

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT
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NORTH
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Be Legendary

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CELEBRATING PLOTS

By Cayla Bendel

I crawl out of my sleeping bag to turn off my phone alarm and give the bird dog at my feet a few good-morning pets. As I unzip the tent door, I instantly squint at the already bright sun. The quickly rising temperatures may say otherwise, but my heart and the calendar don't lie. It's North Dakota's sharp-tailed grouse opener, and while the short grass prairie I'm surrounded by begins to prepare for dormancy with the coming winter, the subtle signs of fall reawaken my spirit.

I've traveled here from my current home in Bismarck, but I don't actually call North Dakota my original home. Thus, I cannot stake claim to Grandpa's "back 40" on this opening morning, nor did I play basketball with a neighboring rancher's kid who invited me out for a friendly reunion, nor do I ever plan on making enough money to own a little piece of this beautiful prairie for myself. But in an equally wonderful way, I, just like you, have access to about 800,000 acres thanks to many passionate and gracious private landowners who are part of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program.

The PLOTS program offers rental payments to landowners in exchange for providing

walk-in access to hunters during any legal hunting seasons, a small price to pay for their continued management and stewardship of the land. In many cases, landowners even opt to enhance wildlife habitat on some or all of those acres. So, while my boots may only tread on these acres a few months out of the year, the habitat exists year-round, providing food, shelter, nesting cover, brood rearing cover, or all of the above. Certainly, a win for all involved.

"Up," I say to my bird dog to prompt him into the pickup. The sun is well into the sky, and we'll need to pack extra water, but those sharpies should be just about done with their breakfast and ready to head to slightly thicker loafing cover. With any luck, they'll pick the stand of grass adjacent to an alfalfa field just 6 miles north of here, easily delineated by the familiar yellow PLOTS sign mounted on a slightly crooked t-post.

As we roll to a stop, and park so as not to block the gate, the bird dog shakes with anticipation. If I'm being honest, so do I. We wait all year for these few glorious autumn months. This is year-three of spending opening morning here and it's hard not to feel some ownership of this piece of land. Understanding this, we treat these acres with the

respect they deserve.

The dog runs wild, months of pent-up energy and instinct unleashing. Eventually, the heat slows him some, and it doesn't take long for that first stiff-tail point. With some rust to shake off myself, I hesitate as the flushing birds startle me, but I eventually recover, pick out a grouse and drop one of the three.

By the time I've picked up my spent shotgun shell, my slightly over appreciated bird dog has retrieved an underappreciated native bird that has danced on this land for eons. I smile from the unique happiness I've come only to find in moments like this.

One of these days I will reach out to the landowners and share these experiences. After all, without them, none of this would be possible and I'm certain I'm not the only one with stories to tell.

So, please be respectful this fall. Be appreciative of the PLOTS program and its willing landowners, be safe and ethical while afield, and maybe even think about sharing this lifestyle, and what these 800,000 acres have to offer, with somebody new.

CAYLA BENDEL is the Game and Fish Department's R3 coordinator and author of *The Drift* blog on the Department's website at gf.nd.gov.

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NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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Front Cover

Fifteen pronghorn hunting units will be open to hunting this fall in North Dakota, the same as 2020. *Photo by Ashley Peterson, Bismarck.*

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Game and Fish



2021

HUNTING

SEASON OUTLOOK

By Jeb Williams

In my 2020 fall outlook, I discussed the challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic that Game and Fish Department staff overcame to ensure business as usual for the sporting public.

Spring, summer and fall of 2021 has presented our state with another sizeable hurdle in the form of extreme drought. While some areas of the state are certainly better than others, there are some parts that are hard to imagine being any worse.

Many areas have set records for being in the top five years of least amount of rainfall and ranking in the top five for hottest temperatures in 125 years of record keeping. The lack of snow and rain led to a spring and summer fire season that we typically don't experience.

Agriculture producers in most areas experienced a year that included little to no hay crop, limited grazing leading to downsizing of animal units, and a grain harvest where the harvest truck driver didn't have any problems keeping up with the combine. In the last 25 years, it certainly wasn't normal to be able to combine most of the day with only one load of grain to show for the effort.

Recognizing the extreme drought in much of the state, the Game and Fish Department has tried to be as flexible as possible assisting producers with haying and grazing opportunities on Department owned and managed wildlife management areas and on leased private land enrolled in the Private Land Open To Sportsmen program. The Department

also supported, along with Delta Waterfowl, Ducks Unlimited, North Dakota Natural Resources Trust and Pheasants Forever, the early haying of Conservation Reserve Program acres in mid-July instead of the standard August 2 date.

Even with this support in the form of a letter dated June 28 and addressed directly to Tom Vilsack, secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the request was denied at the federal level. Conversations and federal legislation are ongoing in hopes of correcting this change to allow producers the flexibility of earlier haying during years when the drought triggers have been met and livestock producers need help.

If the outdoor community values the wildlife benefits associated with CRP on the landscape, we also need to be flexible and reasonable with how these acres are managed to ensure the program is attractive to landowners.

When thinking about fall, and the quickly approaching hunting seasons, the current conditions are cause for many different emotions

for many different people. Many landowners are nervous about hunters and the possibility of fires, yet other segments of the population are excited about the opportunity to take advantage of some much-needed economic activity created by fall hunting seasons during a drought year.

Whether you are an owner of a gas station, restaurant, bar, hotel, or perhaps a landowner who provides a bed and breakfast experience, the economic stimulus is extremely valuable. And the emotion experienced by the hunter who has perhaps drawn a coveted once-in-a-lifetime license should be obvious.

A way to balance concerns related to fires and individuals recreating in the North Dakota outdoors is the daily fire danger index. Each morning, a statewide map is issued by the National Weather Service communicating to the public the level of fire danger in each county. Which is fair, considering some areas have more concerns than others. If the fire danger index is in the high, very high or extreme category, these are certain

restrictions triggered that all outdoor recreationists need to closely follow.

In addition, county governments have the authority to adopt penalties for violations and county restrictions related to local burn bans. These restrictions apply regardless of the daily fire danger index and remain in place until each county's commission rescinds the ban.

Rural fire departments across North Dakota have been overworked already this year. Hunters have a very good track record of not being the cause of fires, but it should be every hunter's goal to keep it that way. Being alert, closely monitoring local conditions and communicating with landowners will all go a long way this fall to ensuring a great hunting season.

The Department is asking everyone to please pay extra attention this fall to the daily fire danger index and other county restrictions at [NDResponse.gov](https://ndresponse.gov). Have a safe and enjoyable hunting season.

JEB WILLIAMS wrote this piece while serving as the Game and Fish Department's wildlife division chief. He has since been named the agency's director.

“Hunters have a very good track record of not being the cause of fires, but it should be every hunter's goal to keep it that way.”



UPLAND AND SMALL GAME



The spring crowing count was up anywhere from 5-18% throughout North Dakota's good pheasant range.

SANDRA JOHNSON

RING-NECKED PHEASANTS

Opens: Oct. 9

Closes: Jan. 2, 2022

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Pheasants in North Dakota were greeted with a very mild winter in 2020-21. We had little to no snow accumulation and above average temperatures, except for a brief subzero spell in February.

Results of the spring crowing count survey showed higher numbers of breeding roosters throughout most of the traditional pheasant range, except the southwest. The number of roosters heard calling was up anywhere from 5-18% 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 and increased over-winter survival of roosters due to the mild winter.

Unfortunately, cover for nesting hens was below average in spring due a dry fall and little to no residual cover. The drought of 2021 continued through summer with a large portion of the state being categorized as "extreme drought." Pheasant chick survival was greatly reduced due to the drought, mainly because of the lack of insects during the critical time after hatching. Chicks eat only insects the first two

weeks of their lives, and survivability is reduced when insects are scarce on the landscape.

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 2017, the last time the state experienced a drought.

Hunters will need to be mobile and willing to move to different locations to find optimal hunting opportunities. Hunters should be aware that many hunting areas will be devoid of cover due to little or no regrowth after being hayed, grazed or harvested. The southwestern and northwestern parts of the state are expected to provide the best fall hunting opportunities for pheasants.

RJ Gross, Upland Game Management Biologist, Bismarck

YOUTH PHEASANT

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

Opens: Oct. 2

Closes: Oct. 3

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 6

Shooting hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.



The Department increased fall turkey licenses slightly in 2021 compared to last year.

SANDRA JOHNSON

WILD TURKEYS

Opens: Oct. 9

Closes: Jan. 2, 2022

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 broods on the ground in most of the state due to drought.

The Department increased fall wild turkey licenses slightly 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.

RJ Gross

RUFFED GROUSE

Opens: Sept. 11

Closes: Jan. 2, 2022

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

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

aged stands of trees.

