

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA

GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT
\$2.00 NOVEMBER 2021

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Official publication of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department (ISSN 0029-2761)
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Website: gf.nd.gov • Email: ndgf@nd.gov
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• The TTY/TTD (Relay ND) number for the hearing or speech impaired is 800-366-6888

Periodical Postage Paid at
Bismarck, ND 58501
and additional entry offices.
Printed in the United States

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to:
North Dakota OUTDOORS
100 North Bismarck Expressway
Bismarck, ND 58501-5095

Report All Poachers (RAP) 701-328-9921
In cooperation with North Dakota Wildlife Federation and North Dakota State Radio.

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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NOVEMBER 2021 • NUMBER 4 • VOLUME LXXXIV

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SANDRA JOHNSON

North Dakota OUTDOORS is published 10 times a year, monthly except for the months of April and September. Subscription rates are \$10 for one year or \$20 for three years. Group rates of \$7 a year are available to organizations presenting 25 or more subscriptions. Remittance should be by check or money order payable to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. Indicate if subscription is new or renewal. The numbers on the upper right corner of the mailing label indicate the date of the last issue a subscriber will receive unless the subscription is renewed.

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Front Cover

*Mule deer buck in the badlands.
Photo by Michael Ranum, Bismarck.*



My 2 Cents

By Jeb Williams, Director

As I write this, that special Friday prior to November 11 is quickly approaching. North Dakota's deer gun season is one of the state's most popular activities that annually reunites friends and families across the state.

I wanted to address a deer season topic we've heard a lot about over the last couple of months and explain our thought process. Epizootic hemorrhagic disease typically rears its ugly head in extreme southwestern North Dakota once or twice every decade, but this year the EHD footprint was farther north and east than most years.

EHD is a virus that is transmitted to deer by biting midges and while it can impact other big game animals, white-tailed deer are the most impacted. Warm, summer-like conditions extended into September and October, allowing for continued midge activity. Many places didn't experience a hard frost or two until late October, which is needed to kill the at-fault insects and halting the virus cycle.

Some of the areas that experienced EHD this year are not typically in EHD's common path, which can cause intense localized mortality of white-tailed deer. This virus not only hit a new population of deer in 2021, but also a population of hunters who have never experienced an EHD die-off in their unit.

Some of these areas did indeed experience this loss and we heard from many of you as to your concerns about the deer population. Over the years after experiencing many EHD events,

the Department responded with what has been our consistent strategy associated with EHD die-offs: in units where the intensity of outbreak may impact hunter opportunities in some areas, we offered refunds to those who have a license to harvest a white-tailed deer within a specified unit. We think that is only fair.

One of the things that EHD has taught us over the years is that these die-offs are not consistent across hunting units. Some areas can and do experience a high mortality, while other animals within the unit are unaffected. Closing the season, as some have suggested, would restrict the option for both hunters and landowners in parts of these units where deer numbers have not been impacted by EHD, and a harvest is still needed.

As we do each year, we will evaluate the deer hunting season and utilize any winter survey data we are able to collect to determine how numbers should be adjusted for 2022. This will be one of several discussion topics at the upcoming advisory board meetings. The meeting format always includes time to discuss local issues and for the Department to take input on matters important to those in attendance. It also includes information Department personnel feel is important to communicate to the public, including the upcoming fishing proclamation, low water levels and lake access, a statewide grassland initiative, and input from hunters and landowners on electronic posting of private land.

I look forward to those conversations.

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THE TIMING

of it All

By Ron Wilson

A photograph of a mule deer buck in a field of dry, brown grass. The buck is facing the camera, looking upwards with its mouth open, performing a lip curl. Its antlers are visible, and its fur is a mix of brown and grey. The background shows some bare trees and a clear sky.

A mule deer buck performs the lip curl to check the reproductive readiness of a nearby doe.



During the daylight-shortened days of fall, both whitetail and mule deer bucks become different animals.

Physically, bucks look different than they did weeks before. Their musculature is bigger, necks are swollen, and their summer-soft antlers have hardened for fighting off other bucks.

Socially, they're no longer hanging with other males, discarding the bachelor group lifestyle as testosterone levels climb. Bucks become single-minded loners, concentrating exclusively – and not necessarily in this order – on staying alive and breeding does.

"If a buck doesn't participate in the rut and produce young, they might as well have not existed," said Bill Jensen, North Dakota Game and Fish Department big game management biologist.

While the rut isn't as vital to hunters by comparison, it ranks pretty high because this period in a deer's life arguably represents the best time to harvest a buck as deer become more active during shooting hours.

"Deer tend to be more active at dawn and dusk, just as a general rule," Jensen said. "But during the rut, bucks are moving around constantly, no matter the time of day, to find does."

Biologists say the rut typically occurs in this neck of the Northern Plains for whitetails from late October to December. Understanding this, North Dakota's deer gun season is, in part, held starting in early November to increase hunter success as deer are more active at that time. Plus, odds of a winter storm not hampering hunters are better at this time of year.

"That's part of it, because people do have higher success during the rut, but we also structure it around tradition," Jensen said. "We schedule it for the first Friday before Veteran's Day. That way it does not always overlap the Thanksgiving holiday."

For more than 30 years, the state's deer gun season has opened on the Friday before Nov. 11, which means the range of opening dates is Nov. 4-10. The season has consistently spanned 16.5 days during that same three-plus decades and when it does happen to be open over Thanksgiving, it's simply a coincidence of the calendar.



"Deer tend to be more active at dawn and dusk, just as a general rule," Jensen said. "But during the rut, bucks are moving around constantly, no matter the time of day, to find does."



*A mule deer buck hot
on the trail of a doe.*

One of the things hunters don't consider as they are sitting in blinds, tree stands or leaning against rock piles waiting for a good one to wander by is the timing of it all. Why the breeding season happens when it does.

"There are two things that people don't often think about," Jensen said. "One is when green-up is in the spring when fawns hit the ground. The second factor is the length of the gestation period for the development of the fawn."

Meaning: fawns are born during spring green-up when habitat conditions are best for survival. At that time, there is good cover for fawns to hide from predators and an abundance of nutritious vegetation for does experiencing the demands of milk production.

