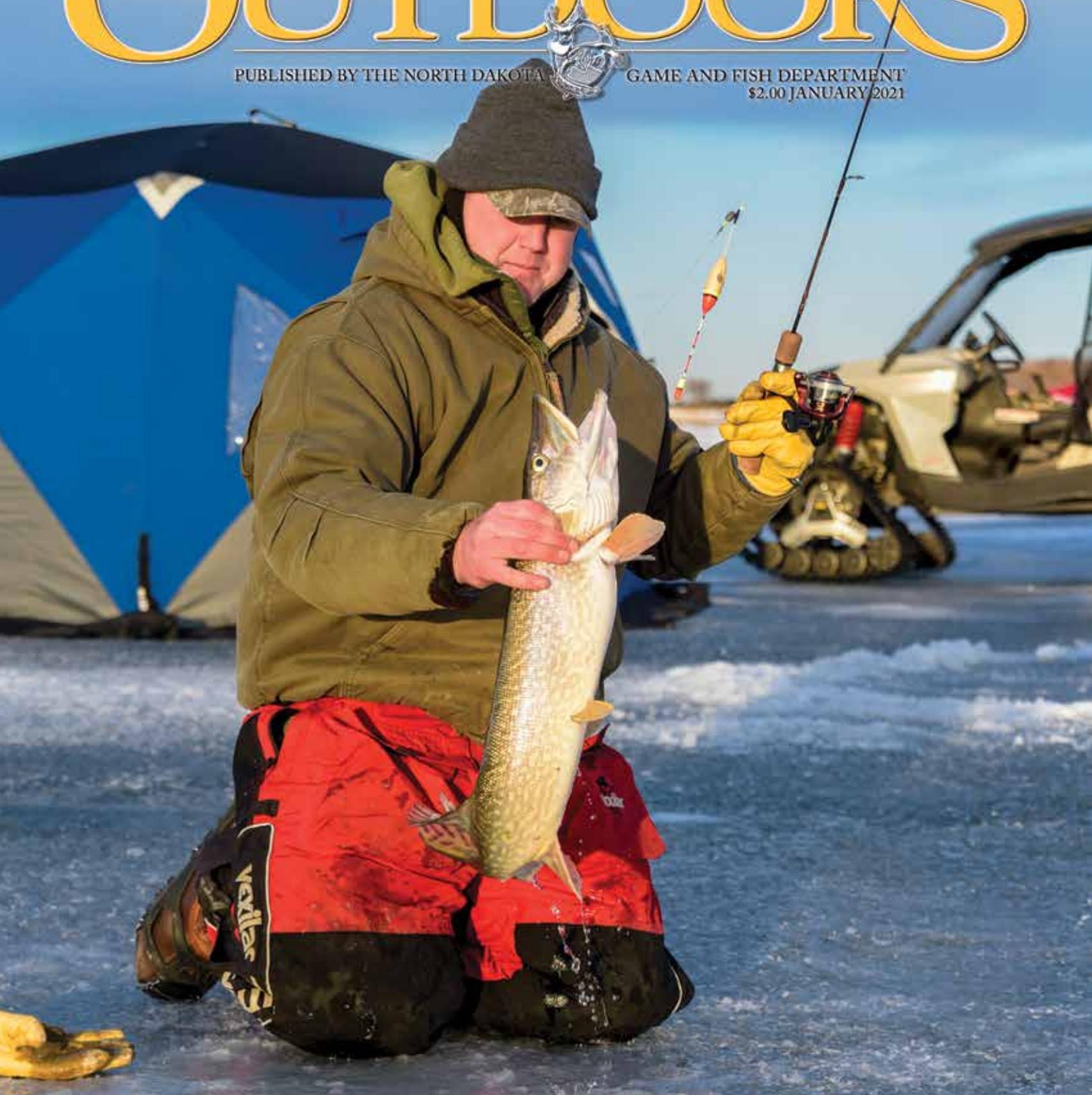


# NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT  
\$2.00 JANUARY 2021



NORTH  
**Dakota** | Game and Fish  
Be Legendary™



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# Matters of Opinion

By Terry Steinwand, Director



As we collectively bid 2020 good riddance, many of the challenges everyone faced in what will be remembered as an unimaginable year, will certainly continue to test us.

Like in all walks of life, North Dakota Game and Fish personnel were challenged over the last many months to fulfill the Department's mission, which is "to protect, conserve and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their habitats for sustained public consumptive and nonconsumptive use."

I can say, without hesitation, that Game and Fish staff met this mission in 2020, despite the long line of obstacles. Many adjustments were made to enable Department personnel to continue to work in the field and indoors safely. These changes were made without hesitation, which came as no surprise to me, considering the makeup of those dedicated individuals employed at Game and Fish.

Later in these pages of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*, deputy director Scott Peterson reviews 2020 and the many hurdles that were needed to overcome to do our jobs. I echo everything Scott revisited, while acknowledging that it was impossible in his effort to name everyone in the Department who adjusted their lives and work efforts to get the job done.

Certainly, it was a team effort, and will remain so as we move on to meet the demands of 2021.

Much of our attention early this year will be devoted to the gathering of the 67th legislative assembly. With lawmakers now in session, it's our responsibility and goal to help foster change to our natural resources that many feel so passionately about in North Dakota.

I said this in prior sessions, but I believe that while it's the Game and Fish Department's job to provide professional and scientific guidance to lawmakers dealing with natural resources, it is the hunters, anglers and other outdoor enthusiasts who have the attention of legislators.

