

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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Jerad Bluem, North Dakota Game and Fish Department warden, checks the fishing licenses of anglers fishing the Missouri River.

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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

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Front Cover

A mallard hen safeguards her young on a Burleigh County nest. Photo by Ashley Peterson.



A paddlefish is released back into the Missouri River north of Bismarck after inspection and tagging by Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel.

SANDWICHED BETWEEN DAMS

By Ron Wilson

While paddlefish hold the title of North Dakota's largest fish, they feed on the tiniest prey, providing valuable insight into the health of the Missouri River System and those game fish species targeted by anglers.

State Game and Fish Department fisheries biologists have long monitored the paddlefish population confined to the Garrison Reach of the Missouri River by gigantic dams both upstream and down. In nearly two decades, biologists have captured and tagged more than 10,000 paddlefish between Garrison Dam and the headwaters of Lake Oahe.

Because paddlefish are filter feeders focusing on zooplankton, their attention to the low end of the food web makes them one of the river's canaries in the coal mine species.

"Zooplankton are one of the key sources of food for our newly hatched walleye, northern pike, crappie and a lot of other species that anglers are very interested in," said Paul Bailey, Department south central fisheries supervisor. "So, learning more about paddlefish and the health of paddlefish in the Missouri River upstream of Bismarck provides pretty good insight on the overall health of our fishery."



PADDLEFISH have a mostly cartilaginous anatomy and represent an ancient lineage of fish most closely related to sturgeon.

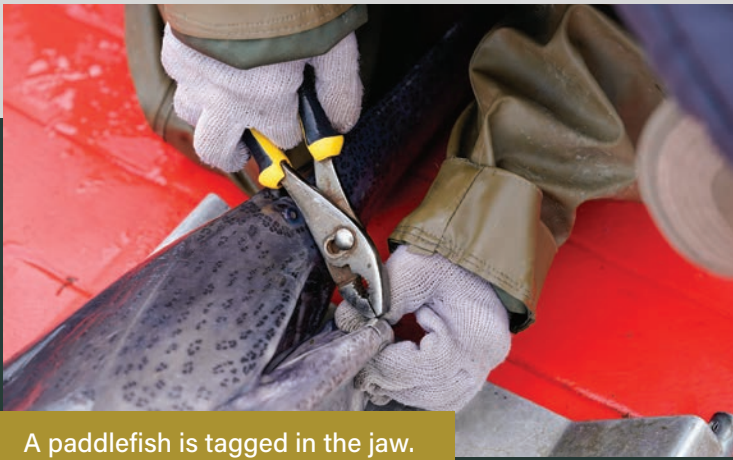
Bailey said learning about, say, walleye, pike and yellow perch is easy in North Dakota with hundreds of fisheries to investigate. Yet, with only two paddlefish populations in the state – one above Garrison Dam and one below – investing the effort to net and tag fish when and where biologists know where the fish are is important.

“We don’t have many opportunities to learn from paddlefish. So, even though this population down here doesn’t support a recreational fishery, it still can provide good insight on how to properly manage paddlefish in North Dakota,” Bailey said in early June.

Paddlefish found in the Garrison Reach spend the majority of their time in Lake Oahe where their food source is most abundant, but in spring the sexually mature fish head upstream to spawn, or at least go through the motions, most notably north of Bismarck.

“These fish seem to kind of concentrate in this area in all likelihood to attempt to spawn and aren’t very mobile in about this 10- to- 12-mile reach of the river,” Bailey said. “When we first started doing these population estimates, just to see where these fish were really concentrated, we floated from Washburn all the way down to Eckroth Bottoms and about 97-98% of the paddlefish that we encountered were in this tiny, 10- to 12-mile reach of the river.”





A paddlefish is tagged in the jaw.



Paddlefish tail fin.

While sexually mature male paddlefish typically attempt to spawn once every two years and females typically every two or three years, there is no evidence that suggests that any natural reproduction is occurring.

"This reach of the Missouri River is likely way too modified due to Garrison Dam for these fish to successfully naturally reproduce," Bailey said. "Garrison Dam has greatly altered the flow regime of the river from what its natural state was.

"Back in the day, with plains runoff causing a little bit of flooding, followed by a June rise from mountain snowpack, that flow pattern was one of the things that triggered paddlefish to naturally reproduce, along with the temperature regime," he added. "Now, this reach of the Missouri River has much colder water temps than what naturally existed before the dams were put in place due to the deep water releases out of Lake Sakakawea. The water today is much cooler that paddlefish can naturally reproduce in."

Knowing that Oahe Dam was completed in 1962, nine years after Garrison Dam, it makes sense that many of the bigger, older paddlefish found sandwiched between the dams have been there since impoundment. Yet, what about the much younger, smaller paddlefish swimming in the same waters?

"In all likelihood, this population is being maintained through some kind of continuous entrainment of small paddlefish that can fit through the power generating turbines at Garrison Dam," Bailey said. "And then, of course, some of the high-water events, like the 2011 flood, when the spillway was operated and paddlefish passed out of Lake

Sakakawea over the dam through the spillway. And then again in 2018 and 2019, the spillway was operated, and we know we had some paddlefish passing through the spillway at that time."

To sample fish, Department fisheries personnel float 180-foot nets downstream that work effectively in depths of 6 to 8 feet. Once the bobbers on the nets floating perpendicular to the flow start to bob, they know they're into fish.

Paddlefish are then measured for length from the eye to the fork in the tail. They are also weighed and fitted with large jaw tags.

"Almost 40% of the fish that we're seeing annually now in our sampling are fish that we've handled in previous years that have been previously tagged," Bailey said. "And then, of course, anglers sometimes incidentally encounter some of these paddlefish. Unfortunately, we do see a number of boat collisions. There's a lot of boat traffic on the Missouri River around Bismarck when these paddlefish are in the area. Unfortunately, some of them are killed every year due to boat collisions."