This timing is important, considering whitetail behavior, like other animals, is driven by long-term survival. With the possibility of a harsh winter ahead, fawns must attain a certain body weight to survive North Dakota's leanest months.

While what triggers the rut in fall is often debated, the primary driver, Jensen said, is photoperiod.

"Over eons, deer have evolved to increase their testosterone production base upon photoperiod, the shortening of the days," he said. "Essentially, that triggering of shorter days causes chemical changes in the brain which in turn causes the production of testosterone."

The secondary driver appears to be the condition of the doe herd, Jensen said.

"If does are in real good condition, they tend to go into estrous earlier," he said. "If they're not in good condition, if they're very young or very old, those animals go into estrous later and then that shifts the timing of the rut."

Jensen said the peak of the rut for white-tails is generally between Nov. 15-20.

"For white-tailed deer, the breeding season is highly synchronous," he said. "Generally, the peak when fawns are born is June 6. Seventy percent of fawns are born within plus or minus two weeks, and over 90% are born within four weeks of that date. So back dating to this time of year, that puts it at about the 15th to the 20th of November."

For mule deer, it tends to be a

little later and slowly tapers off, finally finishing up with a few animals actively breeding in late December.

There are a number of basic rut behaviors bucks exhibit this time of year, from posturing to show dominance to fighting with other bucks.

Another behavior also familiar to hunters who have spent enough time on the ground during the deer season is the lip curl, seen when a buck tilts its head back as if watching something pass overhead, while curling its upper lip and exposing teeth.

While the lip curl is easy to remember and rolls off the hunter's tongue, biologists call this "flehmen" behavior.

When a doe approaches estrus, Jensen said, she provides clues to suitors as to her readiness. Some of the clues are behavioral and some are chemical – the later found in urine she deposits during frequent stops.

And this is where the lip curl comes in.

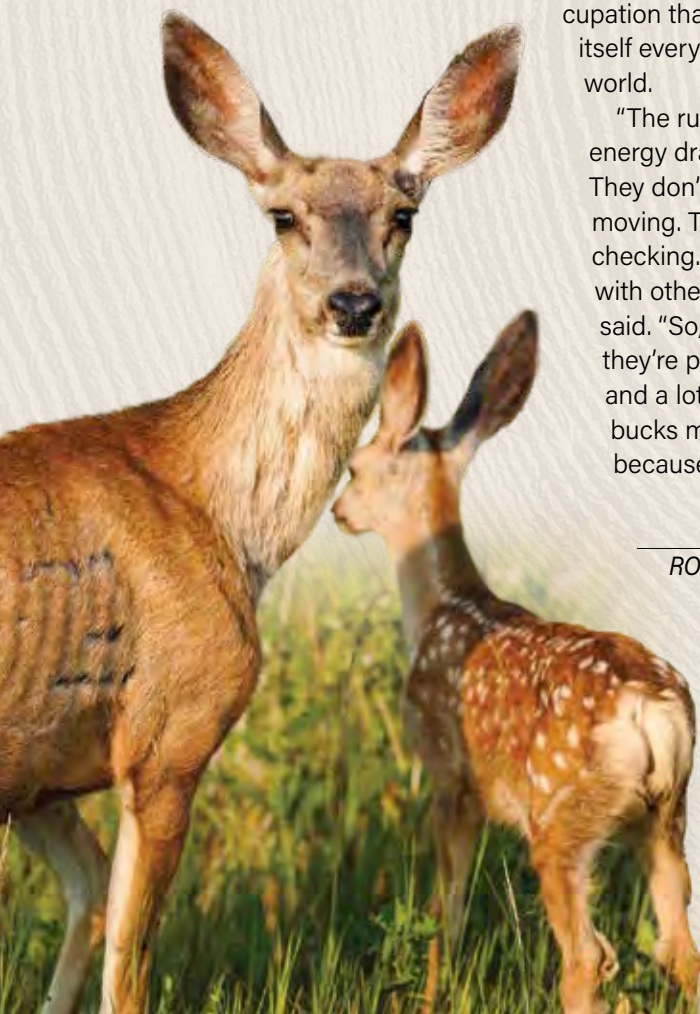
The purpose of the lip curl is to expose the scent from the urine to an olfactory organ called the vomeronasal, located on the roof of the mouth near the nasal passage. This organ aids the buck in his evaluation of the doe's reproductive stage and willingness to mate.

If the message he receives is clear, the buck either follows the trail of a doe, or continues his search.

It's a time-consuming preoccupation that replays itself every fall in the deer world.

"The rut is really an energy drain on bucks. They don't feed. They're moving. They're constantly checking. They're fighting with other males," Jensen said. "So, by December, they're pretty well sapped and a lot of those dominant bucks may die in January because they are exhausted."

*RON WILSON is editor of
North Dakota OUTDOORS.*



ASHLEY PETERSON



TY STOCKTON



MEADOWLARK INITIATIVE

By Ron Wilson

The face of a North Dakota Game and Fish Department effort to tackle the ongoing disappearance of the state's native grasslands is the Western meadowlark, a familiar, yet declining, songster that lights up the prairie with its rich, flute-like call and equally glowing yellow underparts.

Founders of the Meadowlark Initiative, a new statewide strategy that will team landowners, conservation groups, scientists and others to enhance, restore and sustain native grasslands in North Dakota, could have easily gone another route, picked another critter, considering the number of declining grassland-dependent animals they had to choose from.

The list is long, 48 species long, according to the Department's Species of Conservation Priority. This number, which includes everything from songbirds, small mammals, to pollinating insects, isn't surprising when you consider North Dakota has lost more than 70% of its native prairie over time.

"As the name suggests, the Meadowlark Initiative is a landscape level initiative with obvious benefits for our state bird, our well-known prairie crooner," said Greg Link, Game and Fish Department conservation and communications division chief. "That being said, it's about all grassland critters. It's about our prairie habitats."

SANDRA JOHNSON

UNITED EFFORT *to Save* NATIVE GRASSLANDS



While the Western meadowlark is the face of the Meadowlark Initiative, cattle, and those individuals who raise them, play a big role in stemming the loss of native grasslands in North Dakota.

