

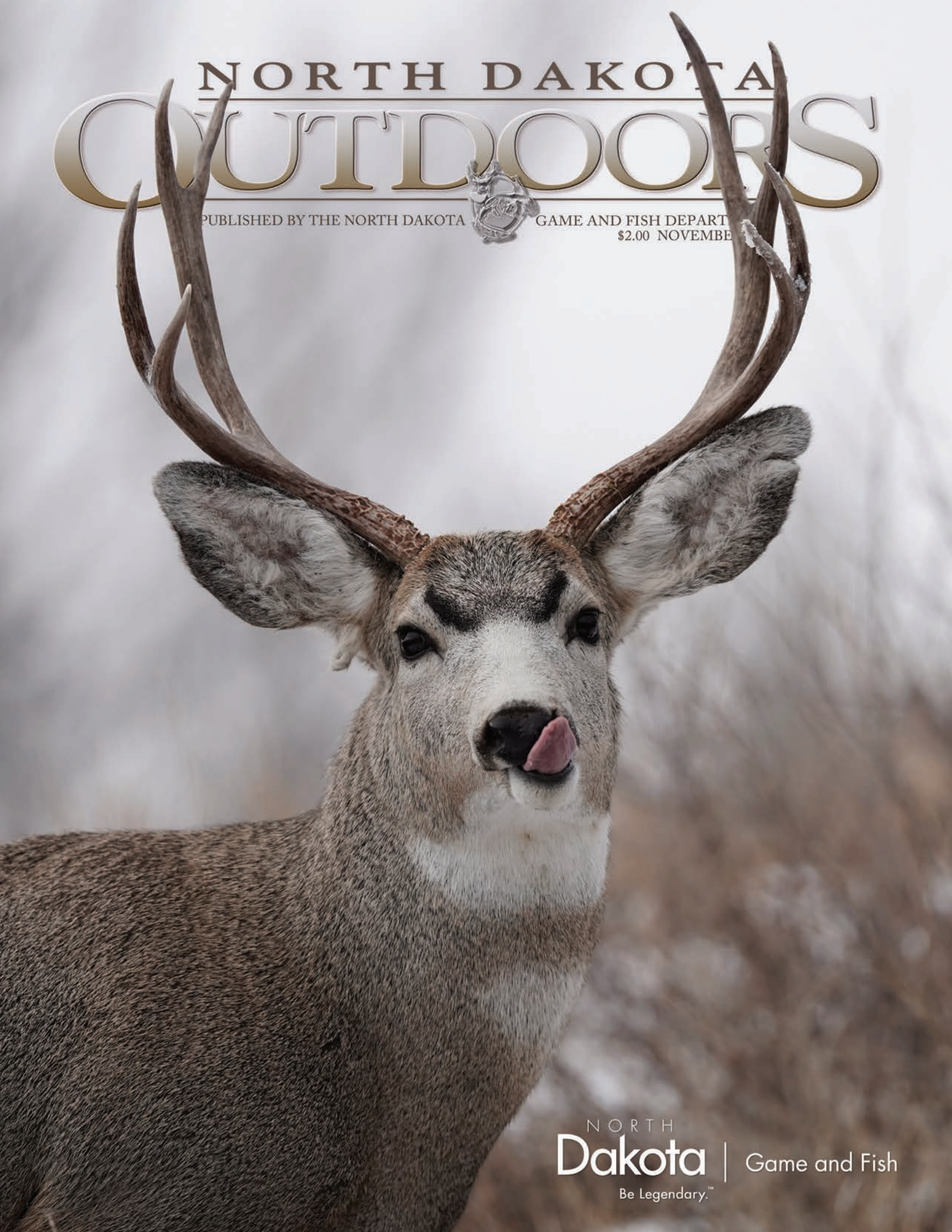
NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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A group of mule deer take turns negotiating a barbed wire fence in North Dakota.

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100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501-5095

Website: gf.nd.gov • Email: ndgf@nd.gov

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NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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

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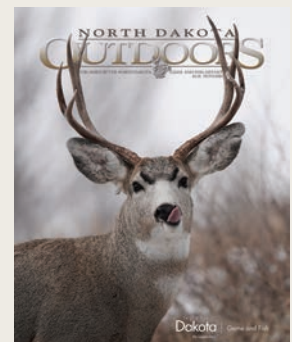
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Front Cover

*A badlands mule deer buck.
Photo by Sandra Johnson*



My 2 Cents

By Jeb Williams, Director

One of the privileges of authoring a column is the chance to write about many topics. Oftentimes, my focus is on the variety of things just floating around in my head. Seems like this column might fall into that category.

As many of you are aware, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department has eight advisory board members appointed by the governor who serve as liaisons between the public and the Department. The advisory board consists of four landowners and four sportsmen and women representatives with affiliations with organizations that have an interest in the Department's form and function. This board has existed since the 1960s and has served the public and the Department well by providing various forms of input into the management of the state's fish and wildlife resources and those who are impacted, either positively or negatively, by the decisions made.

The bi-annual public meetings hosted by each advisory board member, one in fall and one in spring, provides the opportunity for the public to interact with both the advisory board members and Department staff. While this fall's meeting process is the same, the range of the meeting dates is much longer than typical. Normally, the meetings take place after the deer gun season and end in early December. A fairly short window. In an attempt to spread out the meeting dates and to experiment with hosting them earlier in fall, this year's meetings began in late October.

Another thought was by scheduling some of the meetings earlier it would take away any hazardous travel concerns associated with winter weather. A good thought, but we were once again reminded that North Dakota winter weather is never predictable. As

I write this, out of the four meetings scheduled, two have been impacted by weather, and one of those had to be postponed.

Long story short, the opportunities to attend an advisory board meeting this fall are spread over an approximate six-week period instead of a two- or three-week window. We hope that increases the opportunity for those interested in attending one of the eight public meetings across the state.

