds, such as bobolinks and meadowlarks on the prairie. Look for owls in winter and (in Fargo-Moorhead especially) a steady stream of songbirds, including neotropical migrants that travel along the Central Flyway from Central America and the Yucatan. An accomplished birder in Fargo's Forest

Songbirds, butterflies and other wildlife are common inhabitants along the Forest River Nature Park trail (right) and the other nature parks in North Dakota.



JESSE KOLAR

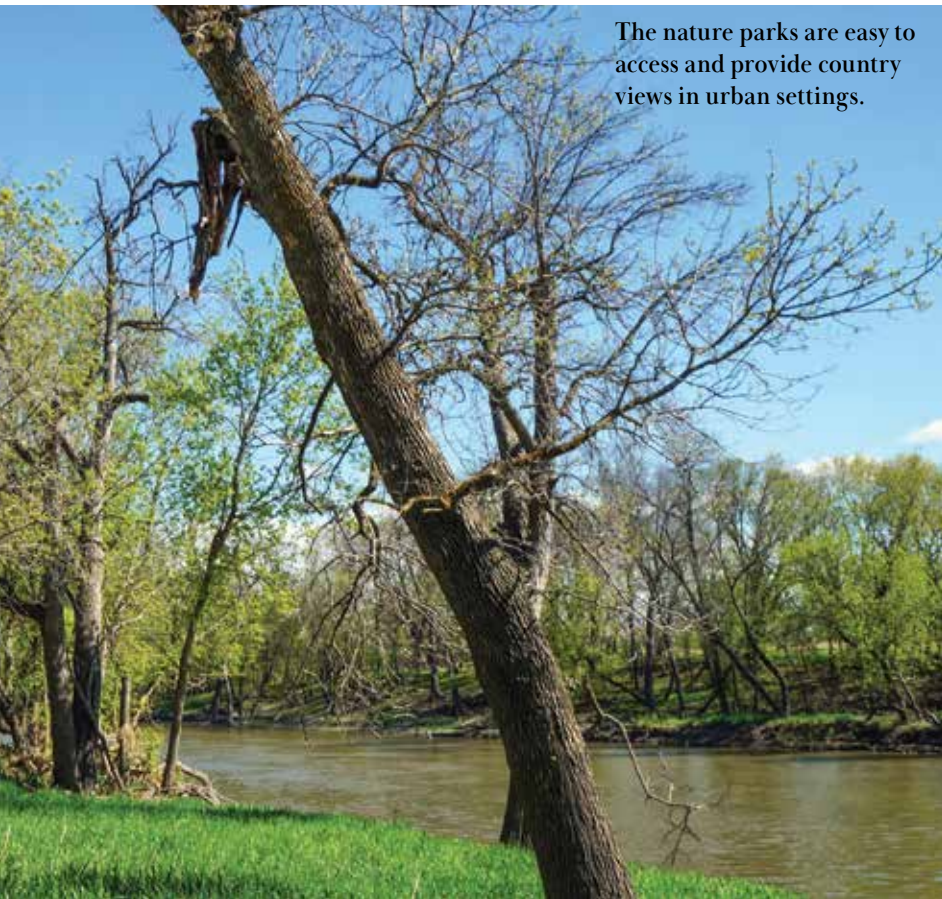


Male ruddy duck.



JESSE KOLAR

The nature parks are easy to access and provide country views in urban settings.



ALICIA UNDERLEE NELSON

River Nature Park might spot 25-30 different bird species in a single day in May or June.

"You're immersed in nature," said Johnson, describing the Forest River site. "All you can hear are fox calls and songbird calls and waterfowl and the life of the river. Most people want to drive an hour or two hours from Fargo to see nature, but right in our backyard, we're able to get right on the river and experience nature in a fundamentally different way."

Nature parks are easy to access. A bonus is that they're also easy for parks officials to maintain, since they require limited mowing and minimal inputs.

"We're supposed to be responsible stewards of the land, so I think it's a great way of doing just that," said Dave Bietz, Fargo Park District director of operations. "We don't use nearly as much chemical inputs or adjustments that we do compared to a mowed turf or even just a mowed park. We fertilize those, we spray herbicides on those, but in a nature park we do very little. So, we're doing something better for our environment and saving on fuel cost and labor cost."