It's about more than that, when you consider what's at stake in the long-haul task of enhancing, restoring and retaining what's left of North Dakota's native grasslands. It's about people, communities, lifestyles, future generations, heritage and quality of life. It's about water, soil, energy and food. It's about partnerships. It's about collaboration.

"It really encompasses all that. And that's why it's important," Link said. "And that's why it's going to take a village to get it done. It's not just the Game and Fish, but we have a key role in it."

The resolve for taking better care of North Dakota's native grassland ecosystem in a more intentional way really started resonating when the Game and Fish Department gathered and listened to input from partners and stakeholders as Department personnel began a revision of the State Wildlife Action Plan for managing the state's Species of Conservation Priority in 2015. A follow-up grassland policy tour in 2018 and a national grassland conference in 2019, both held in Bismarck and attended by conservation groups, state/federal agencies, ranchers, energy regulators, and the state's congressional staff, focused on and reaffirmed the values and opportunities associated with North Dakota's remaining native prairie, as well as the concern and challenges with its on-going decline.

A year ago, the Game and Fish Department and 13 contributing partners submitted a USDA Regional Conservation Partnership Program grant proposal, seeking to leverage over \$12 million in partner contributions with \$10 million of USDA-NRCS funding to kick-start collaborative work toward goals and objectives, encompassed in the Meadowlark Initiative. In spring, it was selected as one of 85 successful projects nationwide.

Together, the collective effort focuses on improving, increasing and connecting wildlife habitat, and supporting the sustainability of new and existing

livestock ranches by offering incentives and programs to promote regenerative grazing with grass-based livestock operations.

"When we start talking about native prairie, we have to ask ourselves who are the users and managers of our native prairie in North Dakota? Why do they use it? How do they use it? We need those folks," Link said. "And, so, right away, in most cases, we're talking about ranchers and producers who run livestock on that prairie. They're important to keeping that prairie healthy."

Link said through the Meadowlark Initiative, producers can plant marginal cropland back to diverse native perennial grasslands for grazing. Cost-share to establish the grass and to install grazing infrastructure, such as fencing and water, is available. During the first three years of grass establishment, producers also are eligible to receive rental payments as the land transitions from cropland to grazing land.

"This is about keeping working lands working, getting it done on the private playing field, and we know in that arena, we have to come together, we've got to collaborate," he said. "As the state's wildlife agency, along with conservation groups, we may be concerned about the wildlife and habitat end of it, trying to develop new habitat alongside existing habitat, native prairie habitat, but we also need to understand and address the concerns, needs and goals of ranchers. What are their stressors and challenges? What do they need to maintain viable, prosperous operations and industry?"

"When that industry starts getting fragmented, or can no longer compete, just like our native prairie, when there's fewer of them out there, pretty soon their infrastructure, their livestock sales barns, veterinarians, available forage and such, start disappearing, and it gets harder and harder for them to do their business," Link added.

As citizens, no matter where you live in North

Dakota, your interests, your goals, your walk of life, our native prairie, or what remains of it, should be of concern.

"I don't think I have to tell you, tell hunters, but our white-tailed deer, pronghorn, our sharp-tailed grouse rely heavily on that native prairie, too, as do the grassland bird species in greatest decline. These are species that we care about in North Dakota," Link said. "But the native prairie ecosystem provides other key services, such as reduced flooding, improve water filtration, water quality, better soil health, soil chemistry ... all those things. If those benefits and services disappear, we must somehow pay and somehow replace them through other means. And that ends up costing us, costing society."

While recovering North Dakota's native prairies will help sustain existing working grasslands and ranches for future generations, the Meadowlark Initiative will aid our state's most rare and declining species.

"We need to take care of those species because it's those rare and declining species whose red warning lights are blinking," Link said. "And if at some point those species get petitioned, they get listed as a threatened or endangered species, that also comes at a cost."

Wildlife managers understand that listing a species as federally threatened or endangered may restrict or intensify certain actions on private and public lands. The cost of protection or restoration of a listed species is often far greater than preventing or stemming the decline in the first place.

"It's like when somebody goes into the emergency room. It's expensive. It's hard work. And it's not always successful," Link said. "Once these species are listed, it gets harder on the landscape because it starts affecting how people do what they do, and oftentimes it can get contentious. And we'd rather do it the proactive way than the reactive way and take care of a species before they get listed."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

Key Elements

The vision of the Meadowlark Initiative is to promote and create healthy, thriving grasslands that provide biodiversity and prosperity for wildlife, pollinators, ranching operations and communities by addressing these elements:

- ▶ **Revitalize**, reconnect and sustain existing working grasslands and ranches.
- ▶ **Reinvent and implement** a statewide grassland reconstruction program.
- ▶ **Offset impacts** to grassland habitat function and value as development advances.
- ▶ **Promote** sustainable and resilient grasslands for vibrant communities and human well-being.
- ▶ **Advance** grassland ecosystem recovery through science and education.