Our public is passionate about North Dakota's fish and wildlife resources and the opportunity to share discussions with interested individuals is a very important aspect of what we do. As we have just about hit the meeting halfway mark, that has indeed been the case. Topics covering electronic posting, fishing access, deer numbers, chronic wasting disease, winter feeding, deer season dates, disability permits for hunters, and many more wide-ranging issues that allow Department staff the opportunity to discuss our thought process on any issue.

While there are many reasons to celebrate why we live where we live, good people like Rex Cook is at the top of a long list of why we call North Dakota home. Earlier this fall I attended a memorial service in western North Dakota for Rex, who passed away at age 95. To shorten a long story, Rex and his family have been close family friends of ours for many years. While Rex had closer ties to my grandparents and my mother's generation, I always felt like he was someone I had known for much longer than I actually had. He was a great example for anyone who knew him when comes to how to work with people and how to treat them. Based on the turnout at his service, many people, both old and young, felt that way as well.

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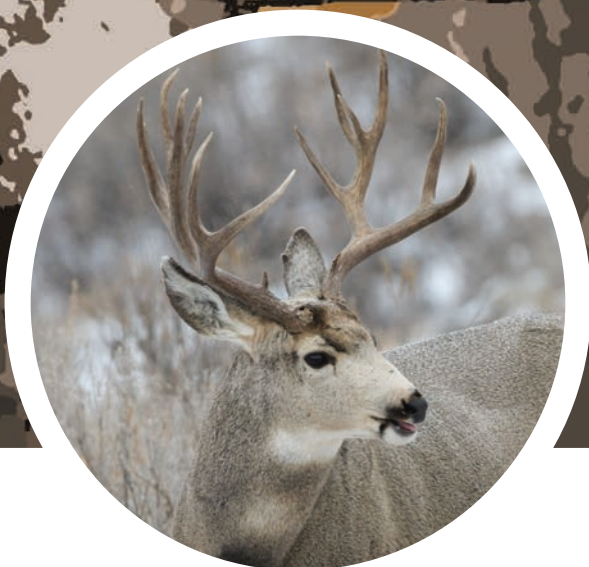
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Kind of a Big Deal Q&A

By Ron Wilson

When you consider the state's first modern deer season was in 1931, the first year a specific license was required to hunt, that means we've been hunting deer in North Dakota for more than 90 years.

That's a long time. There's a lot of history attached to those nine-plus decades. And, understandably, many things — habitat conditions, deer numbers and the fallout from whatever Mother Nature throws our way — have changed over time.

Prior to the 2023 deer gun opener, NDO staff visited with Casey Anderson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief, about the most anticipated hunting season no matter the year, deer numbers across the state, the influence of a tough winter on our most coveted big game species, the list goes on.

NDO: Game and Fish made available 53,400 licenses for the 2023 deer gun season. That's the lowest allocation since 2016. Even so, more than 75,000 hunters still applied. What does that tell you?

Anderson: Deer hunting in North Dakota is, as some people would say, kind of a big deal. There are whole families, extended families that like to try to get out and deer hunt for that short period of time in the fall. Considering we're a very agricultural state, you've got a lot of folks who are working hard to get crops off, get hay hauled in, and it seems like deer season is right about the time that some of that stuff really slows down and they have an opportunity to get together with family. And so, deer hunting gets to be something that a lot of folks look forward to in North Dakota. Unfortunately, the last few years our deer population has been trending down. And really a lot of that has to do with habitat



loss and the types of habitats that are out there. We came out of an unprecedented winter that we haven't seen in quite some time and it really hurt the deer herd that was already in a downward trend because of, again, habitat loss and other things like epizootic hemorrhagic disease that we had on the landscape that set some of the white-tails back.

NDO: Why a reduction of nearly 11,000 deer gun licenses from 2022? How did we get here?

Anderson: Again, we're coming out of a terrible winter that was worse in some parts of the state than others, but no matter what it was like where you live, winter was bad enough to still put stress on the critters out there. Not only did we lose a lot of deer in certain areas of the state, but the tough winter also affected the ability for deer to bring off fawns, at least twins. The license allocation goal that we put out was to hopefully be a little more

conservative and allow the deer to maybe have a decent year. We're crossing our fingers that we have a decent winter and then fawn production should start kicking back in. We were also a little bit behind in some areas because of the EHD outbreak on whitetails especially, so we were pretty conservative with licenses this year just to try to help those populations rebound. But we still want the opportunity for folks to go out and enjoy some deer hunting.

NDO: From 2001 to 2011, Game and Fish made available more than 100,000 deer gun licenses to hunters. Some hunters were carrying several deer tags in their pockets during those years. Will we ever see anything like that again in North Dakota? If so, what needs to be done to get there? If not, why can't we foresee getting there?

Anderson: To get back to that type of situation, it's going to take a landscape shift in habitat. When you think about it, we had more than 3 million acres of CRP on the landscape. We had shelter belts, more old farmsteads with lots of trees on the landscape. Some of that stuff has come off the landscape for multiple reasons, but when it was there, it was really a boon for deer and many other critters in North Dakota. The other thing that all that habitat did back then was help deer and other animals rebound much faster than today after a tough winter. To get back to that, I don't know that we would have to get back to those levels of habitat spread across the state, but we would definitely have to increase habitat in the state in key areas. It's going to take a decision by some folks out there who are controlling a lot of the landscape to increase habitat that would help deer make





it through bad winters, and to provide fawning habitat in spring in places so does can raise their fawns. Those are the things that will really make them bounce back fast. Now, of course, if we get easy winters, that's going to definitely help. While easy winters can take us a long way, one bad winter can set things back quite a ways.

NDO: Is the Game and Fish Department in the mode of increasing the deer population statewide? We ask this because there was a time when the plan was to reduce the state's deer numbers.

Anderson: We have a goal to increase deer populations to a level that is based on habitat on the landscape and tolerances across the state. If you don't have habitat across the landscape to

spread deer out and you get a bad winter when the deer population is climbing, deer can cause problems. And so, without habitat to spread them out, a place to go, they end up going to where the trees are sticking out of the landscape, out of the snow, and in a lot of cases causing problems. And then we're working with multiple landowners trying to help them with depredation situations because the deer are in their livestock feed sources or something like that. In those situations, of course, we try to help them protect those as best we can.

