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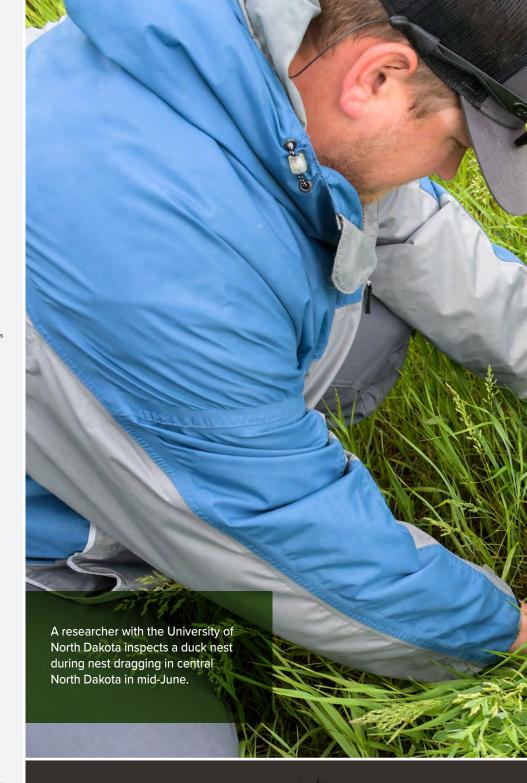
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The mission of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department is to protect, conserve and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their habitats for sustained public consumptive and nonconsumptive use.

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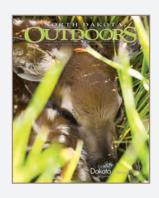
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Front Cover
A whitetail fawn hides in the tall
grass in southwestern North Dakota.
Photo by Lara Anderson, Bismarck.



RATTLESMAKE HEALTH—CHECK

By Ron Wilson

Matthew Smith has kept tabs on a population of prairie rattlesnakes in Emmons County since 2015, dispelling the fictional buzz long circulated in some circles that there aren't rattlesnakes east of the Missouri River in North Dakota.

"We were sampling some of the wildlife management areas in the Linton area in 2014 and my field tech at the time actually knew some of the landowners who claimed they had seen rattlesnakes and I knew I had to check it out," said Smith, associate professor with North Dakota State University biological sciences department. "We looked a lot in 2014, didn't find any, went back in 2015 in midsummer and found a couple. And then I went back that fall and was able to verify that there was a den on the east side of the Missouri River. Since then, I've tried to get back there as often as I can to monitor the population."

Smith's last visit to the den was in mid-May with some Game and Fish Department personnel interested in the often-knocked reptiles. On that day, he said his aim was to simply do a health check on the population that could soon disperse from the den to summer hunting grounds.

"We were able to capture 22 individual rattlesnakes, most of which we actually just looked at general body condition and released right away," said Smith who noted the most he'd encountered and captured on previous visits was 13. "We weren't doing a real intensive survey that day, but there were several that we put into the tube. We checked the sex, we checked body condition. The one pregnant

female, I was able to palpate to see roughly how many follicles she was developing."

The tube, Smith mentioned, is clear and once the snake is inside, gives the researcher an up close and personal view. But first, he must capture the rattlesnakes with long-handled tools and place them in a bucket so they can be easily retrieved and examined individually.

"We put the snake on the ground, present the tube and try to get the dangerous part of the snake headfirst into the tube, and then it's safe for the snake and it's safe for myself," he said. "While in the tube, I can take measurements and I can sex the individuals. I'm getting pretty good at looking at a snake and telling whether it's male or female ... males tend to have longer tails than females."

If needed for his research, Smith can also individually mark snakes, something he didn't do in mid-May, using a unique set of clips on the belly, the ventral side.

"I find the cloaca, and then I work my way up on the left side and the right side clipping a unique combination of scales. By doing that, then I know that this is snake 14, this is snake 15, this is snake 16," he said. "If I just cut the corner of the scale off and they'll keep those marks for 10 to 15 years, even longer in some cases. It's a cost-effective way for me to mark individuals."

While spying 22 prairie rattlesnakes sunning themselves in mid-May, with the promise of warmer temperature to come, certainly isn't for everyone, Smith was elated with the attendance.



"There was a good number of young from last year and there were probably three born the year before that. So, we know that there's been consistent reproduction," Smith said. "The males were larger than I tend to see in western North Dakota, so the males are in really good condition. There was at least one female that was pregnant, so we'll have reproduction again this coming year and most of the females were in good body condition."

Smith said another female was a little thin and had loose skin, indicating that she likely gave birth last year.

"She likely gave birth to individuals in late August or early September and then probably didn't have a meal before going down for the winter," he said. "So, this particular female might not have eaten in a year and a half."

Patrick Isakson, Game and Fish Department conservation biologist, was at the prairie rattlesnake den in mid-May with Smith and others. He echoes Smith, saying while the den they visited is the only known den on the east side of the Missouri River in North Dakota, the Department does receive reports now and again from the public about rattlesnakes on that side of the river.

"We get reports yearly from people that see them when they're out and about, especially in high water years, when the lake and the river come up and pushes some of those snakes up out of that lower country, making them more visible," Isakson said.



Matthew Smith, NDSU associate professor, catches a prairie rattlesnake at a denning site in Emmons County.

While ducks, deer and pheasants receive much of the ink in the Game and Fish Department's world, Isakson said management of rattlesnakes and other similar critters is not lost on wildlife man-

"We think snakes, rattlesnakes in particular, but all snakes in general, are an important part of our ecosystem," he said. "They're both predator and prey and do a great job of controlling small mammal and rodent populations, insects as well."

Smith has worked with rattlesnakes from western North Dakota to Arkansas where he worked on his doctorate. Rattlesnakes have long fascinated him, initially beginning during his undergraduate career at NDSU in the late 1990s.

"People swerve to hit snakes on the road, they go out of their way to hurt snakes," he said. "And rat-



KEEP YOUR DISTANCE

When you study this underdog, investigate a world that some people would find unappealing, if not frightening, Smith said the more you learn, the more immersed you become.