During the 2021 spring drumming counts, biologists heard 42% fewer ruffed grouse on survey routes compared to 2020, but the population had been on the rise for two consecutive years. The decline was largely due to declines in the Turtle Mountains and in the Pembina Hills. Fall populations are expected to be about the same as they were in 2020.

Jesse Kolar, Upland Game Management Supervisor, Dickinson

SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

Opens: Sept. 11

Closes: Jan. 2, 2022

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Good vegetative growth and sharp-tailed grouse populations generally go hand in hand. This was illustrated last year when improved moisture patterns resulted in good early vegetative growth over much of the sharptail range.

Grouse harvest last fall increased an astonishing 153% (possibly due

to increased effort and participation in outdoor activities during the pandemic), and our 2021 spring breeding populations were up a significant 12%, again giving cause for optimism for a good increase of birds in the primary range of the western third of the state.

Drought conditions have made us sharply downgrade the early predictions for increased sharptail numbers. Populations are not expected to be any better than in 2020, and probably significantly lower in the primary sharptail range.

Weather conditions adversely affect upland game nesting birds in a variety of complex ways. Any extreme of hot, cold or wet can cause problems. Severe drought, as we experienced this year, can often be the worst because usually a large area of the state is affected.

To start with, a lack of moisture limits vegetative growth needed for safe nesting and brooding cover. Reduced cover during these periods results in increased predation on nests of young and adults by both avian and mammalian predators. As the drought continues, food for livestock threatens



While their numbers aren't many, ruffed grouse provide a unique hunting opportunity.

JIM JOE

to become short and increased mowing destroys nests along with nesting birds and young broods. Early mowing of grain for feed eliminates potential brooding cover and again sets the stage for increased predation.

Less understood are the direct effects of extreme hot, dry weather on the hatchability of eggs and survival of young leaving the nest. Under extreme conditions this could possibly be devastating.

At the time of this writing in late August, mid-summer brood counts are just winding down, and preliminary observations indicate not all is well. It will be early September when our final summaries are completed, providing insight on how the species fared during the reproductive season.

At present, we are convinced that we will end up with considerably lower populations than we would have had with an average weather pattern. We know all species were adversely affected, but at this point it is just a matter of how much.

Jesse Kolar

HUNGARIAN PARTRIDGE

Opens: Sept. 11

Closes: Jan. 2, 2022

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 similar partridge numbers compared to last year. Biologists have observed similar 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



Hungarian partridge.

from the drier than average summer. Partridge have become an opportunistic bird 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 potential areas.

RJ Gross

TREE SQUIRRELS

Opens: Sept. 11

Closes: Feb. 28, 2022

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 state's squirrel season closes at the end of February.

ASHLEY PETERSON

BIG GAME



For the sixth year in a row, the number of deer licenses made available to hunters has increased.

SANDRA JOHNSON

WHITE-TAILED DEER

Archery Opens: Sept. 3

Archery Closes: Jan. 2, 2022

Regular Gun Season Opens: Nov. 5

Regular Gun Season Closes: Nov. 21

Muzzleloader Opens: Nov. 26

Muzzleloader Closes: Dec. 12

Game and Fish made available 72,200 licenses for the 2021 hunting season, an increase of 3,150 from 2020.

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 2021 to increase hunting opportunities while continuing to encourage population growth. The statewide gun hunter success rate in 2020 was 68%, which was 4% higher than 2019 and near the goal of 70%.

A CWD-positive white-tailed deer buck harvested in hunting unit 3A2 in 2020 altered deer management strategies in that and surrounding

units. The goal is to minimize the CWD prevalence rate and reduce spread of the disease outside infected units; therefore, a more aggressive harvest strategy remains in the northwestern part of the state. From the 2020 surveillance, CWD-positive deer were detected in 3A1 (two mule deer), 3A2 (one white-tailed deer), 3F2 (nine mule deer and five white-tailed deer) and 4B (one mule deer). Increased surveillance will continue in these units to better understand CWD prevalence.

High quality deer habitat is not as abundant as in the past, which has limited the potential for population recovery following severe winter conditions across the entire state during 2008-09 and 2010-11, northeastern part of the state during 2012-13 and 2013-14, and the southeastern portion of the state in 2018-19. 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 70% of CRP grass cover.

Biologists were not able to conduct winter aerial surveys during winter 2021.

Landowners interested in having more antlerless deer harvested are encouraged to call Game and Fish at 701-328-6300, and Department personnel will direct the number of doe hunters landowners are comfortable hosting.

A summary of deer licenses for 2021:

- Any-antlered licenses increased by 1,500.
- Any-antlerless licenses increased by 1,250.
- Antlered white-tailed deer licenses increased by 100.
- Antlerless white-tailed deer increased by 100.
- 1,336 muzzleloader licenses available in 2021 – 668 antlered white-tailed deer licenses and 668 antlerless white-tailed licenses. This is an increase of 60 licenses from 2020.
- 305 "I" licenses available for the youth deer hunting season, the same as 2020. "I" 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 valid for any deer statewide except antlered mule deer in the above restricted units.
- 780 nonresident any-deer archery licenses available in 2021, the same number available in 2020. The number of nonresident any-deer archery licenses will be 810 in 2022.
- For areas in south Bismarck and Mandan, a limited number of special deer bow season licenses will be available and hunters may receive up to three. The areas include private land south and east of Bismarck in Burleigh

One hundred more whitetail doe licenses were made available to hunters in 2021 compared to 2020.



County, land within the city of Bismarck designated by the Bismarck chief of police, private land in Morton County, the USDA-ARS Northern Great Plains Research lab in Mandan and the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation land south of Bismarck.

Bill Jensen, Big Game Management Biologist, Bismarck

MULE DEER

Archery Opens: Sept. 3

Archery Closes: Jan. 2, 2022

Regular Gun Season Opens: Nov. 5

Regular Gun Season Closes: Nov. 21

Mule deer in North Dakota's badlands remain at a healthy level based on the 2021 spring index, which indicated 8.7 deer per square mile, similar to 2020 and 21% above the long-term average.

The mule deer population increase can be attributed to prohibiting harvest of antlerless mule deer in the badlands during the 2012-16 hunting seasons, more moderate winter conditions and improved fawn production in 2013-20. Fawn production was highest in 2014

and 2016 with fawn-to-doe ratios of 95 and 90 fawns per 100 does, respectively.

A stable mule deer population will mean good hunting opportunities again this fall. There were 3,050 antlered licenses and 2,350 antlerless licenses available in 2021, which is 200 more antlerless licenses than 2020.

A mule deer buck license remains one of the most difficult licenses to draw, but for those lucky few, it should result in a very high-quality hunt. Hunter success for mule deer buck hunters was 81% in 2020.

While another year of a stable to increasing population is encouraging, there remain many challenges facing the future population growth of mule deer in the badlands. Encroachment of juniper in mule deer habitat, direct and indirect habitat loss due to oil development, predators and weather conditions including extreme drought are all hurdles the population will face.

Mule deer fawn production will be assessed in October and

will provide insight into the influence of extreme drought conditions.

Bruce Stillings, Big Game Management Supervisor, Dickinson

PRONGHORN

Archery Only Opens: Sept. 3

Archery Only Closes: Sept. 26

Gun/Archery Season Opens:

Oct. 1

Gun/Archery Season Closes:

Oct. 17

North Dakota hunters will have slightly fewer opportunities to hunt pronghorn this year due to a minor population decrease this summer.

Biologists conducted aerial surveys in early July and found that the number of pronghorn in the state decreased by 8% from last year.

Pronghorn have been slowly recovering since 2013 following the severe winters of 2008-10, which resulted in numbers declining by 75%. Epizootic hemorrhagic disease was widespread in the western part of the state dur-



Pronghorn buck.

ing late summer and early fall of 2020. The EHD virus is spread by biting flies and mainly affects white-tailed deer, however biologists documented cases of pronghorn dying from the disease across much of their range.

In addition, drought conditions in most of the primary pronghorn range resulted in poor habitat conditions and lower fawn production. The combination of these factors led to a slight population decrease.

In 2021, 1,715 licenses were made available, 75 fewer than 2020. Fifteen hunting units – 1A, 1D, 2A, 2B, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4C, 5A, 6A, 7A, 8A, 10A, 11A and 13A – will be opened to hunting this fall, the same as 2020. Hunting unit 13A is open for the second consecutive year after being closed since 1993.

Pronghorn remain at a level in hunting units 1A, 2A, 3B, 4A, 5A, 6A, 7A and 11A that allows doe/fawn licenses to be issued to address areas of high pronghorn density with poor range-land conditions, providing additional hunting opportunities.