NDO: What can you say about the white-tailed deer population in North Dakota today?

Anderson: Whitetail deer are down statewide, which is something hunters are going to notice. There will be pockets where there's good populations. When you consider those areas hit hard by EHD and tough winter conditions, there are going to be fewer deer. But, for example, when you get up to Williston and that country, there was less of winter up there. What I'm saying is that it's just going to vary across the state. Last winter was a good example of showing us what we're missing on the landscape in a lot of cases. There were times when we were up in a plane flying over the landscape last winter and it was nothing but snow, there was nothing sticking out of that snow. In North Dakota, winter cover is a big deal. Even having grass on the landscape that catches snow, that doesn't allow places like cattail wetlands to fill in as fast with snow, really does help extend the deer's ability to make it through the winter.



NDO: What about mule deer?

Anderson: Our big game biologists just got done flying yesterday (Oct. 16) and from the information I got from them, it looks like mule deer populations were kind of different across the badlands. We had areas with really good fawn production and areas with pretty minimal fawn production. So, we definitely saw the response from the bad winter we had. It looked like the buck to doe ratio was in pretty good shape, pretty stable. However, a lot of the bucks were a little bit on the younger side compared to other years. But all in all, habitat conditions in the badlands are excellent after this year's rains and growing season. Barring another bad winter, mule deer should have the opportunity to rebound fairly decently.

Overall, no matter if you're hunting whitetails or mule deer, hunters can expect to work a little bit harder to find deer. We've had a pretty nice fall and things are looking good as far as crops being off, so deer will be in a lot fewer places as far as hiding situations. I think if people want to put the work in, they'll be able to find a deer to harvest. Just depends on which deer you want to harvest.

DEER LICENSES BY THE NUMBERS

A look at deer gun license numbers over time. The state's first deer season was held in 1931, the first year a specific deer license was required.

1971 – The first year more than 50,000 deer licenses were made available to hunters. More than 33,000 deer were harvested that season.

1974 – The first year more than 60,000 deer licenses were made available to hunters. Yet, from 1975-81, deer license totals were below 50,000.

1986-87 – More than 80,000 deer licenses were made available to hunters those two seasons. Yet, in 1988, the total fell to about 64,000.

2001-11 – More than 100,000 deer licenses were made available to hunters during those 11 seasons. The high was 149,400 in 2008.

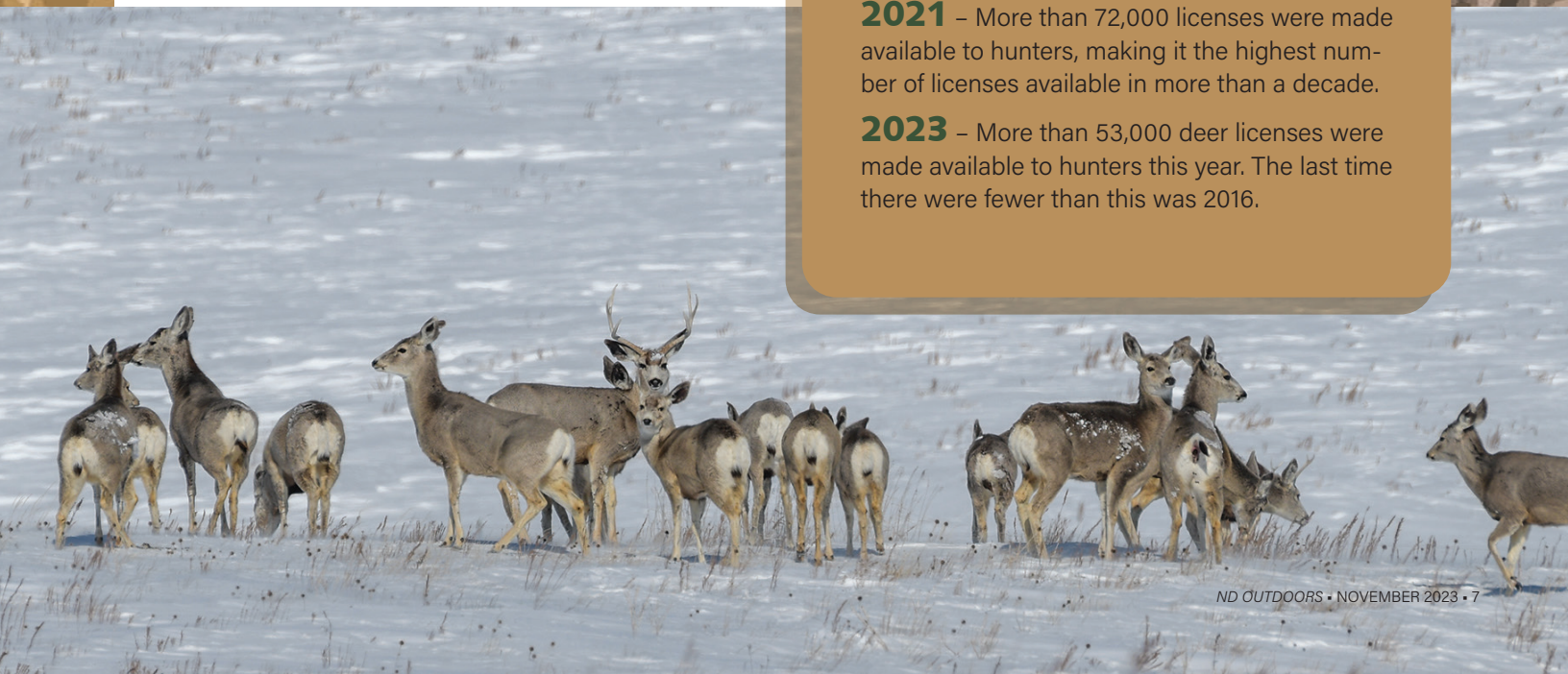
2012 – Nearly 45,000 fewer deer licenses were made available compared to 2011.