"They exhibit lots of complex behaviors. The females, for example, will sort of congregate at what we call rookeries or birthing sites. They babysit not only their young, but the young of other females," he said. "They'll protect baby snakes from predators. They'll put themselves in harm's way when a raptor flies over, when a coyote or badger comes to the den, and some of those babies aren't even hers. The more we study snakes, rattlesnakes in particular, the more complex behaviors that we find."

Also of note, these ambush predators will travel, say, up to 15 miles from the den site to where they detect a high amount of scent from potential prey.

"And there they'll sit, maybe for months. They only need about 500 grams of food a year and they're set. So again, some of the pregnant females might not eat for 18 months and they're fine giving birth to up to 25 babies that year. Males will go months searching for females to copulate with and not have a meal," Smith said. "While they need just a small amount of energy to survive, they can do a really good job at keeping small mammal populations in check. It's not like they're going to decimate small mammal populations."

Smith said prairie rattlesnakes are a keystone species in the prairie habitat in which they exist ... on both sides of the river.

"As somebody who's from North Dakota, I want to see healthy prairie habitat. And I think rattlesnakes are one of the keys to doing that in central and western North Dakota," he said.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

Paul Bailey, Department fisheries biologist, with one of the 22 rattlesnakes caught at a denning site east of the Missouri River in mid-May.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY PAUL BAILEY

Matthew Smith, associate professor with North Dakota State University biological sciences department, offers some advice when treading in snake country.

"Whatever you do, whether it's a rattlesnake, a bull snake or any reptile or amphibian, I would just leave it be. You can admire it from a distance, but just let it be on its own," Smith said. "If you don't interact with it, it's not going to interact with you. If you give them their space, we can enjoy them in the wild where they're supposed to be."

Smith said most rattlesnake bites happen when humans interact with snakes or invade their space.

"There's lots of misconceptions about snakes in general and venomous snakes specifically. We have about 7,500 snake bites a year in the U.S. and 60% are males ages 17 to 27. And 30% of those involve alcohol," Smith said. "Only about 15% of the bites are what I would call legitimate bites, meaning people are not actually messing with the snake. So, most of the bites occur on the hands and arms from people trying to move the snake or kill the snake. Only about 13% of the bites occur on the feet and ankles."

Certainly, some snake bites on hands and arms are legitimate.

"If you're putting your hand in a rock crevice and not looking, you might get bit. But most of the bites are people going out of their way to bother the snake and it ends up poorly for that person," Smith said. "If you give them their space, they will move away from you. They will not strike. They try to avoid contact at all costs."

And, no, prairie rattlesnakes don't chase people.

"The myth about them chasing people ... I can pretty much guarantee that if they are coming at you, that's because you are between the snake and it's hiding place," he said. "It's happened to me countless times. All I got to do is move a couple of feet to the side and they'll leave me alone. They'll go right to their hole. They don't want anything to do with me if they don't have to."



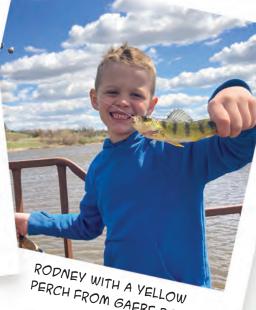
CHALLENGE Smallmouth bass from Lake Audubon. NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH PIKE - SMALLMOUTH BASS PERCH - CATFISH



MD RISALATUL WITH A SMALLMOUTH BASS FROM LAKE ASHTABULA



LORI WITH A NORTHERN PIKE FROM LAKE SAKAKAWEA



PERCH FROM GAEBE POND

"IT'S JUST SOMETHING DIFFERENT AND NEAT TO TRY, YOU KNOW, I NORMALLY FISH FOR WALLEYES AND SOMETIMES SALMON IN THE FALL, AND I CATCH THESE SPECIES BY ACCIDENT BUT IT'S A LITTLE CHALLENGE TO TRY TO TARGET THEM, " said Rothschild

By Cayla Bendel

Be it dumping buckets of ice over our heads, getting in our 11,000 steps for the day, or visiting all 50 states, we love a good challenge. So, I figured why not tap into this when it comes to getting people to wet a line?

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 2022 North Dakota Fish Challenge seeks to do just that. The challenge is designed to get more people fishing, trying to catch a new species, exploring new waters and learning (or remembering) how much fun fishing can be.

To complete the challenge, anglers must catch a channel catfish, northern pike, yellow perch and smallmouth bass of any size in North Dakota from May 1 through August 15. Once submitting each of their catches on the "offishial" landing page, they'll receive a sticker, certificate, and be listed on the page as a challenge winner.

Greg Power, Department fisheries chief, said readers may wonder why the Game and Fish chose channel catfish, northern pike, yellow perch, and smallmouth bass as the four species in the inaugural North Dakota Fish Challenge.

"First and foremost, these species are relatively easy and fun to catch. A boat isn't needed to increase your odds to catch these species. Further, North Dakota has strong populations of these species spread throughout the state and an angler can seek out these species in their own back yard," Power said. "Lastly, these species are a great alternative to walleye.



DANIEL WITH A NORTHERN PIKE FROM LAKE METIGOSHE



MORGAN WITH A SMALLMOUTH BASS FROM LAKE AUDUBON



DAVID WITH A CHANNEL CATFISH FROM STANLEY POND

In terms of both quality and quantity, North Dakota offers some world-class opportunities for these four species."

Power said yellow perch are found in most of the state's waters and with a very simple technique can be caught easily from docks, shores or boat. And in the winter, perch are a destination fishery for many as some of North Dakota waters are known to produce foot-long perch.

Widely known as North Dakotas' state fish, northern pike are truly meant for most of the state's waters. Again, they can be found throughout the state and can be easily caught, especially in spring and winter. Pike are also known as good fighters and certainly provide great memories for anglers fortunate to hook into a larger one (some pike may exceed 20 pounds).

"Historically, channel catfish were only found in some of North Dakota larger river systems. However, Department staff have stocked numerous community fisheries in the state with catfish to bring the fish to the angler," Power said. "Catfish are wildly popular in the southern states and appear to be gaining more attention here at home. Again, catfish are fun to catch as they too can put up quite a tussle."

The Red River is known for its trophy channel catfish, some pushing 30 pounds. Most catfish caught in North Dakota are 2-5 pounds.