Lottery licenses can be used during the archery season (Sept. 3-26) with archery equipment or during the rifle season (Oct. 1-17) using legal firearm or archery equipment for those who do not hunt or harvest during the archery season.

Last year's season was very successful with 1,572 hunters harvesting 1,199 pronghorn for a success rate of 76%.

Bruce Stillings

BIGHORN SHEEP

For season details, refer to the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2021 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 2020 bighorn sheep survey, completed by recounting lambs in early spring, revealed a record 322 bighorn sheep in western North

Dakota, up 11% from 2019 and 13% above the five-year average. The count surpassed the previous record of 313 bighorns in 2008.

Altogether, biologists counted 97 rams, 170 ewes and 55 lambs. Not included are approximately 40 bighorn sheep in the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park and bighorns recently introduced to the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation.

The increase in the 2020 count reflects lessening effects of bacterial pneumonia that was detected in 2014. The northern badlands population increased 13% from 2019 and was the highest count on record. The southern badlands population declined again to the lowest level since 1999.

Game and Fish biologists were encouraged to see the count of adult rams increase after declining the last four years, and adult ewes were at record numbers. Most encouraging was a record lamb count corresponding with a record recruitment rate.

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.

Department staff, in conjunction with biologists from the Three Affiliated Tribes Fish and Wildlife Division, also reported that the bighorn sheep that were translocated in January 2020 from Rocky Boy's Reservation in Montana to the Fort Berthold Reservation performed exceptionally well their first year in the state. Only one adult ewe died but 19 lambs were recruited. Consequently, the population increased from 30 to 48 in the first year.

There are currently more than 400 bighorn sheep among populations managed by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, the National Park Service and the Three Affiliated Tribes Fish and Wildlife Division. The last confirmed native bighorn sheep in North Dakota was killed in 1905, and Theodore Roosevelt reported that bighorns were scarce by the time he hunted them during the 1880s.

So, it's likely that there are more bighorns today than before North Dakota's statehood in 1889.

A bighorn sheep hunting season is scheduled for 2021.

Brett Wiedmann, Big Game Management Biologist, Dickinson



LARA ANDERSON

MOOSE

For season details, refer to the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2021 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

The number of once-in-a-lifetime licenses for moose will remain the same as 2020 after several years of increases for this popular big game species.

The majority of licenses are primarily from the northwest region of the state for moose management units M9, M10 and M11. The moose population continues to do well in northwestern North Dakota, but numbers remain lower in historical hunting units in the Turtle Mountains, Pembina Hills and along the Red River corridor.



The number of moose licenses in 2021 mirror those awarded to hunters last fall.

ASHLEY PETERSON



Bull elk in the badlands.

ASHLEY PETERSON

Moose unit M1C, located in the Pembina Hills region of the state 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 2021. 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 2021 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

North Dakota's 2021 elk season features 523 licenses, the same as 2020 and remains the largest number of elk licenses issued since 2010.

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

Elk hunting in North Dakota can be very challenging, both mentally and physically. Although high when compared to other western states, success rates for North Dakota elk hunters averaged just over 60% over the past five years. The season outlook for elk in 2021 is expected to be good with success similar to previous years.

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

Jason Smith

DUCKS AND GEESE



Breeding conditions for waterfowl across the state varied from very poor to fair, and the wetland index declined by 80%.

SANDRA JOHNSON

Drought severely impacted breeding duck habitats across North Dakota. While 2.9 million ducks were estimated during the Game and Fish Department's 74th annual breeding duck survey in May, behavioral cues suggested that breeding efforts by those ducks would be low.

Breeding conditions across the state varied from very poor to fair, and the wetland index declined by 80%. Conditions were not good statewide and, after a high count in 2020, the decline in wetlands counted represented the largest one-year percentage-based decline in the 74-year history of the survey.

Overall, this year's breeding duck index was the 48th highest on record, down 27% from last year, but still 19% above the long-term average.

With the exception of gadwall, all of North Dakota's primary breeding duck species had indices that declined from what was observed in 2020. Mallards were down 49% from their 2020 estimate and represented their 28th highest index on record, their lowest since

1993. Redheads and blue-winged teal had relatively mild declines of 8-9% each. However, other species declines ranged from 45% for scaup to 75% for ruddy ducks.

Some species dropped below their long-term average, most notably pintails, which had their lowest index since 1991 and are 68% below their 73-year average in the state. Other species had indices on par with the drought years of the early 1990s, ranging from 6% below average for mallards to 68% below the long-term average for pintails. Some species like blue-winged teal, redheads and gadwall are still quite a bit above their 73-year averages, ranging from 42% to 109% above the long-term average.

Not surprisingly, the number of broods observed during the Department's July brood survey dropped considerably, down 49% from last year's count and 23% below the 1965-2020 average. While the number of broods observed is the lowest since 1994, the count was still 62% above the long-term average.

The average brood size was 6.46 ducklings, down 4% from last year's estimate. Following the May survey, North Dakota's landscape continued to dry up as drought persisted across the Prairie Pothole Region of the state. Drought conditions not only affected wetlands, but also lead to sparse upland nesting habitat.

July wetland counts were down 58% from 2020, and 39% below the long-term average. Precipitation was not common in spring and summer, though rare, localized downpours occurred. Despite much-needed rain in some areas, it appeared that ducks had mostly moved on from breeding by the time rains became slightly more prevalent. Lack of moisture, coupled with above-average temperatures, resulted in declining wetland conditions all spring and summer. Generally, numbers and conditions of wetlands were very poor/fair, with little variation statewide.

The fall flight forecast of ducks from North Dakota is down 36% from last year and is the 28th highest fall flight for the state on record.

Numbers of temperate-breeding 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 fair this year, and large-type Canada geese in the state are very abundant as a result of banner production in the Dakotas the last two years. Estimates from arctic breeding areas are not available due to pandemic related travel restrictions, but indications are that arctic goose production will be average to below-average.

Hunters should expect waterfowl hunting to be difficult in North Dakota this year, with the lone bright spot being Canada goose hunting. Nonetheless, localized concentrations of ducks, geese and swans will materialize throughout the hunting season as birds

migrate through the state.

Hunters should take advantage of early-migrants like blue-winged teal during the first two weeks of the season. Hunters won't be able to depend on local duck production to the extent that they have in the past. North Dakota waterfowl hunting seasons are always affected by fall weather, and weather patterns from early to late seasons usually are not consistent from year to year. However, duck production from Prairie Canada is also expected to be below average this year. By and large, with an adult-heavy fall flight, waterfowl hunting will be more difficult than it has been in recent years.

The Department's fall wetland survey will give one last look at regional wetland conditions in September.

Mike Szymanski, Supervisor, Migratory Game Bird Management, Bismarck

YOUTH WATERFOWL SEASON

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

Opens: Sept. 18

Closes: Sept. 19



Canada goose hunting is expected to be one of the lone bright spots this fall for waterfowlers in North Dakota.

