

# NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT  
\$2.00 MAY 2023

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With the coming of spring, winter groups of pheasants break up and roosters become intolerant of one another. Roosters establish territories and crow to advertise to females and warn other males away.

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Official publication of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department (ISSN 0029-2761)  
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• Information 701-328-6300 • Licensing 701-328-6335  
• Administration 701-328-6305  
• *North Dakota Outdoors* Subscriptions 701-328-6363  
• Hunter Education 701-328-6615  
• 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.





SANDRA JOCHIMSON

# 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.*

• **Editor:** Ron Wilson • **Graphic Designer:** Kristi Fast • **Circulation Manager:** Dawn Jochim

MAY 2023 • NUMBER 9 • VOLUME LXXXV

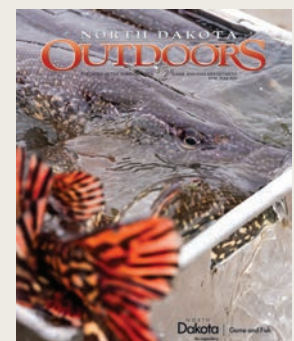
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*North Dakota OUTDOORS* is published 10 times a year, monthly except for the months of April and September. Subscription rates are \$10 for one year or \$20 for three years. Group rates of \$7 a year are available to organizations presenting 25 or 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

*Northern pike in a holding tank prior to being relieved of their milt and eggs at the Game and Fish Department's spring spawning effort on Lake Oahe. Photo by Ashley Peterson.*



# 2023 LEGISLATIVE REVIEW

BY SCOTT PETERSON



**N**orth Dakota's elected officials gather at the state capitol every other year to propose, review, debate and ultimately vote on legislation that will set the course for the state and its citizens.

2023, an odd year, was no different for the gathering of the 68th legislative assembly.

Some of those bills are related to how the North Dakota Game and Fish Department delivers services to its customers, which is partly why we closely tracked those bills and provided input or testimony as needed or appropriate.

Once bills were formally introduced, we sat down and discussed those bills, which may have a nexus to the Department and its customers, based on their merit. A decision was then made to monitor the bills and decide whether to either take a position of support, opposition or to remain neutral.

As the curtain fell on the session at the end of April, it's important to take a step back, as we always do, and assess how the session went from the standpoint of the Department's customer base.

We began the session by tracking as many as 20 bills that had the potential to affect, either directly or indirectly, how the Department conducts business into the future. Of course, not all bills ultimately became law. And as is always the case, some bills generated more scrutiny and discussion than others. It's worthy to delve into a couple of those bills a little more deeply.

House bill 1151 was a bill that, if passed, would have removed the Department's authority to ban hunting big game over bait. Our position on HB1151 was based on the science surrounding chronic wasting disease and our testimony reflected that. HB1151 passed the House but failed in the Senate.

Senate bill 1538 generated a lot of interest and discussion as it relates to how the

Department regulates fishing tournaments. SB1538 passed both the House and Senate but had to go to conference committee as it was amended on the House side. It ultimately passed both chambers, so we have new legislation governing the regulation of fishing tournaments in North Dakota.

The Department makes every attempt to represent its customer base when considering its position on all bills. However, that base is oftentimes divided on their specific perspective of legislation, so it can be virtually impossible to represent all individual interests in a way that satisfies everyone. Which is certainly why we encourage people to get involved in the legislative process in North Dakota that is built around, and encourages, citizen participation.

We will forever continue to encourage all to become informed on legislation and make their opinions known to their respective lawmakers.

One of the major changes made to the legislative process, largely due to covid, was that all conference committee hearings and floor sessions were livestreamed. I found it very convenient to be able to tune into those discussions without having to travel to the capitol each day. I hope others found this as convenient as I did.

So, in hindsight, I would say that our customer base fared fairly well in this past session. What I base that on is the fact that, for the most part, the people who make up our customer base will likely not notice an appreciable difference in hunting, fishing and trapping regulations, at least for the next two years, as they continue to enjoy the outdoors in our great state.

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





ASHLEY PETERSON

# PASSED

## NOTING NEW LEGISLATION

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department tracked 20 outdoors-related bills during the 2023 legislative session, 12 of which passed both chambers and were signed into law.

The following bills take effect Aug. 1.

**HB 1014** – Provides an appropriation for defraying the expenses of the industrial commission and agencies under its control. This includes Outdoor Heritage Fund at \$15 million.

**HB 1134** – Nonresident current North Dakota national guard members are eligible to receive resident licenses, except lottery permits.

**HB 1224** – Allows a dog handler to carry a handgun in the recovery of a big game animal while in the presence of a dog. The dog handler cannot use the handgun to assist in the recovery of the animal and must have permission from the landowner or individual authorized by the landowner before entering private land for the recovery of a big game animal.

**HB 1233** – Allows a 11-, 12- and 13-year-old antlerless white-tailed deer youth hunter to also hunt during the regular deer gun season.

**HB 1260** – Develops agreements to compensate private landowners for the development of habitat on private property for addressing fish and wildlife populations. In addition, allows

the Game and Fish director to issue special antlerless elk depredation management licenses to landowners upon payment of the fee required for a resident big game license. To be eligible for this license a landowner cannot charge a fee for elk hunting and must allow reasonable public access as determined by the director.

**HB 1366** – Allows an individual engaged in barefoot skiing or surfing to wear a wet suit. A life preserver must be on board the towing vessel for an individual barefoot skiing or surfing.

**HB 1409** – A nonresident youth who is less than 16 years of age may purchase a resident general game hunting license and may hunt small game and waterfowl, except swans and wild turkeys, during the entire regular small game and waterfowl seasons. The accompanying adult family member or legal guardian does not have to be licensed.

**HB 1538** – Relates to fishing. Established a \$50 entry fee for a fishing contest, an application fee of \$75 for all tournaments, a conservation fee of an amount to be determined between the tournament sponsor



Jeb Williams, Game and Fish Department director, addresses lawmakers at the 2023 legislative session.

ASHLEY PETERSON



and a representative of the fishing tournament (except for nonprofits), post contest reporting requirements, Game and Fish establishes a fishery conservation fund, and a surcharge of \$5 on each nonresident fishing license. Effective April 1, 2024.

**SB 2017** – Establishes an appropriation of \$107,611,466 to the Game and Fish Department for the biennium beginning July 1, 2023, and ending June 30, 2025.