This combination of good stewardship, low cost and minimal maintenance caught the attention of leaders across the state. The wooded



JESSE KOLAR

American avocets and other migratory water birds are frequent visitors to the nature parks that harbor water. Visiting birders can spot many different species at these nature parks during certain times of the year.



hiking and horseback riding trails of Atkinson Nature Park in Bismarck, sites in Minot's Oak Park and several areas along the English Coulee in Grand Forks, have already started the transition into nature parks. More than a dozen additional sites are planned for these cities and West Fargo in years to come. Several are along the Missouri River in Bismarck.

"Survey results have indicated a strong public interest to acquire more green space, to include natural areas," said Randy Bina, Bismarck Parks and Recreation District executive director. "These areas provide non-structured recreational opportunities, such as bird watching, photography, walking, talking, biking."

Tracie Bettenhausen of Bismarck recently discovered Bismarck's Atkinson Nature Park for the first time. It gave her a different trail to hike and a new sense of perspective.

"Because this is preserved river bottom land, a trail like this gives you a chance to imagine time before Bismarck was here," she said. "It's good to see things not built by humans and give yourself a chance to focus on nature's work."

Nature parks offer a respite for all users, but hunters and anglers might especially appreciate them after a few long months spent indoors. Greg Link, conservation and communications division chief for North Dakota Game and Fish Department (a financial partner in the Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative) said that these accessible nature parks are especially important for recruiting, retaining and reactivating hunters and anglers, especially younger ones.

Hunters and anglers might also find themselves uniquely qualified to take up birding, said Ron H. Miller M.D. He got into the activity himself after noticing birds along trout streams where he went fly-fishing. He's now a contributor to the Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative and teaches birding courses for the Fargo Park District.

"Fishermen see a lot of birds that you wouldn't see just walking through a field — shorebirds like the great blue heron, green herons, sandpipers, loons," Dr. Miller said. "Some of the best initial birders are hunters. If you've ever been a waterfowl hunter, you can recognize the difference between a pintail and a coot

on the wing — and that's a difficult thing. Hunting from a deer stand, you're hunting deer but you're watching everything. So, you see the owls come in, you see the hawks come in. You see birds you don't see in your backyard. Anybody that likes the outdoors is going to enjoy birding."

Urban nature parks are designed to make it easy for anyone to see birds and other wildlife up close. This spring's social distancing requirements have introduced a whole new group of users to the outdoors.

"In an urban area, people can come and throw in a line, canoe, kayak. Even kids on bikes can come in. You see people around Bismarck on the trails," Link said. "It's really becoming apparent during this pandemic that those kinds of opportunities are really important — families just kind of getting away and getting outside and getting some fresh air."

Bill Brooks, 15, and his family have been doing exactly that. While home from school this spring, the Fargo teen scoured maps for quiet nature parks to explore.

"Now that we've been stuck inside, this is one thing that we can do and still



ALICIA UNDERLEE NELSON



ASHLEY SALWEY

The blooming vegetation (left) in Orchard Glen in Fargo may be a little more appealing to the eye for most passersby than, say, a leopard frog (top). Even so, both certainly, make a hike in these urban settings more interesting.

avoid a lot of people and maintain our distance,” he said. “I’ve really taken an interest in this because it’s a fun activity that you can still be safe doing.”

Bill advises hikers to check out Lemke Conservancy Park for its seclusion and scenic trail. Both he and his mother, Emily Brooks, also recommend Lions Conservancy Park, which they discovered after noticing a sign near their home. They’ve enjoyed walking the riverside and grassland trails, with geese and the occasional bald eagle flying overhead, in all seasons.

“It’s just absolutely gorgeous during the fall, especially if you can get to a location where there’s no wind, because all of those vibrant colors reflect off the water in the Red River,” Emily said. “It doesn’t feel like you’re in Fargo.”

That’s exactly the feeling Audubon Dakota and its partners were hoping to evoke when they started the Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative. Now that more people have experienced how transformative native habitat can be, interest is soaring. And Audubon Dakota is happily fielding calls from new partners.

“We’ve been approached by a number of private property owners

who are interested in selling,” Johnson said. “We’ve always sought to create favorable terms for our landowners. Most of this land is not ideal for any type of commercial development. We come in to manage the land in perpetuity, and that’s a high cost that some private and public landowners don’t have the budget for. That’s what we commit to early on, spearheading the conservation efforts. We make them really great nature parks as they would have been before development.”