ASHLEY PETERSON

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. 18

Closes: Sept. 19

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

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

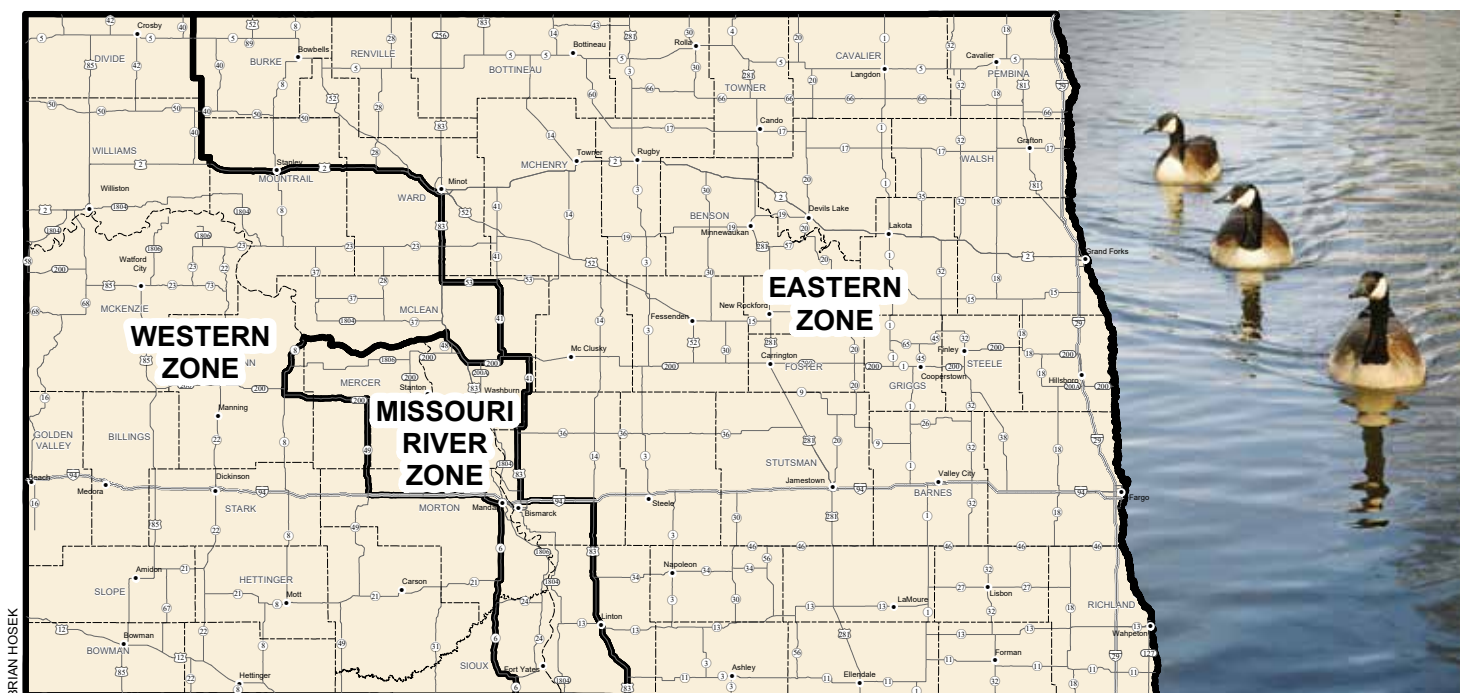
EARLY CANADA GOOSE HUNTING

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

CANADA GOOSE HUNTING ZONES



sunrise to sunset.

Daily Limit: 15

Possession Limit: 45

CANADA GEESE REGULAR SEASON

Opens: Sept. 25 (residents only), Oct. 2 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 31 (Missouri River Canada Goose Zone), Dec. 23 (Western Canada Goose Zone), Dec. 18 (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. 25 (residents only), Oct. 2 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 5

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 9

Light (Snow) Geese (Statewide)

Opens: Sept. 25 (residents only), Oct. 2 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 31

Daily Limit: 50, no possession limit

Shooting Hours for all Geese: Half-hour before sunrise to 2 p.m. Exception: Shooting hours are a half-hour before sunrise to sunset on all Saturdays and Wednesdays through the end of each season. Starting Nov. 28, all-day hunting is also allowed on Sundays through the end of each season.

REGULAR DUCK SEASON

Low Plains Unit

Opens: Sept. 25 (residents only), Oct. 2 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 5

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

High Plains Unit

Opens: Sept. 25 (residents only), Oct. 2 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 5

Opens: Dec. 11

Closes: Jan. 2

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. 25 through Oct. 10.

Possession Limit: Three times the daily limit.

SANDHILL CRANES

Opens: Zone 1 and 2: Sept. 18

Closes: Zone 1 and 2: Nov. 14

Daily Limit Zone 1: 3

Daily Limit Zone 2: 2

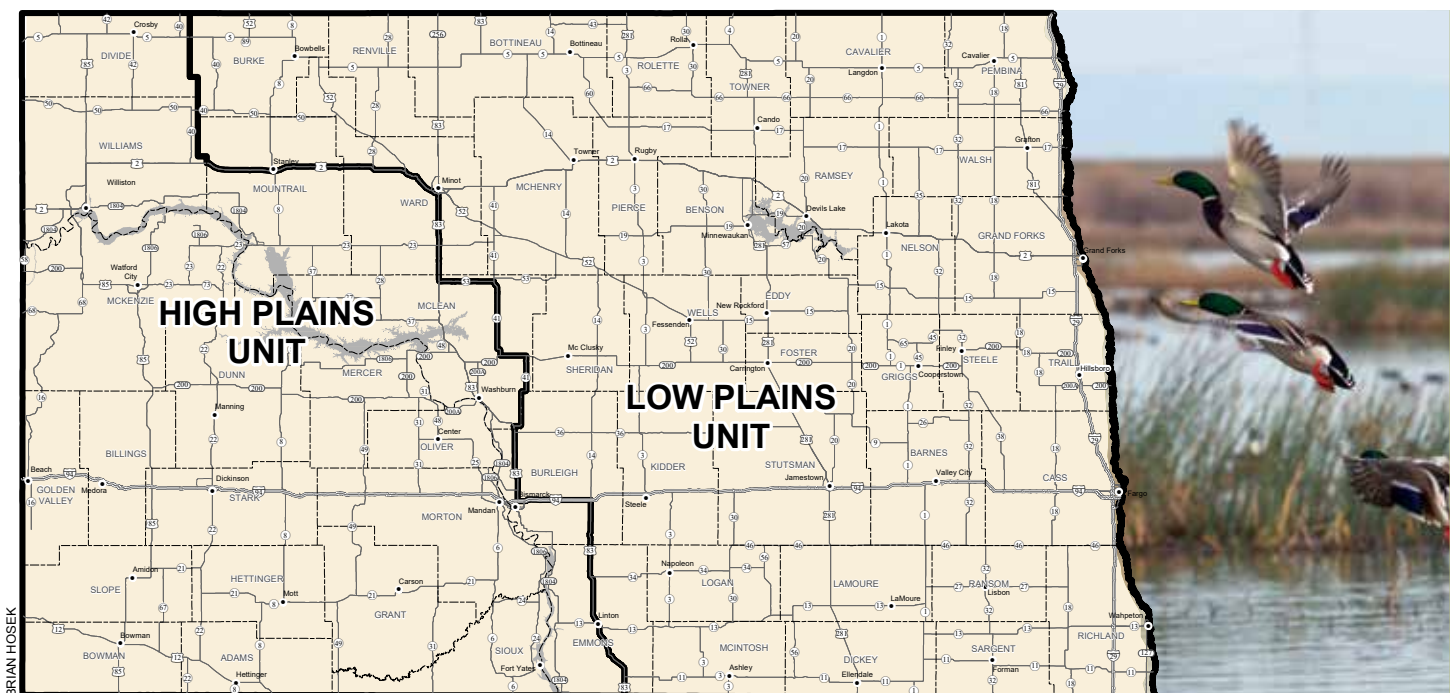
Possession Limit Zone 1: 9

Possession Limit Zone 2: 6

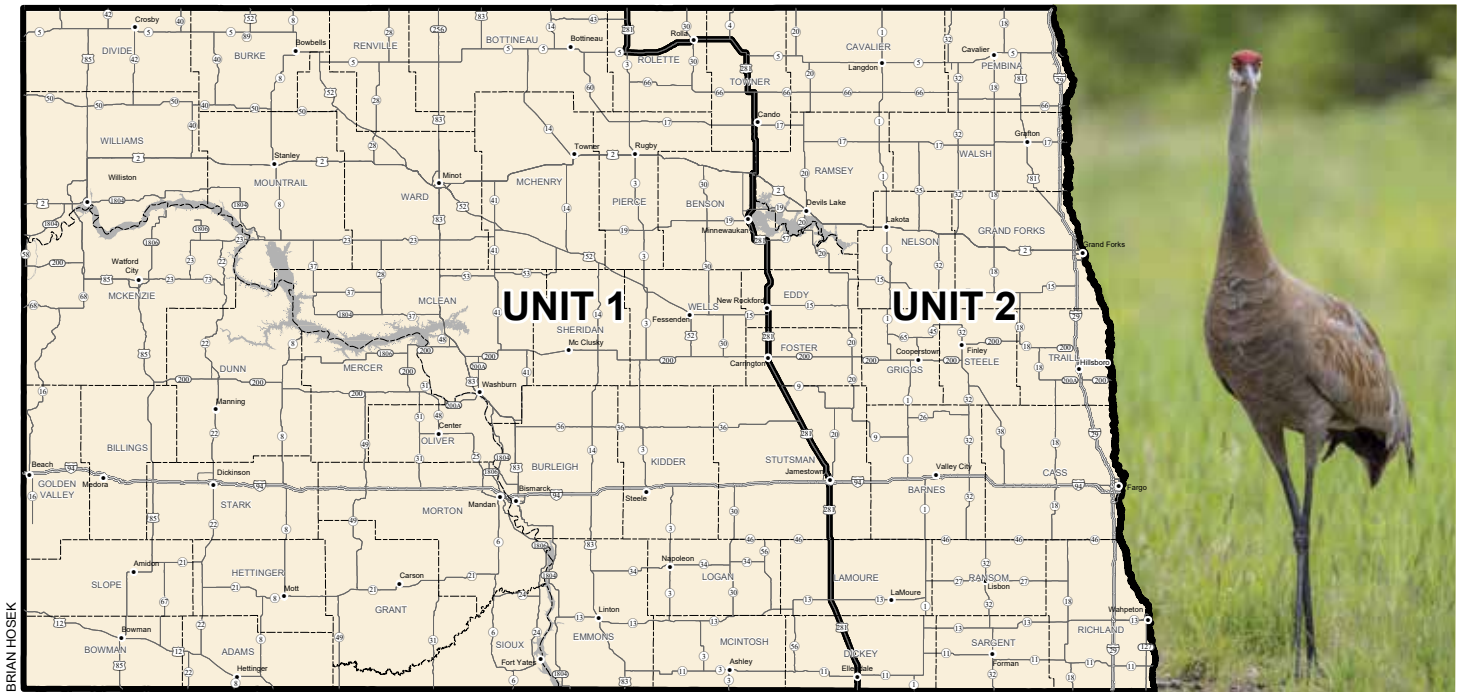
Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to 2 p.m. daily.