"Lastly, the smallmouth bass is the only species of the four not native to North Dakota, although they've been present in the state for around 100 years. Smallies have been introduced to dozens of lakes and have done remarkably well, reproducing, and sustaining themselves," Power said. "This is another species known for their fight when an angler hooks into one. Smallmouth bass can routinely get up to the 3-pound range in North Dakota with some exceeding 5 pounds."

This first challenge features some of our native fish species and some of our best, but often overlooked, fisheries. The idea is to continue the challenge in future years but include different species, a rough fish slam, a panfish palooza, and river monsters have all been discussed.

Retired Minot resident, avid angler, and self-pro-

NORTH DAKOTA OFFERS SOME WORLD-CLASS OPPORTUNITIES FOR THESE FOUR SPECIES.

TAKE THE CHALLENGE gf.nd.gov

claimed "average guy," David Rothschild, saw the challenge and was hooked.

"It's just something different and neat to try. You know, I normally fish for walleyes and sometimes salmon in the fall, and I catch these species by accident but it's a little challenge to try to target them," said Rothschild who grew up in Rugby and has basically been fishing his entire life and has more time to devote to it since retiring. "I mostly fish during the week. I like to leave the weekends to folks who have to work and that way the boat ramps are a little less cramped, too."

So far, Rothschild has caught his catfish and northern pike.

"I figured I better start with catfish because it might be the hardest, so I looked up where they had them on the Game and Fish website and found out Stanley Pond might be a good place to try," he said.

Rothschild and his wife both checked off catfish that day at Stanley Pond from a fishing pier.

"Of course, I've caught pike before," he said, "but I figured I better try to find a lake with a lot of pike to target and I chose Clearwater."

Rothschild said it's one thing to pick the lake, but then once you get out there you've got to figure out where to go and what to do. Fortunately, they had all day to explore Clearwater and were able to fish the entire shoreline with crankbaits and, again, both anglers checked off their northern pike.

"Later I was out with my brother on Lake Darling, and he had to break in his new motor so we were trolling a little and I wondered if I could catch a bigger pike? And I put on the crankbait I used on Clearwater and sure enough, I did," Rothschild said.

Rothschild says even before the Fish Challenge, he liked to push himself to try a new lake each year and both Stanley Pond and Clearwater were new to him.

"Usually, I look at the surveys and the netting reports for the last few years to see what the population is like and then I like to print off a lake contour map, even though I have it on my graph in my boat, because I like a paper copy with me," he said.

Rothschild and his brother are headed to another lake soon to try to get both smallmouth bass and yellow perch. But at the end of the day, he "just likes getting out and feeling the fish on the end of the line ... it's a natural high."

I couldn't agree more. And I feel like I'd be a bit of a hypocrite if I didn't complete the challenge myself.

This time of year often finds me targeting small-mouth bass on their spawning beds, so that one is checked off and these often overlooked fish will no doubt distract me for a few more weeks. Then it's on to pulling spinners for walleyes, which may or may not produce a stray perch or northern pike. If not, perhaps our often-futile attempts at the few muskies in the state will entice a feisty pike. Later this summer, a few days at the Missouri River Tailrace should get channel catfish off the list and into my freezer. And if things get desperate, don't be surprised to find me out at the Department's OWLS Pond on my lunch break in search of a yellow perch.

My husband and I will no doubt have some sort of wager as well – largest of the four species wins – with ice cream or trolling motor duties on the line. After all, I'm notoriously up for a good competition. Either way, I'm looking forward to a summer spent barefoot in the boat in pursuit of that "natural high."

My victory Dairy Queen Blizzard will simply be the cherry on top.

CAYLA BENDEL is the Game and Fish Department's R3 coordinator.





bird populations in the Prairie Pothole Region through voluntary wetland and grassland protection, restoration and enhancement programs.

USFWS officials said the winning artwork will be featured on the federal duck stamp that will go on sale July 1, 2023.

CONSERVATION EFFORT TAKES FLIGHT

First, some background.

The duck stamp, or migratory bird hunting and conservation stamp, began in 1934 in direct response to the grave decline in the nation's once plentiful duck and goose populations.

"Prior to ratification of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918, commercial exploitation and unregulated hunting weighed heavy on waterfowl populations," said Mike Szymanski, North Dakota Game and Fish Department migratory game bird management supervisor. "Add in the conversion of millions of acres of prairie grasses and wetlands to create farmland, coupled with the historic drought of the 1930s, and America's waterfowl simply couldn't recover."

And the astonishing variety of wildlife experienced by explorers to North America was no longer.

According to the USFWS, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act nearly 90 years ago, and an increasingly concerned nation took action to stop the destruction of wetlands vital to the survival of migratory waterfowl. Under the act, all waterfowl hunters 16 years of age and over must annually buy and carry a federal duck stamp.

The first duck stamp, required for the 1934-35 hunting season, cost \$1. That stamp, featuring a pair of mallards landing in a wetland, was the creation of J.N. "Ding" Darling, then director of the Bureau of Biological Survey (forerunner to today's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service).





NONTOXIC SHOT ZONE

Special Regulations In Effect-Consult Manager "I think it's really important for all hunters in North Dakota to take note of what the duck stamp does because they're all benefiting from it, especially pheasant hunters and deer hunters,"

"Ninety-eight percent of the proceeds from those sales go to fund the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, which is then used to purchase national wildlife refuge lands and waterfowl production areas in North Dakota, South Dakota and other upper Midwest states that are part of the national wildlife refuge system," Szymanski said. "It's an extremely effective program. If you want money to go straight into conserving waterfowl habitat, the duck stamp is a great way to direct those monies because if you buy, say, \$100 worth of stamps, \$98 are going to go straight to the landscape."

HABITAT BACKBONE

Today, a federal duck stamp costs \$25. While he needs just one to legally hunt waterfowl, Szymanski buys four or five every year because the monies are so effective in hitting North Dakota's landscape.

"I've always thought the refuges, and especially the waterfowl production areas, are kind of the jewels of our prairie wetland landscape," he said. "Without those we don't have anything to build out from. That's why I kind of think of them as being the spine of the habitat base, because from them we can start adding in to mix and match whatever other habitat programs we can to complement those permanent fixtures on the landscape.