SANDRA JOHNSON

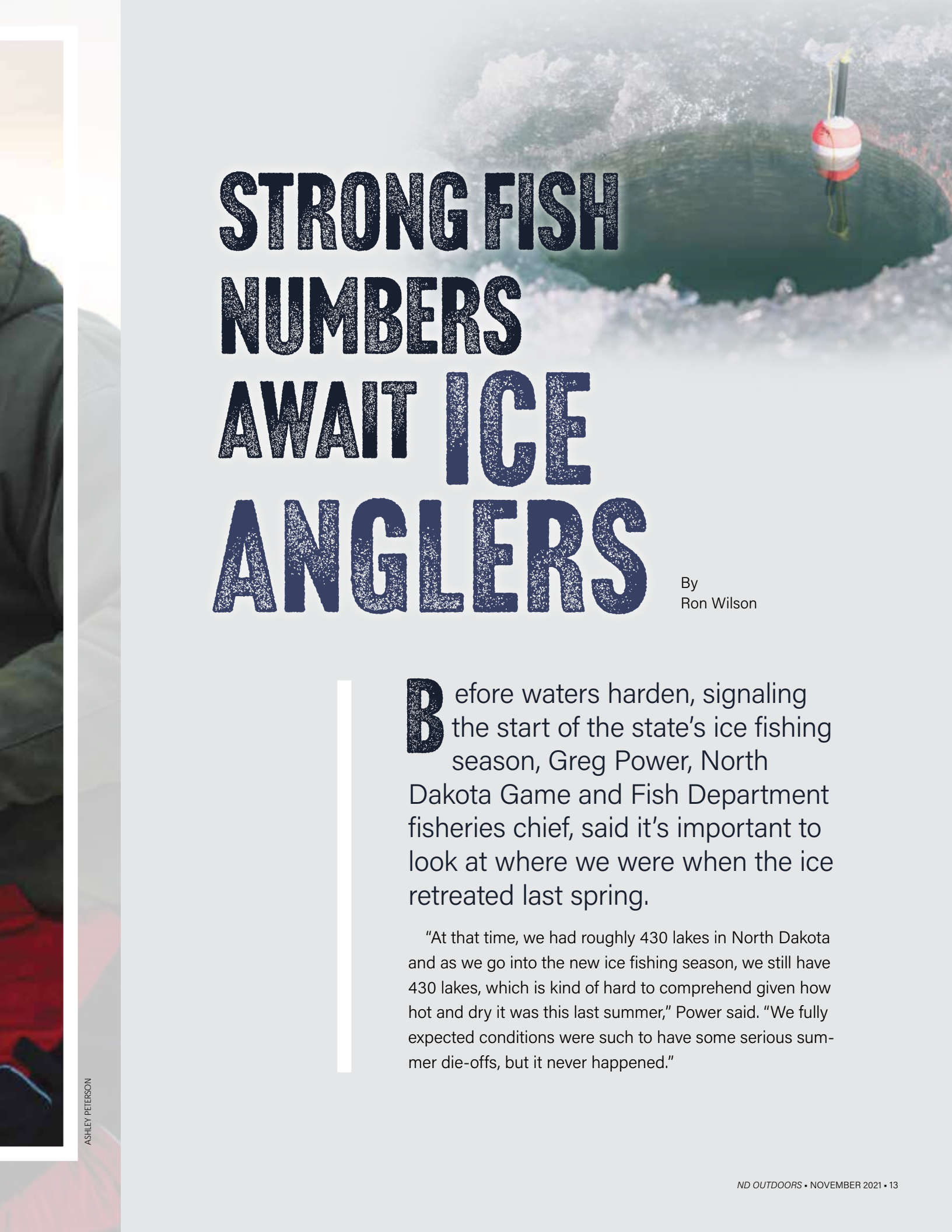
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Millborn Seeds
North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition

SANDRA JOHNSON



A nice winter walleye from
a North Dakota fishery.



STRONG FISH NUMBERS AWAIT ICE ANGLERS

By
Ron Wilson

Before waters harden, signaling the start of the state's ice fishing season, Greg Power, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries chief, said it's important to look at where we were when the ice retreated last spring.

"At that time, we had roughly 430 lakes in North Dakota and as we go into the new ice fishing season, we still have 430 lakes, which is kind of hard to comprehend given how hot and dry it was this last summer," Power said. "We fully expected conditions were such to have some serious summer die-offs, but it never happened."



Which is good news heading into the coming ice fishing season.

"While we have some real concerns about the potential for winterkill, the waters are still out there," Power said. "We've got a nice distribution of lakes across the state and our fish populations in those waters are still strong. They may not be record-setting, but we still have pretty darn good fish populations in most of our water bodies."

The focus of North Dakota ice anglers no matter the winter is typically walleye, yellow perch and

northern pike.

"While you might throw in a few crappie lakes around the state, those three species are certainly the top three," Power said. "But as we come up to a new ice fishing season, and this has changed in the last five or 10 years, the opportunities for perch and pike are fewer, but there are a lot more opportunities for walleye out there."

"We have a lot more prairie walleye lakes with still relatively young populations, but with incredible growth rates on these fish," he added. "So, there should be a lot of catchable walleye throughout the state, especially in central North Dakota."

Today, there are more than 70 prairie walleye lakes across North Dakota's landscape, which is 70 more than in the early 1990s. And they vary in size from 200 acres to thousands of acres.

"The walleye populations in many of these lakes ... it's pretty incredible the number of walleyes out there," Power said. "Of course, anglers know that one of the problems is that the walleye bite, especially in clear lakes, tends to be in the early morning and right at sundown, so oftentimes you only have 45 minutes to an hour of good

fishing. Yet, some of these prairie lakes tend to be a little more muddy, not as clear, and you can get fish all day long, which makes it even more fun."

According to the statewide average, it takes three full growing seasons for a walleye to reach 14 inches. Yet, in these fertile prairie waters, often loaded with fathead minnows, aquatic insects and other forage, walleyes are hitting the 14-inch mark in two growing seasons, and sometimes an unheard of 16 inches.

"What makes it fun is the turnaround from stocking the young walleye fingerlings one year and a couple of years later you have an instant fishery," Power said. "And that's kind of where we're at with a lot of these younger fisheries right now in the state."

While word of a good walleye bite can lure ice anglers from afar, when a North Dakota lake is rumored to be kicking out nice perch, off-the-beaten-path waters can turn into small towns overnight.

"Perch are popular probably because you can catch a bunch of them, it's a daytime bite and they're fun," Power said. "It's been the perfect storm in North Dakota



Catch-and-release walleye.

ASHLEY PETERSON

WENTZ WALLEYES A PLUS FOR AREA FISHERIES

North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel trapped and relocated several thousand walleyes from a Logan County fishery that, depending on the whims of Mother Nature, could winterkill in coming months.

Wentz Waterfowl Production Area, where the fish were trapped earlier this fall, is what fisheries biologists consider an opportunistic fishery. In years with abundant precipitation, Wentz WPA has enough water to support year-round survival.

"We aggressively stocked Wentz WPA in 2019 and 2020 due to its ability to support walleye at that time. It has quite a few walleyes in it that are doing fairly well right now," said Paul Bailey, Department south central district fisheries supervisor. "Unfortunately, due to the drought we're experiencing, Wentz WPA is down to a maximum depth of about 8 feet. Now, that doesn't guarantee we're going to have a winterkill this year, but it definitely increases the probability of that occurring."

Bailey said fisheries personnel trapped and relocated just a small portion of the walleye population from Wentz WPA.