**SB 2097** – Requires a political subdivision to notify the Game and Fish director, among others, before engaging in meetings with federal agencies to have any water body in the state designated a wild, scenic or recreational river under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

**SB 2297** – Certified game and fish volunteer instructors who have maintained active status in the state for 30 years are eligible to receive complimentary fishing and certain hunting licenses. Emergency clause carried; effective immediately.

**SB 2382** – Provides clarity to the motorboat numbering exemptions section of the North Dakota Century Code.

## FAILED BILLS THAT FAILED

**HB 1151** – Prohibits the Game and Fish Department from issuing rules or adopting a policy or practice prohibiting the baiting of big game animals for lawful hunting on private property.

**HB 1175** – Provides for a legislative management study regarding the posting of school trust lands during the big game hunting seasons.

**HB 1258** – The agriculture commissioner shall study challenges associated with native pollinating insects, including their decline, associated ecosystems, health and resilience.

**HB 1377** – Any member of a party of 10 or fewer may take or kill the number of deer which is equal to the number of valid deer licenses held by the participating members of the party.

**HB 1408** – Ten percent of the true and full valuation of land enrolled in the Private Land Open To Sportsmen program, which is owned by a resident of this state, would be eligible for property tax exemption.

**HB 1414** – A nonresident who previously has purchased a resident hunting or fishing license with the

Department and has a resident family member in the state may purchase a resident family member small game license and hunt upland game as authorized by the Department. The nonresident may hunt upland game for four days, which may be consecutive or nonconsecutive from November 15 to the end of the upland game season.

**SB 2294** – Nonprofit organizations eligible to receive special allocation big game hunting licenses would also include those eligible organizations exempt from federal income taxation under section 501(c)(19).


**SB 2368** – During the 2023-24 interim, legislative management shall consider studying the laws governing the Game and Fish Department and the possibility of implementing an appointed game and fish commission to supervise the Department.

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



MIKE ANDERSON





Once pike are relieved of their eggs or milt, Department fisheries personnel release them back into the lake.

# Delayed Start, Great Ending

By Ron Wilson  
Photos by Ashley Peterson





While it wasn't the latest start on record (that belongs to April 26, 2018), North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries biologists collected the first northern pike eggs of the spring spawning season on April 21 at Lake Oahe's Cattail Bay.

"We got a late start to our spring after the pretty terrible winter," said Paul Bailey, Department south central fisheries supervisor in Bismarck. "Typically, we like to be done collecting northern pike eggs about this time of year. Unfortunately, we're now just getting started thanks to the late spring."

On what certainly wouldn't qualify as a spring day to brag about – strong winds, spitting snow and cool temperatures – fisheries biologists still collected 2.28 million eggs, or more than half of this year's egg goal.

Jerry Weigel, Department production/development section supervisor, said fisheries biologists went into the short-lived spawning season with a goal of collecting 75 quarts of eggs, which translates to about 4.5 million eggs.

Weigel said a mature female pike in the 5- to 10-pound range will give up about 60,000 eggs to biologists, while a 15-pound pike will produce roughly double that.

"Typically, we can collect northern pike eggs from a variety of sources from a number of good pike populations across the state," Bailey said. "This year we're left with really one source given the current weather conditions. Lake Oahe just opened up a few days ago, which allowed us to get some nets in here to start collecting northern pike. A lot of our other productive pike fisheries in central and eastern North Dakota are still ice covered so this is really our best option right now."

No matter. Fisheries biologists returned to Cattail Bay April 24 and collected a bunch more eggs, and then some, for a total of 119 quarts, far surpassing their goal.

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*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*





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**Fisheries crews don't have the option of spawning northern pike in spring only when the weather is nice. Spitting snow, wind and cool temperatures are mostly the norm when the ice finally melts and these toothy fish are ready to dump eggs for future generations.**

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Fisheries crews use trap nets to collect pike swimming along the shorelines looking for suitable spawning areas. Once in the nets, male pike are sorted out from the female pike. With the female pike in hand, fisheries biologists then determine which fish are ready to give up their eggs and those that haven't reached that stage just yet.

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**On shore, fisheries personnel strip milt from male pike into a bowl of water. The eggs from female pike are taken next and added to the water and milt mixture. The eggs are typically fertilized within a matter of seconds.**

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After the eggs are fertilized in a bowl on the spawning bench, the eggs then go into a washer to remove any debris. Some eggs are damaged and broken during the process and some just aren't viable. Those that don't make the cut for transportation to the fish hatchery are removed.

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# LEARNING from the DEAD







THESE RIVER OTTERS WERE PHOTOGRAPHED FISHING FOR A MEAL AT A RETENTION POND THAT DRAINS INTO THE RED RIVER IN EASTERN NORTH DAKOTA.

By Ron Wilson

Unlike, say, sharp-tailed grouse that dance on prairie flat spots in spring, providing biologists a decently accurate headcount of those in attendance, many furtive furbearers don't offer the same, or anywhere near the same, unobstructed glimpses into the status of their populations.