Later in summer, after the paddlefish have turned and headed south in the direction of Lake Oahe, encounters north of Bismarck drop dramatically.

"A lot of time later in summer, there are very few to no paddlefish in the Missouri River above Bismarck," Bailey said. "A lot of what we've learned is interesting and helps in the effort to learn more about what factors influence the health of our paddlefish populations in the state."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



I wanted a duck's perspective of a youth waterfowl hunter (on page 7), including water in the foreground. Only one way to get that image. *Samsung Galaxy Note20.*

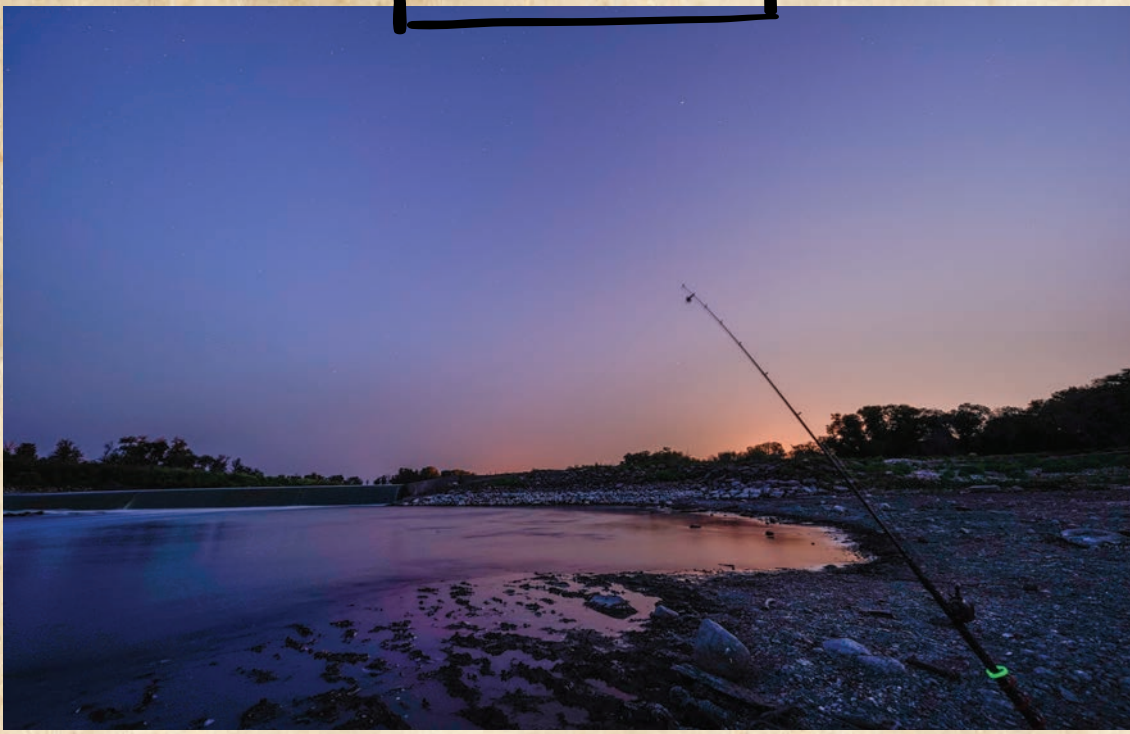
INCONSPICUOUS AS POSSIBLE

BY ASHLEY PETERSON

One day this past spring, I was organizing equipment for a photo shoot when a coworker stopped by. She glanced at my growing pile and said, "Wow, that's a lot of stuff. I didn't know it took this much." The comment gave me pause. I'm used to the baggage by now, but I still had to consider whether I need a whole bunch of stuff to document wildlife and the environment in which they live.

The short answer is no ... but also yes. Perhaps the better way to look at it is considering which tool is right for each job. I shoot a variety of subjects, across a broad spectrum. I wouldn't use a GoPro to photograph a skunk in a field – at least not following it while holding the camera. Likewise, I wouldn't choose a super telephoto lens to document fisheries biologists tagging walleye in a boat. Each item has its place and strengths, and part of my job is knowing where, when and which to choose. The same goes for anyone else who hopes to achieve some outdoorsy photography of their own.





Night photography reveals so much the human eye misses. This is the Red River at Drayton Dam only an hour or so after sunset. *Sony a7iii with Sony FE 12-24mm F2.8 GM on a tripod.*

CHOOSE YOUR GEAR

Anyone will say “you need a camera” and I will, too. But your camera can be as simple as the one in your phone, a point-and-shoot, or if you’re more enthusiastic, a body and a lens. I’ll add, be sure to match your expectations with your gear. A cellphone won’t do justice in capturing a pronghorn in an alfalfa field 50 yards away but could do an excellent job illustrating a monarch chrysalis on a milkweed.

While there is the argument that a more costly setup yields a better image, I’d rather ask “What’s the goal?” Typically speaking, more expensive setups offer more bells and whistles. Some features are very desirable for specific situations, but if you won’t be photographing those situations then naturally those features won’t matter to you. I’m

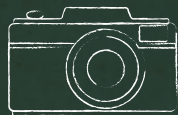
a strong advocate for familiarizing yourself with what you have and becoming the best at using that first. Simply put, you’ll be more successful with gear you know, whatever that looks like.

In addition to your camera choice, a trusty, stable surface to set the camera on while shooting plays a key part. I’m of the opinion that steadiness is underrated as a factor when it comes to producing clean and clear images. This could be in the form of a tripod, steady bag, rock, fencepost or even your vehicle. My favorite go-to is a steady bag, and mine even happens to be homemade. It’s portable, versatile and sometimes doubles as a cushion between me and the ground.

