

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT
\$2.00 JANUARY 2024



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Be Legendary.

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A ring-necked rooster is always a welcome sight to hunters still pursuing these birds in December. What's even better, some may have argued at the time, was lack of snow on the winter landscape in many places as we headed into a new year.

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Contributing photographers for this issue: Mike Anderson, Jim Job, Sandra Johnson, Jesse Kolar and Ashley Peterson.

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NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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

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

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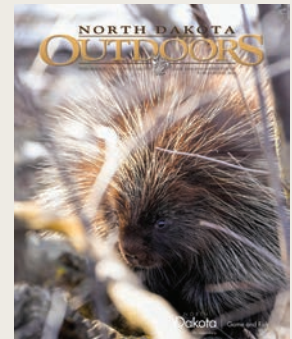
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Front Cover

Like a lot of porcupines, this one photographed in the badlands in December may spend several days in a single tree eating bark and whatever else the tree provides. Photograph by Ashley Peterson



55.7 MIL

Number of walleye
eggs collected in
spring, surpassing the
goal of 50 million eggs.



2023

YEAR IN REVIEW

By Scott Peterson

As we look back over the past year, we are reminded of how fortunate we are to live in this great state. In a day and age when many people can work from virtually anywhere, our citizens still choose to live, work and play in North Dakota.

We often say that quality of life is a big reason why people have made that choice. We also know that for many of those same people, hunting and fishing opportunities factor into that decision. Even after getting through a near-record breaking winter and all the challenges that came along with that, we can still appreciate the positives of living in North Dakota, including the promise of spring, summer and fall.

Despite the harsh winter we experienced last year, fishing remained outstanding across the state. While much attention is always given to the big waters – Sakakawea, Oahe, Missouri River and Devils Lake – our state’s smaller lakes in 2023 produced fishing opportunities that were off the charts. Much of the credit for that, along with an appreciative nod to Mother Nature, goes to our team of fisheries biologists, technicians and development staff who monitor fishing population status, make stocking recommendations, and then ensure that our anglers have access to those amazing resources. Harsh winters, with the abundance of snow and runoff that often comes with them, can be a boon to anglers.

On the flip side, extreme winter weather is

rarely a good thing from a wildlife perspective. As expected, our deer populations, both white-tailed and mule deer, took a significant hit this past year. While much of the blame can be placed on severe winter weather and epizootic hemorrhagic disease, some of the reason for the low numbers, especially in the case of mule deer, can also still be attributed to the severe drought of 2022.

As we’ve said in the past, with favorable weather and habitat conditions, deer numbers can and will rebound to a much more positive status. Yet, with far fewer acres of quality habitat on the landscape than in the past, expectations should be tempered accordingly.

Unfortunately, for the foreseeable future, we’ll also be dealing with a disease in our state’s cervid populations known as chronic wasting disease. Much has been said and debated about CWD, but we will continue to manage the disease based on the best science available.

Upland game populations were a pleasant surprise this past summer and fall. Given the severity of winter, expectations were not high for a promising forecast for bird populations across the state. However, upland game survived a winter that arrived early and stayed late in much better shape than anticipated. Pheasants and Hungarian partridge, in particular, provided hunters with some good opportunities this past fall.

As we consider the possible reasons for upland

8.2 MIL

Number of walleyes stocked in 151 waters across the state.

944,000

Number of chinook salmon eggs collected during the Department's annual salmon spawn.

game faring better than predicted, it likely has something to do with the fact that while we had an absolutely brutal winter, most of January and the early part of February were actually relatively mild and that may have given upland birds the break they desperately needed.

Waterfowl populations were another bright spot in 2023. The considerable amount of snow we received last winter meant good things for refueling wetlands and in turn, meant good things for ducks. Breeding duck numbers, when looked at from an overall perspective, fared well and numbers were up along the Central Flyway. With adequate moisture conditions throughout most of North Dakota, the future is bright for our state's duck and goose hunters.

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

MANY TIGHT LINES

The walleye fishing in 2023 – the focus of more than 80% of anglers in the state in any given year – couldn't have been any better.

News of incredible fishing wasn't coming from just one or two waters, according to fisheries biologists. 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. The big three have been North Dakota's 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, fisheries biologists contend. Also of note, fisheries personnel documented a lot of natural reproduction in these new prairie lakes. And in some cases, the natural reproduction was substantial, so it's possible in a few years some of these lakes are going to be self-sustaining walleye fisheries, which is pretty impressive.