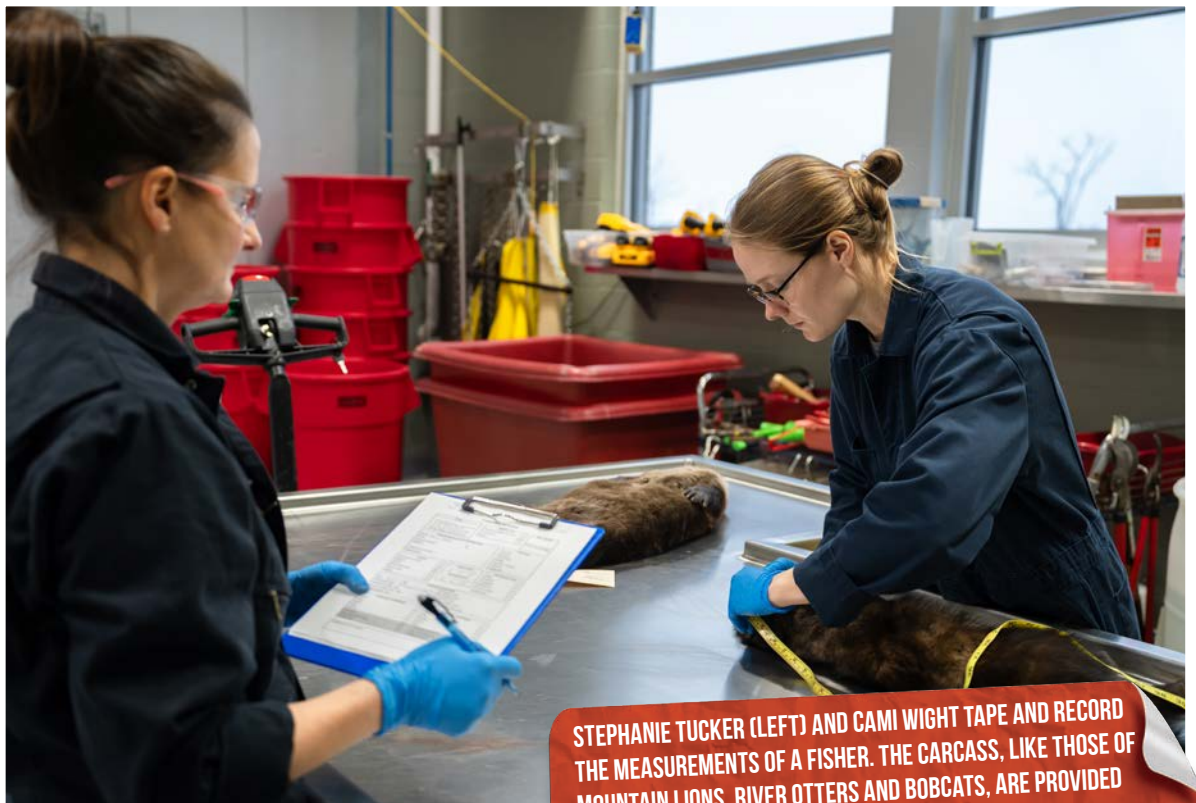
Take mountain lions for instance.

"They have really low densities on the landscape, they have huge home ranges, they're nocturnal and very secretive even when they're moving about during the day," said Stephanie Tucker, North Dakota Game and Fish Department game management section leader. "Which means we can't drive around and count them or even go up in an airplane and count them. So, we have to come up with other ways to survey the populations and monitor those population trends.

"And that is especially important if we have an open hunting or trapping season on that animal," she added. "We need some way to monitor those populations and ensure that our hunting and trapping seasons are either having the impact or not having the impact depending on what our population management goals are for that species."

Game and Fish manages these secretive furbearer species through necropsies, which Tucker explained are autopsies on animals instead of humans. While necropsies are performed for a variety of reasons, to determine an animal's health or cause of death, for example, the necropsies Tucker and





**STEPHANIE TUCKER (LEFT) AND CAMI WIGHT TAPE AND RECORD THE MEASUREMENTS OF A FISHER. THE CARCASS, LIKE THOSE OF MOUNTAIN LIONS, RIVER OTTERS AND BOBCATS, ARE PROVIDED BY HUNTERS AND TRAPPERS FOR INSPECTION.**

ASHLEY PETERSON

staff do on furbearers usually serve a different purpose.

"Mountain lions, bobcats, river otters and fishers are four of the species of furbearers in North Dakota that we require hunters and trappers to relinquish the carcass to us after the pelt has been removed," Tucker said, "and we're just using that necropsy to collect some very basic demographic and reproductive information about the animals so that we can survey them."

While Tucker and staff can learn a number of things about an animal through a necropsy, what's vital is to understand if the population of the furbearer on the examination table is increasing or decreasing.

"For my purposes, when creating a population model, there's really two important pieces of information. We want to know how old the animal is when it died to estimate survival based on that age information," Tucker said. "And the second thing is we want to find out if it is a female, was she reproductively active in the last year? And if so, how big was that litter that she might have had."

In short, Tucker said biologists are trying to determine through information on survival and reproduction if the population is increasing or decreasing. Which is why it's vital that hunt-

ers and trappers help in the effort to collect enough mountain lion, bobcat, river otter and fisher carcasses to create population models to monitor trends.

This information is necessary in assisting wildlife managers in setting furbearer seasons and limits.

"Let's say what we're after is to maintain a stable number of animals on the landscape, but our population trend is really increasing," Tucker said. "Knowing that, we might open up that hunting or trapping season a little bit more. We might allow more animals to be taken the following year. Yet, if the population is trending downward and we don't want it heading that way, we might back off on our hunting or trapping seasons a little bit to account for that."

Before biologists cut open animals to see what information can be gleaned from within, they take a handful of size and weight measurements.

"We want to know, in general, what the size and





weight of mountain lions are in North Dakota, because that's useful to managers both in North Dakota and other regions," Tucker said.

It helps answer whether mountain lions, for instance, are bigger in this region or smaller.

"These measurements help us age the animal a little bit as well," she said.

To get a better account on the age of the furbearer in question, biologists pull a certain tooth and send it elsewhere for examination.

"All mammals have growth rings on the roots of their teeth. It's like when you cut a tree down and you can count the really obvious growth rings, which show that it grows at different rates during different times of year," Tucker said. "The same thing happens to the teeth of mammals. What we do is pull a standardized tooth and send it to a lab in Montana where they section the tooth and stain it so those growth rings really pop under a microscope. Then they count the growth rings to give us a really accurate age."

While age and reproductive information top the list of what biologists are seeking during these necropsies, they can learn some other things about the animals during these examinations as well.

"We are able to collect a lot of other really useful information, such as diet, size differences between males and females, plus the overall health of the animal when it was taken," Tucker said. "We also might do some disease surveillance that can have an impact negatively on the population or have the ability to be transmitted to people."

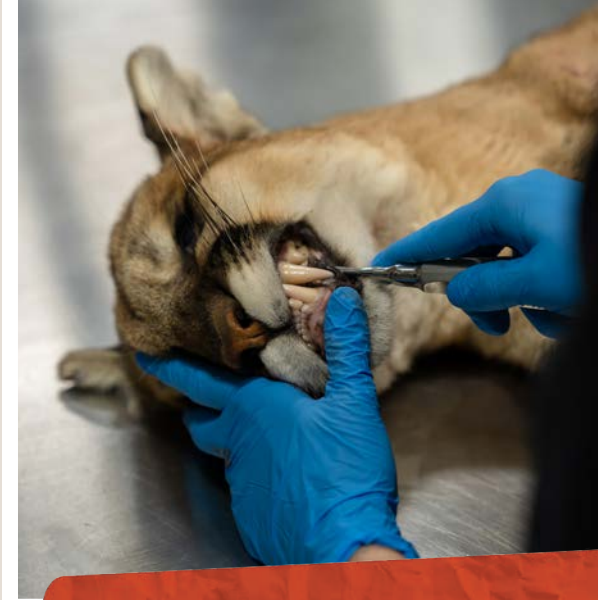
When focusing on the diet of mountain lions,

for example, Tucker said because these predators like to eat porcupines, biologists begin to look for evidence of this by searching for quills in the face, front shoulders and chest area.