The first duck stamp.

"We have just shy of 300,000 national wildlife refuge acres in North Dakota where we don't hunt waterfowl, but we do have some other hunting opportunities on those lands. And we also have the federal waterfowl production areas," Szymanski added. "The WPAs provide just shy of 300,000 acres of public hunting access and that's just what's in North Dakota. Funds from the sale of duck stamps are also super important for conducting voluntary habitat work on private lands that benefit so many species."

The WPAs benefit all prairie habitat type species from sharp-tailed grouse, pheasants, songbirds, wading birds, white-tailed deer and, of course, waterfowl.

Since 1934, according to the USFWS, more than \$1 billion has been raised by the sale of federal duck stamps to help conserve more than 6 million acres of high-quality waterfowl habitat. Service officials, and certainly many conservationists, laud the duck stamp as a conservation success story for the ages.

"The conservation work that's funded by duck stamp dollars is exceptional, and it's the basis of what we have in North Dakota."



"The duck stamp is truly an American thing ... it's one of the rare examples," Szymanski said. "Historically, it is one of the most successful conservation programs in the world. And it is truly an American thing where we're requiring people to buy the stamp for a hunting permit. That's literally what it is, a hunting permit. But all the dollars are going to conservation. There's nothing like it in the world."

Another aspect of the duck stamp that makes it the nation's own, certainly, is the amazing work that graces the stamps.

"The paintings of ducks, geese and other waterfowl is just another part of just how American this is. American folk art is a big deal in our country," Szymanski said. "And that goes back to all kinds of hunting memorabilia, whether it's wooden decoys that were produced in the late 1800s to wildlife prints, wildlife art. And the duck stamp is art."

While waterfowl hunters are required to buy a federal duck stamp each year that they hunt, Szymanski urges other hunters to do the same to provide more juice to the fund.

"I think it's really important for all hunters in North Dakota to take note of what the duck stamp does because they're all benefiting from it, especially pheasant hunters and deer hunters," he said. "The conservation work that's funded by duck stamp dollars is exceptional, and it's the basis of what we have in North Dakota. So, the more duck stamps we sell, the better off we are for conserving habitat and providing hunting opportunities."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



DUCK STAMP MILESTONES

- 1929)) The Migratory Bird Conservation Act is passed.
- 1934)) The first duck stamps are sold.
- 1949)) The first duck stamp art contest was open to any U.S. artist who wished to enter. Decades later, the Federal Duck Stamp Art Contest remains the only art competition of its kind sponsored by the U.S. government, and one that anyone may enter. Wildlife artists annually vie for the prestige of seeing their art grace the new stamp.
- 1984)) Congress amended the Duck Stamp Act to authorize the interior secretary to license reproductions of the federal duck stamp on products manufactured and sold by private sector enterprises. Royalties from the sale of these products are also deposited into the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund for wetlands acquisition.
- 2010)) The Electronic Duck Stamp Program is piloted, allowing users to buy federal duck stamps online through state licensing systems. A printed receipt, available immediately, is valid for 45 days, during which time a physical duck stamp is mailed. The E-stamp Program became permanent in 2013.
- 2014)) President Obama signed into law the first price increase for the federal duck stamp in more than 20 years. Bringing the cost of a duck stamp to \$25 beginning in 2015-16, the price increase ensured that funds would be available to protect an estimated 17,000 additional acres of habitat every year. The additional \$10 would be used to acquire conservation easements, allowing important habitat to be protected for future generations, while allowing owners to retain many private property rights and to live on and use their land.

(Source - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

The duck stamps, including the first duck stamp on page 13, were provided by Mike Szymanski, Game and Fish Department migratory game bird management supervisor.

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DEER LICENSE NUMBERS FALL

EHD TO BLAME

By Ron Wilson

he number of deer gun licenses made available to hunters by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department have been on the rise since 2016.

That changed this year, and the blame for the reduction of 8,000 deer tags compared to 2021 is easy to assign.

In 2021, amid significant drought conditions that hamstrung much, if not all, of the state, the Game and Fish Department received its first report on Aug. 1 of deer dying from epizootic hemorrhagic disease near Mandan.

And reports of the fallout of the naturally occurring virus spread by a biting midge that is often fatal to white-tailed deer, and less commonly to mule deer, pronghorn and elk, continued to pour in to Game and Fish for many weeks thereafter.

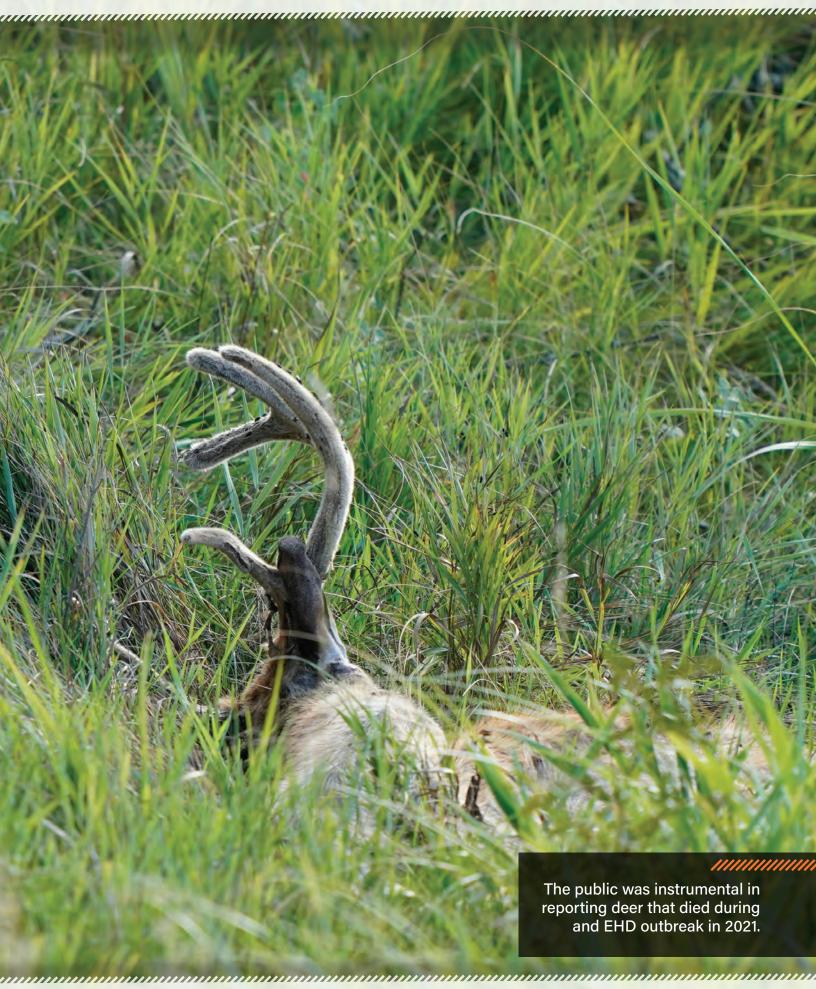
"I'm going to temper my strong statement, but it's safe to say the EHD outbreak in 2021 is on par with the worst year that we've witnessed in terms of EHD attributed mortality," said Dr. Charlie Bahnson, Game and Fish Department wildlife veterinarian. "Devastating is probably a good word for it."