One of those landowners is Dick Monson, a retired farmer from Valley City. He remembers the untamed prairie of his youth. And he wants it back.


“When I was a kid in the early 1950s, our pasture had burrowing owls and there were meadowlarks on the corner posts and every big rock out there,” he said. “I haven’t seen an owl for 60 years and the meadowlarks are disappearing, along with other grassland songbirds, as the native prairie slips away.”

He’s doing what he can to help, transferring some of the acreage to Audubon Dakota for a new nature park that he bought from the railroad 20 years ago.

A portion of Monson’s land was never cleared or grazed. It offers a peek at the biological diversity that awaits other plots slated to become nature parks – diversity many modern residents have never seen.

“There are wild tiger lilies, closed gentians, coneflowers, just a host of native flowers and plants that are seldom seen in eastern North Dakota anymore,” Monson said. “They blossom season long. In the draws there are plum, chokecherry and junberry bushes. It makes a nice wildlife habitat and is worth preserving.”

That’s what the Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative is all about. This unique project gathers a varied group of outdoor advocates from all over the state. They have different passions and goals for the project, but they all have one thing in common. They all believe that what’s good for wildlife is good for humans, too. And they’re willing to help build and preserve the habitat we all need.

ALICIA UNDERLEE NELSON is a freelance travel writer and photographer from West Fargo. She blogs frequently about travels within North Dakota on her website, prairiestylefile.com. 



While crowing counts were up, biologists hope for good chick survival.



ASHLEY SALWEY

Spring Pheasant Count Up from Last Year

North Dakota's spring pheasant population index is up 15% from the same time last year, according to the state Game and Fish Department's 2020 spring crowing count survey.

R.J. Gross, upland game management biologist, said the number of roosters heard crowing this spring was up statewide, with increases ranging from 1% to 18% in the primary regions holding pheasants.

"We entered spring with a larger breeding population compared to last year," Gross said. "Hens should be in good physical shape for nesting season and cover should be plentiful from the residual moisture left from last fall."

However, Gross said there is concern with drought conditions in the western part of the state, and whether insects will be available to chicks for brood rearing.

"I am hopeful for above-average chick survival due to the lush cover and predicted warm temperatures, but we can use some rain," Gross said. "But we don't want any severe weather events."

While the spring number is an indicator, Gross said it does not predict what the fall population will look like. Brood surveys, which begin in late July and are completed by September, provide a much better estimate of summer pheasant production and what hunters might expect for a fall pheasant population.

Pheasant crowing counts are conducted each spring throughout North Dakota. Observers drive specified 20-mile routes, stop at predetermined intervals, and count the number of pheasant roosters heard crowing over a 2-minute period during the stop.

The number of pheasant crows heard is compared to the previous year's data, providing a trend summary.

2019 Upland Game Seasons Summarized

After two years of lower upland game populations, fewer hunters pursued these game birds last fall. With that said, North Dakota's 2019 pheasant and sharp-tailed grouse harvests were down from 2018, while the number of Hungarian partridge taken last year was similar to the year before, according to statistics compiled by the state Game and Fish Department.

Upland game management supervisor Jesse Kolar said the overall harvest was down despite slight increases in most population survey estimates.

"This was likely due to continued declines in hunter numbers and hunter days afield following lower population trends," Kolar added. "We also still have lower densities of upland game birds in areas that traditionally had much of the harvest – pheasant numbers were still low in the southwest and sharptail numbers remained low in the badlands."

Nearly 50,000 pheasant hunters harvested 256,800 roosters (down 25%) in 2019, compared to 59,400 hunters and 342,600 roosters in 2018.

Counties with the highest percentage of pheasants taken were Hettinger, Divide, Bowman, Williams and McLean.

In 2019, 14,000 hunters harvested 34,300 sharp-tailed grouse (down 34%), compared to 15,200 hunters and 51,800 birds in 2018.

Counties with the highest percentage of sharptails taken were Mountrail, Burleigh, Ward, Stutsman and McKenzie.

Last year, 11,900 hunters harvested 32,600 Hungarian partridge (up 5%). In 2018, nearly 12,500 hunters harvested 31,200 Huns.

Counties with the highest percentage of Huns taken were Mountrail, Ward, McLean, Williams and Divide.

Good wetland conditions were found during this year's survey.