The Mid-continent Sandhill Crane Population is in good shape heading into fall. However, spring migration occurred early this year due to light snow cover and warm temperatures in the Northern Great Plains. As a result, the number of birds counted during the spring survey along the Platte River in Nebraska appears to be lower than anticipated, although these numbers are preliminary. Nonetheless, the three-year average population index used for guiding hunting regulations

DUCKS HIGH PLAINS/LOW PLAINS UNITS



SANDHILL CRANE UNITS



will still be well above the management objectives for this population.

Drier conditions this fall will lead to fewer wetlands for migrating cranes to choose from, but receding water levels on larger wetlands should provide abundant open shorelines and mudflats suitable for roosting cranes.

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

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

Hunters are also reminded to be

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

Andrew Dinges, Migratory Game Bird Biologist, Bismarck

DOVES

Opens: Sept. 1

Closes: Nov. 29

Daily Limit: 15

Possession Limit: 45

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

North Dakota has an abundant breeding population of mourning doves and based on casual observations, production in the state was fair to good this year. Relatively dry conditions and warm weather 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 were not yet 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 throughout the state 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 also near shelterbelts or other diverse stands of trees. Doves also need to be within a few miles of water sources.

Harvest of small grains and oilseed crops are projected to be near average, so hunters should have plenty of places to choose from in September.

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 reportband.gov.

Andrew Dinges

CROWS

Fall Season Opens: Aug. 21

Closes: Nov. 8

Spring Season Opens: March 12, 2022

Closes: April 24, 2022

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 depredation as specified in federal law.

SNIPE

Opens: Sept. 11

Closes: Dec. 5

Daily Limit: 8

Possession Limit: 24

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Woodcock

Opens: Sept. 25

Closes: Nov. 8

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 9

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

FURBEARERS



Hunting opportunities for bobcats have been expanded in North Dakota in 2021.

Expansion of bobcat populations into eastern North Dakota have provided opportunity to expand harvest for bobcat hunters and trappers for the first time since 1980.

Bobcat harvest this winter will open statewide, with the state split into two management zones. In Zone 1, west of U.S. Highway 83, regulations will be the same as past seasons. Whereas in Zone 2, east of U.S. Highway 83, harvest will be more limited because bobcats are less abundant and not as widely distributed.

Other changes to furbearer regulations this fall include an increase in the river otter harvest limit, the option to use *floating* colony traps for muskrats in late-spring, and the exemption of *enclosed* foothold traps from some trap set restrictions. As most trappers are aware, we have a variety of "trap set restrictions" at various times of the year to prevent nontarget capture of dogs, waterfowl and shorebirds. Innovations to modern traps, such as *floating* colony traps and *enclosed* footholds, have all but eliminated the risk to nontarget captures in these traps. Therefore, we have removed unneces-

sary regulations related to their use.

Now for the numbers.

North Dakota's most popular furbearer, the coyote, is likely going to be found in lower numbers this year compared to last season. Spring surveys indicated coyote numbers were down in all regions, except south and west of the Missouri River, although that region is trending below the long-term average for coyotes as well. Additionally, fox numbers remain low throughout the state.

On the other hand, spring surveys indicated muskrat numbers increased again this year in the Prairie Pothole Region. Although dry conditions throughout the state in summer may temper the number of muskrats trappers will find this winter.

Last year, hunters and trappers took 22 fishers, 56 bobcats, eight mountain lions in Zone 1 (two in the early-season, four in the late-season and two in the conditional season) and one mountain lion in Zone 2.

Trappers are reminded that written permission is required from landowners prior to placing or setting any traps or cable devices on private land,

including PLOTS lands. PLOTS lands are privately owned lands leased by Game and Fish for walk-in hunting only and all other activities, including trapping, which does require land-owner permission.

For those trappers who do secure permission to trap on PLOTS lands, keep in mind these lands are heavily used by upland game and waterfowl hunters and their dogs throughout their respective seasons.

Additionally, hunters should familiarize themselves with traps and cable devices, so they are knowledgeable about how to release a dog if caught. Directions on how to do this can be found on the Department's website at gf.nd.gov/hunting/trapping-and-dogs.

Stephanie Tucker, Game Management Section Leader, Bismarck

MOUNTAIN LION HUNTING

Zone 1 (early) Opens: Sept. 3

Closes: Nov. 21

Zone 1 (late) Opens: Nov. 22

Closes: March 31, 2022

Zone 2 Opens: Sept. 3

Closes: March 31, 2022

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. 22, 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.

RIVER OTTER TRAPPING OR CABLE DEVICES

Opens: Nov. 22

Closes: March 15, 2022

Limit of one per person. Total harvest limit of 25 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 2021-22 hunting and trapping guide.

FISHER TRAPPING OR CABLE DEVICES

Opens: Nov. 22

Closes: Nov. 28

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 2021-22 hunting and trapping guide.

BEAVER AND RACCOON TRAPPING, HUNTING OR UNDERWATER CABLE DEVICES

Open: Year-round.

For more information, see the North Dakota 2021-22 hunting and trapping guide.

BEAVER AND RACCOON CABLE DEVICES ON LAND

Opens: Nov. 22

Closes: March 15, 2022

From March 16, 2022, through May 10, 2022, cable devices must be within 50 feet of water; they must be no more than 4 inches off the ground and must have a stop restricting loop size to 12 inches or less in diameter.

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

WEASEL TRAPPING, HUNTING OR CABLE DEVICES

Trapping Opens: Oct. 23

Hunting and Cable Devices Opens: Nov. 2

Closes: March 15, 2022

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. 23

Hunting and Cable Devices Opens: Nov. 22

Closes: May 10, 2022

Muskrat huts may be opened for



Long-tailed weasel.

JESSE KOLAR

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

Zone 1: Nov. 6

Cable Devices Opens: Nov. 2

Closes: March 15, 2022

Beginning Nov. 22, bobcats may also be trapped using cable devices and hunted by pursuing with dogs.

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 taken in Zone 1 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.

Zone 2: Nov. 22

Closes: March 15, 2022

Limit is one bobcat per person in Zone 2 and total harvest limit is eight.

In Zone 2, anyone who harvests a bobcat must contact the local game warden or Department field office to report their harvest within 12 hours and make arrangements to have their bobcat tagged.

For more information, see the 2021-22 furbearer hunting and trapping guide.

RED FOX, GRAY FOX, COYOTE TRAPPING, HUNTING OR CABLE DEVICES

Day Hunting and Trapping Open:
Year-round

**Night Hunting and Cable Devices
Opens:** Nov. 22

Closes: March 15, 2022

Red fox, gray fox and coyote may be hunted at any hour from Nov. 22 through March 15, 2022. 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 Open:
Year-round

Cable Devices Opens: Nov. 22

Closes: March 15, 2022

SMALL GAME, WATERFOWL, FURBEARER REGULATION NOTES



North Dakota's 2021 small game, waterfowl and furbearer regulations are set, and most season structures are similar to last year.

Noteworthy items include:

- Opening day for ducks, geese, coots and mergansers for North Dakota residents is Sept. 25. Nonresidents may begin hunting waterfowl in North Dakota Oct. 2.
- The prairie chicken and sage grouse seasons remain closed due to low populations.
- Pre-charged pneumatic air guns are legal for taking beaver, raccoon, bobcat, red fox, gray fox, coyote and badger.
- The season on bobcat is split into two zones.
- Harvest limit for otters increased to 25.
- In accordance with state law, nonresidents are not allowed to hunt in Game and Fish Department wildlife management areas or Private Land Open To Sportsmen areas from Oct. 9-15. Exception: nonresidents hunting on PLOTS land they own.

Hunters and trappers can find the North Dakota 2021-22 Hunting and Trapping Guide, which includes upland game, migratory game bird and furbearer/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.

For a complete listing of opening and closing dates, and daily and possession limits, refer to the table on pages 4-5 of the guide.