2015 – The lowest number of licenses (43,275) made available to hunters in 35 years.

2016-19 – Deer licenses made available to hunters have increased (from 49,000 in 2016 to 65,000 in 2019) in each of those four hunting seasons.

2021 – More than 72,000 licenses were made available to hunters, making it the highest number of licenses available in more than a decade.

2023 – More than 53,000 deer licenses were made available to hunters this year. The last time there were fewer than this was 2016.





INVESTIGATING

American Martens

BY RON WILSON



An American marten caught on a trail camera as it investigates a cubby trap set in the Turtle Mountains earlier this fall.

Surveying American martens in the Turtle Mountains stinks.

As we follow researchers through thick stands of face-slapping, ankle-grabbing trees in this gorgeous neck of North Dakota, the concoction of skunk and whatever else used to lure martens to the survey sites is strong. It doesn't matter that the potion is stored in a sealed jar and stuffed into a backpack. It still smells like roadkill as we part the trees with our hands and arms as if we're doing the breast-stroke to get to the next location.

The lure, dubbed a call lure by researchers and trappers alike, also smells like success when these animals answer the call and leave hair samples on the sticky pads in cubby traps and are captured on trail cameras.

"The technique we're trying out up here is a genetic mark recapture survey, and the only thing we're capturing from the martens is their hair," said Stephanie Tucker, North Dakota Game and Fish Department game management section leader. "We're setting some cubbies that are baited, sort of like a trap, but there's no part of the cubby that's going to restrain or hold the marten. They are simply going into these cubbies to investigate a bait or a lure and hopefully leaving some hair samples behind in the process. We identify individuals using genetic analysis based on that hair. And then we'll determine how many times they come back and visit those sites after we've marked them the first time."

The fall of 2023 marked the second of three years that researchers from Michigan State University have tried to collect marten hair samples. Tucker said the Game and Fish Department is also working with the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa as a significant chunk of the reservation is in the southeastern corner of the Turtle Mountains.



Researcher Rachelle Ketelhohn sets a cubby trap on a wildlife management area in the Turtle Mountains. The interior of the trap (pictured on the right) shows the bait used to entice martens to enter the cubby and hopefully leave hair on the sticky, white pads.



"They have marten within their reservation boundary, too, because these animals certainly don't adhere to administrative boundaries," Tucker said. "To get a complete picture of what's going on in this region, the Tribe is part of that. We are collaborating with them and they're helping us with the survey within the tribal boundary, which will give us a complete picture for the Turtle Mountain region."

Jeff Desjarlais Jr., natural resource director for the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, said it's a good thing the two have joined to learn more about an elusive critter that has been on the landscape for some time.

"We love our partnership with the Game and Fish, and we've been talking about doing a marten study ourselves for a while," he said. "And then Stephanie contacted us, and it was a great opportunity for our staff and myself to learn a lot more about the marten and the practice we want to go with moving forward."

The American marten is a small member of the weasel family, and people are probably more familiar with its semi-aquatic cousin, the mink. While martens look similar to mink and are roughly the same size, the former are completely terrestrial and live above the ground in trees where they seek shelter and den in cavities to have their kits. Also, martens have slightly longer hair than a mink, and the throat, chest or chin patch is orange colored on a marten, whereas it's white on mink.

These terrestrial carnivores eat small rodents, such as mice, voles and squirrels, but they are also opportunistic, Tucker said, and they'll prey on birds and bird nests as well.

"In North Dakota, we know American martens have been established in the Turtle Mountain region for several decades. The Turtle Mountain Provincial Park on the Canadian side of the border reintroduced or introduced marten to their forests back in the late 1980s early 1990s. And that's why martens are on our side of the border as well, they've inhabited this entire eco region," Tucker said. "We've had a few confirmations of American martens in the Red River Valley corridor. But here in the Turtle Mountains we have an established breeding population in the region."

Tucker said first and foremost, the Department is trying to determine with the survey the number of martens in this longstanding population that actually inhabit the Turtle Mountains.

"They have regulated trapping of marten on the Canadian side of this eco region. And we're interested also in exploring whether or not we can have a sustainable harvest season, a sustainable trapping season for marten," Tucker said. "But in order to do that, we need to find out how many there are so that we can regulate that trapping season appropriately and make sure we don't overharvest them."

Desjarlais Jr. said the end goal of a sustainable harvest season is what the Tribe is interested in, too.

"We want to see our resources here forever and not depleted," he said. "So, if we don't have some kind of management plan, we're not going to be able to sustain that population."

While the cubby sets are designed to collect hair samples from the martens, trail cameras are also mounted on nearby trees to monitor animals that come in without leaving evidence of their existence.



Researcher Jazmyn Toombs attaches a trail camera to a tree. The camera is focused on a cubby trap used to collect hair samples from American martens in the Turtle Mountains.



"After three years of surveying in the woods, hopefully we've collected enough individual hair samples to be able to crunch the numbers and get that estimate," Tucker said. "It would be great if we had some preliminary analysis by the end of 2024. But for sure by 2025, we should know enough, and the analysis would be far enough along to be able to propose a season at that time if the population can handle that based on our abundance estimate."

The marten hair samples are sent to a lab at Michigan State University where geneticists determine the identification of individual animals. Tucker said her primary collaborators at MSU are Dr. Gary Roloff and Dr. Steven Gray.

Tucker said Canada has had a marten season for about 20 years and she feels pretty confident the Department and Tribe can manage and support a limited harvest season in the Turtle Mountains.

"We just aren't collecting enough data passively on martens to be able to pull that trigger yet," she said. "That's why we're doing this research project so we

can say with confidence, yes or no, we can have a limited, regulated trapping season. And this is what it's going to look like when we have one."