ASHLEY PETERSON

STEPHANIE TUCKER (RIGHT) AND MEGAN SIEGL DISCUSS THE PHYSICAL MAKEUP OF A MOUNTAIN LION PRIOR TO THE NECROPSY.



STEPHANIE TUCKER INSPECTS THE BUSINESS END OF A MOUNTAIN LION.

"But we're also going to open up the stomach cavity to look to see what's in there. Now, they primarily eat deer. And so, that's typically what we find and what we expect to find in a mountain lion," she said. "But sometimes we find other unusual things like the already mentioned porcupine, beaver, wild turkey, things that they might encounter because they are opportunistic."

But each furbearer species is a little bit different.

"Bobcats, for instance, are rabbit specialists. So, we find primarily remains of rabbits in their stomachs and things like that," Tucker said. "In years of low rabbit numbers on the landscape, we'll find a lot of voles and mice in a bobcat's stomach. It just kind of depends on what's going on at that time in North Dakota with the predator prey cycle. But a lot of species are pretty predictable in what we're probably going to find in their stomach."

Without the necropsies, without the cooperation of hunters and trappers providing the carcasses for inspection, wildlife managers would certainly be behind the game.

"This is our critical survey method for these furbearer species," Tucker said. "Without these animals to necropsy, we would have no other information to adjust our management up or down, depending on what's going on with the populations on the landscape because we just wouldn't know."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

ASHLEY PETERSON





# WILDLIFE CROSSINGS

*Proving their worth*

By Ron Wilson



Nearly two years of monitoring wildlife crossings in western North Dakota revealed that a number of animals — from moose to mule deer to bighorn sheep to white-tailed deer and the occasional turkey — successfully navigated the underground passages hundreds of times out of harm’s way of passing traffic on U.S. Highway 85.

“The number of animals that have successfully gone through the crossings so far is very encouraging and we realize that we’re probably going to see an even higher number of animals use them in the future,” said Bruce Kreft, North Dakota Game and Fish Department resource biologist. “As the Game and Fish Department, we want to protect the animals, help fulfill their life cycles and allow them safe passage. And from a motoring public standpoint, these safe crossings translate to the possibility of hundreds of fewer wildlife-vehicle collisions.”

North Dakota’s first wildlife underpass was constructed on U.S. Highway 85 on the Lewis and Clark Wildlife Management Area near Williston, utilizing design criteria for moose. The second crossing, also on U.S. Highway 85 south of the Long X Bridge near the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park, was completed a few years later in 2021 to accommodate bighorn sheep movements, as well as the comings and goings of mule deer and other animals.

To monitor wildlife movement at the sites, Kreft said trail cameras were installed on both sides of the crossings. While cameras identified successful navigation through the structures, they also identified “deflections,” or animals that simply approached the crossings but didn’t fully commit.

With increased traffic and the proposed widening of U.S. Highway 85 from Belfield to Watford City, Kreft said there is a need to address human safety and economic losses attributed to vehicle-wildlife collisions by evaluating and designing crossings to accommodate the movement of large mammals and other critters.

The 62-mile stretch of highway from Belfield to Watford City wanders through unique habitat types, Kreft said, including native prairie, badlands and the

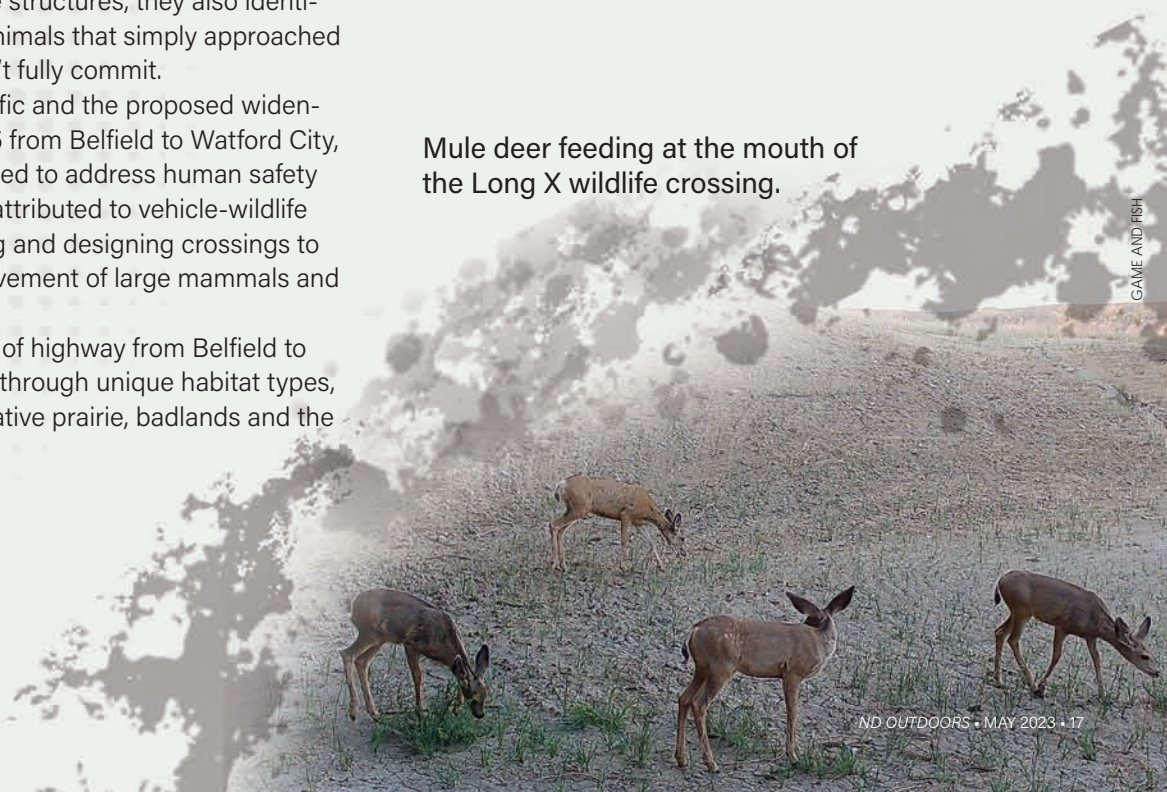


**Bighorn sheep at the Long X wildlife crossing.**

Little Missouri River valley. This corridor is home to a host of North Dakota’s big game species including bighorn sheep, mule deer, white-tailed deer, elk and pronghorn, plus mountain lions, coyotes, the list goes on.