Prep

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Take it from the Boy Scouts and “**be prepared**” should such a situation occur to you in the field an hour from home.

By Corey Erck

Hunting late season pheasants has long been a favorite of mine, and since becoming a game warden, I’ve learned to enjoy it even more.

The end of North Dakota’s deer gun season in late November signals the crescendo for hunting seasons that started with the early Canada goose season in mid-August. After the close of the deer gun season the stresses of the fall hunting seasons fall off dramatically, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t great hunting opportunities to be had.

In December 2020, I and three other North Dakota wardens were able to find time off together for a late season pheasant hunt. Andrew Dahlgren, Jerad Bluem, Erik Schmidt and I found a day that we could all meet at a location determined by Erik. The day turned out to be the kind you hope for in December, cool with light wind.

A close-up, macro photograph of a feather, likely from a pheasant, showing intricate patterns of brown, tan, and grey. The feather's structure, including the rachis and barbs, is clearly visible. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture and color variations.

wn



COREY ERCK

Nick Erck (top) with Axl, one of family's two black Labs. Skeeter (below) after a good day in the field.



COREY ERCK

The four of us executed our plan for the first couple of walks of the day and all was going well. We were finding some birds, each of us having a few chances at flushing roosters, and the dogs were all working well. After a short break, Erik assured us that the last walk of the day would be worth the effort.

I was looking forward to making one more push and even more excited for the end of the day to sit on the tailgate with friends and trade "warden stories" of the events that had taken place over the busy past few months.

We arrived at our final spot, unloaded the dogs and set out for the final walk. We walked some distance into the field and needed to cross a fence before getting into heavy cover that promised to hold birds.

Once on the other side of the fence someone commented on the blood in the snow. As we looked around, there was a lot of blood. During a quick inventory of the dogs, it was discovered that one of my black Labs, Skeeter, was bleeding from a cut on his right front leg. A small cut about a half-inch long on his lower leg. The amount of blood flowing from such a small cut was alarming. It was not spurting but was a steady hard flow and his paw was soaked.

Andrew and I took the big Lab to the ground so we could get a better look. I started applying pressure with my mitten as Andrew helped keep him calm and on his side. It was not long, and it was clear that the bleeding was not to be stopped that easily. Thankfully, Jerad is an emergency medical technician and had a first aid kit in his vehicle.

It was decided that Andrew and I would keep Skeeter down and continue to apply pressure on the cut while Erik and Jerad fetched the first aid kit. I was relieved to see them finally return with the kit in hand.

It was troubling that, even after applying pressure to the wound for some time, the blood would still flow so freely from the wound once the pressure was removed. Jerad's training kicked in and he went to work wrapping the wound and making a compression bandage.

Before loading Skeeter into his kennel, we taped my already blood-soaked mitten around the bandage to prevent him from chewing it off on the ride to the veterinarian. A few quick calls and we discovered that none of the rural vet clinics in the area had anyone available, so I headed back into Bismarck a little over an hour away.

I arranged for Skeeter to be seen by a veterinarian in Bismarck and the drive seemed like it took an eternity. After pulling into the clinic, I walked around to the back of my pickup, unsure of what I would find once I peered into his kennel. To my surprise he was alert and as happy as a Lab who had spent the day doing what he loves. The only blood

in the kennel appeared to be what had come off his blood-soaked paw.

Once in the exam room I was even more impressed with the job Jerad had done with his field bandaging job. The veterinarian worked to take the bandage off to get a look at the small cut. I was shocked, once it was removed the blood returned at the same pace as earlier.

The fallout was a cut vein. The cut was small but went perfectly across a vein in his lower leg. A few small stitches and we were on our way home.

I was thankful that after all the excitement of the day it finally came to an end in less than dramatic fashion. My biggest disappointment was missing the "warden stories" at the end of our hunt.

As usually happens in a crisis, it is not until it is over that you grasp the magnitude of what took place. As I look back on the situation it brings to mind the Boy Scout motto: "be prepared."

I was not!

I was troubled by all the "what ifs." What if Jerad didn't have a first aid kit. What if none of us knew how to stop the bleeding. The scariest of all, what if I was hunting alone.

After this incident in the field with my dog I wanted to take the opportunity to pass along the story to other hunters and dog owners to hopefully help them be more prepared than I was.

Without question, I will not take my dogs into the field without having a first aid kit. There are many commercial first aid kits for canines to pick from. If you would rather put together your own kit, a short visit with your veterinarian, a trip to your local drug store and you should be set. If you don't know basic first aid, take the time to learn by taking a course or finding reliable information online.

Take it from the Boy Scouts and "be prepared" should such a situation occur to you in the field an hour from home.

COREY ERCK, Bismarck, is a Game and Fish Department district game warden.

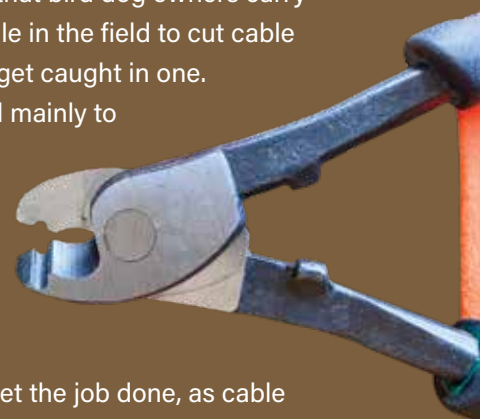


FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

I strongly recommend that bird dog owners carry a bypass cable cutter while in the field to cut cable devices should their dog get caught in one.

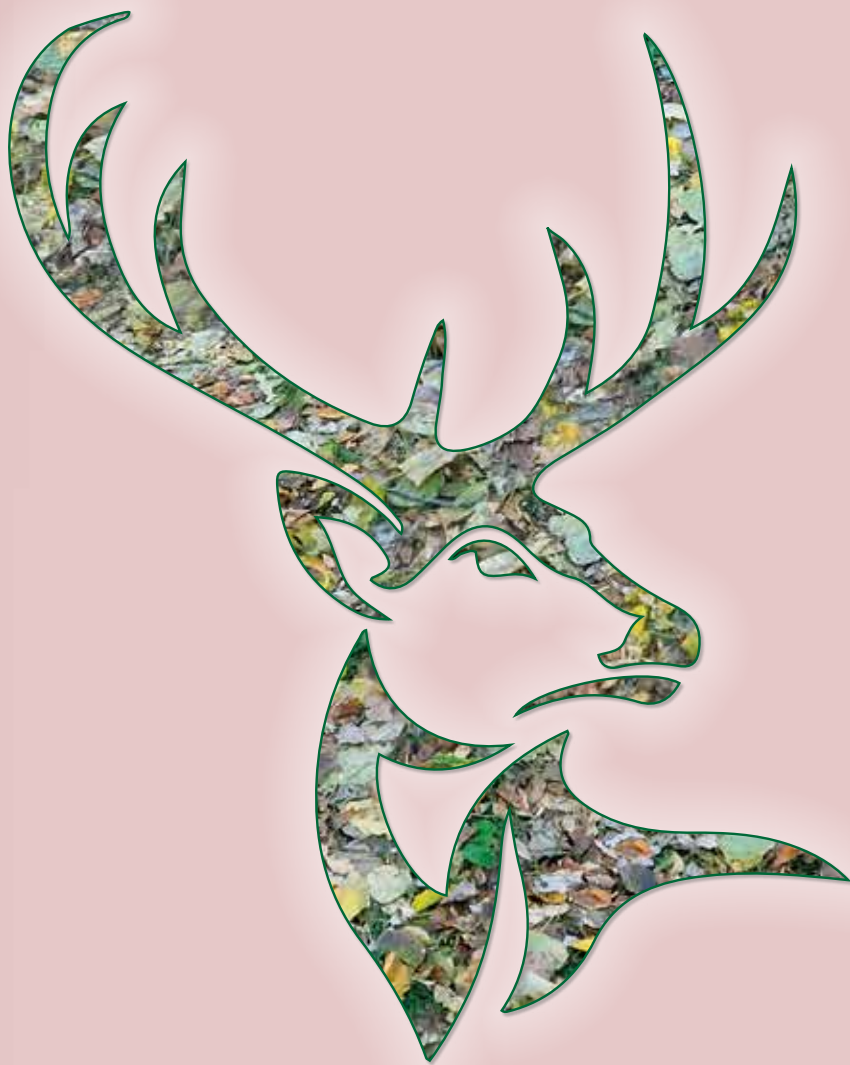
Cable devices are used mainly to take coyotes. It is often difficult to know where cable devices may be set on private or public land. Do not rely on a regular side-cutter or your trusty multi-tool to get the job done, as cable devices are generally made of aircraft grade steel cable. A bypass cable cutter is a little extra money, but it will be money well spent if you ever find yourself in a situation where you need one.