"Honestly, Wentz is going to be one of the places I plan to hit early this ice fishing season as soon as conditions allow," he said. "There will still be good angling opportunities in Wentz. We are trying to utilize some of these fish given the higher likelihood of winterkill. They will really benefit some of our better long-term fisheries."

The plan in early fall was to move the fish to Rice Lake (Emmons County), Braun Lake (Logan County), and Jasper Lake and Lake Josephine (both Kidder County).

"We're trying to take advantage of some of these walleyes from Wentz and stocking them in some other lakes where we haven't had very good stocking success in recent years due to us stocking typically fingerling walleye, which are usually about an inch and a half long," Bailey said. "And the lakes where we're stocking these walleyes have really abundant perch populations. What is most likely happening are the perch are consuming the small walleye that we're stocking. So, we're trying to get around that and give some of these fisheries a little shot in the arm by stocking some of these fish that are large enough to avoid perch predation."

Rice Lake, one of the primary destinations for the Wentz walleyes, is one of those fisheries that Bailey mentioned earlier that harbors a robust perch population that is likely consuming the stocked walleye fingerlings.

"Rice Lake is a very popular, good, long-term fishery where we have struggled to have good stocking success in recent years with our hatchery walleye," he said. "We're hoping to augment the Rice Lake walleye population a bit with these Wentz WPA fish."

over the last 20-30 years when it comes to perch fishing. Probably nowhere in North America has it been better for both quantity and quality."

While there was once 50-plus quality perch lakes in North Dakota, Power said today that number is likely closer to a couple dozen.

"The perch lakes are down for sure. We've probably had a couple of peaks over the last 30 years, including maybe four or five years ago when we had a nice run of a lot of perch lakes," he said. "We still have some, but again, it's all about reproduction and productivity of these lakes. We've had a few years of drying out now and we don't get the production, meaning the zooplankton and the little aquatic bugs in particular. So, the growth of the perch isn't as good and there

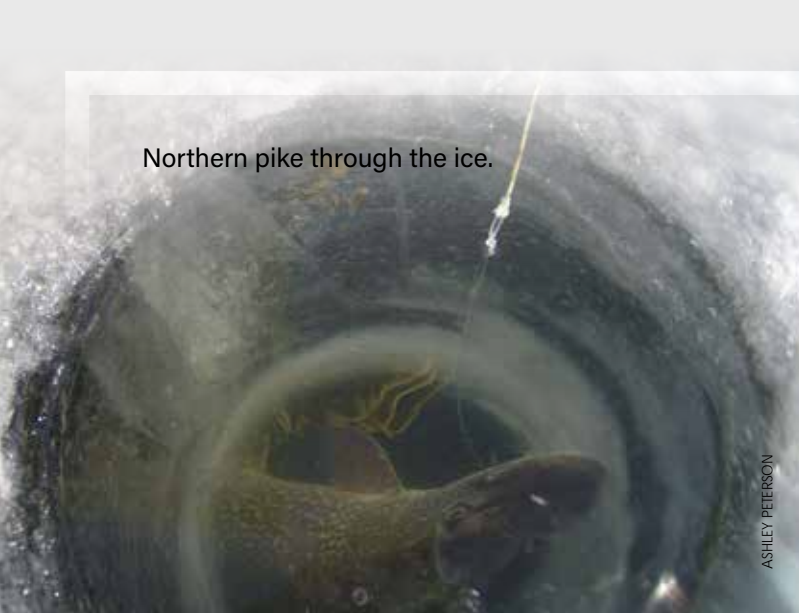
Yellow perch.

TY STOCKTON

TY STOCKTON



MIKE ANDERSON



Northern pike through the ice.

ASHLEY PETERSON

are just fewer perch lakes out there."

North Dakota's pike populations sort of parallel perch. Their numbers are down, but they're certainly not out.

"On a one to 10 scale in terms of pike populations, we're probably at a seven. We're above average for sure," Power said. "We've been trending downward. We're not getting a lot of natural reproduction recently, but pike are still in pretty good shape."

Of course, the biggest uncertainty of the coming ice fishing season is angler access to managed waters during North Dakota's leanest months.

"Last winter, in terms of ice fishing access, was probably never better. It took a while to get good ice, drive-on ice, and that was maybe the only downside," Power said. "But then we had a nice cold snap that made pretty good ice and people were able to drive on lakes in the dead of winter, given the lack of snow throughout the state. There were really no access issues throughout the entire state and that rarely happens."

Ice fishing in North Dakota accounts for about 20% of the annual fishing effort most years. Last year, with access not being an issue, that effort jumped to 25%.

Last winter a record number of residents, about 71,000, along with more than 25,000 nonresidents, participated in ice fishing in North Dakota.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



DARKHOUSE SPEARFISHING 2020-21 HIGHLIGHTS

ASHLEY PETERSON

Last winter marked the 20th year of darkhouse spearfishing in North Dakota. Things have changed on the darkhouse front in the state since its inception.

"While I don't remember exactly, but the first year of darkhouse spearfishing in the state, only five, six, maybe seven, lakes were open statewide," said Greg Power, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries division chief. "We took it slow in the first few years of darkhouse spearfishing to make sure there were no issues. And over time, we've liberalized things tremendously to the point where essentially the entire state is open to darkhouse spearfishing, except a handful of muskie lakes."

- 16,605 northern pike were harvested.
- 4,372 individuals registered (2,853 residents and 1,519 nonresidents).
- Average participant was 49 years old.
- 72% of survey respondents indicated that they actually darkhouse spearfished.
- Survey respondents indicated they speared on 93 water bodies.
- Lake Sakakawea and Devils Lake again received the majority of the pike harvest.
- Median and mean weights of the largest pike reported harvested by survey respondents were 6 pounds and 7 pounds, 8 ounces, respectively, which was down from the year prior.
- 60% of the survey respondents reported they took someone darkhouse spearfishing in North Dakota who had never been spearing before.