While EHD has often been documented in southwestern North Dakota for decades, the hardest hit areas of the state in 2021 were along the Missouri River north and south of Bismarck-Mandan, as well as a smaller area near Williston.

"We saw a pretty dramatic decrease in harvest success in a number of units, particularly along the Missouri River," Bahnson said. "And that really tells you that it was harder to find deer out there. Even when you remove hunters who voluntarily returned their licenses, the remaining success of license holders was dramatically reduced."

The Game and Fish Department in 2021 allowed hunters with whitetail or "any" deer gun licenses in 22 hunting units the option of returning those licenses for a refund.

To use an overused phrase, as Bahnson put it, 2021 was truly the perfect storm for a significant EHD outbreak for a number of reasons.



"For one, 2020 was a bad EHD year in traditional areas, so we knew that coming off of 2020 there was probably a fair amount of residual virus out there," he said. "The second thing would be that the literature has demonstrated a pretty strong tie between bad EHD years and drought conditions, and in July of last year, nearly all of the state was under extreme or even exceptional drought, and the worst areas were actually kind of along the Missouri River, just north of the Missouri River.

"A third factor is that we actually had pretty good high densities of deer along the Missouri River, so the kindling was there for things to blow up," he added. "A final factor was the virus was moving into a population that rarely, if ever, sees the virus. So, there was truly what we call a 'immunologically naïve population,' which also lends itself to really dramatic effects."

On top of that, a couple hard frosts needed to stop the outbreak in its tracks were late in coming.

"On average, we start to see our first frost the fourth or fifth week in September in most parts of the state, but in 2021 we didn't start to see our first hard frost until the end of October," Bahnson said. "Unfortunately, things just continued to spiral out of control for another four or five weeks."

On a positive note, Bahnson said the deer still on the landscape in those areas hard hit in 2021 were likely exposed to the virus and now have some level of immunity.

"There's some resistance built up that should help us out this year," he said. "Because predictions are pretty cheap, I would predict that we won't see nearly the kind of year that we saw last year."

Plus, drought conditions that persisted and fueled the outbreak in 2021 are a thing of the past, at least at this writing.

Bahnson expects whitetail numbers to rebound, and rebound pretty quickly, in those hard-hit areas,

especially if there is good habitat on the landscape and conditions allow.

"If there's good conditions out there, they'll produce more fawns and it doesn't take long to build back up the population," he said. "I think it really demonstrates the fundamental message that the Game and Fish Department tries to put out that habitat is what builds resilience in our deer population. If we can maintain good habitat, get some favorable weather patterns in the next couple of years, I think we can be pretty confident that we'll get back to a level that people are comfortable with."

While EHD reared its ugly head in a big way in 2021, Department wildlife managers consistently monitor other wildlife diseases, namely chronic wasting disease, which affects the nervous system of members of the deer family and is always fatal.

Understanding this, Bahnson said people will ask, and for good reason, why the Game and Fish Department cares about CWD, when clearly there is an impact from EHD?

"One thing I try to illustrate is that EHD is actually a very, well-studied disease phenomenon across the United States, and one big take away from EHD is that as dramatic of a year as we saw in 2021, we know that it's cyclical. It comes and goes, and whitetail deer can definitely survive in the long-term with EHD," Bahnson said. "By comparison, CWD is this slow, incipient thing where you're not going to see one quiet year and one bad year in this oscillating pattern, you're just going to see this increased disease pressure that, if let uncontrolled, could become an annual, mounting cause of mortality, that the population will have a hard time sustaining in the long term."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

One of the fallouts of the EHD outbreak in 2021 was that hunters in 22 hunting units were given the opportunity return their deer gun licenses for refund.





GF.ND.GOV/THE-DRIFT





BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



Blue-winged teal

Spring Breeding Duck Numbers Tallied

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 75th annual spring breeding duck survey conducted in May showed an index of nearly 3.4 million birds, up 16% from last year.

Migratory game bird supervisor Mike Szymanski said the index was the 23rd highest on record and stands 38% above the long-term (1948-2021) average.

Indices for most individual species, with the exception of green-winged teal, gadwall, wigeon and blue-winged teal, increased from 2021. Mallards were up 58% from 2021 and represented the 25th highest count on record. The ruddy duck index increased 157%, shovelers and pintails increased 126% and 108%, respectively, and other increases ranged from 4% for scaup to 69% for canvasbacks. Decreases from the 2021 index were observed for green-winged teal (-42%), gadwall (-36%), wigeon (-10%) and blue-winged teal (-4%).

"It's important to note that some of our statewide increases in species counts might not reflect broader-scale population trends, especially for pintails," Szymanski said. "The abnormally wet conditions in the state are likely holding a higher percentage of breeding pintails than normal. We're coming off a very dry year that resulted in low reproduction, range-wide, for many species."

The number of temporary and seasonal wetlands was substantially higher than last year, as figures show the spring water index is up 616%, the largest single year increase on record for the survey. The water index is based on basins with water and does not necessarily represent the amount of water contained in wetlands or the type of wetlands represented. Consistent precipitation and cool weather leading up to the survey left a lot of water on the landscape in ditches and intermittent streams.