One of the most common emergency situations is dogs overheating in the field on warm days. It can come on fast in either the hard-charging young dog or the experienced older dog. Most bird dog owners know the importance of carrying water and keeping their dogs hydrated, but as part of the first aid kit I recommend including at least one instant ice pack. If you are out in the field and your dog is in distress from the heat, you can activate the ice pack and hold it in their arm pit to help cool them down.



COREY ERCK

MOMMY'S DEER



KAYLEE, THE AUTHOR'S
DAUGHTER, LEADS THE WAY
DOWN A WOODED TRAIL IN
EASTERN NORTH DAKOTA.





CHRIS FELEGE

By Susan Felege

We quickly packed the truck ... bows, tree stand, snacks, extra clothes. The day had gotten away from us as often happens with a toddler (Kaylee), and we were running late for an evening deer hunt. Should we still go? Yes, we must. My soul yearned for that connection to the land, and I reminded myself, "It looks different, Susan, but being out there is all that matters."

It was a beautiful fall October day, but just a week ago we were hit by a snowstorm that shut down most of North Dakota for a few days. I understood that soon enough, dealing with the fallout of winter will be a daily reality so we had to capitalize on every opportunity to be out as a family when the weather cooperated.

After the hour drive to our favorite deer spot, I got my bow and a few personal items out for the hunt, plus a pack with Kaylee's stuff. My hubby, Chris, grabbed a climber tree stand and tree trimmers ready to head down a trail that would lead to an area that had over a foot of snow just a week ago that revealed a superhighway travel corridor. An area Kaylee helped us hang a couple of trail cameras back in August.

Normally, I would scoop up Kaylee and she would enthusiastically get into her backpack carrier. But not today. Today, she was going to "do it herself." As she grabbed my hand, and then my husband's, time stopped just for a moment ... a moment I don't ever want to forget.

And then we were finally off. If I were to walk this trail alone, it would take about 15 minutes, but today we more than doubled it. We stopped to make snowballs to throw at each other, we splashed in puddles, and we talked about the piles of deer poop along the trail.

We got to the spot and Kaylee decided she would cling to me as she does regularly these days. Chris hung the stand as I wondered if Kaylee would walk back with my husband or insist she was going to "hunt with Mommy." After a few minutes of clinging, she reached for Daddy and away they went as I climbed the tree.

This was the first time in weeks I had a little time for me that had nothing to do with work. I was a little lost in the silence of the woods, but at the same time my soul was dancing as I recharged.

We were so late and so noisy coming in that I was realistic about the potential of getting a deer with my bow, but again reminded myself that success looks different these days. After all, my toddler just made her first trip walking into a stand as “a big girl,” mumbling something about “deer hunting.”

That was magical, I thought, as I sat several feet up a tree.

Only 15 minutes had passed when I heard movement ... a yearling buck walking my direction from the north. Although only 30 yards away, he kept cover between us. My heart thumped. I saw a deer after all that. Nice!

Another 45 minutes would pass and then crunch, crunch, crunch, but this time to the south. Two does moving quickly passed at about 50 yards. Cool, I thought. I not only got out, I also saw deer.

As the temperature dropped and I reached that magical time when the sun crept closer to the horizon, I thought what a great job I did packing warm clothes for my daughter but what a poor job I had done packing for me. Perhaps I should have put on another layer?

I looked at my watch with only about 30 minutes left. And then it happened. The footsteps, the big dark body up the ridge and the glisten of antlers got my attention as they moved in my direction. My heart thumped, but for the first time I felt a strange calmness in my excitement.

As the buck worked down the trail I wondered if this could really happen. I drew and he stopped at the one small opening I had along the trail, quartering just slightly away and perfectly in line with the opening. The arrow flew. It looked good ... maybe a little far back, but otherwise in the pocket. Away he ran.

I shook for a second as I took in the moment. Then I grabbed my phone.

Got one.

Beauty.

Come help.

Chris had been joking earlier that a 3.5-year-old, 4x4 buck was going to appear about sunset. Not because we saw one on the trail cameras, but because he “just had this feeling.” Here I was sending him a message about 5 minutes from his prediction saying that I got one. “Could she be joking,” he questioned. I sent another message, “Bring Kaylee mittens and bring flashlights.”

I climbed down and waited on the trail where I had shot. Chris and Kaylee soon joined me as we found blood and soon walked up on my biggest bow buck (interestingly, a 3.5-year-old 4x4).

“Deer!” Kaylee exclaimed. I picked up the head and quickly had two little hands trying to help hold the antlers as we sat there as a family, grateful for the experience, grateful for the meat, and grateful we could share it all together.

SUSAN FELEGE, when she's not sitting in a tree stand, is an associate professor of wildlife ecology and management at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks.



SUSAN FELEGE (TOP) AND DAUGHTER, KAYLEE, CHECK OUT SOME DEER POOP ON THE TRAIL. THE AUTHOR'S (BELOW) EXPECTATIONS WEREN'T HIGH WHEN SHE CLIMBED IN HER TREE STAND, YET THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENED.



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BUFFALOBERRY PATCH

2020 Upland Game Seasons Summarized

North Dakota's 2020 pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian partridge harvests were up from 2019, according to statistics compiled by the state Game and Fish Department.

Upland game biologist RJ Gross said the overall harvest was likely because of increased production of upland birds and favorable weather conditions for hunters.

"The increases are largely due to a larger pheasant breeding population and an increase in production of upland game bird chicks across most of the state that we observed during our 2020 spring crowing and late summer roadside counts," Gross said.

Looking back, Gross said the 2020 spring pheasant crowing counts showed a 15% increase in the breeding population, and roadside counts showed 10% more birds per mile and 17% more broods per mile compared to 2019.

"Combine that with favorable weather conditions late into the hunting season and more hunters on the landscape, you end up with more birds in the bag," he said.

Last year, 57,141 pheasant hunters (up 14%) harvested 330,668 roosters (up 28%), compared to 50,000 hunters and 256,800 roosters in 2019.

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

A total of 19,971 grouse hunters (up 43%) harvested 86,965 sharp-tailed grouse (up 153%), compared to 14,000 hunters and 34,300 sharptails in 2019.

Counties with the highest percentage of sharptails taken were Mountrail, Burleigh, Sheridan, Stutsman and Morton.

Last year 16,795 hunters (up 41%) harvested 52,251 Hungarian partridge (up 60%). In 2019, nearly 11,900 hunters harvested 32,600 Huns.

Counties with the highest percentage of Hungarian partridge taken were Mountrail, Morton, McLean, Williams and Divide.



A successful fall day in the field.

BRIAN SCHAFFER



BRIAN SCHAFFER

HIP Registration Required

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 for which they are licensed to hunt.

Hunters can HIP certify when purchasing a license by visiting the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov. In addition, hunters can call 888-634-4798.

Those who registered to hunt during the spring light goose conservation order 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.

Map Tools to Identify Land Posted Electronically

Hunters should take note of the map tools available to identify electronically posted private land before venturing out in the field this fall.

Brian Hosek, North Dakota Game and Fish Department business operations manager, said map resources, mobile applications and printable maps can be found on the Department's website.

"We do provide a few different tools on our website, and each have different strengths, such as some require cell service while others can work offline, others offer the ability to determine who posted the land or a point of contact," Hosek said. "And you can still pull down that print material for those who do not prefer to use these technologies."

ArcGIS Explorer and Avenza are nationally used applications that will show content the Game and Fish Department publishes, Hosek said. In these applications, users will need to search "NDGF" to find content published by the Department. The electronic posting information is included in the published Private Lands Open To Sportsmen map services. This information will appear, as well as public lands, including lands enrolled in PLOTS.

Hunters should note that electronically posted lands are identified in orange crosshatch when using these mapping tools.

OnX Hunt, another nationally used hunting application, has indicated they will include electronically posted land for the 2021 hunting season.

"OnX is an app that many hunters subscribe to and have purchased. It's another mapping tool that offers many great features, such as collecting, sharing waypoints and the ability to work offline," Hosek said. "Hunters have the option to redeem a free three-month subscription located in the Inbox of My Account on our website. This subscription can be redeemed at any time prior to the end of the year."

Hosek mentioned the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov, has a wealth of information on mapping tools.

"There is a subscription piece for News and Alerts that you can sign up for to check for map updates. Then you will receive alerts of any map updates when the content is published," he added. "This is important with the Avenza app, as it uses content downloaded to the device to work offline."



Report Banded Birds

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

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

The band number, date and location of each recovery are needed.

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

Baiting Restrictions in North Dakota

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, 3A4, 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.