Like in past legislative assemblies, Game and Fish Department staff will track hunting and fishing issues on the Department's website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).

A brief description of each bill will be noted, along with the hearing schedule. If you are passionate about North Dakota's great outdoors, as many of you are, stay abreast and get involved.

To view each bill in its entirety, click on the linked bill number. This legislation tracking feature will remain active until the session ends.

While we were blessed with some pretty decent weather in late fall, we all know that can change in a hurry here on the Northern Plains. Even so, dress accordingly and get outside this winter to enjoy North Dakota's great outdoors.

*Terry Steinwand*

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# NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

*The mission of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department is to protect, conserve and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their habitats for sustained public consumptive and nonconsumptive use.*

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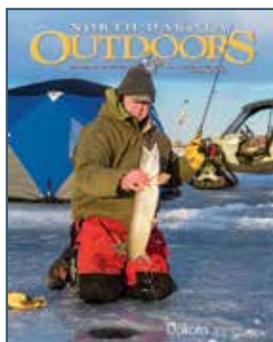
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### Front Cover

Justen Barstad of Bismarck with a northern pike through the ice on Lake Oahe's Cattail Bay.

*Photo by Ashley Peterson*



Game and Fish





## 2020 IN REVIEW



By Scott Peterson

To say that 2020 has been challenging would be a serious understatement. As we approached mid-March, the unimagined happened and the COVID-19 pandemic began to rear its ugly head in North Dakota.

In a lot of ways, though, we were able to function because the nature of what we do for our customer base at the Game and Fish Department keeps much of our staff outdoors and socially distanced at any given time. That's not to say that we didn't have challenges, but for the most part, Department personnel who work in the field daily, were able to continue to do so.

The list of challenges was, and continues to be, lengthy. One of the first decisions that needed to be made was whether to host the annual National Archery in the Schools Program state tournament. This program is incredibly

popular and important to many of the state's students. However, in light of the fact that most, if not all, the North Dakota High School Activities Association sanctioned events were being canceled at that same time, we simply did not feel it would be responsible to conduct the event at the beginning of what appeared to be a serious and persistent pandemic. That was the first of many such decisions that would need to be made throughout the year.

Right on the heels of that dilemma was the challenge of figuring out a way to conduct our fish spawning operations while maintaining social distancing guidelines. The annual spawning operations are vitally important to maintaining the quality fishing our anglers have come to expect and enjoy. As a testament to the work ethic and ingenuity of Department spawning crews, they

persisted and not only met egg collection goals, but surpassed them.

We also needed to figure out a way to certify several hundred new hunter education students while maintaining social distancing criteria. At the time of this writing, about 1,200 students completed the online, written and practical portions of the program that were adjusted to meet the demand during such uncertain times.

Other seasonal field work demands, such as tree and grass planting, noxious weed spraying, wildlife and fishery surveys, and others went on as planned, with some adjustments, as those important tasks needed to be accomplished. Also of note, we were the only state in the Central Flyway to conduct waterfowl surveys this past summer.

While adjustments had to be made in how we do our jobs, from private land

biologists replacing drive-around tours with farmers and ranchers to driveway discussions and phone conversations, the work continued. Department game wardens also continued routine patrols without a hiccup and our licensing staff served our customers without pause.

While I could go on and on about other staff and their duties accomplished, and about the many challenges met head-on during these unprecedented times, it's certain we lost some efficiency in the process, yet we were able to continue to function at a high level. We've always been proud of Game and Fish Department staff, but never more than this past year. They continued to do amazing work despite the many obstacles thrown their way. I'm not certain how much of this is sustainable, but we were able to find ways to keep delivering the high level of customer service that we pride ourselves on.

Because of the pandemic, more has been said and written about individual physical health this past year. However, the subject of mental health has also become even more important and more evident this past year. While we've all adjusted our daily lives to accommodate social distancing guidelines, we've also needed safe distractions from the ongoing pandemic from time to time. It is important to many of our state's citizens that they be able to spend quality time in the outdoors pursuing their passions of hunting, fishing, trapping, recreational shooting, or perhaps just going for a walk in the outdoors.

In retrospect, I think that the biggest casualty for our Department, and its staff, is the reduction in the amount of personal customer interface that we've been able to maintain. We have grown accustomed to interacting with our customers on a regular basis over the course of the year through district advisory board meetings, civic club presentations, or even walk-in traffic at our different office locations. We've obviously found ways around that too, but it is not ideal or preferable and we

all hope that we can get back closer to normal soon.

## Record Lakes Stocked

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

The number of lakes stocked in 2020 bested the previous high by nearly 30 waters.

With record water across the state's landscape, timing of a near record walleye production could not have come at a better time. Valley City and Garrison Dam national fish hatcheries contributed to make it happen. Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery set a record for the most pounds shipped of the 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. In just the first seven days of 2020's walleye production, haulers traveled more than 8,200 miles and stocked over 150 lakes with 7.6 million fish.

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 in 2020 was access to some lakes. As a result of record rains in fall 2019, a lot of local roads in central and eastern North Dakota were flooded and often closed, thus making navigating some roads more challenging.

## More Mussels

The Game and Fish Department confirmed the presence of invasive zebra mussels in Lake LaMoure, a popular boating and fishing destination in LaMoure County, after a local game warden reported the finding in July.

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 of the invasive species once they are established.

The discovery serves as a reminder that everyone plays a role in stemming the spread of mussels to uninfested lakes. Prevention remains the best way to avoid spreading aquatic nuisance species as they often travel by hitchhiking with unsuspecting lake-goers.

