

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA

GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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NORTH
Dakota | Game and Fish
Be Legendary.™



MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

More and more people are venturing outdoors. That's always good news, especially here in North Dakota where we continually encourage people to explore beyond their backyards to experience the wonderful resources the state has to offer.

The recent rise in outdoor attendance is in part tied to the coronavirus pandemic as North Dakotans looked for activities that may have been sort of new to them, but got them away from the crowds and some fresh air.

For instance, here at the Game and Fish Department we saw a big spike in early spring, following COVID closures of in-school attendance across the state, in resident fishing licenses sales.

Greg Power, Department fisheries chief, said as of mid-August, more than 20,000 resident licenses were purchased in 2020 compared to last year at the same time.

Thankfully, we had something to offer people at the right time in terms of many quality fisheries around the state, where friends and families could get outdoors and stand a pretty good chance of catching some fish.

And according to anecdotal evidence, particularly from Game and Fish Department staff who put on thousands of miles hauling fish to be stocked in North Dakota waters, those licenses are being used.

The fishing effort in North Dakota in spring and summer was certainly up, according to staff reports, and in the end, we might see a record in the fishing effort.

While it's nearly a given that North Dakota's veteran hunters will be in

the field this fall as the state's hunting seasons open one after another, the unknown is whether an increase in participation will somewhat mirror that of fishing.

What is known is that the populations of many of North Dakota's wildlife species are trending in the right direction. While the final numbers aren't in at the time of this writing on roadside brood counts for pheasants and sharp-tailed grouse, Department biologists are forecasting, for instance, for the fall flight of ducks from North Dakota to be up 9% from last year and the 13th highest fall flight on record.

On the big game front, Game and Fish made available 69,050 deer gun licenses for the 2020 hunting season, an increase of 3,550 from 2019. Other good news, certainly for those lucky enough to draw a license, is the availability of 1,790 pronghorn licenses in western North Dakota, 460 more than 2019.

Of course, more detailed looks at this fall's hunting and trapping opportunities are found in the following pages of this issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

I hope everyone who ventures out this fall finds what they are looking for and that they make good, safe decisions in their pursuit. I also encourage those experienced hunters to take someone new under their wing, or to inspire those who have hung it up for whatever reasons to get outdoors once again.

I will long tout how special North Dakota is to anyone who will listen. I will also argue that North Dakota is at its finest in fall. Trust me on this and see for yourself what North Dakota's great outdoors have to offer.

Terry Steinwand

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NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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Front Cover

The bounty of an early season bowhunt in North Dakota's badlands for many is a mule deer buck. The bonus is an unfettered view of the Milky Way and uncountable stars.

Photo by Ashley Salwey.



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HUNTING

SEASON OUTLOOK

2020

By Jeb Williams

Small Game, Waterfowl and Furbearer Info

North Dakota's 2020 small game, waterfowl and furbearer regulations and most season structures are similar to last year.

Some reminders:

- Opening day for ducks, geese, coots and mergansers for North Dakota residents is Sept. 26. Nonresidents may begin hunting waterfowl in North Dakota Oct. 3.
- The daily limit on scaup is reduced from three to one.
- The prairie chicken and sage grouse seasons will remain closed due to low populations.
- In accordance with state law, non-residents are not allowed to hunt on Game and Fish Department wildlife management areas or Private Land Open To Sportsmen areas from Oct. 10-16.
- Veterans and members of the Armed Forces (including National Guard and Reserves) on active duty, who possess a resident hunting license, may hunt waterfowl Sept. 19-20.

Hunters and trappers can find the North Dakota 2020-21 Hunting and Trapping Guide, which includes upland game, migratory game bird and furbearer hunting/trapping regulations and other information, by visiting the state Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov. Printed guides are available at vendor locations.

A mule deer buck in velvet.

ASHLEY SALWEY

It was Friday, March 13. Not a good day if you buy into the superstition linked to the day, or grew up in the 1980s and watched any of the “Friday the 13th” movies and understand how things can go south in a hurry.

My wife, son and I were headed to a youth wrestling tournament in Linton when my phone rang about 10 miles north of town.

Tournament canceled, the caller said.

For my son, it was pure devastation. Tears were shed as we turned around and headed back home. After hearing about several COVID-related event cancellations, it wasn’t necessarily a surprise that the tournament was shut down, but a certain sign that things weren’t going to be the same for quite a while, even in North Dakota.

Fast forward to mid-August as I write this, and I believe we all can agree that the last several months have been different. But with fall quickly approaching and all our hunting seasons set, we’ve had an opportunity to reflect on Game and Fish Department spring and summer work activities. And, from the outside looking in, I don’t think there was much to notice.

The Department’s wildlife division is responsible for many tasks, but is commonly known for collecting species information, which help determine hunting season proclamations, provide wildlife habitat on wildlife management areas across the state, and work closely with private landowners to help open up additional hunting opportunities through our popular Private Land Open To Sportsmen program.

All these duties are carried out by dedicated staff who take a lot of pride in what they do and have expectations of completion. These are duties that we consider normal, but following discussions with agencies in other states, we found that this year we were in the minority when it came to working in the field.

So, before reading about the 2020 hunting season outlook, I thought it was important to highlight the Department staff effort it took to gather this information under challenging circumstances.

It didn’t come without some inconveniences, extra safety measures and innovation. But with our mission in mind, it was worth the additional effort to provide

the public with as many outdoor opportunities as possible in a year where outdoor recreation will continue to provide a valuable outlet for many.

Our notable big game surveys in spring and summer are for mule deer, pronghorn and bighorn sheep. The spring mule deer survey in western North Dakota usually takes place in early to mid-April. This year was no exception, but several adjustments were made to ensure a safe environment for staff and survey pilots.

Typically, these surveys consist of a weeklong stay at various hotels and a lot of camaraderie with all involved. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case this year. Instead of hotel stays, staff overnights in Department camper trailers at our Dick-

“THE DEPARTMENT’S WILDLIFE DIVISION IS RESPONSIBLE FOR MANY TASKS, BUT IS COMMONLY KNOWN FOR COLLECTING SPECIES INFORMATION.”

inson district office. The survey crew was smaller than typical, but with additional flying days the survey was completed without a misstep.

Arrangements, precautions and results of the summer pronghorn survey was much the same. The bighorn survey was the last one of summer and has a direct influence on how many lucky hunters will receive a call in early September telling them that they drew a coveted license.

The April portion of the sage grouse translocation project in southwestern North Dakota was put on hold by Wyoming Game and Fish this year due to COVID-19, but the June portion was a go and our staff successfully trapped and released hens and chicks in North Dakota in a continuing effort to bolster the grouse population.

All pheasant and sharp-tailed grouse surveys were conducted in traditional fashion because data is collected by individuals, not by groups. In fact, these peaceful, early morning surveys could easily be the definition of social distanc-

ing.

North Dakota conducts two important wetland and waterfowl surveys in May and July. The May survey has been conducted every year since 1948 and consists of a lot of miles, counting and classifying waterfowl, in normal years, with at least two individuals in a vehicle. The crews this year adjusted to only one individual per vehicle and eliminated any hotel stays. While it made for some long days, both surveys were successfully completed, with what looks to be a promising year for resident ducks and geese, while continuing to collect annual data for important trend information.

Department private land biologists adjusted accordingly by replacing the windshield tours with farmers and ranchers, to driveway discussions and phone conversations. The March through August timeframe for biologists consists of contract renewals, site visits, new contract writing, field coordination, and various other duties, many of which usually consist of face-to-face interaction. Our North Dakota culture prefers the in-person meet and greet, but under the circumstances, Game and Fish staff improvised. When the dust settled, more PLOTS acres were made available to hunters than in 2019.

The Department’s wildlife resource management section is charged with managing the state’s wildlife management areas across North Dakota. District staff took various precautions to ensure the safe working environment for themselves and co-workers. Food plots were planted, grass was seeded, trees were planted, noxious weeds were sprayed, grazing and haying operations were conducted in accordance with area management plans, and all our managed shooting ranges remained open for public use. All of these outdoor public areas remained open, and staff took a lot of pride in making that happen.

We hope that you will remain safe and healthy and that North Dakota’s outdoors provide you with a sense of normalcy in what is currently an unusual time.

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

UPLAND AND SMALL GA

►Ring-necked Pheasants

OPENS: Oct. 10

CLOSES: Jan. 3, 2021

DAILY LIMIT: 3

POSSESSION LIMIT: 12

SHOOTING HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Pheasants in North Dakota, for the most part, were greeted with a much milder winter in most of the state in 2020 compared to 2019. The only portion of the state that had unfavorable conditions was in the southeast, where above average snowfall and below average temperatures were the rule for most of winter.

Results of the spring crowing count survey showed higher numbers of breeding roosters throughout most of the traditional pheasant range. The number of roosters heard calling was up anywhere from 1-18% throughout North Dakota's good pheasant range. This was not a surprise, as last summer's reproduction led to a slight increase in the late summer roadside counts.

Cover for nesting hens was above average in spring due to a wet fall and residual cover. Hen pheasants should have been in good shape where the winter weather was mild, which may have translated into larger clutches of eggs.

At the time of this writing, Game and Fish biologists were still conducting late summer roadside brood counts, but preliminary numbers indicate hunters will see a comparable number of birds this fall to 2019.

While most of the state should have good production, hunters will need to be mobile and willing to move to different locations to find optimal hunting opportunities. The southwestern and northwestern parts of the state are expected to provide the best fall hunting opportunities.

Rodney Gross, Upland Game Management Biologist, Bismarck



TY STOCKTON

An early forecast calls for pheasant numbers in 2020 to be similar to 2019.

►Youth Pheasant

(For legally licensed residents and non-residents ages 15 and younger.)

OPENS: Oct. 3

CLOSES: Oct. 4

DAILY LIMIT: 3

POSSESSION LIMIT: 6

SHOOTING HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

►Wild Turkeys

OPENS: Oct. 10

CLOSES: Jan. 3, 2021

SHOOTING HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

The turkey population in many of North Dakota's hunting units has been higher than normal the past few years due to increased production in the western half of the state. Last year, conditions were ideal for a successful turkey hatch, and

Department surveys showed that.

Turkey production was good last spring from an increasing breeding population, so fall numbers were higher in parts of the state.