“These species all rely on different habitat types to fulfill various portions of their life cycles, which requires crossing Highway 85 numerous times in a year to fulfill those requirements,” Kreft said. “From our standpoint, a biological standpoint, habitat connectivity is the important aspect to this. Many of these animals need different types of habitat during, say, the breeding season, and these structures provide them safe passage to those different habitats.”

**Mule deer feeding at the mouth of the Long X wildlife crossing.**







Safe passage provided by the wildlife crossings in western North Dakota is certainly a plus for animals and motorists.

“The number of animals that have successfully gone through the crossings so far is very encouraging and we realize that we’re probably going to see an even higher number of animals use them in the future,” said Bruce Kreft.

GAME AND FISH

Some findings from the Long X crossing:

- This crossing experienced 386 and 989 mule deer approaching the crossing in 2021 and 2022 with a successful crossing rate of 91% and 93%, respectively. The crossing was only monitored for 143 days in 2021, resulting in fewer animals approaching compared to 2022, but had similar animals crossing per day of monitoring.
- Bighorn sheep movements resulted in 58 and 171 animals approaching the structure in 2021 and 2022, with successful crossing rates of 81% and 89%, respectfully.
- Both mule deer and bighorn sheep experienced an increase in crossing success from 2021 to 2022. This likely is contributed to behavioral learning and hopefully the start of generational learning of fawns and lambs.

“A lot of times with a new structure there’s generational learning that has to occur, that this structure is there for them and it’s a safe passageway for them to get to the other side,” Kreft said. “Typically, it takes about 3 to 4 years to really see the full degree of crossing for those animals. The ewes have to teach their lambs and the does have to teach their fawns that it’s a safe way to get to the other side for breeding purposes, feeding purposes, for whatever.”

Some findings from the Lewis and Clark WMA crossing:

- This crossing had 177 and 654 whitetail deer approach with only a 36% and 69% crossing rate in 2021 and 2022, respectively. The significant increase in 2022 likely attributed to flooding in the underpass in 2021.





Wild turkeys at the entrance of the Long X wildlife crossing.

- Moose had similar numbers approaching the structure in 2021 and 2022, at 188 and 184, respectively, resulting in crossing rates of 87% and 93%.

Kreft noted that many of the animals caught on trail cameras at both crossings were the same animals photographed more than once as they came and went. Not every image is a "new" animal.

As the North Dakota Department of Transportation continues its effort to widen U.S. Highway 85 from two to four lanes, Kreft said the Game and Fish Department and DOT are evaluating the construction of two wildlife crossings between Long X and U.S. Highway 200, one of which will go over the highway, not under it, to accommodate elk, pronghorn and mule deer.

Also of note, Kreft said DOT will construct another wildlife underpass crossing near the Summit Campground, also south of Long X about 3.5 miles.

"Our current elk monitoring program with the GPS collars is indicating that elk want to cross just south of the badlands area on Highway 85," he said. "There's a predominant number of animals that are moving across the roadway there so we're currently evaluating that."

An overpass structure, rather than one that runs under the highway, is being considered because research has shown that elk, and



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especially pronghorn, much prefer the former to the latter.

While evaluation and construction of wildlife crossings south of Long X continues, what's certain is that wildlife crossings work in North Dakota.

"The implementation of wildlife crossings along Highway 85 has been exceptionally successful in reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions and providing habitat connectivity," Kreft said. "Although we are unable to calculate the degree to which the crossings have reduced wildlife-vehicle collisions, they have successfully kept hundreds of animals off the road, creating a safer highway for the traveling public. As these animals become habituated to the crossings and generational learning of the fawns and lambs occur, the success of the crossings will be fully realized."

*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*



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A moose utilized the wildlife crossing near Williston.



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# BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



ASHLEY PETERSON

## CWD Test Results

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department reported 24 deer from the 2022 hunting season tested positive for chronic wasting disease.

Eight deer were from hunting unit 3F2; eight from unit 3A1; two from unit 4B; and one from units 3B1 and 3E2. Single positive deer were also found in four new units — 3A3, 3E1, 3F1 and 4F — where the disease had not been previously detected.

Casey Anderson, Department wildlife division chief, said the Department is encouraged the number of cases was on par with results from the 2021 hunting season when 26 cases were found.

"While we certainly wish the number was zero, this stable trend is a good thing and supports our current management approach," he said.

CWD is a fatal disease of deer, moose and elk that remains on the landscape and can cause long-term population impacts as infection rates climb.

CWD forces Game and Fish to make tough decisions that leave some folks unhappy, Anderson said.

"That said, the Department is charged with protecting the health of the deer herd for current and future use," he said. "It'd be irresponsible of us to ignore the serious threat CWD poses, and we hope to have every tool available to do our job. Unfortunately, with CWD, we don't get a redo."

Confirmed cases included 22 hunter harvested mule deer; one harvested white-tailed deer; and one mule deer hit by a vehicle. The estimated infection rates among mule deer were 4.9% in unit 3F2 and 9.8% in unit 3A1. Only 4.4% of hunters submitted heads for testing in units where the Department focused its surveillance efforts.

Game and Fish will use its 2022 surveillance data to guide its CWD management strategy moving forward. More information about CWD can be found by visiting the Department's website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).

## New Licenses Needed

North Dakota anglers, trappers and hunters are reminded that new licenses are required beginning April 1.

Licenses can be purchased online by visiting the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov). Once the license is processed, hunters and anglers will have the option to print a hard copy and/or download the license to a smartphone or mobile device, which is helpful when asked to show proof while hunting or fishing in rural areas that lack cellular service.