“WHAT I DIDN'T SEE COMING,
WAS FALLING IN LOVE WITH THE PRAIRIE”

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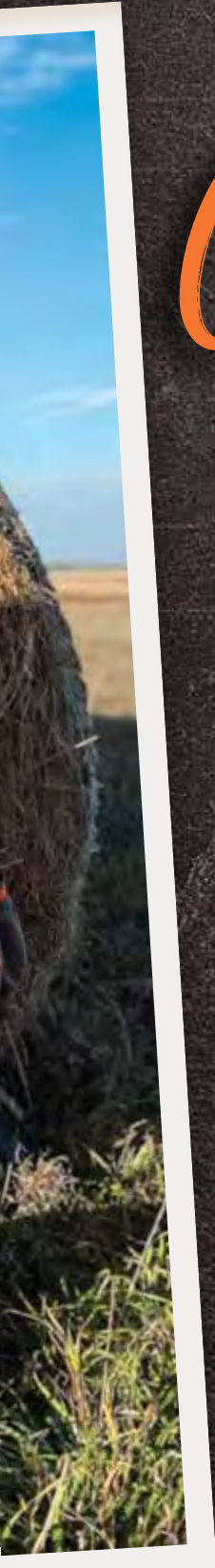
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Scott Clausen (left), Finley (middle) and Cayla Bendel pose after the opening day of pheasant season.



Connecting the Dots

By Ron Wilson

“

"There's nothing more empowering and cool than going into the field and coming back and cooking what you harvested, or maybe saving for later to share with friends and family," Cayla said. "I love the feeling of connecting all those dots together from field to table."

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CAYLA BENDEL

ere filming a Game and Fish Department webcast on cooking wild game.

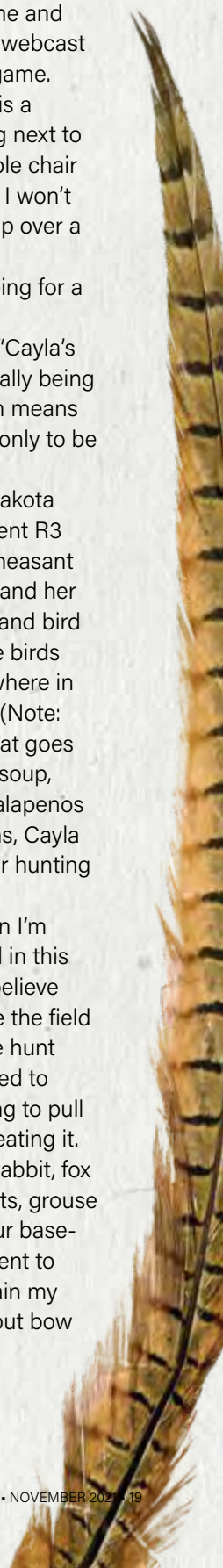
Actually, the “we’re” part is a stretch because I’m doing next to nothing from a comfortable chair in the background where I won’t bump an LED panel or trip over a camera tripod.

If all goes well, I’m hoping for a free bowl of soup.

The webcast is called “Cayla’s Kitchen,” but it’s not actually being shot in her kitchen, which means nothing, and I mention it only to be transparent.

Cayla Bendel, North Dakota Game and Fish Department R3 coordinator, is cooking pheasant tortilla soup today. Cayla and her husband, Scott Clausen, and bird dog, Finley, harvested the birds opening weekend somewhere in Sheridan County, I think. (Note: While she will tell you what goes into her pheasant tortilla soup, from the garden-grown jalapenos to the canned black beans, Cayla is not going to give up her hunting spots.)

Maybe the main reason I’m playing the fly on the wall in this production is because I believe it’s important to celebrate the field to table aspect of why we hunt and fish. I’ve long preached to my kids that if you’re going to pull the trigger, then plan on eating it. The vacuum-sealed jackrabbit, fox squirrels, doves, pheasants, grouse and venison housed in our basement freezers are testament to that mantra that I’m certain my kids are tired of hearing but bow to with certainty.





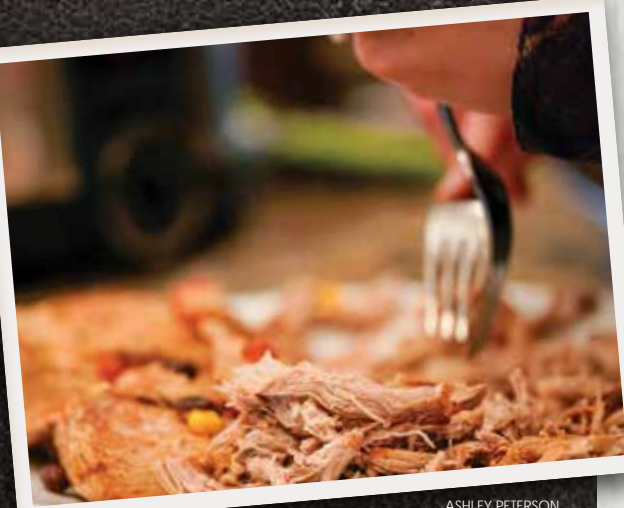
ASHLEY PETERSON

Ingredients for pheasant tortilla soup.



ASHLEY PETERSON

Cutting jalapenos.



ASHLEY PETERSON

Shredding a pheasant breast.

"There's nothing more empowering and cool than going into the field and coming back and cooking what you harvested, or maybe saving for later to share with friends and family," Cayla said. "I love the feeling of connecting all those dots together from field to table."

Knowing what will grace her dinner plate and its origin is also a big motivator in her push to eat mostly wild game no matter the season.

"A pretty big driver for me and for a lot of young people getting into hunting is knowing where their food came from and eating healthy," she said. "In terms of getting new people interested in hunting, the food aspect is a big deal ... from field to table with no steps in between."

Cayla and Scott hunt and fish a lot and chase whatever is in season. While upland game bird hunting behind their pointing dog might top the list of her favorite outdoor activities, choosing a favorite many times fluctuates with the season.

"Pretty much every weekend that we can, we're out doing something," she said. "The downside of trying to do it all is I feel like we're always torn on which thing to do and sometimes I feel we're making the wrong decision, but every once in a while, we get lucky."

And Cayla is just as passionate about the time she spends in the kitchen. She smiles when asked if she enjoys cooking. She laughs when asked if Scott is any help in the kitchen. She wishes she could make a pie crust as well as her mom.

"Turkey hunting ranks pretty high with me and a lot of that has to do with the fact that I love the meat from wild turkey," she said. "Usually, I just make turkey nuggets with the birds we get. That's probably my husband's favorite meal is when I make wild turkey nuggets."