Since Lake LaMoure eventually flows into the James River above the city of Oakes, Game and Fish Department staff increased zebra mussel surveillance on the lower James. In addition, ANS watercraft inspections increased at Lake LaMoure.

Lake LaMoure, and the James River in Dickey County, are 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.

## Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease

Based on reports of white-tailed deer mortality in western North Dakota caused by epizootic hemorrhagic disease, the Game and Fish Department allowed hunters with whitetail licenses in 12 hunting units the option of turning those licenses in for refunds. Hunters who returned their licenses had their bonus points restored, if applicable, to the same number of points prior to the 2020 deer gun lottery.

The decision was based on evidence of moderate to significant white-tailed deer losses in some areas that could have affected hunting success in those locations.

The Department first received reports of isolated deer deaths in August and losses to the disease appeared to have extended into October, covering a large area of western North Dakota.

EHD, a naturally occurring virus that is spread by a biting midge, is almost always fatal to infected white-tailed deer, while mule deer do not usually

## 2020 Numbers

- 780 – Number of any-deer bow licenses made available to non-residents.
- 1,200 – The approximate number of students, at the time of publication, who completed the written and practical portions of the Department's hunter education program, which was adjusted to meet the demands of students during the pandemic.
- 2,364 – Number of mule deer counted during the Department's spring survey, indicating a 7% population increase from 2019.
- 10,000 – Estimated number of mussels collected below Kathryn Dam on the Sheyenne River. The collected mussels were relocated elsewhere in the river because it was feared that work being done to the dam would be detrimental to the population.
- 90,000 – Estimated number of Canada geese counted during the Department's annual midwinter waterfowl survey.
- 170,000 – Number of advanced walleye fingerlings stocked in state waters.
- 800,000 – Approximate number of PLOTS acres made available to hunters.
- 2.1 million – Number of chinook salmon eggs collected during the Department's salmon spawning operation in fall on the Missouri River System.

die from the disease. The virus that causes EHD is not known to cause disease in humans.

The whitetail population, big game biologists noted, was not decimated and in many areas a good harvest was still needed. More than 9,000 white-tailed deer license holders were eligible for license refunds.

The last time Game and Fish made license refunds an option for hunters because of an EHD outbreak was in 2011.

### Upland Birds and Waterfowl

North Dakota's roadside surveys indicated pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian partridge numbers were up compared to 2019.

The survey showed total pheasants observed per 100 miles were up 38% from last year, but 14% below the 10-year average. Broods per 100 miles were up 30% from last year and 16% below the 10-year average. Average brood size was up 10% from 2019 and 5% below the 10-year average.

Game and Fish Department biologists reported good residual cover to start the year, and good weather for nesting and brood-rearing. There were some areas that experienced abnormally dry periods throughout the summer, but nesting appeared to be successful.

While the numbers were encouraging, it was noted that bird numbers in the last five years have been lower than what upland game hunters have been used to for many years, due to changing habitat conditions and the drought of 2017.

The survey indicated that sharp-tails observed were up 54% statewide and partridge were up 45%.

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

Game and Fish Department biologists expected the fall duck flight from North Dakota to be up 9% from 2019, based on observations from its annual mid-July duck production survey.

The 2020 duck brood index was comparable to 2019's estimate and showed 4.5 broods per square mile, 52% above the long-term average (1965-2019). Average brood size was also similar at 6.8 ducklings per brood.

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

### Mule Deer Counted

The Game and Fish Department's fall mule deer survey indicated another year of good fawn production.

Biologists counted 2,116 mule deer in the October aerial survey. The ratio of 82 fawns per 100 does was similar to last year, while 36 bucks per 100 does was lower than in 2019.

Snowfall and poor ground conditions during most of the

survey limited biologists to 18 of the 24 study areas.

Overall, fawn production was good, which could lead to population growth depending on the severity of this winter.

### Electronic Posting Study

Hunters in Ramsey, Richland and Slope counties were encouraged to use the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's online map resources last fall to evaluate electronic posting, a pilot study that was authorized by the 2019 state legislature.

Private land that was posted electronically for the 2020-21 hunting season was viewable on a computer or smartphone or could be printed from the Department's website.

A benefit of electronic posting is the ability for hunters to determine a point of contact for the landowner, or authorized individual who posted the land. Point of contact was included on the Department's map service application.

Hunters who used the application will help evaluate electronic posting as an option for landowners to post land into the future. The electronic posting study will conclude with a brief survey. The information collected will help the North Dakota Legislature's Interim Natural Resources Committee determine the usability of the electronic posting application and provide direction for changes required to existing law.

A total of 79 landowners in the three counties participated in the pilot study by electronically posting their

land, totaling 268 parcels and 38,600 acres.

## CWD Surveillance Continued

Since 2009, 26 deer have tested positive for chronic wasting disease in the state. Those animals that tested positive were from hunting units in parts of southwestern and northwestern North Dakota.

Testing in North Dakota for the invariably fatal disease began in 1998 with roadkilled, sick and suspect animals. In the early 2000s, Game and Fish increased CWD surveillance efforts by annually collecting samples from hunter-harvested deer, elk and moose.

Typically, surveillance efforts from hunter-harvested deer focuses on a third of the state on a rotating basis, and those areas where wildlife managers are trying to manage for CWD. In 2020, given the COVID situation, Department wildlife managers prioritized efforts and focused resources and personnel in the southwestern and northwestern parts of the state where the disease continued to be of greater concern.