The 2023-24 small game, fishing and furbearer licenses are effective until March 31, 2024.

## Deer Application Online

Hunters and landowners interested in a 2023 deer licenses must apply online by visiting the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov). The deadline for applying is June 7.

Gratis applicants who have previously applied online will automatically have their land description forwarded to this year's application. However, any changes with land descriptions from last year's application must be made prior to submitting the 2023 application.



SANDRA JOHNSON

## Record Count of Bighorn Sheep

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 2022 bighorn sheep survey, completed by recounting lambs in March, revealed a record 347 bighorn sheep in the grasslands of western North Dakota, up 4% from 2021 and 15% above the five-year average. The count surpassed the previous record of 335 bighorns in 2021.

Altogether, biologists counted 96 rams, 206 ewes and 45 lambs. Not included are approximately 40 bighorn sheep in the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park and bighorns introduced to the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in 2020.

Big game biologist Brett Wiedmann was pleased to see an increase in the survey for the fifth consecutive year.

The northern badlands population increased 4% from 2021 and was the highest count on record. The southern badlands population was unchanged at the lowest level since bighorns were reintroduced there in 1966.



"We were encouraged to see the count of adult rams down just slightly from last year, and adult ewes were at record numbers," Wiedmann said. "Unfortunately, following a record summer count of lambs, winter survival was only 54%, the lowest level on record and well below the long-term average. The lamb recruitment rate was also near a record low. Nearly six months of harsh winter conditions was the likely cause of poor winter survival of lambs."

Department biologists count and classify all bighorn sheep in late summer, and then recount lambs the following March as they approach 1 year of age to determine recruitment.

Department staff, in conjunction with biologists from the Three Affiliated Tribes Fish and Wildlife Division, also reported the bighorn sheep translocated in January 2020 from Rocky Boy's Reservation in Montana to the Fort Berthold Reservation performed exceptionally well their third year in the state, as the population has nearly tripled.

There are currently about 470 bighorn sheep in the populations managed by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, National Park Service and the Three Affiliated Tribes Fish and Wildlife Division. Wiedmann said the next benchmark is 500 bighorns in the state, which seemed improbable just a few years ago.

"Considering how severe last winter was, we were very encouraged by the results of the 2022 survey," Wiedmann said.

A bighorn sheep hunting season is tentatively scheduled to open in 2023. The status of the season will be determined Sept. 1, following the summer population survey.

Game and Fish issued five licenses in 2022 and all hunters were successful in harvesting a ram.



ASHLEY PETERSON

## 2023-25 Watercraft Registrations

North Dakota watercraft owners should note that 2023 is the first year of a new three-year registration period.

Watercraft registrations must be renewed online by visiting My Account at the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov). A credit card is required.

The price to register motorboats in North Dakota under 16 feet in length, and all canoes, is \$18; motorboats from 16 feet to less than 20 feet in length is \$36; and motorboats at least 20 feet in length is \$45. Fees are prorated.

In addition, state law requires an ANS fee of \$15 for each motorized watercraft registered in North Dakota to run concurrent with the three-year watercraft registration period.

The 2023-25 watercraft registration cycle runs through Dec. 31, 2025.

New watercraft owners can attach the required documentation, such as the bill of sale or proof of taxes paid, with the online purchase, or send in the required documentation via standard mail. A 10-day temporary permit will be issued to allow for processing and delivery of registration and decals. For timely processing, Game and Fish encourages watercraft owners to submit attachments online.

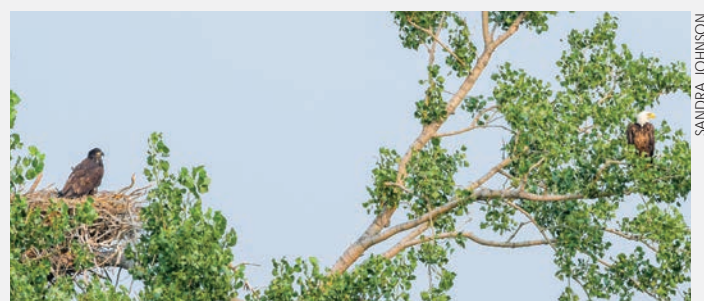
## ANS Sticker for Watercraft

Boaters with watercraft registered outside the state must have a 2023 aquatic nuisance species sticker before operating watercraft in North Dakota.

State law requires a \$15 ANS fee for motorized watercraft not licensed in North Dakota to be paid for each calendar year, and the ANS sticker must be displayed on the watercraft.

In addition, Minnesota anglers launching boats on the North Dakota side of the Red River must have a current ANS sticker displayed on the watercraft.

The ANS sticker can only be purchased by logging into the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).



SANDRA JOHNSON

## Report Bald Eagle Nest Sightings

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is asking for help locating active bald eagle nests.

Sandra Johnson, Department conservation biologist, said the Department is looking for locations of nests with eagles present, not individual eagle sightings.

Eagles lay eggs in early to mid-March, which hatch about a month later. Johnson said it's easy to distinguish an eagle nest because of its enormous size.

Nearly 350 active bald eagle nests can be found in 47 of the 53 counties in the state.

Historically, Johnson said nests were found along river corridors, but that's not the case today, as bald eagles



will nest in trees in the middle of pastures, fields or anywhere near a food source.

Nest observations should be reported online at the Game and Fish website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov). Observers are asked not to disturb the nest, and to stay a safe distance away. Johnson said foot traffic may disturb the bird, likely causing the eagle to leave her eggs or young unattended.

## 2022 Deer Season Summarized

A total of 47,590 North Dakota deer hunters took approximately 25,093 deer during the 2022 deer gun hunting season, according to a post-season survey conducted by the state Game and Fish Department.

Game and Fish made available 64,200 deer gun licenses last year. Overall hunter success was 53%, with each hunter spending an average of 4.4 days in the field.

"The lower success was due, in part, to deteriorating weather conditions during the beginning of the season," said Casey Anderson, wildlife chief for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. "We were met with high winds immediately followed by blizzard conditions, producing measurable snow amounts and below normal temperatures for most of the season."

Hunter success for antlered white-tailed deer was 43% and 40% for antlerless whitetails.

Mule deer buck success was 64%, and 70% for antlerless mule deer.