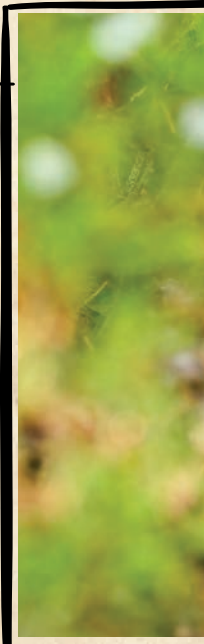
GO UNNOTICED

As part of getting out there, I’m often challenged to be as inconspicuous as possible. The less threatened the intended subject feels, the more likely I am of getting a natural-looking image. For wildlife, that’s typically my goal — documenting animals in their natural settings.

Accomplishing this comes in a few forms, such as setting up in a blind, crouching in bullrushes in a wetland or hunkering down inside a vehicle. There are other, more creative ways, depending on the subject, but my point being



Having a stable surface to set your camera on helps reduce camera shake, bettering your odds of getting a tack sharp image. *iPhone XS*



that many images don't come to light by simply walking out to an animal and clicking away. It helps to understand the animal's habits and environment, too.

RESPECT THE SPACE

I try to remind myself when I venture into the outdoors, I'm not on my time. The wildlife didn't get the memo I'm coming to visit and hope to capture their image. Should I be so lucky, I recognize my window of opportunity is usually brief. Either because the critter will move on or I should, so as not to disturb their natural way of being.

The least impact I can make on a spot, the better in my book. This pertains to borrowing time on private land too if I'm fortunate to get permission. I try not to overstay my welcome. As time has proven, this usually rewards me with repeated success in the same area. No matter where I go, how long I spend there, or what I think I'm prepared for, nothing will substitute for patience.

CHILL OUT

This goes without saying, but I am going to stress it. Be patient with wildlife and with yourself. Sometimes I sit in a single spot for an hour, see many animals, and get no photos. Either because I'm not prepared or I'm trying to rush the shutter. Or very simply, nothing comes by.

When one or a combination of those events occur, I refer to a previous tip: match expectations, changing course if necessary. I'm always optimistic I'll get to photograph something, but to what extent of exciting is always to be determined. I can hope for a predator cruising along with a meal, but at the bare minimum, a habitat image suits my needs, too.



Magpies are tough birds to photograph in general, so to get a photo of one in flight while also carrying dinner was a big win that day. *Sony A1 with Sony FE 400mm F2.8 GM OSS.*

TAKE AWAY

I think the most important thing I've learned in this space is to have a goal. Have a backup goal. Then expect nothing and let the images come to you. Within the branch of outdoors photography, one has a lot of room to play. I really suggest doing just that: play. See what you can see, then see if you can capture an image of it. That doesn't have to mean deep pockets or traveling across the state. Learning your gear, the intended animals, and how ambitious you set out to be goes further than the latest and greatest, as far as I'm concerned.

ASHLEY PETERSON is the Game and Fish Department's photographer/videographer.



Here's a great example of paying your respects to wildlife space. This mallard hen nested in a high human traffic area. Despite the fact she was accustomed to visitors, I made sure to get what I needed and then left her alone to take care of her new babies. *Sony A1 with Sony FE 70-200mm F2.8 GM OSS II and Sony FE 2x teleconverter on a tripod.*

While chinook salmon cannot successfully spawn on their own in Lake Sakakawea, Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel help in this undertaking in fall by removing the eggs and milt from mature fish.



A person is holding a large salmon in front of a lake. The fish is silver with a yellowish belly and is being held by a hand. The background shows a calm lake with a dark wooden post in the foreground.

MANAGING SALMON

IN WALLEYE COUNTRY

By Ron Wilson

Introduced into Lake Sakakawea to inhabit the deep coldwater habitat not utilized by other fish, chinook salmon have remained popular among anglers for nearly a half-century.

"We know walleye is king in North Dakota and the salmon fishing is nowhere near the walleye fishing, but generally over the years it's pretty good," said Russ Kinzler, North Dakota Game and Fish Department Missouri River System supervisor. "The problem with salmon fishing is we go through drought, periods of good water, then drought again."

It's during those lean water years, Kinzler said, that the interest in salmon fishing wanes because the effort to get into fish increases.

"That's when we lose some anglers. But right now, our water levels are good, and we've been that way for quite a while, so our salmon abundance as well as angler numbers are pretty good," he said.

While Kinzler describes Sakakawea's salmon fishing as pretty good, the size of fish, although close to the long-term average, have been trending down for about three years. The long-term average for male and female fish is 4.9 pounds and 7.1 pounds, respectively. Last year, males averaged 3.9 pounds and females 5 pounds.

The why behind this downward trend is not entirely known.

"We suspect it's that the reservoir's aging. It's not new like it was when salmon were first put in. It was new to salmon, new to rainbow smelt ... everything boomed. We had lots of smelt, big smelt, big salmon," Kinzler said. "As the reservoir ages, that productivity decreases and we're seeing that in our smelt as sizes are decreasing and we think that's why our salmon sizes are decreasing."



"IF WE DIDN'T CONTINUALLY SPAWN SALMON IN FALL AND STOCK THEM IN SPRING, IN A MATTER OF FIVE YEARS THEY WOULD ALL BE GONE," Kinzler said.

"It's like you and I eating a steak every day for breakfast, lunch and dinner. We're going to get big. If all of a sudden we start eating only hot dogs, we're not putting on the weight we used to," he added. "And we think our smelt are getting smaller and so the salmon have to catch more of them, put more energy into catching that food, which leads to not getting as big as they used to."