CWD test results for the 2020 deer gun season weren't available at the time of publication.

## Additional Bighorn License Allocated

The Game and Fish Department allocated six bighorn sheep licenses for the 2020 hunting season, one more than 2019.

Two licenses were issued in units B1 and B4, and one license in B3. In addition, one license, as authorized under North Dakota Century Code, was auctioned in March by the Midwest Chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation, from which all proceeds are used to enhance bighorn sheep management in North Dakota.

The number of once-in-a-lifetime licenses allotted to hunters was based on data collected from the Game and Fish Department's summer population survey, which showed a 22% increase in ram numbers from 2019 due primarily to high lamb survival last year.

The objective of the 2020 hunting season was to maximize hunter opportunity in the northern badlands where ram numbers remained strong, while continuing to reduce the number of rams in the southern badlands to lessen the risk of transmitting disease to the northern population. The concern, as in past years, is the ongoing effects of the bacterial pneumonia outbreak that was first detected in 2014 that resulted in a loss of 15-20% of the adult population.

## Moose, Elk, Pronghorn Licenses

While hunters were afforded more elk and pronghorn hunting opportunities in 2020, once-in-a-lifetime licenses for moose decreased slightly.

After several years of increasing and record-setting moose licenses, Game and Fish issued 474 licenses in 2020, down from 479 in 2019.

A total of 1,790 pronghorn licenses were available in 2020 in 15 units, three more hunting units than 2019. According to Department aerial surveys, the pronghorn population increased 6% from 2019.

North Dakota's 2020 elk season featured 523 licenses, an increase of 45 licenses from 2019 and the highest number of elk licenses issued since 2010.

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

2019-20 LICENSES AND PERMITS ISSUED		
	RESIDENT	NONRESIDENT
Individual Fishing	46,626	19,318
Married Couple Fishing	13,370	5,660
Senior Citizen Fishing	12,396	
Disabled Fishing	268	
Short-Term Fishing		
10-Day		7,283
3-Day		26,235
Paddlefish Tags	2,477	688
Commercial Tags	9	
Retail Bait Vendor	229	
Wholesale Bait Vendor	30	4
Fish Hatchery	4	
2019 Boat Registrations (Third year of 3-year decal)	7,348	
General Game Hunting	41,257	36,660
Small Game Hunting	13,726	18,128
Combination License	58,097	
Waterfowl Hunting		20,733
Furbearer Hunting/Trapping	8,463	2,753
Fur Buyer	28	10
Deer Gun Hunting	52,347	571
Deer Gun Hunting (Gratis)	11,981	292
Deer Bowhunting	24,902	2,687
Moose Hunting	406	
Moose Hunting (Preferential Landowner)	69	
Elk Hunting	405	
Elk Hunting (Preferential Landowner)	83	
Turkey Hunting (Spring)	6,085	
Turkey Hunting (Fall)	3,450	
Turkey Hunting (Gratis Spring)	413	
Turkey Hunting (Gratis Fall)	210	
Habitat Stamp	94,966	
Shooting Preserve	11	
Fishing/Hunting Guide	281	34
Taxidermist	279	4
Falconry	3	
Scientific Collector	30	30
Swan	1,624	1,076
Sandhill Crane	2,284	1,555

### 2020 SPECIAL BIG GAME LICENSES

	LICENSES AVAILABLE	APPLICATIONS RECEIVED
Moose	470	24,027
Elk	532	21,069
Bighorn Sheep	5	16,935

### FINANCIAL STATEMENT JULY 1, 2019 TO JUNE 30, 2020

Income	\$ 42,703,761
Expenses	\$ 34,646,137
<b>FUND BALANCES, FIXED ASSETS AND LONG-TERM DEBT</b>	
Game and Fish General Fund	\$ 33,434,612
Habitat and Depredation Fund	\$ 1,594,095
Nongame Wildlife Fund	\$ 163,669
Aquatic Nuisance Species Program	\$ 983,317
Total All Funds	\$ 36,175,693
Fixed Assets	\$ 53,967,644
Department Net Worth	\$ 90,143,337

2020

# Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest

By Patrick T. Isakson

Participation in the 2020 North Dakota Game and Fish Department Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest was a good reminder of the importance of our outdoors.

Even though things went seriously sideways in 2020, it's clear by the nearly 600 photographs entered in the contest that North Dakota's outdoors – from the badlands, to the wetlands, or simply in some back yards – played a role in providing some sense of what normal feels like.

Like last year, more photographs than typical are featured in this issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*. This adjustment is certainly a testament to the number of quality photos entered in the contest.

The contest was divided into three categories – game, nongame and plants and insects – and features a first-place photograph and eight runners-up.

The overall winning photograph in the 2020 contest is a Northern saw-whet owl taken by Daniel Mason of Fargo.

This small, yellow-eyed owl is almost entirely nocturnal, spending daylight hours roosting in dense cover. Biologists will tell you the Northern saw-whet likely got its name because one of its several calls sounds like a saw being sharpened on a whetting stone.