"Besides being our 75th consecutive survey year, this was an interesting survey, as we've gone back and forth between wet and dry conditions over the past couple of years," Szymanski said. "We actually had our second highest wetland index in the state, which is largely made up of water that'll dry up fairly quickly. But ponds that are important for brood-rearing habitat have rebounded nicely as well.

"A lot can change between May and hunting season, so we'll get a few more looks from our July brood index and our September wetland count," he added. "But duck production should be a little bit better this year than it was last year due to a stronger breeding effort. However, we continue to lose grass in upland nesting sites that will diminish reproductive potential for ducks in the state. Despite expected low Canada goose production this year due to the harsh conditions in April, we did have a record number of geese on breeding territories, so hunting opportunities for those birds should be pretty good again this year."



Upland sandpiper

Significant Conservation Bill Clears Major Hurdle

Wildlife conservationists in North Dakota and elsewhere applauded the U.S. House of Representatives for passing the bipartisan Recovering America's Wildlife Act in June, lauding the landmark legislation as the most significant investment in wildlife conservation in a generation.

If approved by the Senate, RAWA will provide unprecedented levels of funding for states, along with tribal nations, to conserve and recover imperiled wildlife and plant species.

According to the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, RAWA would strengthen the nation's conservation legacy by dedicating \$1.3 billion annually for state-level conservation and \$97.5 million to tribal nations to recover and sustain healthy fish and wildlife populations. The funds will be used to accelerate the recovery of the more than 12,000 species of greatest conservation need across the country by implementing strategies identified in each state's federally approved State Wildlife Action Plan.

If approved as is, it's estimated that North Dakota could receive about \$15 million annually in dedicated wildlife funding.

Jeb Williams, North Dakota Game and Fish Department director, said that while RAWA passing the House was momentous, he understands the hurdles the bill must clear to become reality. "The Senate will now be the next step in the process and discussion continues amongst leadership on the importance of this funding," he said.

Wildlife managers, Williams said, 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.

"We have 115 species of conservation priority in North Dakota and the backbone of RAWA is to give extra attention to those species so they don't become threatened or endangered," he said. "Recovering America's Wildlife Act is a state wildlife grant on steroids and the funding will certainly provide us the opportunity in North Dakota to keep that from happening."

New Buffalo Record Set

A bow fisherman from Bismarck has set a new bow/spear state record.

Mitch Estabrook arrowed a 60-pound, 8-ounce buffalo from Heart Butte Reservoir on May 16. It broke the previous record by 3 pounds, taken at Heart Butte Reservoir in 2017 by Derek Larson of Mandan.

Buffalo are a native fish sometimes confused with nonnative and invasive common carp. North



Mitch Estabrook with his record fish.

Dakota Game and Fish Department records indicate that Estabrook's fish is the largest weighed in the state that was not a paddlefish or pallid sturgeon.

Archery Hunters Plan for Licenses

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department reminds archery hunters to plan accordingly and allow for time to receive their bow tag in the mail as hunters will not receive their tag immediately after purchase.

Bow licenses can still be purchased at license vendors, but like last year the tag will arrive by postal mail, not over the counter while the customer waits. This applies while purchasing a bow license at a license vendor, or at the Game and Fish Department's main office in Bismarck.

The bow tag will be mailed the next business day after the bow license is purchased. All archery hunters must have the bow tag in their possession before hunting.

Bow licenses can also be purchased online by visiting My Account at the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov.

Earth Day, Every Day

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has for years encouraged students to design Earth Day patches to bring greater awareness to the environment in the state and elsewhere.

Yet, like Earth Day, which began in 1970 and kickedstarted the environmental movement, the concern for our outdoor places isn't simply a once-a-year-thing, but ongoing.

Understanding this, the Game and Fish Department has initiated Earth Day, Every Day to promote continual awareness about the environment.

Groups that engage in environmental clean-up projects, landscaping, or other efforts that promote environmental awareness, will receive an Earth Day patch for all participants.

The patches are used to recognize groups that work to celebrate the Earth Day concept, and everyone is encouraged to participate in the Earth Day, Every Day awareness campaign.

For more information about Earth Day, Every Day, or to request patches for your project, contact Sherry Niesar, Earth Day coordinator, at 701-527-3714 or sniesar@nd.gov.



Cami Wight, North Dakota Game and Fish Department lab technician (pictured) and Ryan Herigstad, Department game management technician, set cubby sets for pine martens across the Turtle Mountains in June as part of a three-year study with Michigan State University. The goal of the study, which is in its first year, is to help assess prevalence, distribution and genetic variance of pine martens in the Turtle Mountains. The cubby sets were baited with beaver meat, salmon oil was used as lure on the base of the tree, and sticky pads were strategically placed to collect marten hair samples. Cameras were also placed at each site.



Anglers Encouraged to Report Tagged Fish

Anglers can help fisheries managers by reporting information on tagged fish.

Most tagged fish in North Dakota, except salmon, will have either a metal tag on the jawbone or a small tag attached near the dorsal fin. Tagged salmon have their adipose fin removed and also have a microscopic, coded wire tag embedded in their head. Anglers are asked to drop their tagged salmon heads off at Game and Fish offices in Riverdale or Bismarck so that biologists can remove the tag and read it.

North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries biologists say it's imperative anglers report tagged fish from whatever waters they are fishing in, no matter if they end up in livewells or back in the lake. Anglers are also encouraged to treat tagged fish just like they would treat any other fish they might have caught. Anglers practicing catch-and-release should record the tag number before releasing the fish.

Anglers are asked to record the tag number and report that along with the date and location the fish was caught, approximate size and whether the fish was harvested or released. Tagged fish can be reported on the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, or call the Department's main office in Bismarck at 701-328-6300.



Tips When Launching, Loading Boats

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department encourages boaters to plan accordingly when launching and loading a boat. Here are a few simple reminders to ensure a fluent transition at the ramp.

Launching

 Don't pull onto the ramp until your boat is ready to launch.