The eastern part of the state has seen decreasing numbers of birds the last few years in response to the loss of quality turkey habitat. Early reports from brood surveys indicate a slight decrease in the number of turkey broods on the ground in the west.

The Department increased fall wild turkey licenses slightly in an attempt to give hunters more opportunities in areas where turkey numbers are above management goals. It is expected that the central and west-central parts of the state along river corridors will provide some of the better turkey hunting opportunities in the state this fall.

Rodney Gross

►Ruffed Grouse

OPENS: Sept. 12

CLOSES: Jan. 3, 2021

DAILY LIMIT: 3

POSSESSION LIMIT: 12

SHOOTING HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Ruffed grouse populations occur in isolated pockets, namely the Turtle Mountains in the north central part of the state and in the Pembina Hills in the northeast. They are strongly associated with aspen forests with multi-aged stands of trees.

In 2020 spring drumming counts, increases in the ruffed grouse indexes were observed, particularly in the Pembina Hills where the number of ruffed grouse drumming heard per stop was up for the second year in a row.

Once again, for anyone looking to key in on ruffed grouse, it's recommended to look for areas with quaking aspen stands that provide areas of young, densely packed shoots mixed with areas of large mature trees.

Jesse Kolar, Upland Game Management Supervisor, Dickinson

►Sharp-tailed Grouse

OPENS: Sept. 12

CLOSES: Jan. 3, 2021

DAILY LIMIT: 3

POSSESSION LIMIT: 12

SHOOTING HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Sharp-tailed grouse harvest in 2019 finally started to rebound after lows the past three years. Interestingly, much of the rebound occurred in the prairie Coteau and Prairie Pothole regions and remained low in the badlands. Hunters who found sharptails in the central regions of the state reported seeing larger coveys, like what was observed in 2019 during late summer roadside counts.

Game and Fish Department spring counts, which use counts of males at displaying grounds as a population index,

indicated sharptails increased by roughly 20% across the state. However, since most hunters end up harvesting mostly juvenile birds, it's important to focus on reproduction for a fall forecast. Good reproduction requires both good nesting and brood-rearing success.

Nesting conditions were good for 2020 across most of North Dakota, however, the far eastern portion of the state and parts of the southeast were saturated from the wet fall in 2019. This spring was only the second spring since the drought of 2017 where we had tall residual vegetation structure and promising nesting conditions. Late winter temperatures and snowfall were mild, particularly farther west. Nesting conditions remained good over the peak nesting period (May-July). However, hot, dry weather, like what the western portion of the state experienced in June, may have inhibited egg-laying by hens.

Brood-rearing conditions this year were also good with warm, dry weather in June and only a few severe hailstorms. Anecdotal reports indicated that insect densities were higher this year than the past two, which is also important as grouse chicks rely on insects for protein as they grow.

So far, during the first half of the

Department's late summer roadside counts (brood surveys), biologists observed increases in the number of grouse broods observed per 100 miles, the number of chicks per brood, and the overall number of grouse per 100 miles. The largest increases were in the southwest, but keep in mind that area had the lowest rebound last year.

Hunters across the state should find higher numbers of sharptails than what they saw the past three years. Hunters should be aware of two areas closed to sharptail hunting: an area west of Grand Forks and an area around the Sheyenne National Grasslands. (Maps of areas closed to sharptail hunting are found in the North Dakota 2020-21 Hunting and Trapping Guide on the Department's website at gf.nd.gov.)

Once again, we ask grouse and partridge hunters to send in wings from harvested birds to help in the effort to analyze production for 2020. The hope is for additional submissions from hunters who have not submitted wings in the past. Hunters can request prepaid wing envelopes on the Department's website.

Jesse Kolar



The good news is that hunters should find more sharp-tailed grouse in 2020 than they did the last three years.

BIG GAME

►Hungarian Partridge

OPENS: Sept. 12

CLOSES: Jan. 3, 2021

DAILY LIMIT: 3

POSSESSION LIMIT: 12

SHOOTING HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

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

However, last year hunters saw a welcomed increase in the partridge population and early indications are similar this year. Hunters will most likely see increased numbers of partridge in the field compared to last year due to improved reproduction. Biologists have observed larger partridge broods this year compared to last summer. Department biologists will continue to observe broods during late summer roadside counts and results will be available in early September.

Partridge respond favorably to drier conditions and it's hopeful that the population continues to rebound from the dryer than average summer. Partridge have become an opportunistic bird that is harvested while hunting either sharp-tailed grouse or pheasants, so keep a look out for areas such as abandoned farmsteads and native prairie that is on the edge of small grain crops. Pockets of decent hunting may be found in these areas, but hunters will need to spend some time in the mornings scouting out potential areas.

Rodney Gross

►Tree Squirrels

OPENS: Sept. 12

CLOSES: Feb. 28, 2021

DAILY LIMIT: 4

POSSESSION LIMIT: 12

SHOOTING HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

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



The Game and Fish Department made available 200 more whitetail doe licenses in 2020 compared to 2019.

►White-tailed Deer

ARCHERY OPENS: Sept. 4.

ARCHERY CLOSES: Jan. 3, 2021

REGULAR GUN SEASON OPENS: Nov. 6

REGULAR GUN SEASON CLOSES: Nov. 22

MUZZLELOADER OPENS: Nov. 27

MUZZLELOADER CLOSES: Dec. 13

Game and Fish made available 69,050 licenses for the 2020 hunting season, an increase of 3,550 from 2019.

Population and harvest data indicate the state's deer population is stable to increasing, but still below management goals in most eastern hunting units. Consequently, there was a moderate increase in deer licenses allocated in 2020 to increase hunting opportunities while continuing to encourage population growth. The statewide gun hunter success rate in 2019 was 64%, which was the same as 2018, but below the Department goal of 70%.

Because deer have tested positive for chronic wasting disease in hunting units 3A1 and 3B1, deer management strategies were altered in those and surrounding units. The goal is to minimize the CWD prevalence rate and reduce the spread

of the disease outside those two units. Therefore, a more aggressive harvest strategy remains in the northwestern part of the state.

High quality deer habitat is not as abundant as in the past, which has limited the potential for population recovery. For example, deer numbers in hunting units 2E and 2C have responded slower to more favorable winter weather conditions and reduced harvest, due in part to these hunting units having lost approximately 60% of CRP grass cover and nearly 400 acres of trees.

Winter aerial surveys were generally poor. Biologists surveyed four (2H, 2F2, 2A and 2B) of 32 hunting units in 2020. Large amounts of standing corn made observing deer more difficult during winter aerial surveys. Surveys indicated stable white-tailed deer numbers in those units. In terms of severity, winter 2019-20 was moderate to mild, except for the region south of Interstate 94 and east of U.S. Highway 281.

The 2020 badlands mule deer spring index increased by 7% from 2019. Mule deer in the badlands have increased since winters of 2008-10 to a level within

management objectives. A conservative management approach will continue for 2020, with the same number of licenses as 2019.

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

A summary of deer licenses for 2020:

- Any-antlered licenses increased by 1,500.
- Any-antlerless licenses increased by 1,600.
- Antlered white-tailed deer licenses increased by 250.
- Antlerless white-tailed deer licenses increased by 200.
- Antlered and antlerless mule deer licenses remained the same.
- 1,276 muzzleloader licenses available in 2020 – 638 antlered white-tailed deer licenses and 638 antlerless white-tailed deer licenses. This is an increase of 70 muzzleloader licenses from 2019.
- 305 “I” licenses available for the youth deer hunting season, the same as 2019. The licenses are limited in number for units 3B1, 3B2 and 4A-4F, and are valid for any deer. There are unlimited “H” youth deer hunting licenses that are valid for any deer statewide, except mule deer in the above restricted units.
- 780 nonresident any-deer archery licenses available in 2020, an increase of 173 from 2019. The number of nonresident any-deer archery licenses will remain at 780 in 2021.

An experimental bow season for private land in Burleigh and Morton counties located adjacent to Bismarck and Mandan was implemented to address high white-tailed deer numbers in the Missouri River bottoms.

Bill Jensen, Big Game Management Biologist, Bismarck

►Mule Deer

ARCHERY OPENS: Sept. 4

ARCHERY CLOSES: Jan. 3, 2021

REGULAR GUN SEASON OPENS: Nov. 6

REGULAR GUN SEASON CLOSES: Nov. 22

Mule deer in North Dakota's badlands continue to show signs of recovery following the severe winters of 2008-2010, which resulted in deer numbers declining by nearly 50% since 2007.

The 2020 spring index was 7% higher than 2019, and 22% above the long-term average. The mule deer population increase can be attributed to prohibiting the harvest of antlerless mule deer in the badlands during the 2012-16 hunting seasons, more moderate winter conditions, and improved fawn production in 2013-19. Fawn production was highest in 2014 and 2016 with fawn-to-doe ratios of 95 and 90 fawns per 100 does, respectively.

A stable to increasing mule deer

population will mean good hunting opportunities again this fall. There were 3,050 antlered licenses and 2,150 antlerless licenses available in 2020, the same as 2019. A mule deer buck license remains one of the most difficult licenses to draw, but for those lucky hunters, it should result in a high-quality hunt. Hunter success for mule deer buck hunters was 79% in 2019.

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

Bruce Stillings, Big Game Management Supervisor, Dickinson



Like mule deer doe licenses, mule deer buck licenses in 2020 remained the same as 2019.

BIG GAME

►Pronghorn

ARCHERY ONLY OPENS: Sept. 4

ARCHERY ONLY CLOSES: Sept. 27

GUN/ARCHERY SEASON OPENS: Oct. 2

GUN/ARCHERY SEASON CLOSES: Oct. 18

North Dakota hunters will have more pronghorn hunting opportunities in 2020 due to a slight population increase.

Biologists conducted aerial surveys in early July and found that the number of pronghorn in the state increased by 6% from last year.

The pronghorn population increased to just over 10,400 animals, which is the highest estimate since 2009. The population has been slowly recovering since 2013 following the severe winters of 2008-10, which resulted in numbers declining by 75%. A combination of milder winter conditions since 2010-11, closed seasons from 2010-13, and improved fawn production and survival since 2013 have resulted in the population reaching a level that is able to support a higher harvest this fall.

In 2020, 1,790 licenses were allocated, or 460 more than 2019. Fifteen hunting units – 1A, 1D, 2A, 2B, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4C, 5A, 6A, 7A, 8A, 10A, 11A, and 13A – will be open this fall, three more than 2019. Units 8A and 11A will be opened for the first time since 2009, while 13A includes an area not open to hunting since 1993.