Rainbow smelt were stocked in Lake Sakakawea in the early 1970s to improve the lake's forage base. While small individually – smelt seldom grow longer than 12 inches – the smelt population as a whole is made up of millions of individual fish. Aside from the occasional cisco, chinook salmon feed on little else in the lake.

Sakakawea's smelt population is doing well, which is a good thing no matter their size, because without them, the chinook salmon population would struggle mightily.

Anglers have noted that the salmon in upstream Fort Peck Reservoir in Montana and the downstream fishery at Lake Oahe in South Dakota are bigger, making some argue that North Dakota's salmon are smaller because of genetics. Yet, genetics have nothing to do with it. It's all about cisco.

"North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana all have the same salmon. We share them. When one state needs some, we offer them up, and then when we need them, they offer them up," Kinzler said. "So, the salmon are the same salmon, but they get bigger in South Dakota. They get bigger in Montana. And it's the forage. That's what it is. Montana has strictly cisco and they get big salmon."

Oahe, on the other hand, has both smelt and cisco, but Kinzler said there was a time the reservoir was kicking out big salmon, bigger than Sakakawea.

"After the 2011 flood, South Dakota lost a lot of their smelt out of the system. Because smelt and cisco compete, it gave the cisco a chance to rebound," Kinzler said. "In 2015 and 2016, anglers set the South Dakota state salmon record several times and it was because of the forage base.

"Now in Lake Sakakawea, we have plenty of cisco ... it's not that we don't have them," he added. "They're out here. It's just that when they spawn the young-of-the-year just get outcompeted by the smelt."

Some of the biggest salmon caught in North Dakota are landed by anglers fishing Garrison Tailrace below the dam. Fisheries biologists learned that

if they want salmon in the Tailrace, there's no reason to stock them there as the fish make it through the dam on their own.

"You think it would have to be a high-water year for us to lose fish, but we're always losing fish," Kinzler said. "We found through our tagging program that the vast majority in the Tailrace come from Lake Sakakawea. Even when we stocked tagged fish in the Tailrace, the vast majority were still fish that were stocked in Lake Sakakawea.

"So, we've determined that if you really want salmon in the tailrace, stock them in the lake because the fish we stock below the dam, most of them just disappear," he added. "We don't know where they go. They don't come back. South Dakota doesn't catch them. They just disappear."

Chinook salmon don't naturally reproduce in Sakakawea because the habitat needed to successfully pull it off isn't there. Even so, mature fish still die when they move into the shallows and go through the motions in failed spawning attempts.

Understanding this, salmon in this nonnative environment don't live long. Kinzler said the oldest salmon that they documented was 5 years old.

"We see some 4-year-olds now and then and some years we struggle to even get some 3-year-old salmon. So, when you think about it, when we get those 7-, 8- and 9-pound fish that are 2 years old, that's pretty good growth," Kinzler said.

Especially when you consider the environmental conditions salmon must endure to reach sizes that make anglers happy.

"When the lake is lower than this, you get summer heat stress on salmon, which means they're not growing as good when the water gets warmer. You start compressing that amount of coldwater habitat they have, and they get crowded," Kinzler said. "Also, in the winter under the ice when the water is cold, they're not growing very well either. That's a cold stress for them.

"So, when you think about it, we only have like five months of a growing season for salmon," he added. "To get salmon that we have to the size we have is pretty good for North Dakota."

Which is better than the alternative.

"If we didn't continually spawn salmon in fall and stock them in spring, in a matter of five years they would all be gone," Kinzler said.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



ODLAND RECEIVES *upgrade*

Aerial view of Odland Dam in western North Dakota.

By Ron Wilson

Arguably one of the largest sediment removal projects from a fishing lake in North Dakota is expected to improve angling opportunities in a part of the state where prospects for wetting a line are few.

Odland Dam, located 7 miles north of Beach in western North Dakota, was constructed nearly 90 years ago, and last winter a staggering amount of frozen sediment was removed from the 120-acre reservoir after the water was drained.

The project was made possible by an alliance of the North Dakota Game and

Fish Department, Golden Valley County Water Resource District, local land-owners and funding from the Outdoor Heritage Fund.

According to Bud Ordahl, Golden Valley County Water Resource District chairman, 166 million gallons of water was pumped out of Odland to make possible the removal of 130,000 cubic yards of sediment.

"That would be equal to 6,450 of those big, off-road haul truck loads, or 60-foot tall when stacked on a football field," Ordahl said.

Odland Dam has long been a fishing and recreational boating fixture to the local community and surrounding areas, but the decades old reservoir was feeling its age because of the sediment overload, so making it more attractive to users was important.

"Been after it for years and years and years just because the community wanted it and over the years it just got where we couldn't hardly boat out in it anymore," Ordahl said. "The weeds were growing back too fast because of the shallow depths. And the fishery was getting in rough shape because of no depth also."

Jeff Merchant, Game and Fish Department fisheries biologist in Dickinson, said Odland Dam for years has been managed primarily as a walleye, yellow perch and bluegill fishery. Unfortunately, fisheries management efforts over time were often hampered because of frequent winterkills.

"Odland is capable of growing some really nice fish, but when you have winterkills often, it really hinders that," Merchant said. "Another issue we've had in the past several years are the perch have become way too abundant. And so, this project is really giving us a chance to reset the fishery and kind of start over."

Water was already back in Odland in spring and Merchant and other Department fisheries personnel stocked fish to jumpstart what could easily be called a new fishery, considering its major facelift.

"We're hopeful that this project will help with the winterkill situation, so going forward this year we've already stocked adult bluegills and we're hopeful that they'll reproduce," Merchant said in early June.

The plan was to also stock walleye fingerlings sometime in June.

Even so, area anglers will still need to pump the brakes a bit as it will take some time for fish to start bending rod tips.