North Dakota already has a trapping season for fishers in parts of the state. The fisher is related to the marten but is larger and also does most of its hunting in trees. Because similar methods are used to trap both species, Tucker said the Turtle Mountain region is currently closed to fisher trapping because there isn't a regulated, legal season on martens.

"If you're trapping for fishers, you're likely going to catch a marten. And because we aren't far enough along to say whether or not we feel comfortable opening a trapping season on marten, we've not allowed fisher trapping here either," Tucker said. "The hope is that if we can open a marten trapping season, we'd open up this area to fisher trapping as well."

Researchers will run the genetic mark recapture survey as long as they can, but not to the point where snow will limit access and the ability of researchers to wander the woods and set cubby traps and trail cameras.

"Later in the fall there's a couple of things going on. One, you have the kits from the spring litters that are mostly full grown and they're really moving around. So, this is the time of year when our density of marten in an area would be at its highest," Tucker said. "And two, the later it gets in the year, the hungrier the marten get and the more curious they are about food attractants. And that's what we're using to get them to try and entice them to go into the cubbies and leave those hair samples. So, the later in the year, the better because there's not as much natural food resources out on the landscape, and they'll more likely come in and investigate and give up some hair samples."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.





Izzy R., a young angler from Bismarck, with a walleye from West Lake Napoleon.

FROM OPEN WATER TO ICE

BY RON WILSON

While it's only a guess at how North Dakota's ice fishing season will shake out in the coming months, anglers would likely maintain that they'd be happy if it's half as good as the open water season soon to be tucked away for winter.

Looking back, the walleye fishing — the focus of more than 80% of anglers in the state — couldn't have been any better, said Greg Power, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries chief.

"It was incredible how many calls we got ... a lot of positive things were said about the walleye fishing in North Dakota in 2023," Power said. "And it wasn't any one water, and that's what was super neat about it. It was pretty much throughout the state, particularly our new walleye prairie lakes."

Per typical, the big three — Lake Sakakawea, Lake Oahe and Devils Lake — fielded the bulk of the fishing activity with good results.

"Lake Sakakawea had another excellent year. Devils Lake was solid throughout summer and into fall, and Oahe was a little surprising, it was probably a little better than expected," Power said. "The big three have been our mainstay walleye fisheries for 50 years. What makes them work is water, and we've had decent water. Oahe is a walleye factory. It's our only truly self-sustaining walleye fishery in the state. So, there's plenty of walleye all the time in Oahe. But Sakakawea has had excellent stocking results for the last 10-20 years and good natural reproduction. Same thing with Devils Lake. Just a lot of success in the stocking because we've got good water and good forage."

North Dakota's prairie walleye waters, most initially pike and perch fisheries back in the day, were started from scratch. But with continued stocking of walleye fingerlings over time, these lakes have evolved.

"The history of our walleye stocking is the reason why we have these fisheries today," Power said. "I should also note, though, what's kind of cool is that in 2023, we've never documented so much natural reproduction in these new prairie lakes, and it's substantial in some cases. So, it's possible in a few years some of these lakes are going to be self-sustaining walleye fisheries, which is pretty impressive."

Much of the credit for the stellar walleye fishing on these prairie lakes falls on the two federal fish hatcheries in North Dakota. Without a state fish hatchery, the working relationship between the Game and Fish Department and the hatcheries has been nothing but a

boon to anglers.

"Garrison in particular has a long, long history of incredible production of pike and walleye. Because of that, we've been able to stock 8-12 million walleye fingerlings in our lakes for the last 10-plus years," Power said. "So, thank God we have that. If we didn't have that tool, it wouldn't be anything like it is today."

With roughly 450 waters in the state, Power said stocking and managing the fisheries is only half the battle.

"Over half of these waters have boat ramps and all the infrastructure that come into play ... parking lots, fishing docks, and in some cases, fishing piers, toilets and fish cleaning stations," he said. "We're still doing a lot of catch up on the infrastructure part of it. While we have a lot of partners, the list is long when it comes to the development program and the needs out there. The good news is that last year we did some internal restructuring, so to speak, and we have two field crews now. So, we have four people full-time that can attend to all the needs out there at the boat ramps."

Next up, certainly, with the coming of winter, is the state's ice fishing season. Power said he hopes, knock on wood, that ice anglers aren't faced with the same weather and access challenges of last winter.

"It's beyond our pay grade to know what Mother Nature has in mind for North Dakota, but hopefully we don't have a repeat of last year and that we have better access," he said. "For the most part, our lakes are in good shape, the prairie walleye lakes in particular, which should make for some good winter fishing."

No matter, the fishing future is bright in North Dakota.

"From a fisheries biologist's perspective, and we've said this for a very long time, we get a lot more excited when we see 8-inch walleye than 8-pound walleye because the 8-inch fish is the future. And we're seeing a lot of that," Power said. "As good as fishing is today, we still see a lot of younger year-classes coming up. In fact, Sakakawea, for example, had the second highest on record for young-of-the-year walleye this fall. The future ... today, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, probably for the next five plus years at least, our fishing in North Dakota looks really positive. As long as we have the water, I think the fish will be there."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



It's only a guess if winter will dig its heels into North Dakota in early November like last year and linger way longer than tolerable.

What's certain is that winter is coming and that North Dakota Game and Fish Department personnel will be trapping wild turkeys for the second year running and fitting them with backpack-style GPS transmitters with VHF to allow researchers the ability to track the birds.

Department personnel put transmitters on 100 turkeys last winter, with the goal of fitting 115 birds with the same devices this winter.

Rodney Gross, Game and Fish Department upland game management biologist, said this winter will mark the end of trapping turkeys for this specific research project. What follows in the five-year study, conducted in conjunction with the University of North Dakota, is field work and data analysis.

After less than a full season of tracking turkeys from the air and on the ground, Gross said they've already gained some insight into a species that's been studied very little over the years in North Dakota.