Pronghorn have also increased to a level in hunting units 1A, 2A, 4A, 5A, 6A, 7A and 11A where doe/fawn licenses will be issued to address areas of high pronghorn density and provide additional hunting opportunities.

Lottery licenses can be used during the archery season (Sept. 4-27) with archery equipment or during the rifle season (Oct. 2-18) using legal firearm or archery equipment for those who do not hunt or harvest an animal during the archery season.

Last year's season was very successful with 1,167 hunters harvesting 859 pronghorn for a success rate of 74%.

Bruce Stillings

►Bighorn Sheep

For season details, refer to the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2020 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

The Department's spring bighorn sheep survey, completed by recounting lambs in March, revealed a minimum of 290 bighorn sheep in western North Dakota, up 2% from 2018 and 3% above the five-year average.

Altogether, biologists counted 77 rams, 162 ewes and 51 lambs. Not included are approximately 30 bighorn sheep in the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park and 30 bighorns recently translocated to the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation.

The increase in the 2019 count reflects lessening effects of bacterial pneumonia detected in 2014. The northern badlands population increased 12% from 2018 and was the highest count on record. The southern badlands population declined again to the lowest level since 1999.

The total count of adult rams unfortunately declined for a fourth consecutive year in 2019, but adult ewes remained near record numbers. Most encouraging was the significant increase in the lamb count and recruitment rate following record lows in 2016 and 2017.

Game and Fish Department biologists count and classify all bighorn sheep in late summer, and then recount lambs the following March, as they approach one year of age, to determine recruitment.

Fortunately, annual survival rates of adult bighorns are very high and similar to those prior to the die-off, and lamb survival continues to improve, which could indicate the population is becoming somewhat resilient to the deadly pathogens first observed in 2014. The pathogen, *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae*, has not been detected the last two years in most of the northern herds via annual disease testing and none are currently showing symptoms of pneumonia.



GREG GULLICKSON

The Game and Fish Department opened additional pronghorn hunting units in 2020 and made available 460 more licenses than last year.



Six bighorn sheep licenses – five lottery and one auction – were issued to hunters in 2020.

TY STOCKTON

However, the next few years will be important in determining if the state's population shows signs of recovering from the disease outbreak, or if the pathogens are likely to persist and cause a long-term population decline.

A bighorn sheep hunting season is scheduled for 2020. The status of the bighorn sheep season was determined after the summer population survey was completed.

Game and Fish issued five licenses in 2019 and all hunters were successful in harvesting a ram.

Brett Wiedmann, Big Game Management Biologist, Dickinson

►Moose

For season details, refer to the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2020 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

After several years of increasing and record-setting moose licenses, the number of once-in-a-lifetime licenses was reduced slightly for 2020. The decrease was related to reduced hunter success in moose hunting unit M6.

The majority of licenses again come primarily from the northwest region of the state in moose management units M9, M10 and M11. Moose continue to do well in northwestern North Dakota, but

numbers remain low in historical hunting units in the Turtle Mountains, Pembina Hills and along the Red River corridor.

Moose unit M1C, located in the Pembina Hills region, has been closed since 2006 and will remain closed again this year. Moose unit M4, which encompasses the Turtle Mountains, was closed in 2013 and will also remain closed this fall.

Game and Fish issued 474 licenses for 2020, down from 479 licenses in 2019. Expectations for the season are high as

success for moose historically runs above 90%.

Jason Smith, Big Game Management Biologist, Jamestown

►Elk

For season details, refer to the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2020 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

North Dakota's 2020 elk season features 523 licenses, an increase from 2019 and the highest number of elk licenses issued since 2010.

The primary increase in licenses was for elk unit E3 in western North Dakota. This was in response to an increasing elk population in the area and landowner tolerance concerns.

The elk season outlook for 2020 is expected to be good with success similar to previous years.

As always, making landowner contacts and preseason scouting prior to the season opener is recommended and is an essential component to a successful hunt.

Jason Smith



JESSE KOLAR

The number of elk licenses made available to hunters in 2020 is the most since 2010.

MIGRATORY BIRDS

►Ducks and Geese

Much improved wetland conditions, along with increased numbers of waterfowl responding to those conditions, were found during the Game and Fish Department's 73rd annual breeding duck survey. Much of the state had good to excellent conditions for breeding ducks in spring and breeding habitats generally held up during the breeding season.

The 2020 May water index was the sixth highest on record, up 65% from 2019, and 71% above the 1948-2019 average. Wetland conditions in May ranged from fair to excellent across the state.

This year's breeding duck index was the 13th highest on record, up 18% from last year, and 64% above the long-term average. The state's estimated breeding population of ducks (3.98 million) is the highest index since 2014.

With the exception of redheads, all of North Dakota's primary breeding duck species had indices at or above what was observed in 2019. Mallards were basically unchanged from their 2019 estimate and represented their 18th highest count on record. Green-winged teal and blue-winged teal were up 66% and 58%, respectively. Ruddy ducks had another big population increase from last year and are up 87%. Changes in estimates of all other duck species ranged from a 2% decline for pintails to a 40% increase for scaup.

All species are above their long-term average, with the exception of pintails being 5% below their 72-year average. Green-winged teal came in at a record high index and are 249% above their 1948-2019 average. Other important species like gadwall (up 43%); canvasbacks (up 54%); wigeon (up 68%); redheads (up 72%); scaup (up 85%); mallards (up 84%); shovelers (up 95%); and ruddy ducks (up 142%) are above the long-term average.

The number of broods observed during the Department's July brood survey was similar to last year's count, and 52% above the 1965-2019 average. The

average brood size was 6.75 ducklings, nearly identical to last year's estimate. Following the May survey, North Dakota's landscape began to quickly dry up as drought crept across western and northern portions of the state. However, average to above average rainfall began in late June and continued into mid-July in nearly all important duck producing regions. This needed rainfall maintained excellent wetland conditions farther east and slowed drying in smaller seasonal wetland basins in many breeding areas.

July wetland counts were up 11% from 2019, and 49% above the long-term average. Despite abundant rain in June, precipitation has been somewhat limited in many areas of the state following unprecedented precipitation last fall. Wetland conditions were stable to declining across most of the state, with the exception of the northeast region and some smaller, isolated areas. Generally, numbers and conditions of wetlands were fair to good, but very wet in the northeast part of the state, starkly contrasting areas in the north central and central parts of

the state that continue to show some drying.

The fall flight forecast of ducks from North Dakota is up 9% from last year and is the 13th highest fall flight on record.

Numbers of resident Canada geese, Western Prairie Canada geese and arctic nesting Tallgrass Prairie Canada geese, snow geese and Ross's geese all remain high. Production of Canada geese in the state was quite high this year; estimates from arctic breeding areas are not available due to pandemic related travel restrictions.

North Dakota's waterfowl hunting seasons are always influenced by fall weather, and weather patterns from early to late seasons usually are not consistent from year to year. By producing a lot of birds locally, hunters aren't as dependent on good migration weather to bring birds from Canada in a timely manner.

Abundant small wetlands in good condition, coupled with abundant, secure nesting cover in the uplands, drives duck production. Hunting opportunities for waterfowl should be good this



Numbers of resident Canada geese in North Dakota remain high.



season based on duck production in North Dakota. However, prairie Canada was fairly dry again this spring and might limit the size of the fall flight of ducks that migrate through the state.

Mike Szymanski, Supervisor, Migratory Game Bird Management, Bismarck

►Youth Waterfowl Season

(For legally licensed residents and non-residents ages 15 and younger.)

OPENS: Sept. 19

CLOSES: Sept. 20

SHOOTING HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

DAILY LIMIT: Ducks and geese – same as regular season.

►Special Veteran and Active Military Waterfowl Season

(For legally licensed veterans and members of the Armed Forces on active duty, including members of the National Guard and Reserves on active duty, other than for training.)

OPENS: Sept. 19

CLOSES: Sept. 20

SHOOTING HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

DAILY LIMIT: Ducks and geese – same as regular season (does not include bonus blue-winged teal).

►Early Canada Goose Hunting

OPENS: Aug. 15 (statewide)

CLOSES: Sept. 7 (Missouri River Canada Goose Zone), Sept. 15 (Western Canada Goose Zone), Sept. 22 (Eastern Canada Goose Zone)

SHOOTING HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

DAILY LIMIT: 15

POSSESSION LIMIT: 45

►Canada Geese Regular Season

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

CLOSES: Jan. 1 (Missouri River Canada Goose Zone), Dec. 24 (Western Canada Goose Zone), Dec. 19 (Eastern Canada Goose Zone)

DAILY LIMIT: 5 (Missouri River zone), 8 (all other zones)

POSSESSION LIMIT: 15 (Missouri River zone), 24 (all other zones)

►White-fronted Geese (Statewide)