"Anglers should expect probably a couple of years before

While the Game and Fish Department stocked adult bluegills in Odland Dam in spring, with plans to add walleye sometime in summer, it will likely be a couple years before fish reach sizes desired by anglers.



Bluegill from Odland Dam.

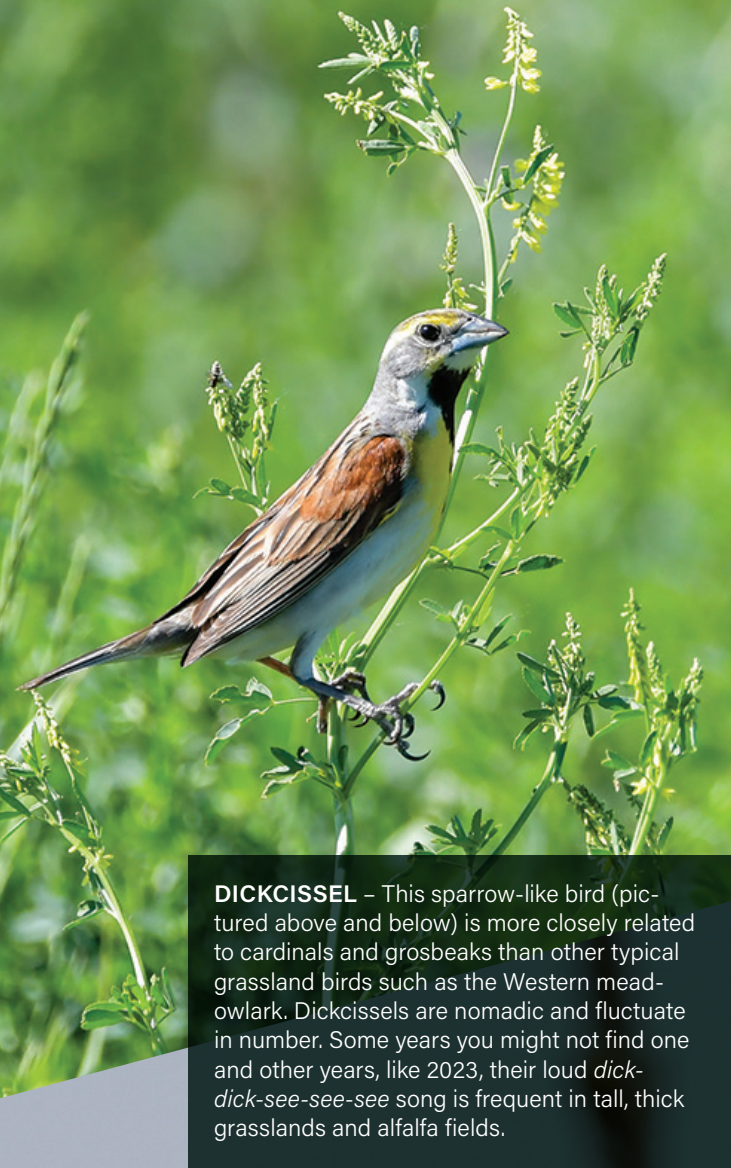
there's catchable fish in Odland. The adult bluegills that we put in, there wasn't very many of them. They won't provide much for fishing right now, it's their reproduction that they have that will hopefully provide the fishing in the future," Merchant said. "The walleyes, with the forage we have in Odland, they could be up to 13 to 14 inches by the end of their second growing season."

In the interim, people are already enjoying Odland Dam while they patiently wait for the fish to grow to eater-sized.

"Everybody's sure liking it that's been out here boating. They can definitely tell the difference in the weeds, and then they're all excited for the fishing to come and be better, and we're hoping to do some primitive campsites out here eventually," Ordahl said. "With Odland and Camels Hump (lake) 10 miles away, that's kind of all we have here, so we make use of it. We can be out here 10-15 minutes from town and in the water and having fun. So, it's nice."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.





DICKCISSEL – This sparrow-like bird (pictured above and below) is more closely related to cardinals and grosbeaks than other typical grassland birds such as the Western meadowlark. Dickcissels are nomadic and fluctuate in number. Some years you might not find one and other years, like 2023, their loud *dick-dick-see-see-see* song is frequent in tall, thick grasslands and alfalfa fields.



BIRDING

By Ron Wilson

While the bulk of us wouldn't know a Say's phoebe from a dickcissel, the cool thing is we can venture outside with a little guidance and a touch of dumb luck and maybe see for ourselves.

Birding has long been an activity enjoyed by oodles of people in the United States and beyond, yet those in the know have seen a positive shift in participation in an activity that gets people outdoors.

"The last couple of years we've really seen an increase in the number of younger birders," said Sandra Johnson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department conservation biologist. "A lot of that can be attributed to the pandemic when many of us were home wondering what to do. We'd go outside in our back yards and started noticing nature and birds more."

Because of its prairie potholes and grasslands, North Dakota is a special place in the birding world, as the state attracts a large array of birds dependent on the habitat available for nesting and rearing young.

Even better, in the spring and summer months when these birds are here courting the opposite sex, they are at their showiest, touting their prime breeding plumage.

According to the checklist of North Dakota birds on the Department's website (gf.nd.gov), it's possible to see 376 species of birds in the state. Of these, 216 species nest or have nested in the state.

To get started birding, Johnson said you really don't need much.

"A pair of binoculars would really help, as would a good bird book. But recently we've really seen an increase in the number of online resources, apps on your phone that can help you identify birds, find out places to go," she said. "Social media has really taken off. There are some great social media sites on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and people are taking fantastic pictures of birds, which could help identify some of the birds you're seeing."



BEYOND YOUR BACK YARD

One of Johnson's favorite apps is Merlin Bird ID that provides a guide to the different birds in your area, and a tool that allows the user to punch in how big the bird is and its color to help determine what you're looking at through binoculars.