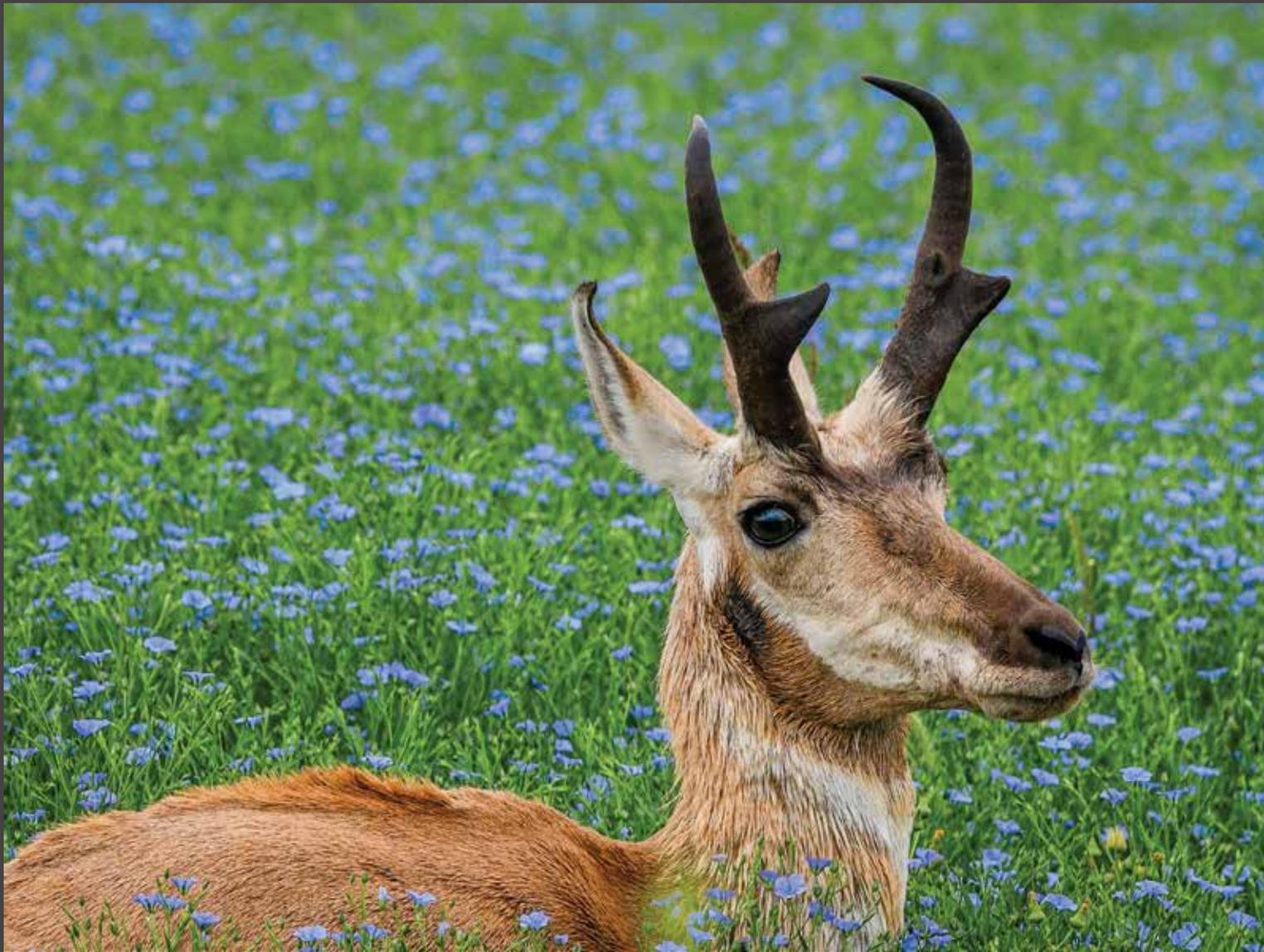
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**PATRICK T. ISAKSON** is a Game and Fish Department conservation biologist.





Overall Winner  
Northern saw-whet owl  
**DANIEL MASON, FARGO**  
Photo taken at Heritage Hills Park, Fargo



Game Winner  
Pronghorn  
**THOMAS KREBS, DICKINSON**  
Photo taken in Hettinger County



Game Runner-up  
Hen pheasant  
**ROSS WARNER, BISMARCK**  
Photo taken in Burleigh County

Game Runner-up  
Red fox  
**BRYAN LIND, EPPING**  
Photo taken near Epping

Game Runner-up  
Elk  
**NELS KILPELA, DICKINSON**  
Photo taken near Medora







Game Runner-up  
White-tailed deer (near water)  
**THOMAS KREBS, DICKINSON**  
Photo taken at the Cannonball River

Game Runner-up  
Sharp-tailed grouse  
**CINDY NAGLE, FARGO**  
Photo taken near Rhame

Game Runner-up  
Moose  
**LEE BURKHARTSMEIER, RURAL RUGBY**  
Photo taken in Benson County

Game Runner-up  
White-tailed deer (land)  
**LEE BURKHARTSMEIER, RURAL RUGBY**  
Photo taken in Pierce County

Game Runner-up  
Common snipe  
**KEVIN HICE, WASHBURN**  
Photo taken in Burleigh County





Nongame Winner

Virginia Rail

**KELLY KRABbenhOFT,  
WEST FARGO**

Photo taken in Burleigh County

Nongame Runner-up

Juvenile bald eagle

**JASON CLARK, GRAND FORKS**

Photo taken near Mekinock

Nongame Runner-up

American bittern with short-tailed  
shrew

**JO LYSNE, CARRINGTON**

Photo taken near Pipestem Creek

Nongame Runner-up

Western grebe

**MATT SORUM, FARGO**

Photo taken near Sanborn

Nongame Runner-up

American bison

**MICHAEL RANUM, BISMARCK**

Photo taken near Medora





Nongame Runner-up  
Ruby-throated hummingbird  
**THOMAS WIRTZ, BISMARCK**  
Photo taken in Morton County