ANECDOTAL TURKEY FINDINGS

By Ron Wilson

"While everything we know at this point is anecdotal, we're learning some really good stuff about our turkeys," Gross said. "We've been moving these turkeys since the 1990s from depredation sites on private lands to wildlife management areas and we don't know where they're going specifically, are they moving off to other areas? We also want to know more about survival, and we're finding so far is that survival has been a little better than what I expected. Having to deal with the tough elements of last winter and being moved to new locations ... it was encouraging to see that they survived as well as they did."

Gross added that the nesting success by those birds relocated to wildlife management areas was low, but that was expected, especially among juvenile hens that typically have a 5% chance of hatching young.

"We figured that's how it would go because we were taking turkeys and putting them in places they weren't familiar with," he said. "When you do that, their pecking order gets out of whack. They will eventually reestablish that order and it will be interesting to see in year two if these hens will nest after everything is reestablished."

It needs to be noted that not all the birds trapped and marked with GPS transmitters this winter and last are relocated to new digs. Some birds, the study control birds, stay on site.

Much of the weight of the study falls on Cailey Isaacson, University of North Dakota Ph.D. student, who has been monitoring movements and the whereabouts of the turkeys for months.

"I'm all over the western half of the state, essentially



Researcher Cailey Isaacson (top) checks for the whereabouts of wild turkeys fitted last winter with backpack-style GPS transmitters with VHF. Rodney Gross, Department upland game management biologist, and Isaacson look over the data revealed by turkeys trapped last winter and relocated to wildlife management areas.

west of the Missouri River," Isaacson said. "My commutes are about 3-5 hours between field sites."

Isaacson describes the study as having a handful of overreaching themes.

"The first one focuses on the movement ecology of these turkeys. So, when we're translocating them and releasing them to these WMAs, what are they doing? Are they staying put? Are they just moving off to the next nearest farmstead? What are they gravitating towards or what would be potentially keeping them there?" she said. "The second theme would be their reproduction. When we're translocating these females, what is the reproduction of these birds here in North Dakota? Are they nesting and at what rates? Then we also have the survival component. So, what is the annual survival of these birds here in North Dakota?"

Isaacson added that they are also trying to figure out what the disease prevalence is within the population and what kinds of diseases are the birds dealing with, if any.

"And lastly, I have a stakeholder component of this project, so I'll be interviewing landowners to kind of get their perspectives and attitudes on turkey management in the state," she said.

Concerning the movement component of the study, anecdotal evidence suggests that if turkeys find themselves somewhere not to their liking, it's nothing for them to travel miles to find an area more suitable.

"There have been some really big movements, some interesting movements that we didn't expect," Gross said. "I think over the whole course of the study, we're going to learn a lot about turkey movements in North Dakota."

Gross said some of the birds have already shown the ability to move 15 miles or more to find what they're looking for.

"You would think 15-plus miles for a turkey is pretty good movement ... it just shows you what they are capable of doing," he said. "I had an idea that they would make those kinds of moves because we don't have abundant turkey habitat in North Dakota, except for the river corridors. Then again, they're not necessarily in all cases following river corridors either. They're going over prairies and crossing other rivers to find what they're looking for."

The results of the five-year study will hopefully aid in the Department's effort to manage a population that has been pursued by hunters in spring and fall for years.

Gross said the study will certainly help wildlife managers evaluate the trap and transport program of moving turkeys from private lands in winter to Department managed lands where hunters can pursue them.

"It will help us determine if we are doing the right thing by moving these birds in the trap and transport program. Are there other alternatives that we could do? I mean, if survival is near zero, maybe we need to think of other things that we can do," he said.

And considering so little work has been done with turkeys in the state, Gross said the study will help in determining peak nesting time.

"Currently, we have no nesting data in North Dakota. So, if we can determine that, if we can define when peak nesting is, what's peak breeding in North Dakota, then that would help with season structures and management of turkeys in the state," he said.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



Department personnel put transmitters on 100 turkeys last winter before relocating the majority of the birds to Department managed lands. The goal this year is to trap and fit transmitters on 115 turkeys.



A man in a light blue uniform with a circular patch on the sleeve that reads "NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH" is leaning over a river. He is holding a metal bucket filled with lake sturgeon, and the fish are being poured into the water. The background is a blurred natural setting with rocks and greenery.

STURGEON

Return to Pembina River

By Ron Wilson

Brandon Kratz, Department fisheries supervisor in Jamestown, releases lake sturgeon into the Pembina River earlier this fall.



Fish long missing from a tributary of the Red River in northeastern North Dakota are home again.

In late September, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel released 1,000 lake sturgeon into the Pembina River to reestablish a population of fish that can live long and grow large. The reintroduction of the 6- to 8-inch sturgeon was a first in the agency's history and it will be years before biologists can determine if the effort to launch a self-sustaining population is successful.

State fisheries managers don't have to look too far to see the blueprint for such an effort as the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has been doing similar work with noticeable gains for more than two decades.

"In an attempt to reestablish the population of lake sturgeon in the Red River watershed, which was part of their native range, the Minnesota DNR has actually been stocking lake sturgeon in various places throughout the Red River watershed since about 1997," said Todd Caspers, Game and Fish Department fisheries biologist in Devils Lake. "These efforts have been successful at reestablishing the species in the Red River and some of those tributary rivers in Minnesota. And they're actually seeing adult sturgeon that are attempting to spawn on their own in several places now."

Scott Gangl, Department fisheries management section leader, said fisheries biologists are hoping the newly released lake sturgeon will imprint on the Pembina River and someday spawn there once they are able and ready.

The answer to that won't be revealed for years.

"Lake sturgeon have been gone from the Pembina River for so long, it's just not natural for them to move up it and spawn," he said. "The males we just stocked won't be mature enough to spawn for a decade or more and the females will be in their late teens to early 20s before they are ready."

Caspers said there are historical records of lake sturgeon in the Pembina River, but due to several factors such as overfishing and habitat degradation from the construction of a number of low head dams in the Red River and elsewhere, the lake sturgeon population dwindled and eventually disappeared.