"There are also a couple cool features where you can take a photo of a bird or even use a sound recording and it will tell you what the bird is, which is really fun," she said.

If people are interested in venturing outside their own back yards, which Johnson encourages, the public lands options to view birds in North Dakota is seemingly unmatched.

"North Dakota has the most national wildlife refuges of any state, which are great places to go as they are scattered around the state," she said. "If you're in Bismarck, for example, you could go to Long Lake National Wildlife Refuge. If you're in Grand Forks, there's Kelly Slough National Wildlife Refuge. There are some great maps out there showing where these refuges are. Some of them also have birding drives where you can drive an auto route and it'll tell you what birds you might see at different spots."

Not to mention, the Game and Fish Department also manages more than 200,000 wildlife management acres open to the public.

"We've got some great WMAs like Lonetree WMA in the middle of the state. That's a beautiful place. Some great ones along Saka-kawea," Johnson said. "Those are all places you could check out on our website, use the same tools that hunters use to find public land and those are places you could go."

While North Dakota is a birding hotspot for certain species, it's also underutilized, which isn't a bad thing if you're looking for some elbowroom when out exploring.

"In other states way more heavily populated than North Dakota, birding is a bigger deal simply because more people mean more people are doing it," Johnson said. "Here, you can often have the entire WMA, for example, to yourself."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



PECTORAL SANDPIPER – Standing at only 8 inches, this champion shorebird flies 19,000 miles annually from its wintering range in southern South America to breed in the tundra in northern Alaska and Canada. The trip would be near impossible without refueling in our prairie potholes during both spring and fall migration.

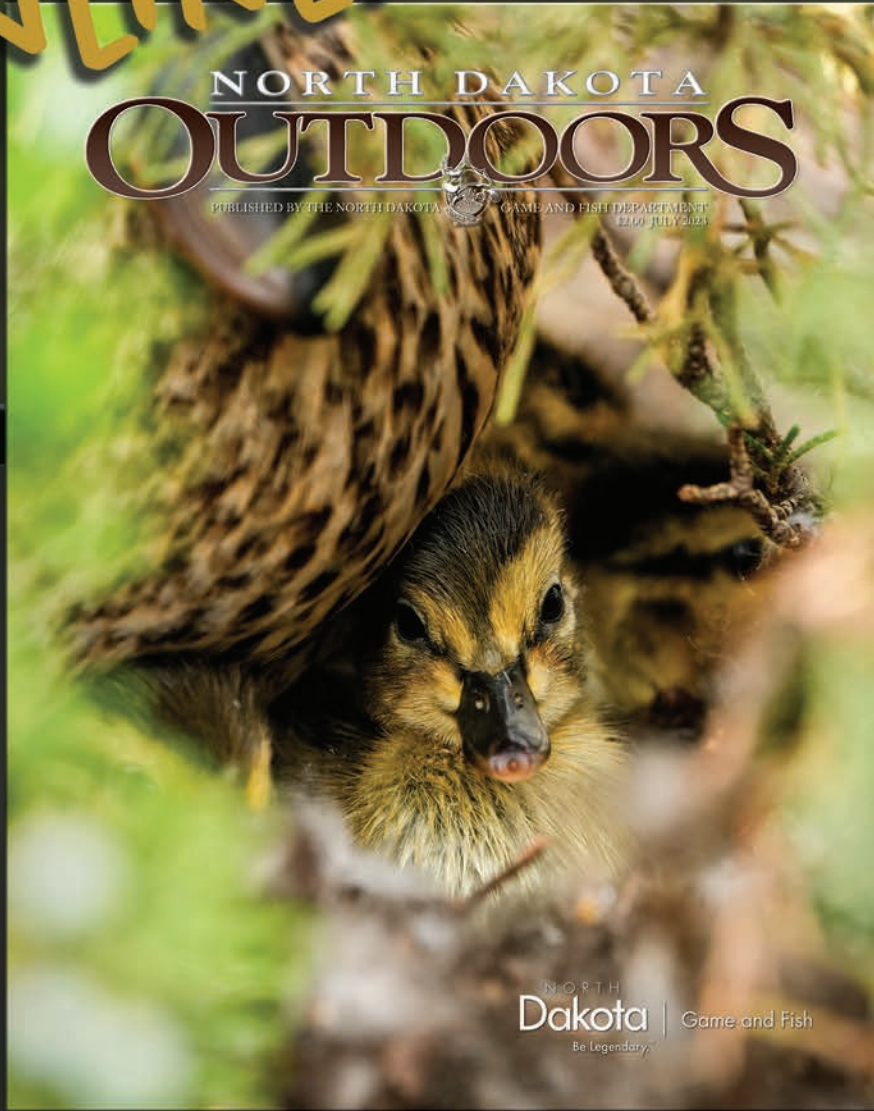


FRANKLIN'S GULL – This handsome gull features a distinct black head and pinkish cast on its chest and abdomen when they first arrive in North Dakota after wintering along the coasts of Chile and Peru. The pink fades during the breeding season, where they nest in colonies of hundreds or thousands of birds in large cattail wetland/lake complexes, such as J Clark Salyer National Wildlife Refuge.

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BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



Ring-necked rooster.

Crowing Counts Up Statewide

The number of roosters heard crowing during the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 2023 spring pheasant crowing count survey was up 30% statewide from last year.

"We documented increased production for most of the state during 2022 brood routes compared to the last couple years, and we also confirmed high reproduction rates while aging hunter-submitted pheasant wings," said R.J. Gross, Department upland game management biologist. "So, the increase in pheasant density comes as no surprise despite the high snowfall this past winter."