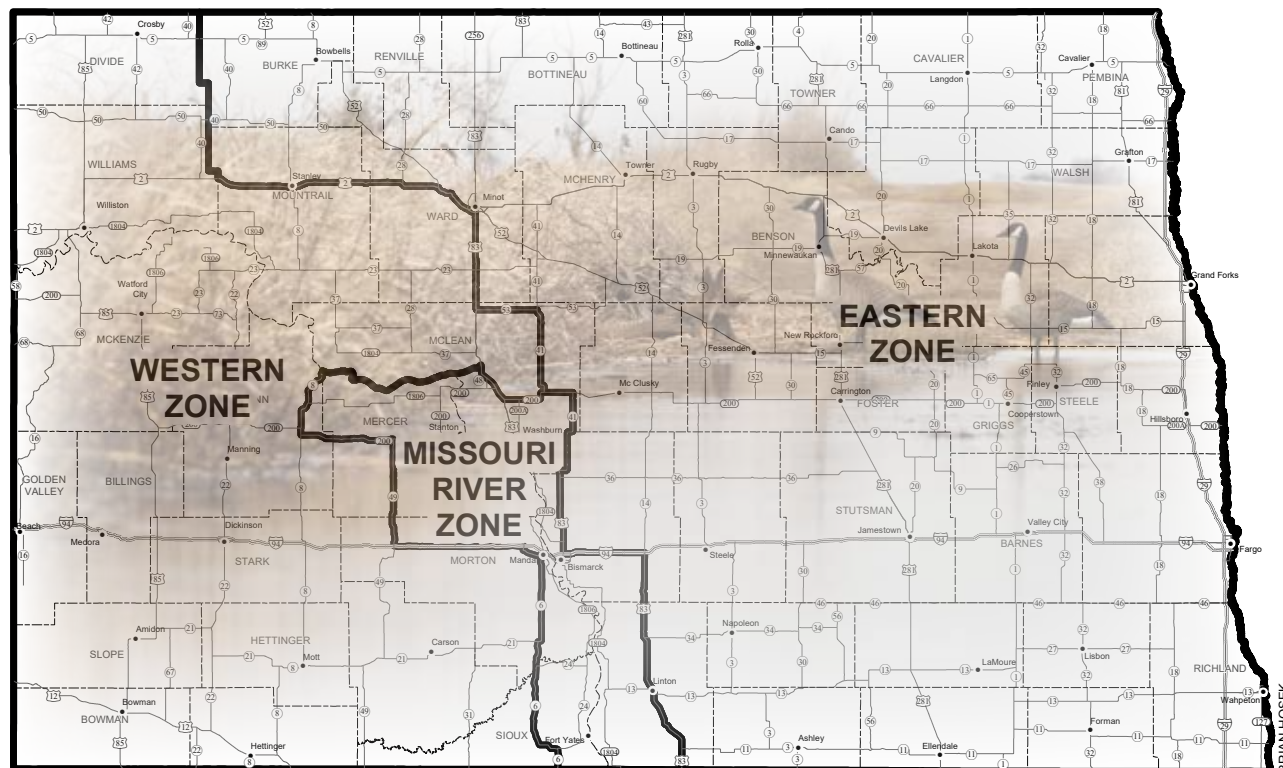
OPENS: Sept. 26 (residents only), Oct. 3 (nonresidents)

CLOSES: Dec. 6

DAILY LIMIT: 3

POSSESSION LIMIT: 9

CANADA GOOSE HUNTING ZONES



MIGRATORY BIRDS

►Light (Snow) Geese (Statewide)

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

CLOSES: Jan. 1

DAILY LIMIT: 50, no possession limit

SHOOTING HOURS FOR ALL GEESE: Half-hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. each day through Oct. 31. Starting Nov. 1, shooting hours are a half-hour before sunrise to 2 p.m. each day.

EXCEPTION: Shooting hours are a half-hour before sunrise to sunset on all Saturdays and Wednesdays through the end of each season. Starting Nov. 29, all-day hunting is also allowed on Sundays through the end of each season.

►Regular Duck Season

LOW PLAINS UNIT

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

CLOSES: Dec. 6

SHOOTING HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

HIGH PLAINS UNIT

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

CLOSES: Dec. 6

OPENS: Dec. 12

CLOSES: Jan. 3

SHOOTING-HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

DAILY LIMIT: Six ducks, which may include no more than five mallards (two of which may be hens), one pintail, two redheads, two canvasbacks, one scaup and three wood ducks. In addition to the daily bag limit of ducks, an additional two blue-winged teal may be taken from Sept. 26 through Oct. 11.

POSSESSION LIMIT: Three times the daily limit.



GREG GULLICKSON

Biologists say waterfowl hunting opportunities should be good this fall based on duck production in North Dakota.

►Sandhill Cranes

OPENS: Zone 1 and 2: Sept. 19

CLOSES: Zone 1 and 2: Nov. 15

DAILY LIMIT ZONE 1: 3

DAILY LIMIT ZONE 2: 2

POSSESSION LIMIT ZONE 1: 9

POSSESSION LIMIT ZONE 2: 6

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

The spring survey for Mid-continent Sandhill Cranes in the central Platte River valley in Nebraska was canceled this year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Although no annual survey information is available for 2020, the three-year average population index used for guiding hunting season regulations has been stable to slightly increasing for several years.

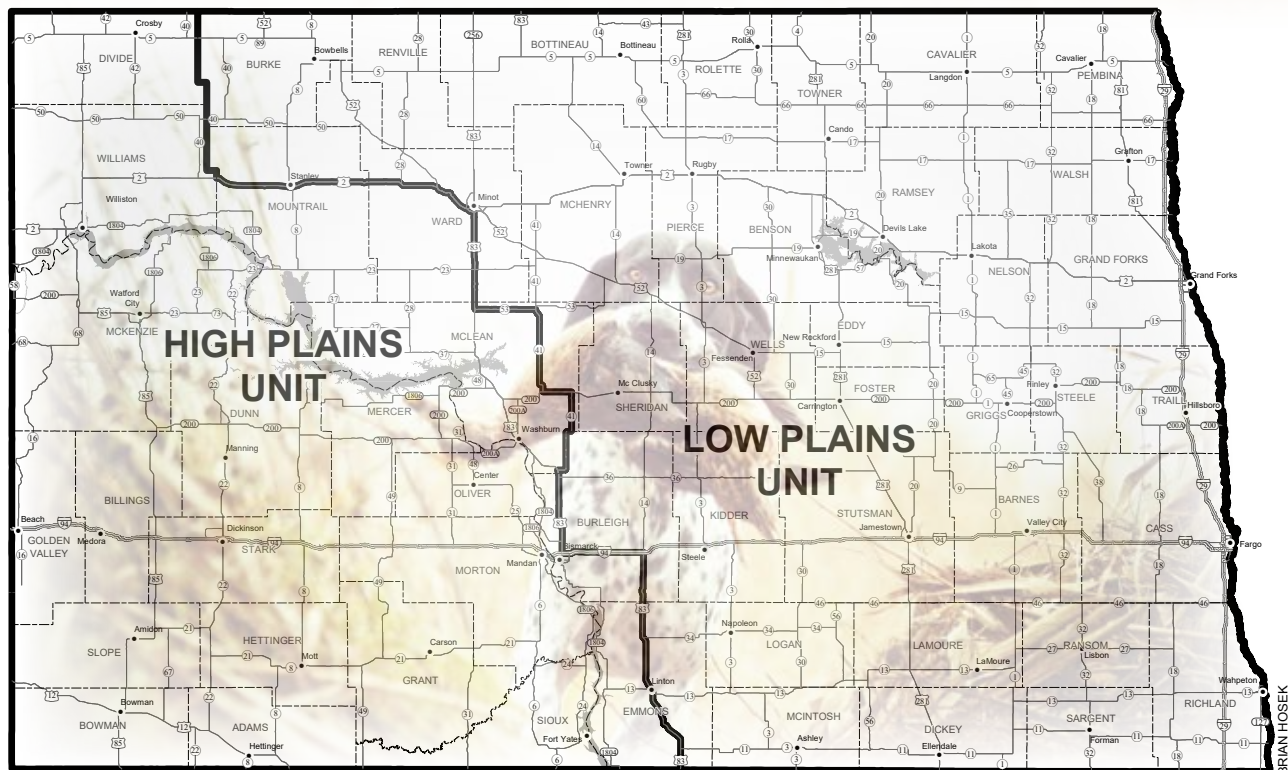
In addition, the canceled 2020 survey will be removed from any subsequent calculations of the three-year index and the current average is still well above the management objectives for this population. With these considerations, the

Mid-continent Sandhill Crane Population should still be in good shape heading into the fall hunting season. Wetland conditions throughout much of North Dakota have also improved over the last year or so, which will provide plenty of options for roosting sandhill cranes during fall migration.

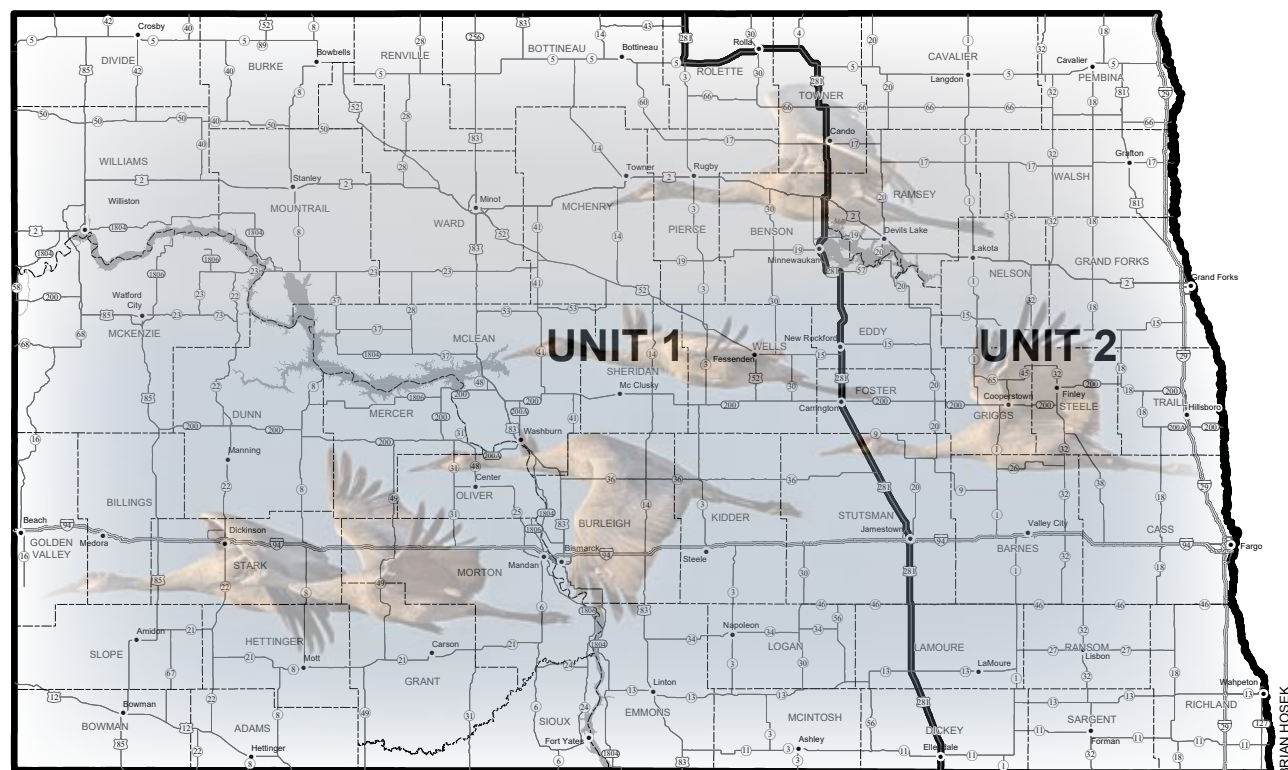
The two zone – Zone 1 west of U.S. Highway 281 and Zone 2 east of U.S. Highway 281 – structure for sandhill cranes continues. The two zones will have the same season lengths (58 days) and dates, but will continue to have different bag limits. Zone 1 has a daily bag limit of three cranes; in Zone 2 the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

Nonresident sandhill crane hunters can pursue sandhill cranes with either a valid nonresident small game or waterfowl license, in addition to a crane permit. Nonresident sandhill crane permits are valid for use within the dates and zones of nonresident waterfowl or small game licenses selected during purchase.