Another perk in my attendance is that while I've long enjoyed cooking wild game – I'm a long way from being good at it and always resort to the same old recipes – is that I figured I could pick up some ideas, go home with a tip or two.

Tip 1: "The first thing we are going to do before we put the pheasant breasts into the crock pot is brown them. This is a really good habit to get into with any cooking. Browning things before you prep them is going to help them retain their juices, especially pheasant. People say that pheasant gets dry, but this will help so that it doesn't."

Tip 2: "Now that we have our pheasant browned, we're going to put everything in the crock pot except for our lime juice and cilantro. The lime juice and cilantro are going to go in for just a little bit at the very end because you don't want to cook those flavors out."

See, I learned something. A couple easy tips to store in my mostly empty pantry of wild game cooking knowledge.

And just so you know, I never did get my free bowl of soup.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



To watch "Cayla's Kitchen," visit the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's website at gf.nd.gov/ndo-webcast. In this episode, Cayla Bendel, Department R3 coordinator, navigates viewers through her favorite pheasant tortilla soup recipe.



ASHLEY PETERSON

Pheasant Tortilla Soup

INGREDIENTS

3-4 pheasant breasts
 1 ½ c. chicken broth
 ½ can black beans
 1 ½ c. corn (*canned, frozen, or fresh*)
 1 can red enchilada sauce
 1 c. diced tomatoes and peppers
 (*or 1 can Rotel*)
 1 c. onion diced
 1 jalapeno pepper diced (*optional*)
 4 tbsp. lime juice
 4 tbsp. cilantro
 Shredded cheese and tortilla chips
 to top (*optional*)

STEPS

Lightly brown pheasant breasts on both sides.

Mix all ingredients in Crockpot EXCEPT lime juice and cilantro.

Cook on low for 4 hours.

Remove breasts and shred.

Return shredded meat to the pot, add lime juice and cilantro, and cook 30 more minutes on low.

Crunch tortilla chips and cheese on top.





BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



ASHLEY PETERSON

Winter

Anglers are encouraged to refer to the 2020-22 North Dakota Fishing Guide or the Game and Fish Department's website at gf.nd.gov for winter fishing regulations.

Some winter fishing regulations include:

- A maximum of four poles is legal for ice fishing. However, when fishing a water body where both open water and ice occur at the same time, an angler is allowed a maximum of four poles, of which no more than two poles can be used in open water.
- Tip-ups are legal, and each tip-up is considered a single pole.
- There is no restriction on the size of the hole in the ice while fishing. When a hole larger than 10 inches in diameter is left in the ice, the area in the immediate vicinity must be marked with a natural object.
- It is only legal to release fish back into the water immediately after they are caught. Once a fish is held in a bucket or on a stringer, they can no longer be legally released in any water.
- It is illegal to catch fish and transport them in water.
- It is illegal to leave fish, including bait, behind on the ice.
- Depositing or leaving any litter or other waste material on the ice or shore is illegal.
- Any dressed fish to be transported, if frozen, must be packaged so that the fillets are separated and thus can be easily counted without thawing. Two fillets count as one fish.

- The daily limit is a limit of fish taken from midnight to midnight, and no person may possess more than one day's limit of fish while actively engaged in fishing. The possession limit is the maximum number of fish that an angler may have in his or her possession during a fishing trip of more than one day.
- Anglers are reminded that three North Dakota lakes are closed to ice fishing. The State Fair Pond in Ward County, McDowell Dam in Burleigh County and Lightning Lake in McLean County are closed when the lakes ice over

Darkhouse Spearfishing Registration

North Dakota's darkhouse spearfishing season opens whenever ice-up occurs. The season extends through March 15. Legal fish are northern pike and nongame species.

Darkhouse spearing is allowed for all residents with a valid fishing license and for residents under age 16. Nonresidents may darkhouse spearfish in North Dakota if they are from states that offer the same privilege for North Dakota residents.

Individuals who are required to possess the needed valid fishing license to participate in darkhouse spearfishing must register with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department prior to participating. Registration is available at the Department's website, gf.nd.gov, or through any Game and Fish Department office.

All waters open to hook and line fishing are open to darkhouse spearing except: Lake Audubon, East Park Lake and West Park Lake, all McLean County; Heckers Lake, Sheridan County; Larimore Dam, Grand Forks County; McClusky Canal; New Johns Lake, Burleigh County; Red Willow Lake, Griggs County; Wood Lake, Benson County; Lake Ashtabula, Barnes and Griggs counties; and Whitman Dam, Nelson County.

Anglers should refer to the 2020-22 North Dakota Fishing Guide for more information.



ASHLEY PETERSON



NDGFD

North Dakota Game and Fish Department wardens Cory Erck, left, and Andrew Dahlgren, right, check a hunter's harvest at a game check station in mid-October near Kulm. In a little over 4 hours, wardens checked 36 vehicles and 68 hunters. Game checked included ducks, geese, pheasants,

sharp-tailed grouse and northern pike, with the most common violations being failing to leave identification attached to game during transport and aquatic nuisance species related issues like leaving plugs in boats, transporting vegetation, and no ANS boat registration. Department wardens were assisted in the effort by a U.S. Fish and Wildlife officer, North Dakota Highway Patrol and a local sheriff's office.



MIKE ANDERSON

The finishing touches on a wildlife crossing under U.S. Highway 85 near the Long X bridge in western North Dakota is a 3-mile-long, 10-foot-tall fence being installed this fall. Once completed, the fence will funnel animals through the crossing and off the busy highway. "Every animal that goes through here is one less potential accident on the highway. We want to save the animals. The North Dakota Department of Transportation wants to create a safer roadway. And so, this crossing functions for both agencies," said Bruce Kreft, Game and Fish Department resource biologist. Prior to construction of the crossing and fence, bighorn sheep rams in rut looking for ewes would migrate across the busy road at all hours and get hit by vehicles.

Call RAP

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department encourages hunters, anglers and landowners who witness a fish or wildlife violation to file a report with the Report All Poachers program.



Call
701-328-9921

Witnesses should report a violation by calling the RAP telephone number at 701-328-9921.

Witnesses should note the vehicle description, including make, color, license plate number and state issued. Description of the violator should also be considered.