Hunters with any-antlered or any-antlerless licenses generally harvest white-tailed deer, as these licenses are predominantly in units with mostly whitetails. Buck hunters had a success rate of 54%, while doe hunters had a success rate of 56%.

Game and Fish issued 10,822 gratis licenses in 2022, and 8,301 hunters harvested 3,578 deer, for a success rate of 43%.

A total of 1,168 muzzleloader licenses were issued, and 1,018 hunters harvested 461 white-tailed deer (223 antlered, 238 antlerless). Hunter success was 45%.

A total of 27,720 archery licenses (24,414 resident, 3,306 nonresident) were issued in 2022. In total, 22,985 bowhunters harvested 7,780 deer (6,491 whitetails, 1,289 mule deer), for a success rate of 34%.

The Department is in the process of determining recommendations for licenses in 2023. In addition to harvest rates and winter aerial surveys, Game and Fish staff monitor other population indices to determine license numbers, including depredation reports, hunter observations, input at advisory board meetings, and comments from the public, landowners and Department field staff.

## Earth Day Patch Contest Winners

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department announced the winners of the 2023 Earth Day Patch Contest. Over 2,000 students from 116 schools entered this year's contest.

Winners in three age categories are Ella Fernandez, Fessenden Bowdon Elementary, (K-4); Brooke Livingston, Kenmare Public School (5-8); and Alex Dodgen, Minot High School Central Campus (9-12). Livingston's design was chosen as the overall winner and will be made into the 2023 Earth Day patch.



Youth and adults who participate in cleaning up public lands receive the 2023 patch to celebrate Earth Day and their service. Projects that qualify for the Earth Day patch include refuse pick-up on local, state or federal properties and landscaping on public property including planting trees, bushes and pollinator plants.

Groups participating in the service projects are encouraged to take the following precautions to ensure their safety: keep young people away from highways, lakes and rivers and only allow older participants to pick up broken glass or sharp objects.

Participants are asked to contact Sherry Niesar at 701-527-3714 or [sniesar@nd.gov](mailto:sniesar@nd.gov) to receive a patch.



## North Dakota Junior Duck Stamp Winners Announced



A tranquil colored-pencil rendition of a pair of tundra swans standing in icy waters earned Best of Show honors in this year's North Dakota Junior Duck Stamp Contest.

Ayden McPartland, a junior at Valley City High School, found inspiration for this year's artwork after viewing the behaviors and interactions of tundra swans as part of a school biology project.

A Runner-up Best of Show was selected in case the



Best of Show winner was not able to advance to the national contest. Claire Powell received the Runner-up Best of Show award this year with her acrylic painting of a drake wood duck stretching its wings over calm water. Powell, a junior, also attends Valley City High School.

In addition to the art contest, students are encouraged to write a conservation message. This portion of the contest is judged anonymously by U.S. Fish and Wildlife staff from across the state. Savannah McKay, a sophomore from Devils Lake, wrote this year's winning message: "Conservation is to honor those in an environment before you, and to protect those who will be there after you." McKay's art entry of an American wigeon descending toward rough water amidst a dark grey sky earned honorable mention in this year's contest.

The Junior Duck Stamp program is a dynamic science and art-based program open to all K-12 students. Artwork is judged in four separate age categories. This year 763 students participated from across the state.

All North Dakota winning artwork will be exhibited across the state throughout the year at national wildlife refuges, events, zoos, shopping malls, schools and other locations. To learn more about the contest, contact the North Dakota Junior Duck Stamp coordinator at colleen\_graue@fws.gov.



MIKE LALONDE

Jeb Williams (left), Department director, and Scott Peterson (far right), Department deputy director, congratulate Justin Hughes, Harold Capaci and Jon Hughes.



MIKE LALONDE

Jeb Williams (left), Department director, and Scott Peterson (far right), Department deputy director, congratulate Gary Knotts.

## Game and Fish Volunteers Recognized

Volunteer instructors for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department were recognized in March at the annual banquet in Bismarck.

Gary Knotts, Fargo, was recognized as Hunter Education Instructor of the Year and Heather Retzer, Wahpeton, was named Volunteer of the Year. Minot instructors Jon Hughes,

Justin Hughes and Harold Capaci were recognized as Team of the Year.

Longtime volunteers were also recognized for their service:

- **30 years** – Richard Bahm, Mandan; James Borkowski, Bottineau; Myron Brager, Finley; Joseph Haas, Lidgerwood; Robert Haglund, Minot; Doyle Roeder, Bismarck; Dale Veselka, Tower City; Curtis Walen, Carrington; and Merle Weatherly, Jamestown.
- **25 years** – Burns Bailey, Moffit; Mark Berg, Nortonville; Matthew Evans, Stanley; William Gauslow, Wahpeton; Larry Leier, Hague; Mike Marquette, Cogswell; Bradley Moser, Medina; Scott Sigette, Devils Lake; Melisa Toepke-Peterson, Fargo; Beverly Turbiville, Dickinson; and Leonard Wysocki Jr., Grafton.
- **20 years** – Janice Bishop, Kathryn; Doug Hintzman, Kulm; Justin Houghton, Steele; Peggy Knotts, Fargo; Joe Lautenschlager, Berthold; Jeffrey Lemer, Anamoose; Robert Miller, Oakes; Mark Pfeifer, Lidgerwood; and Scott Wagner, Casselton.
- **15 years** – Roger Decker, Belfield; Michael Feener, Fargo; Mike Graue, Devils Lake; Terry Huwe, Menoken; Casey Martin, Bismarck; Michael Myers, Dickinson; Timothy Nelson, Harvey; John Paulson, Bismarck; Randy Schock, Bismarck; Penny Slagle, Williston; and Joe Tuchscherer, Rugby.
- **10 years** – Lena Bohm, Mohall; Kaya Engen, Bismarck; Jose Figueroa-Diaz, Fargo; David Hammond, Abercrombie; Clint Johnson, Carrington; Nicholas Krump, Grand Forks; Jason Sauer, Glen Ullin; Kristofer Schmidt, Velva; and Eric Viall, Ray.
- **5 years** – Charles Betts, Minot; James Decker, Bismarck; Michael Deville, New Town; Seth Engelstad, Walhalla; Bernard Ficek, Bismarck; Clarence Gilstad, Ashley; Michael Goroski, Wahpeton; Michael Hamling, Hankinson; Katrina Haugen, Minto; Wayne Henderson, Edgeley; Isaac Hendrickson, Agate; Nathan Hill, Wahpeton; Jesse Kalberer, Bismarck; Jeanette Kieper, Bismarck; Trevor Larsen, Bowdon; Howdy Lawlar, Watford City; Bruce Leiseth, Jamestown; Arlyce Malarkey, Bismarck; Michael Malarkey, Bismarck; Brian Miller, Heaton; Jeremy Mohl, Williston; Dustin Newman, Watford City; Albert Olson, Bismarck; Frank Rohloff, Grand Forks; Scott Rupert, Des Lacs; Ethan Shulind, Grand Forks; Danielle Siverhus-Dinger, Oakes; Timothy Smith, Burlington; and Lori Wertz, Fargo.