DUCKS HIGH PLAINS/LOW PLAINS UNITS



SANDHILL CRANE UNITS



MIGRATORY BIRDS

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

Andrew Dinges, Migratory Game Bird Biologist, Bismarck

►Doves

OPENS: Sept. 1

CLOSES: Nov. 29

DAILY LIMIT: 15

POSSESSION LIMIT: 45

SHOOTING HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

North Dakota has a large population of breeding mourning doves and based on casual observations, production in the state in 2020 was good to fair.

Relatively normal precipitation and warm weather have made it favorable for doves to nest often during the breeding season. The Game and Fish Department also tallies mourning doves during late summer roadside counts, but numbers have yet to be finalized. Although survey numbers are not currently available, age ratios of juvenile to adult birds captured at banding stations throughout the state have also been indicative of good production this year.

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

Hunters should look for areas with abundant harvested small grain or oilseed fields that are near shelterbelts or other diverse stands of trees. Doves also need to be within a few miles of water sources. Harvest of small grains and oilseed crops are projected to be near average, so hunters should have plenty of places to choose from this fall.



SANDRA JOHNSON

The daily limit for snipe, a species not often pursued by hunters in North Dakota, is eight.

Eurasian collared doves continue to expand throughout the state and are found in almost every city and small town. However, these birds are not often found outside of municipalities and are rarely harvested by hunters. Nonetheless, Eurasian collared doves can be pursued during the dove season and are included with mourning doves in the daily bag and possession limits if harvested.

Some dove hunters may be contacted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to participate in a wing survey, which involves clipping one wing from each dove shot early in the season to send in for analysis. Hunters are also reminded to look for banded mourning doves in their bag and report bands directly to the Bird Banding Laboratory website at report-band.gov.

Andrew Dinges

►Crows

FALL SEASON OPENS: Aug. 22

CLOSES: Nov. 9

SPRING SEASON OPENS: March 13, 2021

CLOSES: April 25, 2021

DAILY LIMIT: No limit on crows.

SHOOTING HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

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

►Snipe

OPENS: Sept. 12

CLOSES: Dec. 6

DAILY LIMIT: 8

POSSESSION LIMIT: 24

SHOOTING HOURS: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

►Woodcock

OPENS: Sept. 26

CLOSES: Nov. 9

DAILY LIMIT: 3

POSSESSION LIMIT: 9

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

For more season details, refer to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the North Dakota 2020-21 Hunting and Trapping Guide.

FURBEARERS

There are no significant changes to the furbearer regulations this fall. Harvest limits, timing of seasons and zones remain similar to last year.

Spring surveys indicated trappers and hunters can expect coyote numbers similar to last year in most regions of the state. Fox numbers remain low throughout the state. Night hunters for coyote and fox are reminded that the night hunting season opens Nov. 23, after the deer gun season closes. Additionally, hunters pursuing coyotes or fox a half-hour after sunset to a half-hour before sunrise are not allowed to use archery equipment or crossbows until after the archery deer season closes on Jan. 3, 2021.

Muskrat numbers increased slightly in most regions of the state compared to last year. The highest numbers of muskrats can once again be found in the Prairie Pothole Region.

Similarly, spring surveys indicated increases in raccoons throughout most of the state. Yet, while badger, beaver and mink numbers are up slightly in some regions compared to last year, these species remain below their long-term averages statewide.

Last year, hunters and trappers took 17 fishers, 73 bobcats and 14 mountain lions in Zone 1 (six in the early-season and eight in the late-season) and three mountain lions in Zone 2. Additionally, last season the harvest limit of 20 river otters was reached after 37 days.

We encourage anyone to report sightings of rare furbearers they see at gf.nd.gov/hunting/furbearers/rare-furbearer-observation. Observations by citizens provide valuable

information regarding population distribution, dispersal routes, habitat use and frequency of occurrence.

Many species of furbearers are difficult to survey because of their secretive nature and naturally low densities. Therefore, we encourage reports of these cryptic furbearers, their sign (e.g., tracks), or captures on trail camera photos. Please include only observations you personally witnessed, as firsthand accounts of a species are most accurate.

Stephanie Tucker, Game Management Section Leader, Bismarck

►Mountain Lion Hunting

ZONE 1 (EARLY) OPENS: Sept. 4

CLOSES: Nov. 22

ZONE 1 (LATE) OPENS: Nov. 23

CLOSES: March 31, 2021

ZONE 2 OPENS: Sept. 4

CLOSES: March 31, 2021

The overall harvest limit on mountain

lions in Zone 1 is once again 15, with an early season limit of eight, and a late-season limit of seven (or three females, whichever comes first). If the early season ends before eight mountain lions are taken, a conditional season could reopen after the late season, if the late season limit is reached prior to March 25.

There is no mountain lion harvest limit in Zone 2.

Mountain lions may be hunted statewide by residents using legal firearms or archery equipment during regular hunting hours. Beginning Nov. 23, mountain lions may also be hunted by pursuing with dogs. Cable devices and traps are not allowed. The limit is one lion per hunter. Kittens (lions with visible spots), or females accompanied by kittens, may not be taken.

Any lion taken must be reported to the Department within 12 hours and the entire intact animal must be presented for tagging. Legally taken animals will be returned to the hunter.



The mountain lion season in North Dakota opens Sept. 4.

TY STOCKTON

FURBEARERS

►River Otter Trapping or Cable Devices

OPENS: Nov. 23

CLOSES: March 15, 2021

Limit of one per person. Total harvest limit of 20 statewide.

Trappers must contact the local game warden or Department field office to report their harvest within 12 hours and make arrangements to have their river otter tagged. For more information, see the North Dakota 2020-21 Hunting and Trapping guide.

►Fisher Trapping or Cable Devices

OPENS: Nov. 23

CLOSES: Nov. 29

Open statewide except for Bottineau and Rolette counties. Limit one per person. Trappers must contact the local game warden or Department field office to report their harvest within 12 hours and make arrangements to have their fisher tagged. For more information, see the North Dakota 2020-21 Hunting and Trapping guide.

►Beaver and Raccoon Trapping, Hunting or Underwater Cable Devices

OPEN: Year-round.

For more information, see the North Dakota 2020-21 Hunting and Trapping Guide.

►Beaver and Raccoon Cable Devices on Land

OPENS: Nov. 23

CLOSES: March 15, 2021

From March 16, 2021, through May 10, 2021, cable devices must be within 50 feet of water; they must be no more than 4 inches off the ground and must have a stop restricting loop size to 12 inches or less in diameter.

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



LARA ANDERSON

Beaver numbers are up slightly compared to 2019 in some regions of North Dakota.



ASHLEY SALWEY

Muskrat numbers, compared to 2019, increased slightly in most regions of the state.

►Weasel Trapping, Hunting or Cable Devices

TRAPPING OPENS: Oct. 24

HUNTING AND CABLE DEVICES OPENS: Nov. 23

CLOSES: March 15, 2021

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

►Muskrat and Mink Trapping, Hunting or Cable Devices

TRAPPING OPENS: Oct. 24

HUNTING AND CABLE DEVICES OPENS: Nov. 23

CLOSES: May 10, 2021

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

Beginning March 16, 2021, colony traps must be under at least 2 inches of water, and trapping or using cable devices on the outside of any muskrat house or structure of any size is prohibited; traps may be placed completely inside a muskrat house or structure of any size, except when used on float sets; foothold traps must be submerged under water at all times or must have a protective covering; body-gripping traps used in water can have no more than 2 inches of the trap above the water or must have a protective covering.

Beginning May 1, 2021, float sets must have a protective covering.

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

►Bobcat Trapping, Hunting or Cable Devices

HUNTING AND TRAPPING OPENS: Nov. 7

CABLE DEVICES OPENS: Nov. 23

CLOSES: March 15, 2021

Open only in the area south and west of the Missouri River. Beginning Nov. 23, bobcats may also be hunted by pursuing with dogs.

The pelt and carcass of each bobcat must be presented to Department personnel for inspection and tagging prior to sale or transfer of possession, but no later than 14 days after the close of the season.

For more information, see the 2020-21 Hunting and Trapping Guide.

►Red Fox, Gray Fox, Coyote Trapping, Hunting or Cable Devices

DAY HUNTING AND TRAPPING OPENS: Year-round

NIGHT HUNTING AND CABLE DEVICES OPENS: Nov. 23

CLOSES: March 15, 2021

Red fox, gray fox and coyote may be hunted at any hour from Nov. 23 through March 15, 2021. Any hunter who engages in the hunting of red fox, gray fox or coyote during the time from a half-hour after sunset to a half-hour before sunrise, must hunt exclusively on foot.

Hunters can use night vision, artificial light, thermal vision, and infrared light equipment during the night hunting season. Hunters are prohibited from using archery equipment (including crossbows) for night hunting until after the close of the archery deer season.