Nongame Runner-up  
Blue jay  
**LEE BURKHARTSMEIER, RURAL RUGBY**  
Photo taken in Pierce County

Nongame Runner-up  
Common Loon  
**LISA BUCHWEITZ, LANGDON**  
Photo taken in Pembina County

Nongame Runner-up  
Porcupine  
**JEREMY WITTE, DICKINSON**  
Photo taken at Theodore Roosevelt National Park





Plants and Insects Winner  
White-banded crab spider  
**PHIL GUNDERSON, MAPLETON**  
Photo taken in Mapleton

Plants and Insects Runner-up  
Prairie smoke  
**ALEX DOHMAN, BISMARCK**  
Photo taken at Little Missouri National Grasslands

Plants and Insects Runner-up  
Horned spanworm larva  
**SHARON WATSON, BUXTON**  
Photo taken in rural Buxton

Plants and Insects Runner-up  
Dakota skipper  
**RUSTIN NORDSVEN, SPEARFISH, S.D.**  
Photo taken in McKenzie County

Plants and Insects Runner-up  
Shamrock orb weaver spider  
**SHARON WATSON, BUXTON**  
Photo taken in rural Buxton







Plants and Insects Runner-up  
Dragonfly

**PHIL GUNDERSON, MAPLETON**

Photo taken in Mapleton

Plants and Insects Runner-up  
Blue damselfly

**JEN GUNDERSON, MAPLETON**

Photo taken in Mapleton

Plants and Insects Runner-up  
Honeybee and sunflower

**NANCY SECREST, HETTINGER**

Photo taken near Hettinger

Plants and Insects Runner-up  
American hoverfly

**PHIL GUNDERSON, MAPLETON**

Photo taken in Mapleton







# BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



ASHLEY PETERSON

## Fall Mule Deer Survey

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's fall mule deer survey indicated another year of good fawn production.

Biologists counted 2,116 mule deer in the aerial survey in October 2020. The ratio of 82 fawns per 100 does was similar to last year, while 36 bucks per 100 does was lower than in 2019.

"Overall, fawn production was good which could lead to population growth depending on the severity of this winter," said Bruce Stillings, big game management supervisor, Dickinson.

Snowfall and poor ground conditions during most of the survey limited biologists to 18 of the 24 study areas, Stillings said.

The fall aerial survey, conducted specifically to study demographics, covers 24 study areas and 306.3 square miles in western North Dakota. Biologists also survey the same study areas in the spring of each year to determine deer abundance.

## Smartphone Apps for Ice Fishing

Advancements in technology, easily retrieved on the Game and Fish Department's website, allow ice anglers access to more than 200 lake contour maps, providing yet another tool in the angler's tackle box.

"Back when we first started mapping in the early 2000s, anglers pretty much had to print a paper lake contour map at home and take it with them to help navigate and find the underwater features," said Jerry Weigel, Department fisheries production and development section supervisor.

Times have changed.

Anglers now have access to two free smartphone mobile apps on the Game and Fish Department website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov), both of which provide interactive functionality and work with a phone's GPS.

One option, Weigel said, is ESRI ArcGIS Explorer, which requires cellular service to work in the field.

"When you're out on the lake and you have the app running, it literally has the lake contour lines and everything," he said. "It'd be the exact same thing you would do with your Lowrance GPS or young Hummingbird GPS when you're navigating open water in the summer."

Considering cellular service is iffy, at best, on about 30% of North Dakota's fishing waters, there are benefits to downloading maps to your mobile device before leaving home using the Avenza Geospatial PDF app.

"With this electronic fishing map information and you see there's a sunken island out there, you can literally drive right to it on the ice using either of the two technologies," Weigel said.

Weigel added that there is something anglers need to keep in mind when using this GPS technology on their favorites fishing waters.

"They imply they're absolute," he said. "In other words, when it says it's 15 feet deep, we say that there's 15-foot depth in that general area. But folks need to keep in mind that their GPS's are plus or minus 10 feet at the best."

What's more certain, if Mother Nature allows, are the opportunities afforded ice anglers this winter across North Dakota's landscape.

"There have never been stronger populations of fish than there is now," Weigel said. "It's amazing. And we literally have twice the number of fishing lakes as there once was."



RON WILSON

## NDGF and USDA Partner to Help Landowners with CRP Offers

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is accepting applications for its voluntary Conservation Reserve Program. Private landowners can sign up at their local USDA Farm Service Agency office through Feb. 12.

This popular USDA program provides options for environmentally sensitive land by reducing soil erosion and improving water quality, but it also provides significant benefits to wildlife populations through the habitat it creates. The habitat created by CRP makes it a great fit for the Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program.

"Game and Fish has partnered with the USDA Farm Service Agency to help producers learn more about CRP and options available to them," said North Dakota Game and Fish private land section supervisor Kevin Kading.

Landowners are encouraged to visit <https://gf.nd.gov/landowner/2021-crp-contact-request> to answer a few questions that will direct them to their local FSA county office for more detailed information and to apply for CRP. Landowners can also request to be contacted by a Game and Fish private land biologist to learn more about additional incentives and cost-share for allowing walk-in hunting access to their CRP through PLOTS.



TY STOCKTON

## Hunting and Fishing Legislation on Game and Fish Website

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department will once again track hunting and fishing issues during the 2021 legislative session.

Interested outdoor enthusiasts can follow proposed outdoors-related bills by visiting the Game and Fish website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).