SUBMITTED PHOTO

“Over the years, the club has been active and cooperated with the Game and Fish Department on development and maintenance of a wide variety of public use facilities on area lakes and recreation areas,” said Wes Erdle, Department fisheries development project manager. “Activities include partnering with Game and Fish on boat ramps, courtesy docks, fishing piers, roads, vault toilets and parking areas at sites such as Lehr WMA, Mundt Lake and most recently Railroad Lake.”

The Lehr Wildlife Club, Erdle added, has also been very supportive in providing the all-important role of ongoing maintenance on the facilities at their local fisheries.

“As we all know, maintaining anything is as important as the initial construction and the club does an outstanding job in performing this task,” Erdle said. “The club was selected from a long list of candidates throughout the state and is a very worthy recipient of this award.”

## Lehr Wildlife Club Honored

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department recognized the Lehr Wildlife Club with a certificate of appreciation for the difference the club has made at its local fisheries.

## STAFF NOTES

### North Dakota Wildlife Habitat Award

Kevin Kading, Game and Fish Department private land section leader, was awarded the North Dakota Wildlife Society’s Wildlife Habitat Award in February at the chapter’s annual meeting.

The award is presented to an individual, or group that has made an outstanding contribution toward preserving, improving and/or establishing high quality wildlife habitat on the lands of North Dakota.

“Kevin has been steadfastly dedicated to developing and improving wildlife habitat in our state for over 25 years. As the private land section leader, Kevin oversees a multi-million-dollar annual budget and 12 staff who implement wildlife habitat and access programs across North Dakota,” said Robert Newman, Wildlife Society chapter president. “Under his leadership, our state has benefited from tens of thousands of acres of grass and CRP plantings, the development and growth of one of the largest habitat-based hunter access programs in the nation, and millions of dollars in financial support paid out annually to landowners for wildlife habitat improvements on private lands.”



### Kinzler Promoted to MRS Position, Sea Welcomed

Russ Kinzler (top left), longtime Game and Fish Department fisheries biologist, was promoted to Missouri River System supervisor in Riverdale. Bryan Sea (bottom left), who had been working for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources in Detroit Lakes, Minn., was hired in February to the Missouri River Systems fisheries biologist position vacated by Kinzler.



### Heyer Hired in Fisheries

Jacob Heyer was hired earlier this spring as a fisheries development specialist for the Game and Fish Department.

Prior to moving to the fisheries division, Heyer, a University of North Dakota graduate in fisheries and wildlife biology, worked with the Department’s private land section.



### Ryckman New Wildlife Health Hire

Mason Ryckman was hired in February as the wildlife health biologist for the Game and Fish Department.

Ryckman was a fisheries development specialist prior to his move to the Department’s wildlife division.





# BACKCAST

By Ron Wilson

**W**hy this spot? There's nothing seemingly remarkable about this particular prairie hilltop that separates it from the others rimming the valley wandering north of here.

Maybe what distinguishes it is hidden under 8 inches of snow, the remains of an unrelenting winter that showed few signs of retreating until early April.

It doesn't matter, really. What does is that the sharp-tailed grouse dig it, returning year after year without hesitation as the days lengthen in spring to participate in a mating ritual that's as old as the countryside.

Like the unflinching marriage of opposing poles of a magnet when held too close together, the pull on the birds to this Emmons County dancing ground starting in early March is without argument. Peak activity is roughly mid-April when, during ritualized displays of flared tails, busy feet and inflating and deflating air sacs, males establish territorial boundaries and advertise to females.

This spring, on this 11th day in April, the grouse arrive about sunrise or shortly thereafter. There are roughly 30 of them. Some square off in pairs, extend their wings and stamp their feet, while others dance in groups. Then, as if some kind of signal has been passed between the participants spread out over 20 yards of prairie, they all stop at once. And do nothing.

This sharp-tailed grouse version of a TV timeout lasts for minutes before play once again resumes.

Driving here this morning I wondered if things would be different this time compared to past years. I questioned whether the attendance would be down because the winter was so difficult, or that the grouse might delay things because of all the snow still covering the landscape.

Silly me.

I've been told that sharp-tailed grouse will dance in 2-3 feet of snow if that's what's presented to them. Driven by photoperiod, not by weather, the hardy, native birds gather without pause spring after spring no matter the circumstances.

Unfortunately, the circumstances this spring — an abundance of snow on the landscape, followed by mud-slick roads — was expected to make it difficult, if not impossible, for Game and Fish Department biologists to survey dancing birds on those difficult-to-get-to leks.

Biologists have been counting grouse on North Dakota leks for decades and this isn't the first time, considering the temperament of the Northern Plains weather, that they may not complete the grouse surveys in full. Even so, there are protocols for such hurdles that enable them to capture the best sample size of dancing birds.

What's certain is that the grouse will be in attendance even if no one shows up to watch.

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*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*





North Dakota Outdoors Magazine  
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*The North Dakota Game and Fish Department, in conjunction with others, typically count sage grouse on leks in southwestern North Dakota the third week in April. A delayed start to spring, however, shifted much of the survey work until later. Biologists report cover across the badlands and into western Bowman county looks much better than it looked a year ago, so there's hope for a good nesting season. Unfortunately, the long-term projection for this struggling population isn't good. Sage grouse are large-scale, specialist species, and with North Dakota's patchwork of land ownership and existing fragmentation, it would be difficult to restore slow-growing big sagebrush on the scale needed for sage grouse to rebound.*

JESSE KOLAR

PHILLY HELFSON

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