►Badger Trapping, Hunting or Cable Devices

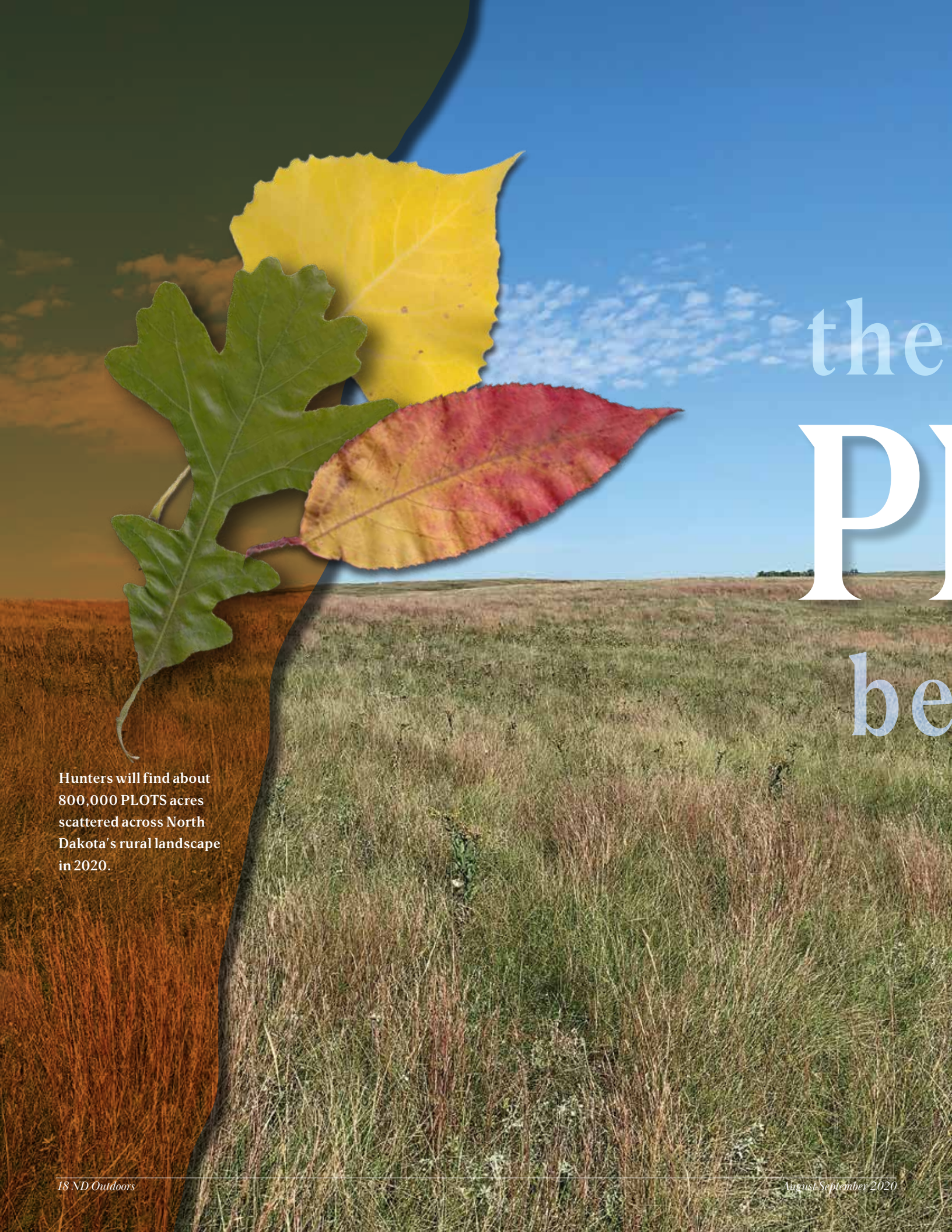
HUNTING AND TRAPPING OPENS: Year-round

CABLE DEVICES OPENS: Nov. 23

CLOSES: March 15, 2021



For more information on hunting/trapping fox and other furbearers, see the North Dakota 2020-21 Hunting and Trapping Guide.



the P be

Hunters will find about
800,000 PLOTS acres
scattered across North
Dakota's rural landscape
in 2020.

VALUE of LOTS yond Fall

STORY BY RON WILSON



SANDRA JOHNSON



SANDRA JOHNSON

PLOTS tracts across the landscape are marked (top) by yellow signs so familiar to hunters. Sandra Johnson, Bismarck, (right) with her bird dog, Luna, and a sharp-tailed grouse taken from a PLOTS tract. Ducks, upland birds and many other bird species (far right) benefit from the nesting cover found on PLOTS lands in the spring and summer months.



Like falling leaves, migrating birds and the smell of burnt gunpowder, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program screams fall.

And that's for good reason, as the popular walk-in access program, marked by unmistakable yellow signs and visited by an uncountable number of hunters, has been on North Dakota's landscape for more than 20 years. This year, about 800,000 are available to hunters.

"A lot of people associate PLOTS with fall and fall hunting because that's what these lands are largely used for," said Kevin Kading, Game and Fish Department private land section leader. "I'm guessing that the first time some people ever step foot on a PLOTS tract is during the hunting season."

Yet, while these lands garner the bulk of the attention when the days cool and leaves turn, PLOTS acres are beneficial to wildlife during other seasons.

"At this time of year, a lot of wildlife production is happening on PLOTS and other places with quality habitat," Kading

said in June while standing on a PLOTS tract in Emmons County. "Any grassland component on PLOTS or elsewhere is important for grassland dependent birds, grassland nesting birds from ducks, to pheasants, to sharp-tailed grouse, to Western meadowlarks and everything in between."

Kading said all the birds mentioned, from the upland game birds hunters pursue, to those that color the prairie with their presence, have different habitat needs, which means, for example, different heights and composition of grasses.

"The habitat at this time of year, from the old growth grasses from last year, to the new grasses coming in now, are all vitally important for these birds to be able to pull off successful broods," he said. "If you boil it all down, these are grassland dependent birds and North Dakota is a prairie state."

Kading said the grasslands found on PLOTS and across the landscape need to be managed to provide the proper benefits to wildlife.

"There was a time when we thought

that these lands should just be left idle for 10, 20 years, but that's just not the case," he said. "Having some disturbance out there, some frequent management to these lands is beneficial. Whether that's haying, grazing, mowing, burning ... Even going out on planted grassland like CRP or a PLOTS tract and disking it lightly to kind of rejuvenate the grass and get a forward response again is beneficial."

"Sometimes it might look to a hunter who is maybe not aware what is happening out there that it's destroying habitat, but it's actually a longer-term benefit," Kading added. "If you come out in April or May and there is a prescribed burn going on you might only see a loss of habitat for one year, but not consider the benefits to the grass stand overall."

Much is made, and for good reason, about having good winter habitat on the landscape because it's during North Dakota's leanest months when animals are most stressed. Yet, Kading and other wildlife biologists are quick to praise the importance of quality grassland habitat in the spring and summer months for birds,



TIM JOHNSON



SANDRA JOHNSON

such as pheasants, which garner the most attention from hunters.

"Not all pheasants make it through winter, but if enough do and you've got good nesting cover on the landscape for them come spring, they'll rebound very quickly," he said. "Anywhere from as early as mid-April to late August, birds are on their nests and raising broods. How well they pull it off this time of the year really drives the population."

Quality habitat on PLOTS and across the landscape is not only important for grassland nesting birds, but also whitetail deer, the state's most harvested big game animal.

Bill Jensen, Game and Fish Department big game management biologist, who was with Kading on the Emmons County PLOTS tract in June, said at that time of year, the home range of a whitetail doe is about 1.5 miles, but her fawn is confined to about 100 acres of less. So, everything a fawn needs to survive – quality, heightening habitat – needs to be available in that 100 acres.

"For the doe, she needs water and high-quality food because this is an energeti-

cally demanding time for her because she is nursing so much," Jensen said. "Because the doe needs to drink at least once a day within her home range, these small wetlands on PLOTS are just as important for deer as ducks.

"The fawn needs good hiding cover from predators, which usually consists of low vegetation of at least 18 inches in height," he added. "They also like over-story vegetation like shrubs and trees. Usually, they want or need about 50-75% of that home range in a stable bedding cover."

According to research, Jensen said the peak of the fawning season in North Dakota is about June 6. Within two weeks of that date, 75% of the fawns are born and 90% percent within four weeks.

"Without good, quality habitat fawns are subjected to higher predation," he said. "If they're confined to narrow tree rows, those fawns are easily found and killed."

And the same goes for pheasants as their nest are easily found and destroyed.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



PLOTS Guide Online

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen Guide for 2020 is available online at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov. In addition, the free printed PLOTS guides are available at most license vendors and other locations throughout the state.

The guide features about 800,000 PLOTS acres. Because the guide is printed in mid-August, some PLOTS tracts highlighted in the guide may have been removed from the program since the time of printing. There will also be some PLOTS tracts where the habitat and condition of the tract will have changed significantly. Conversely, Game and Fish may have added new tracts to the program after the guide went to press.

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

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

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



ELECTRONIC P IS UNDERWAY



By Greg Freeman

Ramsey. Richland. Slope.

Three counties that could possibly shape the future of hunting in North Dakota.

As part of a pilot study authorized by the 2019 state legislature, Ramsey, Richland and Slope were chosen to test a system that allows landowners the option to electronically post their land through an online application that is linked to land descriptions based on property tax records.

Current state law provides that private land is open to hunting unless the landowner, or an individual authorized by the owner, posts the land with signs notify-

ing hunters that no hunting is permitted unless permission is obtained.

"This allows landowners in those three counties an additional option, to try a new concept by using technology for managing access this fall," said Terry Steinwand, North Dakota Game and Fish Department director.

But first, let's back up. How did we get here?

Automatic posting has been an issue in North Dakota's state legislature for a

minimum of the last 16 years. Bills were introduced in different variations, and all were defeated largely due to concerns from both hunters and landowners who were opposed to the concept.

Initially, landowners expressed concerns over the time and expense to place physical signs on private property, but during the 2019 session, private property rights were added, and legislation was drafted that would have overturned current law and made all private land closed



POSTING

Automatic posting is an issue lawmakers have addressed over and over for many years in North Dakota.

ASHLEY SALWEY

to hunting without permission. The bill was modified in the Senate to include electronic posting, but some amendments were made in conference and the bill was defeated in the House of Representatives.

Subsequent legislation then created the study to determine if there was a way to relieve landowners of the burden of putting up signs every half-mile around their property.

“Study access to public and private lands for hunting, trapping, fishing and related issues, including trespass violations and penalties, and provided recommendations regarding a land access database and the capability of electronic posting. At the direction of the Legislative Management, before August 1, 2020, the Information Technology Department and Game and Fish Department shall establish a trial electronic posting and hunter

access information system in up to three counties. The Information Technology Department and Game and Fish Department may contract with a third party to assist with the electronic posting and hunter access information system development and operation.”

“Richland, Ramsey and Slope counties volunteered for the study, were chosen by the interim committee and represent counties with GIS land parcel capabilities,” Steinwand said. “And, all three counties are rich in hunting activity.”