A brief description of each bill will be included. To view each bill in its entirety, click on the linked bill number.



ASHLEY PETERSON

## Fish Caught Deep

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

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

Fish caught in deep water won't likely survive because of the extreme change in water pressure, which causes the swim bladder to expand. Fish can no longer control their balance in the water column when this happens. Other internal injuries, such as rupturing of organs and bleeding, are also likely for fish hauled from deep waters.

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

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

## Tentative Season Opening Dates

To help North Dakota hunters prepare for hunting seasons in 2021, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department annually provides its best estimate for opening dates for the coming year.

Dates become official when approved by governor's proclamation. Tentative opening dates for 2021 include:

- Spring turkey – April 10
- Dove – Sept. 1
- Deer and pronghorn bow, mountain lion – Sept. 3
- Sharptail, Hun, ruffed grouse, squirrel – Sept. 11
- Youth deer – Sept. 17
- Youth waterfowl – Sept. 18
- Early resident waterfowl – Sept. 25
- Pronghorn gun – Oct. 1
- Regular waterfowl, youth pheasant – Oct. 2
- Pheasant, fall turkey – Oct. 9
- Mink, muskrat, weasel trapping – Oct. 23
- Deer gun – Nov. 5



## Pronghorn Season Statistics

Hunter success during last fall's pronghorn hunting season was 76%, according to statistics provided by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

Game and Fish issued 1,782 licenses (1,108 lottery and 674 gratis), and 1,572 hunters took 1,199 pronghorns, consisting of 1,044 bucks, 137 does and 18 fawns. Each hunter spent an average of three days afield.

The 2021 pronghorn hunting season will be determined in July.



## Fish House Regulations

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

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

Other fish house regulations include:

- Fish houses do not require a license.
- Occupied structures do not require identification. However, any unoccupied fish house must have an equipment registration number issued by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, or the owner's name, and either address or telephone number, displayed on its outside in readily distinguishable characters at least three inches high.
- Fish houses may not be placed closer than 50 feet in any direction to another house without consent of the occupant of the other fish house.
- All unoccupied fish houses must be removed from all waters after midnight, March 15.

Anglers should refer to the 2020-22 North Dakota Fishing Guide for other winter fishing regulations.

## Ice Awareness

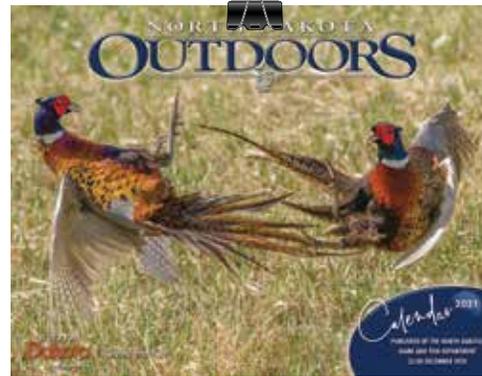
Considering the unusually warm weather in early December, ice anglers, hunters and trappers are reminded to be aware of ice conditions before traveling onto and across North Dakota waters.

A few reminders include:

- Edges firm up faster than farther out from shore.
- Snow insulates ice, which in turn inhibits solid ice formation, hiding cracks, weak and open water areas.
- Ice can form overnight, causing unstable conditions. Ice thickness is not consistent, as it can vary significantly within a few inches.
- Avoid cracks, pressure ridges, slushy or darker areas that signal thinner ice. The same goes for ice that forms around partially submerged trees, brush, embankments or other structures.
- Anglers should drill test holes as they make their way out on the lake, and an ice chisel should be used to check ice thickness while moving around.
- Daily temperature changes cause ice to expand and contract, affecting its strength.
- The following minimums are recommended for travel on clear-blue lake ice formed under ideal conditions. However, early in the winter it's a good idea to double these figures to be safe: 4 inches for a group walking single file; 6 inches for a snowmobile or all-terrain vehicle; 8-12 inches for an automobile; and 12-15 inches for a pickup/truck.

And some life-saving safety tips:

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



## Order 2021 OUTDOORS Calendars

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is taking orders for its *North Dakota OUTDOORS* calendar, the source for all hunting season and application dates for 2021. Along with outstanding color photographs of North Dakota wildlife and scenery, it also includes sunrise-sunset times and moon phases.

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



## Watchable Wildlife Checkoff on State Tax Form

North Dakota citizens with an interest in supporting wildlife conservation programs are reminded to look for the Watchable Wildlife checkoff on the state tax form.

The state income tax form gives wildlife enthusiasts an opportunity to support nongame wildlife like songbirds and birds of prey, while at the same time contributing to programs that help everyone enjoy all wildlife.

The checkoff – whether you are receiving a refund or having to pay in – is an easy way to voluntarily contribute to sustain this long standing program. In addition, direct donations to the program are accepted any time of year.

To learn more about Watchable Wildlife program activities, visit the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website at [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).

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## Coyote Catalog

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department and North Dakota Department of Agriculture are once again opening the Coyote Catalog, a state-wide effort designed to connect committed coyote hunters and trappers with landowners who are dealing with coyotes in their areas.

Landowners can sign up on the Department of Agriculture website, [nd.gov/ndda/](http://nd.gov/ndda/). Hunters and trappers

can sign up at the Game and Fish website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).

Anyone who registered for the Coyote Catalog in the past must register again to activate their names on the database.

Throughout winter, hunters or trappers may receive information on participating landowners, and they should contact landowners to make arrangements.