The RAP line offers rewards – from \$100 to \$1,000 depending on the nature and seriousness of the crime – for information that leads to conviction of fish and wildlife law violators. Reports can also go directly to game wardens or other law enforcement agencies. Callers can remain anonymous.

Survey Participation Wanted

North Dakota hunters receiving a survey this winter are encouraged help with wildlife management by completing the survey online or returning it to the state Game and Fish Department.

Chad Parent, survey coordinator, said big game, small game, waterfowl, swan, turkey and furbearer questionnaires will be mailed to randomly selected hunters.

"It is important hunters complete and promptly return the survey, even if they did not hunt," Parent said. "The harvest survey allows us to evaluate the hunting season, to determine the number of hunters, amount of hunting activity and size of the harvest."

A follow-up survey will be mailed to those not responding to the first survey.

NDO Calendar Orders

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is taking orders for its 2022 North Dakota OUTDOORS calendar, the source for all hunting seasons and application dates. Along with outstanding color photographs of



North Dakota wildlife and scenery, it also includes sunrise-sunset times and moon phases.

To order online, visit buy.nd.gov and apply at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov, or send \$4 for each, including postage and shipping, 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 mail.

The calendar is the North Dakota OUTDOORS magazine's December issue, so current subscribers will automatically receive it in the mail.



MIKE ANDERSON

Earlier this fall, through the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Save Our Lakes program, a 20-acre pond on the outskirts of Glen Ullin received a bit of a facelift in an effort to create an urban fishery. Scott Elstad (pictured), Department aquatic habitat supervisor, said much of work consisted of reshaping some shoreline areas for angler access and removing sediment to make the fishery deeper in places. "Currently, the pond is 3- to 4-feet-deep, but if we deepen up these areas to, say, 12 feet, the fish will more likely be able to survive all summer long and even into winter," Elstad said. The urban fishery will be stocked in spring with catchable-sized fish, creating an immediate fishery. "We believe these urban fisheries are important, especially for kids who don't have a car and can't drive 50-60 miles to fish elsewhere," Elstad said.

Waterfowl Book Available

Outdoor enthusiasts interested in North Dakota's waterfowl will want to get their hands on the state Game and Fish Department's newest book, "The Duck Factory – A History of Waterfowl in North Dakota."

Authored by Mike Jacobs and Erik Fritzell, the 213-page, soft-cover publication in full color traces the history of waterfowl species and their habitats in North Dakota.

"The Duck Factory" is an important story because of North Dakota's longtime and continuing contribution to the world of migratory birds, migratory game bird program leader Mike Szymanski said.

"North Dakota is the most important state for breeding ducks," he added. "The contribution of ducks from North Dakota into the fall flight is unmatched by any other state, and its importance to duck hunters cannot be understated. Describing the history of waterfowl in North Dakota was a story that we felt was certainly worth telling."

The book is sold only online for \$24.99, including shipping, on the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, by clicking on Buy and Apply, and then Shop.

STAFF NOTES



Haase Named Assistant Wildlife Chief

Bill Haase was named Game and Fish Department assistant wildlife division chief in October.

Haase has worked with the Department for 18 years, the last 10 as a wildlife resource management supervisor. Haase has a wildlife management degree from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.



George Lee Retires

George Lee retired in October after 42 years with the Game and Fish Department. Lee started with the Department in 1979 and spent the last 31 years as the agency's administrative officer/building maintenance supervisor.



Peterson Joins Agency

Alan Peterson was named Department administrative officer/building maintenance supervisor earlier this fall. Peterson is a graduate of North Dakota State University, with a master's degree in plant sciences and a bachelor's degree in crop and weed sciences-agronomy.



BACKCAST

By Ron Wilson

The coyote reminds me of my 13-year-old golden retriever who, at this hour, maybe 45 minutes after sunrise, might still be sacked in the bed we bought him off the internet that looks like a bagel cut in half.

Like Ollie, the coyote's face is white, much lighter than the rest of his coat. An old man face. Or maybe it's not that at all. Maybe its white face, that nearly glows in this light, is a product of nature, something it was born with, not something it earned by being long in the tooth.

It doesn't matter.

I've been watching the coyote through binoculars for a couple minutes and I'll lose it shortly when it crests the prairie hilltop to my north.

For the moment, at least, we're sharing a PLOTS tract that bumps up against some state school land east of here. We're here for different reasons. With the deer gun season a couple weeks out, I'm scouting. The coyote is hunting, doing what it does to survive, participating in a year-round effort that must get more and more difficult as fall slips into winter when temperatures nosedive and the snow piles up.

While the threat of winterlike weather isn't in the forecast for coming days, big patches of the mostly brown landscape are nearly white from the thousands of migrating snow geese that are here for now, but can pick up, alerted by whatever cues that drive them, and point their pinkish bills south.

The geese are a treat to watch, but a distraction from what I came here for. They are as noisy as they are jumpy, seemingly never at ease with their surroundings. Oftentimes, there are half as many birds in the air getting ready to land as there are geese on the ground. This confusion of unsettledness reminds me of a snow globe that was turned upside down and then placed upright on a flat surface.

It's not lost on me that I'm watching a species that is legally classified as overabundant – the daily limit is 50 birds – yet I'm out scouting for an animal that, because of an EHD outbreak, had its numbers negatively influenced in some areas, to the point Game and Fish officials allowed hunters with whitetail or "any" deer gun licenses refunds on tags in 22 hunting units in western North Dakota.

Department officials urged folks to talk to landowners in the areas they hunt, or maybe make the effort during preseason to see what they see before forgoing the season.

I'm doing the latter, but it's something I do every year no matter the forecast. We'll hunt, most certainly, because we never considered that we wouldn't.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

North Dakota Outdoors Magazine
North Dakota Game and Fish Department
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Bismarck, ND 58501

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North Dakota Game and Fish
Department fisheries crews
completed their annual salmon
spawning operation on the
Missouri River System after
collecting more than 1.8 million
eggs. Russ Kinzler (pictured),
Department fisheries biologist,
and other personnel took the first
salmon eggs from fish captured
in Lake Sakakawea and the
Garrison Dam Tailrace on Oct.
1 and finished the egg-take
operation on Oct. 22.



RON WILSON

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