Sen. Robert Erbele, chairman of the Interim Natural Resources Committee tasked with undertaking the study, said since this is a trial study, landowners who volunteered to participate in electronic posting must still physically sign those land parcels.

“There aren’t any penalties in law that address electronic posting, therefore

the landowner still has to physically post the land for this year,” Sen. Erbele said. “Our intention is that hunters will view the application and they will see the posted tract, honor it and will not have to go out and look for a posted sign.”

Altogether, 79 landowners in the three counties met the July 15 deadline to electronically post their land, totaling 268 parcels and 38,600 acres.

What does this mean for hunters this fall?

Hunters interested in viewing maps displaying electronically posted lands should visit the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov, and access Electronic Posting Pilot Study under Seasonal Shortcuts. Private land that is posted electronically is viewable on a personal computer or smartphone. Hunters can use any of the map resources presented on the website. These map resources will temporarily include electronically posted lands during the 2020-21 hunting season. In addition, individual map pages that are seen on the guide viewer can be printed.

“Under this section of the website, you’ll see a portion for map resources and the tools that can be used, whether it is printing maps and taking them in the field with you, or making use of some of the technologies with a smartphone or a mobile device of some kind, you can access the other applications that are available,” said Brian Hosek, with Game and Fish administrative services. “Each of these applications have their strengths and weaknesses, so some you access through a browser and you navigate to the website to launch the application to use it. They do have a rich set of tools with them where you can identify features and see the contact information for the landowner who posted the land.

“You can also create your own maps. Others are native mobile applications, so that’s something that you go out to one of the stores to download to your device,” he added. “With these applications some of them you need internet access, so you need cell service range. There is another application that doesn’t require cell service, so it does require you to upload the maps before you go out in the field, but you can certainly do so prior and then you have this out in the field with you if

While mule deer can be found elsewhere in the state, most people think of the western part of the state when it comes to mule deer. Slope County, one of three counties in the pilot study, is located in southwestern North Dakota where a fair share of the state's mule deer population can be found.



TY STOCKTON

you're out of cell service range.”

A benefit of electronic posting, Hosek said, is the ability for hunters to determine a point of contact for the landowner, or authorized individual who posted the land.

“The point of contact, including a phone number and email in some cases,

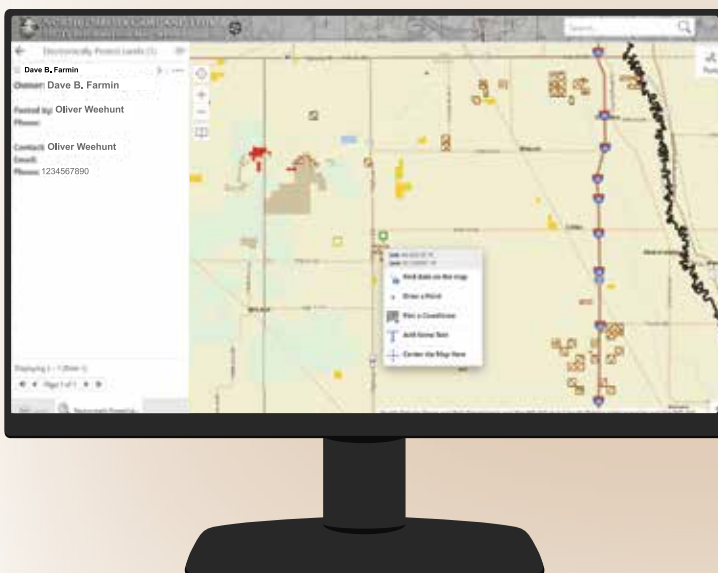
is included on the map service application,” he said.

Steinwand reminds hunters to be respectful of landowners and be mindful of their daily schedules, as farmers will be busy with fall duties, including harvesting crops, moving cattle and hauling bales.

Hunters and landowners using the

electronic posting application will receive a brief survey, asking to provide their experience using the map and electronic posting applications. The information collected will help the Interim Natural Resources Committee determine the usability of the electronic posting application and provide direction for changes

TO ACCESS PLOTS INTERACTIVE GUIDE VIA DESKTOP COMPUTER:



- 1 Go to gf.nd.gov
- 2 Under Season Shortcuts, click “Electronic Posting Pilot Study”
- 3 Click on PLOTS Guide Viewer under Map Resources
- 4 Scroll, click and drag to zoom/pan around map
- 5 Locate an electronically posted area, denoted by crosshatching
- 6 Right-click area and choose “Find data on the map” or use identifying tool
- 7 Repeat steps 6-7 for other electronically posted areas



Current state law provides that private land is open to hunting unless the landowner, or an individual authorized by the owner, posts the land with signs notifying hunters that no hunting is permitted unless permission is obtained.

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required to existing law. The committee is comprised of legislators, and representation from landowners and sportsmen's organizations.

"We need hunters to use this map application and take the little time necessary to complete the survey," Steinwand said. "The more information that is

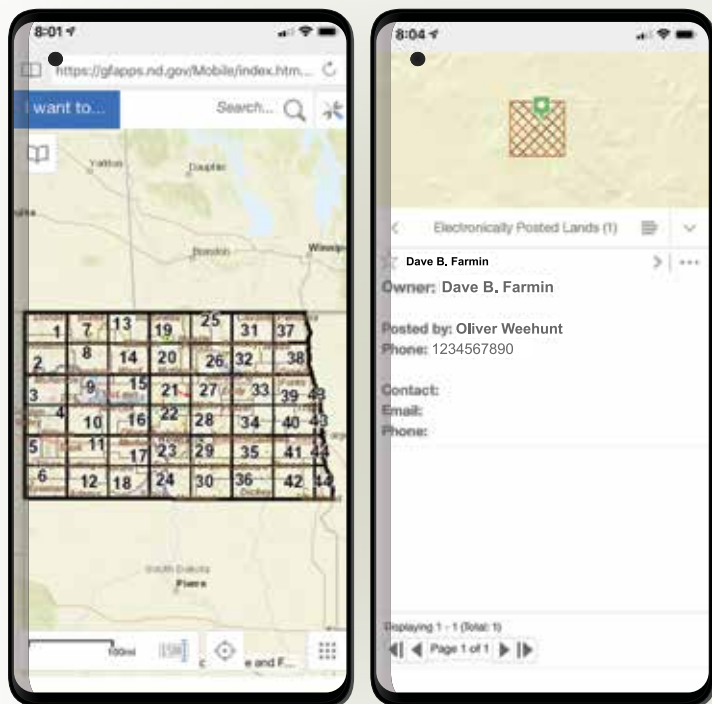
gathered will help guide the committee moving forward."

If the current law eventually becomes amended to include electronic posting, Sen. Erbele believes the penalties for violating electronic posting should be the same as the current penalties for hunting on physically posted land.

In addition, if lawmakers deem that the pilot study provides a viable solution and is amended into current law, Hosek said it's possible for counties to be on board in short order.

GREG FREEMAN is the Game and Fish Department's communications supervisor.

TO ACCESS PLOTS INTERACTIVE GUIDE VIA MOBILE PHONE (WITH CELLULAR SERVICE):



- 1 Go to gf.nd.gov
- 2 On the homepage, tap the compass icon
- 3 Locate and tap Map Service Apps
- 4 Scroll to bottom, tap PLOTS Guide Viewer
- 5 Pinch to zoom and tap to drag around the map
- 6 Locate an electronically posted area, denoted by crosshatching
- 7 Tap and hold, then choose "Find data on the map" or use identifying tool
- 8 Repeat steps 6-7 for other electronically posted areas

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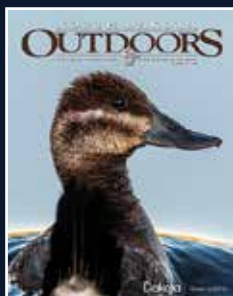


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Jerry Weigel, Department fisheries production and development supervisor, with walleye fingerlings.

Record Number of Lakes Stocked

North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel stocked a record 180 lakes across the state with nearly 12 million walleye fingerlings.

Jerry Weigel, Department fisheries production and development supervisor, said the number of lakes bested the previous high by nearly 30 waters.

"There is record water across the state, so timing of a near record walleye production could not have come at a better time," Weigel said. "Valley City and Garrison Dam national fish hatcheries contributed to make this happen. Both hatcheries have been outstanding in helping address our demand for walleye fingerlings."

Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery set a record for the most pounds shipped of these 1- to 1.5-inch fingerlings, with more than 8,400 total pounds.

Given the record walleye production, coupled with a record number of lakes stocked resulted in a lot of driving time for fish haulers.

"Just in the first seven days of this year's walleye production, haulers traveled more than 8,200 miles and stocked over 150 lakes with 7.6 million fish," Weigel said.

Crews had near perfect conditions with most lakes at or near record water levels, with flooded vegetation for the young fish to hide and plenty of food for them to eat, which bodes well for future fishing opportunities.

"One of the biggest challenges this year was access to some lakes," Weigel said. "As a result of last fall's record rains, a lot of local roads in central and eastern North Dakota remained flooded and often closed, thus making navigating some roads more challenging."

Later this fall, fisheries personal will sample walleye lakes to assess success of this year's walleye stocking, as well as what Mother Nature provided.

One common observation fish haulers noted while traveling across the state, Weigel said, was the high amount of fishing taking place, both from shore and from boats.

"It's a great time to fish for walleye," he added. "Statewide, there are a lot of opportunities, and a good chance of success."

For a complete list of all fish stockings, visit the fishing link at the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov/fishing.

Baiting Restrictions

Hunters are reminded it is unlawful to hunt big game over bait, or place bait to attract big game for the purpose of hunting, in deer units 3A1, 3A2, 3A3 north of U.S. Highway 2, 3B1, 3C west of the Missouri River, 3E1, 3E2, 3F1, 3F2, 4A, 4B and 4C.

The restriction is in place to help slow the spread of chronic wasting disease, a fatal disease of deer, moose and elk that can cause long-term population declines if left unchecked.

In addition, baiting for any purpose is prohibited on all North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife management areas. Hunting big game over bait is also prohibited on all U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service national wildlife refuges and waterfowl production areas, U.S. Forest Service national grasslands, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers managed lands, and all North Dakota state trust, state park and state forest service lands.

More information on CWD can be found at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov.