Landowners experiencing coyote depredation of livestock should first contact the U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services.

The Coyote Catalog will remain active through March 31, 2021.

For more information, contact Ryan Herigstad at Game and Fish, 701-595-4463 or [rherigstad@nd.gov](mailto:rherigstad@nd.gov); or Jamie Good, at the Department of Agriculture, 701-328-2659 or [jgood@nd.gov](mailto:jgood@nd.gov).

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## STAFF NOTES



*Mike Anderson (left), 2020 Game and Fish Director's Award recipient, along with Terry Steinwand, director.*

### Anderson Named Game and Fish Employee of the Year

Mike Anderson, video project supervisor for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department in Bismarck, received the agency's Director's Award for professional excellence at the Department's annual staff meeting in December.

Terry Steinwand, Game and Fish director, said COVID-19 did not stop him from missing a weekly assignment or deadline.

"From traveling to every corner of the state to take his next photo, film his next video, conduct his next interview or package his next story, Mike was able to deliver more than 100 programs this year alone, because of his commitment and passion for his job, this agency and his peers," Steinwand said. "He is the consummate professional. He spends countless hours knowing and understanding the subject at hand, and he wants this to come across to the viewers, and it does."



*Ashley Peterson*



*Bob Frohlich*

### Game and Fish Recognizes Employee Efforts

North Dakota Game and Fish Department Director Terry Steinwand recently honored employees with performance-based awards. Steinwand presented the following employees with special recognition awards during the Department's virtual staff meeting in December.

- Ashley Peterson, photographer/videographer, Bismarck, was recognized for her efforts in livestreaming the spring and fall advisory board meetings.
- Bob Frohlich, fisheries development supervisor, Bismarck, was recognized for fisheries development projects, specifically with state, federal and local permitting, and federal grant funding and construction plans.
- Brett Wiedmann, big game biologist, Dickinson, was recognized for his leadership in coordinating a bighorn sheep translocation from Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation in Montana to Fort Berthold Indian Reservation.

In addition to special recognition recipients, Drew Johnson, district game warden, Finley, was named North Dakota's Boating Officer of the Year. His district includes several smaller lakes and reservoirs, along with the Red River. Chief game warden Scott Winkelmann said warden Johnson's work ethic and attitude are exemplified in his passion for boating law enforcement.



*Brett Wiedmann*



*Drew Johnson*

# BACKCAST

We're sitting on our heels, knees firm against the grass-covered hilltop about 200 yards south of a gravel road, waiting, killing time.

The deer season opens at noon, in about 15 minutes according to my wrist-watch, just like it has for as long as I can remember and years before that.

My 24-year-old daughter, Lauren, is hunting deer for the first time and understands the legality behind not pulling the trigger until noon. Yet, she suggests that noon on a Friday in early November seems like an odd time to get things started.

All of this is new to her. From dressing in 400 square inches of fluorescent orange above the waist (plus an equally colored cap), to maybe, hopefully pulling the trigger on an animal significantly bigger than the ducks and geese she's shot in the past.

Time is dragging, but that's our only complaint. The temperature is a little north of 50 degrees, a gorgeous day compared to many deer openers past.

An SUV pulls next to my pickup, parks and no one gets out. I look through binoculars to see if it's someone I know, a rig that I recognize. I don't.

What are they doing, Lauren asks.

Probably waiting for us to get moving and maybe kick a deer their way, I say.

Well, that's rude, she adds.

Yep, this is all new to her.

Lauren's brothers are maybe a half-mile and several hills east of us. I expect they're doing much of the same, checking the time on their phones as neither wears a watch.

I know their plan when they do get moving without having discussed it with them. They've hunted these hills before and know what to do. They'll hit the scattered patches of buckbrush, some no bigger than our living room and others big enough to swallow our house, and bellycrawl to the crest of each hill to keep

from spooking deer that might be bedded beyond them.

Lauren spots the deer first. Her young eyes pick out six, maybe seven, mule deer moving right to left way out of shooting range. The wind is right, and we hurry to get in front of them, knowing if we pick the wrong finger draw as an ambush point, there's a good bet our one good look through binoculars at 500 yards may be our only look.

We'll never know.

My cellphone vibrates in my front pocket and before I even look at the screen, I know it's one of my boys and I have a good idea why they're calling.

They've got deer bedded. Look to the southeast, one of them says into the phone, and you'll see us sitting in the grass at the bottom of the hill and the deer are bedded north about 100 yards out ... watch the wind ... you might want to hurry.

We make our way there and Lauren says little, which is unlike her. She's nervous. I know, and understand, that she doesn't want an audience when she shoots, especially not her brothers who will ride her the remainder of the day if she misses.

Piece of cake, I tell her, it's a shot you can make.

I tell her when the deer stand, things could happen fast, so pick an animal and get ready. With her rifle anchored on wooden shooting sticks Grandpa made years ago, I hear her thumb the safety and take a breath.

As we hike back to the pickup, I tell her that things aren't always going to play out this way. For starters, I add, we seldom get this lucky with the weather. Second, this might be the last time your brothers offer to drag your deer out to the road for you.

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



By Ron Wilson



RON WILSON

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North Dakota Game and Fish Department  
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North Dakota's darkhouse  
spearfishing season  
opens whenever ice-up  
occurs. This winter, with  
a December seemingly  
milder than most, finding  
good, safe ice was likely a  
challenge at first. The good  
news is that the season  
extends through March 15.  
Legal fish are northern pike  
and nongame species.



ASHLEY PETERSON

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