- Prepare for launching in the parking area. Remove covers, load equipment, remove tie downs, attach lines and put in drain plug before backing onto the ramp.
- When ready, pull in line to launch. Wait your turn. Be courteous.

Loading

- Don't block the loading area with your boat until your tow vehicle is ready to load. Wait until you are clear of the launch area to unload gear.
- As soon as your trailer is in the water, load and secure your boat to the trailer.
- Remove boat and trailer from the water as quickly as possible.

Get clear of the ramp. Pull into the parking area to finish securing your boat, unload gear, drain all water and inspect for and removing any vegetation. Remember to leave plugs out when transporting your boat.



MIKE ANDERS

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual aerial pronghorn survey began in early July and will determine pronghorn abundance, herd demographics and fawn production. This data, which was not available at publication, is used to set the number of licenses for the fall hunting season.

ANS Regs for Traveling Boaters

North Dakota boaters traveling to or through other states or Canadian provinces, are reminded to check the aquatic nuisance species regulations of their destination.

Mandatory boat inspections may be required along highways or at lakes based on destination or route taken. In general, to ensure compliance, boaters are strongly encouraged to clean, drain and dry equipment.

- CLEAN: remove plants, animals and excessive mud from trailers, hulls, motors and other equipment such as fishing rods.
- DRAIN: drain all water, including bilges, livewells and bait buckets.
- DRY: allow all equipment to dry completely, as an inspection might fail in a neighboring state if any standing water is present. If necessary, use sponges or towels to remove excess water and leave compartments open to dry.

More information on bordering state and provincial ANS

regulations is available at the following web addresses.

- South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks at sdleastwanted.sd.gov
- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources at dnr.state.mn.us/invasives/ais/index.html
- Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks at cleandraindry.mt.gov/
- Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment at saskatchewan.ca/residents/environmentpublic-health-and-safety/wildlife-issues/ invasive-species/aquatic-invasive-speciesprevention-program
- Manitoba Department of Sustainable Development at ov.mb.ca/sd/ waterstewardship/stopais/index.html



Fur Harvester Ed Classes Slated

The North Dakota Cooperative Fur Harvester Education Program is hosting fur harvester education classes on Aug. 2, 4, and 6 at the North Dakota Game and Fish Department in Bismarck and Oct. 6, 7, and 8 at the Velva Wildlife Club in Velva.

Fur harvester education classes are 16 hours in length, free, voluntary, and cover topics associated with trapping and fur hunting. Much of the instruction includes hands-on experience with traps and equipment commonly used for harvesting furbearers and properly caring for the pelts.

Successful completion of this training provides certification, which is recognized by other states where mandatory trapper education training is required. Participants can enroll for either of these classes on the Game and Fish Department website at gf.nd.gov/education/fur-harvester.

The North Dakota Cooperative Fur Harvester Education Program is also hosting a Using Cable Devices in North Dakota training seminar on Oct. 15 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Velva Wildlife Club.

The seminar is free and available to anyone who would like information and experience using cable devices. All aspects of cable device construction, care, use, ethics, responsibility,

and legal requirements are covered. Much of the instruction includes hands-on field application and set construction. Preregistration is required by contacting Rick Tischaefer at 701-460-1055.

Boaters Reminded to Report Accidents

Regardless of how safe and cautious boaters are on the water, accidents happen. If a boating accident involves injury, death or disappearance of a person, an accident report must be completed and sent to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department within 48 hours of the occurrence.

If property damage exceeds \$2,000, but no deaths or injuries occur, a boat operator has five days to file a report.

These reporting requirements are mandatory whether there is one or more boats involved.

A boat accident form is available on the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, at any Game and Fish office or by contacting a local game warden.

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/photocontest. 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. 3. 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.

Boat North Dakota Course

North Dakota state law requires youth ages 12-15 who want to operate a boat or personal watercraft by themselves with at least a 10-horsepower motor must pass the state's boating basics course.

The course is available for home-study by contacting the North

Dakota Game and Fish Department at 701-328-6300, or ndgf@nd.gov. Two commercial providers also offer the course online, and links to those sites are found on the boat and water safety education page on the Game and Fish website at gf.nd.gov.

While the home-study course is free, students are charged a fee to take it online. The online provider charges for the course, not the Game and Fish Department. The fee remains with the online provider. The course covers legal requirements, navigation rules, getting underway, accidents and special topics such as weather, rules of the road, laws, lifesaving and first aid.

Leave Baby Animals Alone

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department offers a simple message to the well-intentioned who want to pick up and rescue what appear to be orphaned



baby animals this time of year: don't touch them. Whether it is a young fawn, duckling, cottontail rabbit or a songbird, it is better to leave them alone.

Often, young animals are not abandoned or deserted, and the mother is probably nearby. Young wildlife are purposely secluded by adults to protect them from predators.

Anytime a young wild animal has human contact, its chance of survival decreases significantly. It's illegal to take wild animals home, and captive animals later returned to the wild will struggle to survive without possessing learned survival skills.

The only time a baby animal should be picked up is if it is in an unnatural situation, such as a young songbird found on a doorstep. In that case, the young bird can be moved to the closest suitable habitat.

Citizens should also steer clear of adult wildlife, such as deer or moose that might wander into urban areas. Crowding stresses animals and this can lead to a potentially dangerous situation.

In addition, motorists are reminded to watch for deer along roadways. During the next several weeks young animals are dispersing from home ranges, and with deer more active during this time, the potential for car deer collisions increase.

White Suckers Only Legal in Bois de Sioux, Red Rivers

The state Game and Fish Department reminds anglers that live white suckers are not legal baitfish anywhere in North Dakota, except in the Bois de Sioux and Red rivers.

Anglers can use live white suckers on the Bois de Sioux

and Red rivers, and tributaries up to the first vehicular bridge; however, they are illegal elsewhere. Fathead minnows, sticklebacks and creek chubs are the only legal live baitfish outside of the Bois de Sioux and Red rivers.

The transportation of live white suckers, other than in Richland, Cass, Traill, Grand Forks, Walsh and Pembina counties, is illegal.

For more information, refer to the 2022-24 North Dakota Fishing Guide, available at license vendors or online at the state Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov.