Report Banded Birds

Hunters should check harvested migratory birds for bands this fall and report federal bands at report-band.gov.

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

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



MIKE ANDERSON

Survey Wings

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

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

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

Game and Fish biologists will take as

many sharptail and partridge feathers as they can get because the more collected, the better the data. Biologists can determine sex and age ratios from wings and tail feathers, survival, nesting success, hatch dates and overall production.

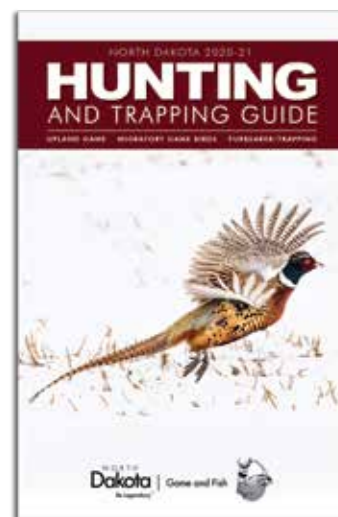
What biologists learn from the samples is vital to helping manage North Dakota's upland game birds.

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

New Hunting, Trapping Guide

Hunters and trappers can find the North Dakota 2020-21 Hunting and Trapping Guide, which includes upland game, migratory game bird and furbearer hunting/trapping regulations and other information, by visiting the state Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov. Printed guides are available at the usual license vendor locations.

The 50-plus page guide also features a colored duck identification guide, aquatic nuisance species information, Tom Roster's Nontoxic Shot Lethality Table and more.



LARA ANDERSON

WMA Equipment Requirement

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department reminds hunters that tree stands, ground blinds and game cameras cannot be placed on state wildlife management areas prior to August 20.

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

In addition, an equipment registration number, or the owner's name, address and telephone number, must be displayed on all equipment requiring identification.

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



Transporting Big Game

Big game hunters are reminded of requirements for transporting deer, elk and moose carcasses and carcass parts into and within North Dakota, as a precaution against the possible spread of chronic wasting disease.

Hunters are prohibited from transporting into or within North Dakota the whole carcass of deer, elk, moose or other members of the cervid family from states and provinces with documented occurrences of CWD in wild populations, or in captive cervids.

In addition, hunters harvesting a white-tailed deer or mule deer from deer hunting units 3A1, 3B1, 3F2, 4B and 4C, a moose from moose hunting units M10 and M11, or an elk from elk hunting units E2 and E6, cannot transport the whole carcass outside of the unit. However, hunters can transport the whole carcass between adjoining CWD carcass restricted units.

The following lower-risk portions of the carcass can be transported:

- Meat that has been boned out.
- Quarters or other portions of meat with no part of the spinal column or head attached.
- Meat that is cut and wrapped either commercially or privately.
- Hides with no heads attached.
- Skull plates with antlers attached having no hide or brain tissue present.
- Intact skulls with the hide, eyes, lower jaw and associated soft tissue removed, and no visible brain or spinal cord tissue present
- Antlers with no meat or tissue attached.
- Upper canine teeth, also known as buglers, whistlers or ivories.
- Finished taxidermy heads.

Federal Duck Stamp Required

A federal duck stamp is required for waterfowl hunters age 16 and older beginning September 1. Waterfowl includes ducks, geese, swans, mergansers and coots.

This year's 2020--21 federal duck stamp is available for electronic purchase through the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, instant licensing telephone number, 800-406-6409, or at license vendors registered with the Department's licensing system.

Physical stamps are not available at North Dakota license vendors, but can still be purchased at many U.S. Postal Service offices.

The electronic stamp is a purchase item like any other hunting or fishing license. When the purchase is completed the electronic stamp is valid immediately. Federal Duck Stamp will be printed on the license certificate, along with an expiration date 45 days from the date of purchase. The actual physical stamp will be sent by postal mail.

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

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

Wildlife Photo Contest Deadline

With the October deadline for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Watchable Wildlife Photo contest nearing, photographers are reminded to follow the guidelines for submitting their entries.

Photographers who want to submit photos to the contest should go to 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 deadline for submitting photos is Oct. 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.



TY STOCKTON

Sandhill Crane Permits Required

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

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



ASHLEY SALWEY

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

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

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

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



MIKE ANDERSON

With most in-person North Dakota Game and Fish Department hunter education program courses canceled in spring due to the coronavirus pandemic, Game and Fish needed to find a way to get students certified for hunter education this year. To do so, Department staff and volunteers traveled around the state this summer to provide practical and written exams to those students issued temporary hunter education certification. Through this effort, hundreds of students received their hunter education certification. Jeff Long, Department education coordinator, is pictured here administering a portion of the practical exam to a student at Game and Fish headquarters in July.

Caution on Rural Roads

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

Fall is a busy time in the state as farmers and ranchers are harvesting crops, moving cattle, hauling bales and moving heavy machinery. Knowing this, hunters driving around on country roads should slow down when meeting another vehicle and pull well to the right when topping a hill.

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



Zebra Mussels Discovered in Lake LaMoure

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department confirmed the presence of invasive zebra mussels in Lake LaMoure after a local game warden reported the finding in July.

Ben Holen, Department aquatic nuisance species coordinator, said follow-up sampling confirmed well-established populations of zebra mussels of various ages, especially near the dam. It is unknown how the small, sharp-shelled mussels were introduced, and there is no known method to completely rid a lake once they become established.

The 430-acre lake, located in LaMoure County in southeastern North Dakota, is a popular boating and fishing destination.

Holen reminds water recreationists that everyone plays a role in stemming the spread of mussels to waters not infested.

"This situation shows how important it is for boaters, anglers, swimmers and skiers to be aware of aquatic nuisance species and to take precautions to prevent their spread," he said.

Prevention is the best way to avoid spreading ANS. They often travel by hitchhiking with unsuspecting lake-goers.

"Always clean, drain and dry boats and other equipment before using another lake," Holen said. "Also, don't transfer lake water or live fish to another body of water. This can help stop the spread of not only zebra mussels, but most aquatic nuisance species that may be present."

Since Lake LaMoure eventually flows into the James River above the city of Oakes, Game and Fish Department staff will also increase zebra mussel surveillance on the lower James.

Lake LaMoure, and the James River in Dickey County, are now considered Class I ANS Infested waters. They join Lake Ashtabula, lower portion of the Sheyenne River, and the Red River as zebra mussel infested waters. Emergency rules are in effect to prohibit the movement of water away from the lake, including water for transferring bait. Notices are posted at access sites.

Zebra mussels are just one of the nonnative aquatic species that threaten our waters and native wildlife. After using any body of water, water recreationists must follow North Dakota regulations:

- Remove aquatic vegetation before leaving the water access and do not import into North Dakota.



MIKE ANDERSON

- Drain all water before leaving the water access.
- Remove drain plugs and devices that hold back water and leave open and out during transport.
- Do not import bait. For Class I ANS Infested waters, bait cannot be transported in water. In all other areas, bait must be transported in a container that holds 5 gallons or less. Remember that it is illegal to dump unused bait on shore or into the lake.

In addition to North Dakota regulations, the Department strongly recommends that all equipment be cleaned, drained and dried every time it is used.

- Clean – remove plants, animals and excessive mud prior to leaving a water access.
- Drain – drain all water prior to leaving a water access.
- Dry – allow equipment to dry completely before using again or disinfect. This includes boat docks and boat lifts brought from other waters/states.

For more information about ANS in North Dakota, visit gf.nd.gov/ans.



BACKCAST



By Ron Wilson

I drew a pronghorn license in 2018 after a 14-year dry spell.

I shot a buck the second weekend of the season not far from where, years ago, my bird dog and I weaved through sagebrush, cactus and chunks of open grassland hoping to flush a sage grouse.

I never fired a shot the couple falls we hunted the big birds during the abbreviated seasons that started on a Monday and ended on a Wednesday.

Not shooting a sage grouse was a disappointment because, more than anything, I wanted to see for myself if the birds, as people said with some disregard, tasted strongly like their environment after being roasted over coals in camp, or cooked with a little more flourish in the kitchen at home.

Considering the sage grouse season has been closed in North Dakota for more than a decade, and with little evidence to suggest a hunting season is on the horizon, it's unlikely I'll ever find out.

The pronghorn buck I harvested wasn't big and the shot certainly doable, with my rifle solidly centered over wooden shooting sticks Grandpa made some years back. Nothing significant. Just an enjoyable hunt.

What carried some weight, at least for me, was that I shot the animal on public land, I christened a handmade, fixed-bladed knife my son gave me as a gift, the hike back to my pickup was only about a mile, and for the first time in years a pronghorn was headed for our freezer.

Like a lot of hunters, I would guess, eating what we shoot is a big part of why we get up early and put in the miles. I'm convinced that while I pulled the pronghorn out of the field on a game cart near dark that, between trying to remember if I put new batteries in my headlamp, I imagined frying the animal's backstraps in cast-iron with a half-stick of butter.

Maybe it's an age thing and I'm more appreciative today of whatever makes my game bag heavy or the cart difficult to jerk uphill.

Yeah. I'm certain of it.

Thirty years ago, it's hard to image what would

have been going through my head on the same hike out, but I'm guessing not buttered backstraps.

The wild game served fresh or stored in our freezers at home most years runs from doves to deer. And we can tell you without much thought, just like most North Dakota hunters, where this self-sourced protein came from exactly.

Yet, how much of it really makes up our diet throughout the year is simply a guess.

While I likely never know that answer, Bill Jensen, Game and Fish Department big game management biologist, came up with some interesting findings on food/meat production from hunting big game – from moose to mule deer – in North Dakota.

Jensen said that based on average body weights, assuming 35% of the animal's total body weight is meat, 2.8 million pounds of venison, according to harvest estimates, was taken last year. And 76% of that total was from white-tailed deer.

Better yet: "This is roughly enough meat to feed every North Dakotan (2019 population estimate of 762,062) an 8-ounce serving each day for a week," he said.

Those numbers, like the deer you hope to drag out of the field this fall, carry some weight.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



TY STOCKTON

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The North Dakota Game and Fish Department, along with Utah State University, Wyoming Game and Fish Department and U.S. Geological Survey, are trying to bolster North Dakota's sage grouse numbers after population declines in the mid-2000s. Sage grouse hens and chicks were translocated from Wyoming and periodically monitored under spotlight after being released in southwestern North Dakota.



ASHLEY SALWEY

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