Hunters Can Help With 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.

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



Fire Danger Index for Fall Outdoor Activity

As hunting seasons and other fall activities get underway, hunters and other outdoor enthusiasts need to be aware of the daily fire danger index.

Considering this year's prolonged drought, combined with typical dry, late-summer and early-fall ground conditions, an elevated fire danger index in most counties will likely influence outdoor activities.

Hunters are urged to keep up with the daily rural fire danger index, which is issued by the National Weather Service, to alert the public to conditions that may be conducive to the accidental starting or spread of fires.

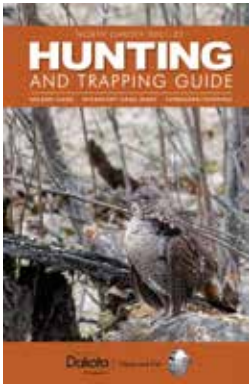
In addition, county governments have the authority to adopt penalties for violations of county restrictions related to burning bans. These restrictions apply regardless of the daily fire danger index and remain in place until each county's commission rescinds the ban.

Hunters should consider bringing along a shovel, fire extinguisher, extra water and heavy fabric for putting out accidental fires. However, individuals who are not trained firefighters should not attempt to fight a fire that is out of control. Instead, contact the nearest rural fire department immediately.

Also, hunters should stay clear of tall vegetation when parking a vehicle.

The fire danger index can change daily depending on temperature, wind and precipitation forecasts. If the index reaches the high, very high or extreme category, open burning is prohibited; off-road travel with a motorized vehicle is prohibited, except for people engaged in a trade, business or occupation where it is required; and smoking is restricted to inside of vehicles, hard surface areas, homes or in approved buildings.

Information on current fire danger indexes is available at NDResponse.gov.



New Hunting, Trapping Guide

Hunters and trappers can find the North Dakota 2021-22 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.

PLOTS Guide Available Online

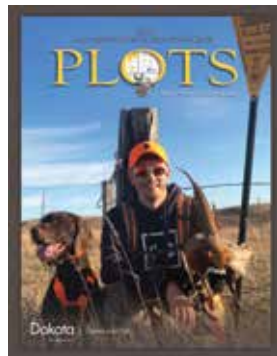
The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen Guide for 2021 is now available online at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov. In addition, the free printed PLOTS guides are available at most license vendors and other locations throughout the state.

The guide will feature nearly 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 Game and Fish offices, or print individual maps from the website.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Bill Haase (left) with Virgil and Carol Schlosser.

Schlosser Earns WMA Award

Virgil Schlosser, with Hettinger County Water Resource District, was named the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Wildlife Management Area Partnership Award recipient for 2021 for his work on Indian Creek WMA.

This is the first year of the award.

Indian Creek Dam WMA is a 1,200-acre property in Hettinger County managed for wildlife, hunting, fishing and camping. A portion of the area is leased to the Hettinger County Water Resource District and Schlosser is their caretaker for this area.

"Virgil does an exceptional job of maintaining this area," said Bill Haase, Game and Fish Department wildlife resource management supervisor. "He has a very high standard, so you can guarantee the recreational area is immaculate. Virgil's efforts, with a helping hand at times from his wife, Carol, are appreciated by the Department and the sportsmen and women."

Indian Creek WMA is managed from the Department's Bismarck district office which is more than 2 hours away.

"We continually rely on Virgil for help with garbage clean-up, tree plantings, noxious weed control and mowing," Haase said. "His local knowledge of the area is a real asset for our wildlife, fisheries and enforcement divisions. He always goes above and beyond what is expected of him and is willing to help whenever and however needed."

WMA Equipment Deadlines

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department allowed hunters to place tree stands, ground blinds and game cameras on state wildlife management areas beginning Aug 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.

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.



Renee Tomala with a sandhill crane.

SANDHILL CRANE PERMITS REQUIRED

North Dakota's sandhill crane season opens Sept. 18 and continues through Nov. 14.

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

Federal Duck Stamp Required

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

This year's 2021-22 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 \$2 fee is added to cover shipping and handling costs of the physical stamp.





GF.ND.GOV/THE-DRIFT

STAFF NOTES



Ernie Dawson

Dawson Retires after 45 Years

Longtime employee Ernie Dawson, Jamestown, retired in July after 45 years with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

Dawson was a Department wildlife technician in Jamestown at the time of his retirement.



Erica Sevigny

Sevigny New PLI Biologist in Williston

Erica Sevigny has been named the Game and Fish Department's private land biologist in Williston.

Prior to accepting the position, Sevigny worked with the Department in Riverdale and then at the agency's wildlife health lab in Bismarck.

Weston New Wildlife Health Biologist

Brent Weston of Kentucky is the Game and Fish Department's new wildlife health biologist in Bismarck.

Weston has both a communication degree from his home state and a wildlife degree from North Dakota State University. For the past couple of years, he has worked at the Dakota Zoo in Bismarck.



Brent Weston

Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest

Photographers interested in sending photos for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest are reminded to follow the guidelines for submitting their work.


Photographers 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 department staff.

The contest is now open and the deadline for submitting photos is Oct. 1. For more information or questions, contact Patrick Isakson, Department conservation biologist, at pisakson@nd.gov.

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

Contestants are limited to no more than five entries. Photos must have been taken in North Dakota.

By submitting an entry, photographers grant permission to Game and Fish to publish winning photographs in *North Dakota OUTDOORS*, and on the Department's website.



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BACKCAST



By Ron Wilson

I watched a doe and her twins for much of the summer as they moved from one piece of cover to the next, negotiating passing vehicles and other urban hazards they faced daily.

I could bank on seeing them most days before sunrise in a mixed stand of trees, hiding behind evergreen branches that touch the ground in places. The fawns, anxious about my approach, would break from cover while the doe would simply move her head to follow my passing.

For whatever reason, I haven't seen any sign of the trio in the last two weeks or so, which is not unusual. Maybe my timing has been off, or the animals simply moved on to new digs that are obvious to them but lost on me.

Yet, under the circumstances, I wonder.

Nature can be cruel at times and we're in the midst of one of those times as August noses up against September. For days now, reports to Game and Fish Department officials of dead or dying deer have been common, signaling an epizootic hemorrhagic disease outbreak that is seemingly at its worst in the Bismarck/Mandan area.

Department wildlife officials confirmed the first EHD case on Aug. 1. Reports of dead whitetails floating in water, or just barely hanging on, since then have been daily.

When I talked to Corey Erck, Bismarck area game warden for the Department, he said he'd received reports of dozens of dead deer.

"The word I've been using to describe what's going on is 'disturbing,'" Erck said. "You do this job because you enjoy nature, but what I've witnessed of late is disturbing."

Wildlife biologists have long understood that white-tailed deer in North Dakota die every summer from EHD because the biting midge responsible for transmitting the virus is forever present.

It's just that some years more whitetails are killed from the disease than others, and

2021 happens to be an outbreak year, at least close to home.

Scientists tell us that EHD is primarily a disease of ruminants, or cud-chewing animals with four stomach chambers, such as white-tailed deer, mule deer, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, moose, elk, bison, cattle and domestic sheep. While all these animals can be infected with the virus, it seldom kills anything but whitetails in North Dakota.

"The frightening thing is that we're just hearing about the deer being found by people, but you would have to believe there are more," Erck said.

As people on the landscape are seeing, whitetails with EHD often die in water or are found near water because the infected animals are running a fever and seek out the wet, cooling source.

It was troubling to look at the photos of dead deer and videos of animals in their last throes on Erck's cellphone, and the only solace was knowing that deer showing clinical signs die within three to four days.

While EHD isn't infectious to humans, finding a bunch of dead deer on the landscape can certainly shake many of us.

Ultimately, deer numbers rebound pretty quickly, biologists say, and generally the population level impacts are less dramatic than people assume when they are finding dead deer in August and September.

While nature is cruel at times, its resiliency is equally impressive.

It's said the first series of hard frosts typically kills the midge that carries and transfers the EHD virus, which will slow or arrest the spread of the disease. Cooler weather is certainly something we can count on in this neck of the Northern Plains, but it's only a wonder when it will get here.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

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For a pheasant chick to make it from egg to the fall hunting season on the Northern Plains is a tough road. One of those uncertainties is cold, wet weather. Because pheasant chicks are unable to control their body temperature for many days after hatching, untimely cold, wet weather can kill the chicks despite the hen's best efforts to keep them warm and dry. Unfortunately, but for other reasons, the hot, dry weather experienced over much of North Dakota's pheasant range this year, is just as deadly. The fallout of drought is the scarcity of nesting habitat, cover for rearing broods, lack of dew to help regulate a chick's body temperature and a decline in insect production.

SANDRA JOHNSON

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