TY STOCKTON

Spring Breeding Duck Numbers

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department completed its 73rd annual spring breeding duck survey in May despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and results showed an index of nearly 4 million birds, up 18% from last year.

Migratory game bird supervisor Mike Szymanski said despite most waterfowl surveys in North America being canceled this spring, Game and Fish was able to make adjustments to continue this long-term data set.

"Crews were turned into single person crews to make sure there was only one person in a vehicle, and we changed some of the route assignments to accommodate increased driving distances and workloads, but still maintained overlap with our fall wetland survey routes," Szymanski said. "It was definitely quite a bit more work, and we are grateful that our crew members were up for the challenge."

This spring's wetland index was the sixth highest on record and the breeding duck index was the 13th highest, both are highs since 2014.

For the second year in a row the number of temporary and seasonal wetlands was substantially higher than the previous year, as figures show the spring water index is up 65% from last year. The water index is based on basins with water, and does not necessarily represent the amount of water contained in wetlands or the type of wetlands represented.

"Not surprisingly, we found really good wetland conditions during this year's survey," Szymanski said. "We had an unusually large amount of rain last fall, but have really been drying up since, especially in the western half of the state. The eastern half of North Dakota is still incredibly wet, and wetland numbers in the western half of the state are still in pretty good shape despite some drying."

The breeding population survey results indicate numbers for all primary species, except redheads (down 12%), were stable to up from 2019 estimates. Ruddy ducks were up 87%, green-winged teal were at a record high and up 66% and blue-winged teal were

up 58%. Mallards were unchanged. All other ducks ranged from down 2% (pintails) to up 40% (scaup) from last year's numbers. All species, except pintails, which were down slightly, were well-above the 72-year average.

"Conditions that we have seen since 1994 seem to be the new normal with more precipitation and higher duck numbers," Szymanski said. "This year's ranking of our breeding population is a pretty good sign as our 13 highest duck counts are all within the last 26 years. When you start getting around the 4 million range, you are talking about very, very good duck numbers. So it is good to see us getting back to the middle of the road for the new normal."

The July brood survey provides a better idea of duck production and insight into expectations for fall, Szymanski said, though hunting success is also influenced by bird movements before and during hunting seasons, and weather patterns during the fall migration.



Randall Gienger was hoping to catch a trout, or maybe one of Harmon Lake's pike or bass in June. Instead, he hooked and landed a big channel catfish that he'll likely never forget.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Big Cat Swims Another Day

Randall Gienger of Bismarck was fishing out of a canoe with a coworker on Harmon Lake June 19 when things got interesting.

Gienger, using an 1/8-ounce spoon tied to 10-pound test line that he uses to entice the lake's trout, hooked a once-in-a-lifetime channel catfish.

"It was getting late in the morning when we decided to see if we could find some trout in the deeper parts of the lake, using the wind to blow the canoe across the lake, slowly trolling, letting the lines run long and deep," Gienger said. "When he hit, I thought it was a snag at first, but when I felt the slow, strong tug, I knew I had something."

The big fish made a couple of runs, one time rolling within 10 feet of the canoe, showing its big, black head.

"I was able to bring him up alongside the canoe, but we had a problem," Gienger said. "We had no

way of getting him into the canoe ... no net."

With the help of a loaner lip gripper from a nearby angler in a kayak, who also helped steady the canoe, Gienger was finally able to land the catfish.

"Unfortunately, we had no scale or tape measure," Gienger said. "We estimated the length at 30-36 inches and 30-40 pounds. His mouth was big enough to fit my fist."

Gienger said he's not an avid angler and it had been a few years since he'd last wet a line.

"This is the biggest catfish I have ever seen, let alone caught," he said. "And no one would have believed it if we didn't have the pictures."

Paul Bailey, North Dakota Game

and Fish Department south central district fisheries supervisor, said when Harmon Lake filled in spring 2009, following completion of the dam in fall 2008, fisheries biologists found the lake full of small black bullheads that would likely be a detriment to the fishery if ignored.

"So, in spring of 2010, we trapped 502 adult channel catfish in Lake Oahe and stocked them in Harmon Lake because we've found that channel cats readily feed on black bullheads," Bailey said. "We've had success with adult channel cats reducing bullhead numbers in places like Braddock Dam and the OWLS Pond next to Game and Fish Department headquarters in Bismarck."