The primary regions holding pheasants showed 19.5 crows per stop in the southwest, up from 14.1 in 2022; 16.6 crows per stop in the northwest, up from 13.7; and 12.8 crows per stop in the southeast, up from 9.7. The count in the northeast, which is not a primary region for pheasants, was 3.3 crows per stop, up from 3.0 last year.

"Current conditions are excellent across the state with adequate moisture this spring and early summer. These conditions should foster insect hatches, which would provide forage to chicks for brood rearing," Gross said. "Pheasant chicks hatch from early June through late July. Much of nesting success will depend on the weather, and we will more accurately assess pheasant production during our late summer roadside counts, which begin at the end of July."

Pheasant crowing counts are conducted each spring throughout North Dakota. Observers drive specified 20-mile routes, stopping at predetermined intervals, and counting the number of pheasant roosters heard crowing over a 2-minute period.

The number of pheasant crows heard are compared to previous years' data, providing a trend summary.



Blue-winged teal.

Nominal Increase in Breeding Duck Numbers

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 76th annual spring breeding duck survey conducted in May showed an index of more than 3.4 million birds, up just 1.5% from last year.

And like last year, the breeding duck index for 2023 was the 23rd highest on record and stands at 39% above the long-term (1948-2022) average, according to Mike Szymanski, migratory game bird supervisor.

"As with all May waterfowl surveys, we are counting what remains of last year's fall flight. After a modest production year last year, duck numbers were flat relative to responses that are more typical with abundant water on the landscape," Szymanski said. "Moreover, a large decrease in the number of ducks observed in areas with good wetland conditions (i.e., the Drift Prairie) is emblematic of a broader population that has declined overall. Such observations may be more typical as prospects for large fall flights decline from those of the 1994 to 2016 time period."

The number of total wetlands was down 26% from last year and 76% above the 1948-2022 average. 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.

"This is the seventh wettest spring in terms of wet basins on record, following our second wettest survey last year," Szymanski said. "The prairie wetland ecosystem is highly dynamic, which is evidenced by the last few years bouncing between wet and dry conditions. Whether wet or not, waterfowl resources continue to decline in the state due to diminished reproductive potential, limited by secure nesting cover."

Indices for most individual species, except for blue-winged teal, mallards and scaup increased from 2022. Mallards were down 9.8% from 2022 and represented the 27th highest count on record. The green-winged teal index increased 71%, wigeon and pintails increased 58% and 47%, respectively,

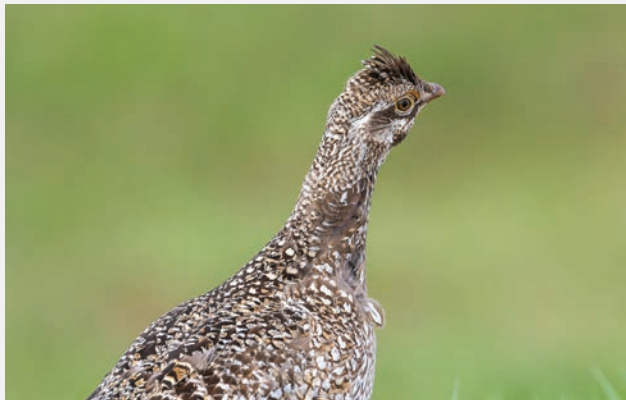
and other increases ranged from 12% for shovelers to 19% for canvasbacks. Decreases from the 2022 index were observed for scaup (-23%), mallards (-9.8%) and blue-winged teal (-4.4%).

Pintails, a species of management concern, appeared to be responding to excellent nesting conditions where available, Szymanski said. These birds have struggled continentally and it's good to see them respond to good habitat conditions in the state, he added.

"Breeding duck numbers in North Dakota generally trend with wetland conditions. After a nominal increase, the overall number of ducks is still above the 75-year average, but 15% below the 1994-2016 average," Szymanski said. "Breeding duck indices above 4 million in the state will be unlikely, even during the wettest years, unless our upland nesting habitats improve. The Dakotas will no longer be able to consistently buoy midcontinent duck populations without large numbers of acres of secure nesting cover on the landscape in the form of perennial grasses provided by programs like CRP."

Szymanski added that the estimated number of Canada geese (297,914) in North Dakota during the May 2023 survey was down 23% from the 2022 estimate, which was a record.

"Canada goose nesting efforts appeared to be reduced and delayed as few Canada goose broods and lower than normal numbers of nests were observed on the survey," he added. "There were many pairs and small groups of Canada geese observed during the survey on territories. Pairs may have simply been delayed, but some flooding of nests occurred during early May in areas with 4 to 8 inches of rainfall during active nesting."



Sharp-tailed grouse.

2022 Upland Game Hunting Summary

North Dakota's 2022 pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian partridge harvests were up from 2021.

R.J. Gross, Game and Fish Department upland game biologist, said the overall harvest was likely a result of more hunters and good production.

"We were somewhat surprised that harvest was up despite slight declines during our spring 2022 surveys and the early end to most upland seasons when winter showed up in November," Gross said. "The increase in

harvest indicates good reproduction, perhaps even better than what we saw during our brood routes. The statewide blizzards that occurred in spring of 2021, combined with spring showers, were followed by a rapid vegetation response, so late-season nesting cover was exceptional. In addition, brood survival benefited from a warm and dry late summer with abundant insects."

Last year, 51,270 pheasant hunters (up 9%) harvested 286,970 roosters (up 10%), compared to 47,020 hunters and 259,997 roosters in 2021. Counties with the highest percentage of pheasants taken were Hettinger, Divide, Bowman, Williams and Stark.

A total of 20,461 grouse hunters (up 29%) harvested 62,640 sharp-tailed grouse (up 37%), compared to 15,762 hunters and 45,732 sharptails in 2021. Counties with the highest percentage of sharptails taken were Mountrail, Burke, Bowman, Divide and McKenzie.