Gangl said the Department decided to stock lake sturgeon in the Pembina River in 2023 in anticipation of work down the road to modify an existing low head dam on the Pembina River near the confluence of the Red River to allow the fish passage from one river to the next.

"Today, it's a major impediment that keeps sturgeon from moving up the Red into the Pembina River," he said. "We have been working with the city of Pembina to get their blessing to modify the low head dam and ease the passage of these and other fish in the future."

Gangl said it makes sense to establish a lake sturgeon population in the Pembina River now instead of waiting until the modifications to the low head dam are completed.

"Hopefully, in time, the stocking of sturgeon in the Pembina River will also reestablish lake sturgeon population in that river, and also help to contribute to the population of the Red River watershed at large," Caspers said of a species of fish that has been said to live more than 100 years and grow to more than 200 pounds.

While there's historical documentation of lake sturgeon weighing more than 100 pounds in the Pembina River, it will be decades before these fish grow to that size.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.





BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



CWD Testing, Disposal Requirements

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department will continue its Hunter-Harvested Surveillance program during the 2023 hunting season by sampling deer for chronic wasting disease from select units in the southeastern portion of the state.

Samples will be tested from deer taken from units 2A, 2B, 2F2, 2G, 2G1, 2G2, 2H, 2I and 2J2. Outside of this area, hunters can still have their animal tested by taking to a Game and Fish district office, deer head collection site or by using a self-sampling kit.

CWD is a slow-moving brain disease of deer, moose and elk that can cause population-level impacts under high infection rates.

Hunters are encouraged to drop off heads of adult or yearling deer at collection locations listed on the Department's website at gf.nd.gov. Fawns and head-shot deer cannot be tested. Hunters wishing to keep the heads can bring them to a Game and Fish district office during business hours to have them sampled.

Self-sampling kits are available for hunters who wish to have their deer tested but are unable to drop the head at a collection site. The do-it-yourself kit allows hunters to remove the lymph nodes and ship them to the Department's wildlife health lab for testing. The kits can be found on the Department's website and at district offices.

Results can be expected within four weeks and will be sent to your Game and Fish My Account inbox.

Hunters are also reminded that carcass disposal requirements now apply statewide. The entire carcass can be transported outside of the gun unit where it was harvested. If transported out of the gun unit, the carcass waste (material left after processing) must be disposed of via landfill or waste management provider. This requirement does not apply to heads dropped at CWD collection sites, or lymph nodes submitted for CWD surveillance.

More information on CWD is available at the Game and Fish website.



Ice Fishing Reminders

Anglers are encouraged to refer to the 2022-24 North Dakota Fishing Guide or the Game and Fish Department's website at gf.nd.gov for winter fishing regulations.

Some winter fishing regulations include:

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

- The daily limit is a limit of fish taken from midnight to midnight, and no person may possess more than one day's limit of fish while actively engaged in fishing. The possession limit is the maximum number of fish that an angler may have in his or her possession during a fishing trip of more than one day.

Hunters Urged to Participate

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

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

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

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



Darkhouse Spearfishing Registration

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

In addition, for Stump Lake and the Devils Lake complex south of U.S. Highway 2 and the Missouri River System (including lakes Sakakawea, Oahe and the Missouri River) up to the first tributary bridge, walleyes are also legal.

Darkhouse spearing is allowed for all residents with a valid fishing license and for youth under age 16.

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

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

Anglers should refer to the 2022-24 North Dakota Fishing Guide for more information.

Report Violations with RAP

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

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

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

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

Register for Game Warden Exam

Individuals interested in taking the exam to select candidates for a full-time temporary district game warden position must register by Dec. 27. Testing locations are scheduled for 10 a.m. Central time at the following locations the first week in January 2024.

- Jan. 3 – Game and Fish office, Williston.
- Jan. 4 – Game and Fish office, Bismarck.
- Jan. 5 – West Fargo Police Department, West Fargo.

Applicants must register by submitting an online application through the North Dakota State Job Openings website.

Applicants must be at least 21, have a bachelor's degree at time of hire or an associate degree with either 2 years of law enforcement or wildlife experience, have a valid driver's license and a current North Dakota peace officer license, or eligible to be licensed. Candidates must successfully complete a comprehensive background check and must not have a record of any felony convictions.

Salary through training is \$4,500 per month. For more information, see the district game warden job announcement on the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov.



Advisory Board Meeting Dates

Outdoor enthusiasts are invited to attend a North Dakota Game and Fish Department fall advisory board meeting in their area.

The first four meetings were held earlier this fall. The remaining four are scheduled in late November, including district 7 in Bismarck which will be streamed live on the Game and Fish website. For the statewide livestream, questions can be submitted via chat during the meeting.

The public meetings, held each spring and fall, provide citizens with an opportunity to discuss fish and wildlife issues and ask questions of their district advisors and agency personnel.

The governor appoints eight Game and Fish Department advisors, each representing a multi-county section of the state, to serve as a liaison between the Department and public.

District 8 – Adams, Billings, Bowman, Dunn, Golden Valley, Hettinger, Slope and Stark counties

Date: November 20 – 7 p.m.

Location: Dickinson Eagles Club, 31 1st Ave E, Dickinson

Host: Mule Deer Foundation

Contact: Marshall Johnson, 701-989-4488

Advisory board member: Rob Brooks, Rhame

District 7 – Burleigh, Emmons, Grant, Kidder, McLean, Mercer, Morton, Oliver, Sheridan and Sioux counties

Date: November 21 – 7 p.m.

Location: Game and Fish Main Office, 100 N. Bismarck

Expressway, Bismarck

Host: Friends of Lake Sakakawea

Contact: Jody Sommer, 701-527-2295

Advisory board member: Jody Sommer, Mandan

District 3 – Benson, Cavalier, Eddy, Ramsey, Rolette and Towner counties

Date: November 27 – 7 p.m.