It appears Gienger's big channel catfish has done its job of thinning the bullhead population at Harmon Lake and will continue to do so as the Bismarck angler released the fish after a few photographs.



2019 Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest Game Runner-up

Elk
Jill Edinger, Carrington

Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest

While contest guidelines for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest have change little from previous years, photographers are reminded to follow the guidelines for submitting their work.

Photographers who want to submit photos to the contest should go the Game and Fish Department's website at gf.nd.gov/photo-contest. Then it is a matter of providing some pertinent information about the photo and uploading it.

Doing so helps both with ease of submitting photos for the photographer and managing those images for Game and Fish staff.

The contest is now open and the deadline for submitting photos is October 2. For more information or questions, contact conservation biologist Patrick Isakson at pisakson@nd.gov.

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.


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.

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Application Deadlines

Hunters are reminded the pronghorn application deadline is August 5 and the deadline for swan permits is August 12.



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KUMV - Saturday - 6 pm
KXMD - Sunday - 10 pm;
Monday - Noon

GRAND FORKS

KVRR - Saturday - 9 pm

MINOT

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

DICKINSON

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

BISMARCK

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

FARGO

KVRR - Saturday - 9 pm

ON

WEEKLY VIDEO NEWS BROADCAST

STAFF NOTES



Craig Bihle

Bihle Retires, Freeman Fills Position

Longtime employee Craig Bihle retired in June after nearly 34 years with the Department. Bihle started his career in 1986 as the associate editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*. In 1999, he was named communications supervisor, the title he held until his retirement.

Greg Freeman, the Department's news editor since 2001 and with the agency since 1991, has filled Bihle's position.



Greg Freeman

BACKCAST



By Ron Wilson

For a fish that hits like a punch in the gut and fights without apology, it seems so out-of-character for smallmouth bass, even briefly, to come off as, well, tidy.

Typically, sometime in May in North Dakota when water temperatures allow, male smallmouth bass move into the shallows to build nests bigger than a Frisbee, and nearly as perfectly circular.

But let's back up. Smallmouth bass males, according to biologists, simply don't settle. They build a couple of nests with a sweeping motion with their tails before finally deciding on one that is most fitting. Larger objects that can't be finned aside are picked up by the mouth and discarded.

When a suitable nest is constructed – I read where one fisheries biologist said he never saw a smallmouth bass nest that wasn't – the male bass waits for a female bass to show up and enrich his construction. His diligence doesn't end there as the male sticks around to guard the eggs from predators.

Of course, with a medium to lightweight spinning rod in hand that will cast bait wholly appropriate to the experienced smallmouth angler, but comically too big to those who aren't, you don't think about any of this stuff. You simply pitch into the shallows – varying your retrieve, obviously, to find what will entice a strike on this day – hoping the bass are still hanging around, before moving off to deeper digs as the season dictates.

It's early June on Lake Audubon and the fish are scattered. The idea of spying bass or their circular, neat and tidy nests through Polarized sunglasses in the shallows is impossible even if you wanted to because of the wind. Our host, who knows this game better than we do, lines his boat into casting range with the trolling motor despite the occasional gust that threatens to blow my ballcap into the lake.

Lake Audubon is arguably one of the state's top smallmouth bass lakes, and I'm certain you'd get some argument from anglers who hang their hats on Sakakawea, Darling or Ashtabula, to name a few. I've heard the stories and have seen the photos about this place, most notably from the guy manning the boat and currently catching fish.

Lake Audubon smallmouth bass are beautiful. When the sun gets low in the sky and hits them just so before being released back into the water, their bronzeback handle, one of many given to them from anglers around the country, is evident.

In a perfect world, I think to myself, my kid will hang his biggest smallmouth bass ever, experience the hard take and bulldog fight these McLean County bass are known for.

While things are far from perfect nowadays, he does get his fish and it's a nice one.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

North Dakota Outdoors Magazine
North Dakota Game and Fish Department
100 N. Bismarck Expressway
Bismarck, ND 58501

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Ben Holen, North Dakota Game and Fish Department aquatic nuisance species coordinator, inspects a boat and trailer at a voluntary aquatic nuisance species check station at Lake Sakakawea State Park. The Game and Fish Department, and its band of roving inspectors, bounce from check station to check station on the Missouri River System, Devils Lake and elsewhere around the state.



ASHLEY SALWEY

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