Anglers May Not Bring Live Aquatic Bait into North Dakota

Anglers are reminded that it is illegal to import minnows and other forms of live aquatic bait, such as leeches and frogs, into North Dakota,

When purchasing live aquatic bait, anglers must buy from a licensed North Dakota retail bait vendor. Bait vendors can properly identify species and ensure all bait is clean of any aquatic nuisance species.

For more information, refer to the 2022-24 North Dakota Fishing Guide, available at license vendors or online at the state Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov.

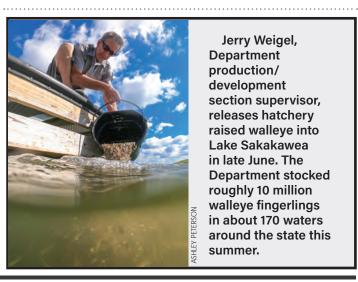
Put Garbage Where it Belongs

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department reminds outdoor recreationists to keep it clean this summer by packing out all trash.

All garbage, including used fireworks, should be placed in a proper trash receptacle. If trash cans aren't available, or full, dispose of trash at home.

It is not uncommon to see garbage piling up around full trash containers. Styrofoam containers are not biodegradable, but are often found wedged in cattails, drifting or washed up on shore.

Tires, mattresses and kitchen appliances have found their way to public use areas. This illegal dumping is costly to clean up and takes a significant toll on the environment. Not only does it spoil the beauty of the land, it destroys habitat, has the potential to pollute North Dakota waters and can injure wildlife.



Jerry Weigel, Department production/ development section supervisor, releases hatchery raised walleve into Lake Sakakawea in late June. The Department stocked roughly 10 million walleye fingerlings in about 170 waters around the state this summer.

BACKCAST By Ron Wilson

Back in the day, largely free of parental oversight, mostly broke and certainly comfortable sleeping in the dirt while chasing fish or whatever wild game was in season, I made some questionable, but not surprising, housing choices.

I wasn't picky.

What's the rent? Does the roof leak? When can I move in?

Writing from memory about my first off-campus housing in college, I remember how the light from the apartment below would shine through the rotten chunk of bathroom floor between the tub and toilet, acting as sort of a dim nightlight, but also as a warning to mind my next step.

That memory, a mostly clear recollection from the early 1980s, has little do with anything, but everything to do with the pair of house wrens nesting in our back yard.

Turns out, these birds aren't fussy either when it comes to picking temporary digs to raise young. I read where they've nested in mailboxes, flowerpots and the pocket of a coat hanging on clothesline.

The tiny pair, often seen holding their short tails cocked over their backs as they bounced from limb to limb in our back yard ash tree, nested in a birdhouse that reminds me of a prairie church.

While their choice was likely better than a coat pocket, it didn't end well as high winds blew out the bottom of the birdhouse and its underdeveloped inhabitants. I found three of their young, mostly featherless, covered in ants the following day.

Life is tough on the Northern Plains, even in a back yard.

I repaired the birdhouse with the hope that maybe they'll renest. I welcome their company because their full-throated song is a treat and one of just a handful that I recognize. House wrens sound like summer, that too short season in North Dakota, but fortunately leads us into fall.

By comparison, the diminutive house wren has nothing in common, at least physically, with the long-billed curlew, North America's largest shorebird. The latter is roughly 17-18 inches taller than the former.

The connection, at least for this dispatch, is loose, but there is one as I was the fly on the wall about mid-May in southwestern North Dakota as researchers trapped and outfitted male and female curlews with satellite and cellular transmitters.

One of the things I found interesting is that female curlews seemingly waste little time hanging around North Dakota after her young have hatched. While parental care is fairly equal for the first 10 days for the young that hit the ground fully feathered, the duties of protecting the long-legged newbies is left to the male for however long.

This my-job-is-done mentality was confirmed as one of the tagged and tracked females landed in central Nebraska on June 16, and three days later made it to the Texas coast near South Padre Island where she'll likely spend the winter.

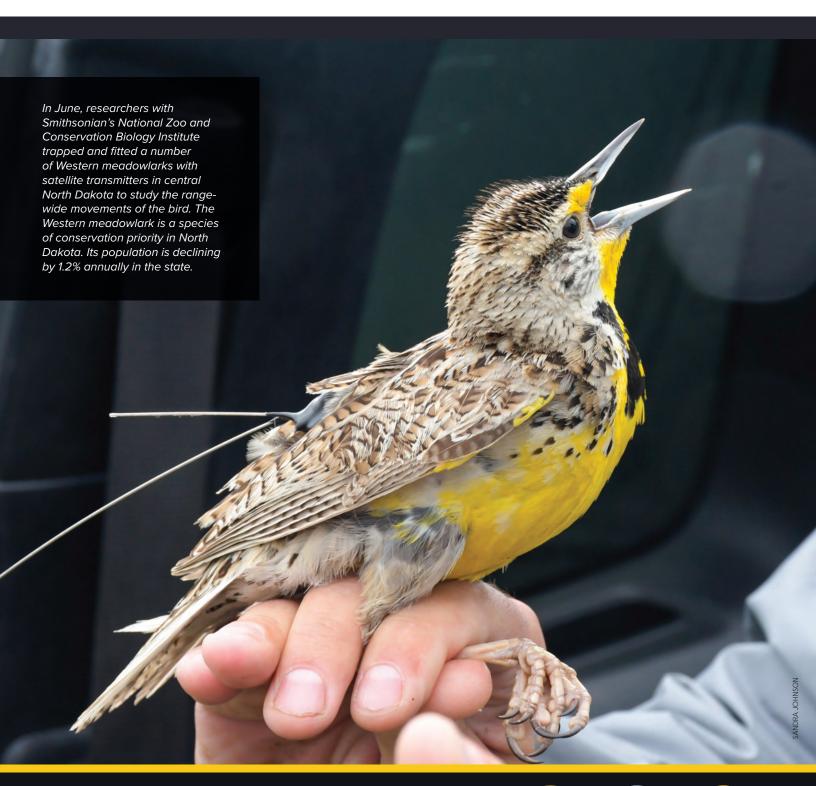
That's a quick about-face as the curlew likely completed its entire breeding season, travel and all, in about two months.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



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