Location: Fire Hall, 216 Second Ave. N., Esmond

Host: Esmond Fire Department

Contact: Jeff Hagen, 701-351-2237

Advisory board member: Edward Dosch, Devils Lake

District 4 – Grand Forks, Nelson, Pembina and Walsh counties

Date: November 28 – 7 p.m.

Location: American Legion, 208 Main St. N., Fordville

Host: Dakota Prairie Wildlife Club

Contact: Lynn Baier, 701-331-1074

Advisory board member: Karissa Daws, Michigan

2024 Calendar Orders

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is taking orders for its North Dakota OUTDOORS calendar, the source for all hunting season and application dates for 2024. Along with color photographs of North Dakota's wildlife and outstanding scenery, it also includes sunrise-sunset times and moon phases.



Calendars must be ordered online by visiting the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov.

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



Cayla's kitchen

Spice up the holiday season with these not-so-traditional wild turkey leg Barbacoa Bowls. Check out this installment of Cayla's Kitchen for an easy recipe using wild turkey legs from birds harvest during North Dakota's turkey season. For this dish, and other ideas to bring wild game to your table, visit gf.nd.gov/caylas-kitchen.



ND Outdoors Podcast

In this episode of NDO Podcast we visit with Ron Wilson, North Dakota OUTDOORS editor, about the history of the Department's magazine and trends from the past and present. Plus, we wander down a few squirrel trails, too. Listeners can find the official podcast of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department on their favorite podcast platform. Listeners can also subscribe to the NDO Podcast (gf.nd.gov/ndo-podcast) to get text or email reminders each time and episode launches.

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STAFF NOTES

ANS Biologists Hired

Mason Hammer and Kyle Oxley have been named aquatic nuisance species biologists for the Game and Fish Department in Jamestown.



Mason Hammer



Kyle Oxley

Hammer attended the University of North Dakota where he earned a degree in fisheries and wildlife biology. Oxley attended Bemidji State University where he earned a degree in aquatic biology with a fisheries emphasis. Both had experience working with the Department before landing their new positions.

Larsen Joins Conservation Staff

Aaron Larsen was named conservation biologist for the Game and Fish Department in Bismarck.

Larsen worked with North Dakota Department of Environmental Quality for 17 years before coming to the Game and Fish Department. His focus will be on aquatic habitat assessment and assisting with aquatic invertebrates for the State Wildlife Action Plan.



Aaron Larsen

Mosset Retires, Klein Joins Agency

Gail Mosset retired after 34 years with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. At the time of her retirement, Mosset was a licensing assistant in the Department's Bismarck office. Elizabeth Klein was hired to fill the licensing vacancy.



Gail Mosset



Elizabeth Klein

Sea New District Fisheries Supervisor

Bryan Sea was promoted to Department district fisheries supervisor in Devils Lake. Sea was working in the agency's Riverdale office as a fisheries biologist on the Missouri River System prior to the promotion.



Bryan Sea



Hunt for
TOMORROW

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BACKCAST

By Ron Wilson

The blood-red buffaloberries that spill from the crops of the four sharp-tailed grouse we're cleaning on the tailgate in western North Dakota are the same color as our hands.

We rinse the inside of the birds with water from a blue, 5-gallon water jug that rides around in the back of the pickup in a plastic milk crate to keep it from tipping over and leaking because the spigot has been broken for a couple of hunting seasons or more.

We wash our hands next and dry them on an old, stained rag that was likely last washed when the water jug spigot was still working.

We put the grouse in a cooler that holds a half-dozen milk jugs that I filled more than halfway with water and froze days ago in a basement freezer.

It's a big cooler. Not as big as they come, but past experiences tell us it's big enough to certainly hold the quarters of two adult whitetails and more.

We don't need much room this trip if things go as planned. If you don't count the sharptails that are impossible to ignore when we come across them, things haven't gone as intended. I missed a pronghorn buck maybe a couple hours ago that was right on the edge of the yardage that I'm comfortable at.

No excuses, really. I just missed.

We spotted the herd, maybe a dozen or more, from a Slope County hilltop. Through good binoculars, borrowed binoculars from good friends, they simply registered as little white dots moving east to west on public land. The fact that we eventually get close enough to get a shot without getting busted by the many eyes and noses sort of feels like a win.

No matter, a missed shot still makes for skinny soup.

Hiking back to the pickup we find a deadhead in the sage and grass from a white-tailed buck that, like a lot of animals last winter, didn't make it to green-up.

From right here where I hold his antlers in my hands, we're about a quarter-mile from the creek bottom that runs through badlands country where we imagine the buck spent most of his time.

My pronghorn license says I can shoot a buck or a doe. My choice. My 20-year-old son, Jack, my sidekick, my young eyes, my pack mule, insists that we're

buck hunting. Doesn't matter how many times I tell him they both eat the same.

We ignore the sharptails that flush from the edge of the two-track as we drive to another spot. It's maybe an hour before sundown and critters are moving. Not just the grouse, but both the mule deer and whitetails have abandoned their beds, making themselves visible.

"There's three."

I don't bother to ask what he's spotted because I know. They're just over the hill, now out of sight, but we still have time to make a play. We check for a second time to make sure it's public land before negotiating the barbed wire fence.

Following Jack's lead through the knee-high grass, it hits me that our long-held roles are now reversed. I'm the one following in his footsteps, obeying his hand signals to hurry it up just a bit. It's been that way, now that I think about it, most of the day.

With the rifle I've been shooting for 45 years resting on shooting sticks, I pull the trigger and our pronghorn season is over.

It will be dark soon as we hustle to find the buck. I know that when we do, our hands will once again be the color of buffaloberries.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



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Bismarck, ND 58501

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your address, call 701-328-6300 or
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Joe Lucas, Department warden supervisor in Riverdale, checks the license of a nonresident pheasant hunter near Lake Sakakawea. With the third smallest number of wildlife law enforcement officers in the nation, North Dakota game wardens are busy year-round, especially in fall, considering the number of hunters on the landscape and the vastness of the state where those hunters pursue wild game.

PHOTO BY MIKE ANDERSON



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