Last year, 19,125 hunters (up 36%) harvested 54,553 Hungarian partridge (up 22%). In 2021, 14,013 hunters harvested 44,822 Huns. Counties with the highest percentage of Hungarian partridge taken were Mountrail, Ward, Bottineau, Williams and Divide.

Bait Regulations

Anglers should note that live white suckers are not legal baitfish 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. In addition, it is illegal for anglers 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.

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.



Tagged walleye.

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.



Muskrat.

Fur Harvester Ed Classes

The North Dakota Cooperative Fur Harvester Education Program is hosting fur harvester education classes on Aug. 1, 3 and 5 at the North Dakota Game and Fish Department in Bismarck and Oct. 5, 6 and 7 at the Velva Wildlife Club in Velva.

Fur harvester education classes are 16 hours, 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. 14 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 Tischaeyer at 701-460-1055.

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 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.

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.

Put Garbage Where it Belongs

Outdoor recreationists are encouraged 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.

Report Boating 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 asked to follow the guidelines for submitting their work.



Photographers should go to the Game and Fish Department's website at gf.nd.gov/wildlife/watchable-photo-contest. Then it is a matter of providing some pertinent information about the photo and uploading it. Doing so helps both with ease of submitting photos for the photographer and managing those images for Department staff.

The contest is now open and the deadline for submitting photos is Oct. 2. 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.



Cayla's Kitchen - VENISON BURGERS

Nothing says summer like burgers on the grill. Check out this installment of Cayla's Kitchen for an easy burger recipe using ground venison. And for more ideas to bring wild game to your table visit gf.nd.gov/caylas-kitchen.

STAFF NOTES



Steve Dyke

Dyke Retires, Kreft Fills Supervisor Role

Steve Dyke retired after 35 years with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. Dyke joined the Department in 1988 as a fisheries biologist. At the time of his retirement, he was the Department's conservation supervisor, a position he held since 2001.



Bruce Kreft

Bruce Kreft, who joined the agency's fisheries division in 1989, and has been a conservation biologist since 2000, filled the position vacated by Dyke.

PLI Habitat Manager Named

Nate Harling, Department private land field operation supervisor since 2015, was named habitat manager for the Game and Fish Department's private land initiative in June. Harling will focus heavily on managing various partnerships and projects to put more habitat on the landscape.



Nate Harling



Doug Olson

Olson Retires, Lucas Promoted to Supervisor

North Dakota Game and Fish Department game warden, Doug Olson, retired after 42 years with the Department. Olson was a regional supervisor for the enforcement division for the last 19 years in both Dickinson and Riverdale.

"Doug was a valuable member of the Department and specifically the enforcement division," said Scott Winkelman, enforcement division chief. "He was an excellent training officer and was dedicated to protecting our wildlife and those who enjoy it. His knowledge and experience is invaluable to the agency and will be difficult to replace."



Joe Lucas

Joe Lucas, Department game warden in Turtle Lake, filled the Region 3 supervisor position in northwestern North Dakota vacated by Olson.

BACKCAST

By Ron Wilson

My daughter travels a lot, mostly for work. Alabama, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Ohio, Oregon, Texas ... I know I missed a few stops.

Spending as much time as she does en route to somewhere, there are the usual hiccups with the airlines, rental car folks and so on.

Yesterday, she hit me with this dispatch on my phone as she was trying mostly unsuccessfully to get home, back to Denver, from Seattle. I knew it was coming and was hoping to dodge the topic for at least a few days.

"My flight got canceled. Had to buy a ticket on another airline for tomorrow morning at 5 a.m. And I just saw that I didn't draw a deer tag. Great day."

I wanted to tell her that not drawing a doe tag wasn't a surprise, considering she is a nonresident and was vying, per state law, for just 1% of the tags. I wanted to add that we got here because deer were hit hard by the unrelenting winter and tags were reduced statewide by nearly 11,000 and the unit we hunt was arguably the hardest hit. I wanted to say that the Department issued just 53,400 deer tags this year, the lowest since 2016, yet more than 75,000 hunters applied for those tags.

Instead, because I don't like to text and I'd see her over the Fourth of July weekend, I replied: "I know it sucks. Your brother didn't draw either."

To people who don't deer hunt, or even some who do, they don't understand the worth in drawing a deer license. While figuring out where deer are moving, playing the wind, getting up well before first light to get into position because you think you've got it wired, pulling the trigger, skinning animals hung upside down and cutting up and vacuum packing the fallout in a warmish garage out of the wind are significant, there's more to it than that.

I would bet that the kids and I talk about deer season, the one that awaits or seasons that are simply memories, every month because it's important to us. It sustains us just a bit. The chatter certainly



increases as we inch into fall as there are weighty topics to discuss, notably the deer camp menu and whose turn it is to sleep on the camp's hide-a-way bed.

These conversations certainly play better if all involved were successful in drawing a deer tag in June, but that's just simply not the case this year. We're no different than a lot of hunting parties. Just the luck of the draw.

No matter. We'll still gather as a family for the November 10 opener, the latest the season can open because of the way the calendar falls. I'm hoping the weather won't be an issue, that we don't get a repeat of last season.

Then again, it's way too early to worry about that. Hoping for agreeable deer hunting weather, like drawing a nonresident doe tag in the lottery, is a crapshoot at best.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

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Patrick T. Isakson, Game and Fish Department conservation biologist, holds a Canadian toad caught along the banks of the Missouri River. Researchers are searching for American toads in North Dakota and how they relate to Canadian toad populations in the state. Researchers are concentrating their efforts on Department wildlife management areas east of the Missouri River.

PHOTO BY ASHLEY PETERSON



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