Fisheries biologists get a lot more excited when they see 8-inch walleye than 8-pound walleye because the 8-inch fish is the future. And they're seeing a lot of that. 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 last fall. For the foreseeable future, fishing in North Dakota looks positive.

WINTER'S TOLL

Fish in 2023 fared better than deer.

Following an ugly winter that hung around for half a year, state wildlife managers made available 53,400 deer gun licenses for 2023, nearly 11,000 fewer than 2022, making it the lowest tag total since 2016.

While this was not the kind of news hunters wanted to hear, the announcement likely didn't surprise many hunters. An untold number of deer died last winter from starvation or exposure as much of what little quality winter habitat there is on the landscape was uninhabitable because of all the snow. While there were reports of winterkilled deer across the state, some of the hardest hit areas extended from Bismarck east and south.

Wildlife biologists said some deer went into winter not in the best shape and didn't stand much of a chance against a winter that showed up in early November and refused to give in to spring.

Wildlife managers rely on a host of things to determine the number of deer licenses to make available to hunters includ-





ing, but not limited to, what game wardens and other staff are seeing in the field in winter, hunter harvest surveys and aerial surveys.

With plenty of snow on the landscape – 12 inches is needed to fly the surveys – Game and Fish personnel spent 251 hours in the air, starting in early January, counting deer over all survey areas encompassing 27% of the state.

What wildlife biologists observed from the air over 6-plus weeks of survey time was discouraging. For example, they saw a 51% decrease in white-tailed deer and an 84% decrease in mule deer in the Wing-Tuttle area (hunting units 2J1 and 2J2) from Jan. 10 to April 7.

HUNS SHINE, OTHER BIRDS FOLLOW

Welcome news in 2023 was how well our upland birds did considering the unfriendly circumstances of the difficult winter.

North Dakota's late summer roadside surveys indicated pheasant, Hungarian partridge and sharp-tailed grouse numbers were up. Department biologists said survey conditions were exceptional, which might have led to increased observations, but survey conditions should not have had a large influence on brood sizes or age ratios, which were also up.

Total pheasants observed (65 per 100 miles) were up 61% from 2022 and broods (7.5) per 100 miles were up 70%. The average brood size (6.3) was up 2%.

Observers in the northwest counted 13.5 broods and 113 pheasants per 100 miles, up from 11 broods and 96 pheasants in 2022. Average brood size was six.

Sharptails had above average production and rebounded back to the good years of 2011-15. Hunters were expected to find a good ratio of hatch-year grouse in 2023. Much of the increase in sharptail observations was driven by a rebounding population in the southwest district.

Sharptails observed per 100 miles were up 116% statewide. Brood survey results showed 2.6 broods and 29 sharp-

tails per 100 miles. Average brood size was six.

Partridge observed per 100 miles was up 200%. Observers recorded 2.4 broods and 36 partridge per 100 miles. Average brood size was 11.

Hungarian partridge numbers were impressive in 2023. For the first time more partridge were observed than sharptails on brood routes. Their numbers were tied with an all-time high, dating all the way back to 1992.

MAKE THAT FIVE

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 2022 bighorn sheep survey, completed by recounting lambs in March 2023, revealed a record 347 bighorn sheep in the grasslands of western North Dakota, up 4% from 2021 and 15% above the five-year average. The count surpassed the previous record of 335 bighorns in 2021.

This survey marked the fifth consecutive year that an increase was observed in the bighorn population.

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

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

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

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

Department staff, in conjunction with biologists from the Three Affiliated Tribes Fish and Wildlife Division, also



6 Number of licenses allocated, including one auction license, for the bighorn sheep hunting season. A record 20,290 applications were received for bighorn sheep.



9.8 MIL

Number of acres of private land electronically posted.

reported the bighorn sheep translocated in January 2020 from Rocky Boy's Reservation in Montana to the Fort Berthold Reservation performed exceptionally well their third year in the state, as the population has nearly tripled.

There are currently about 470 bighorn sheep in the populations managed by the Game and Fish Department, National Park Service and the Three Affiliated Tribes Fish and Wildlife Division. The next benchmark is 500 bighorns in the state, which seemed improbable just a few years ago. And considering how severe last winter was, we were very encouraged by the results of the 2022 survey.

BUMP IN FALL FLIGHT

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 2022, the breeding duck index for 2023 was the 23rd highest on record and stands at 39% above the long-term (1948-2022) average.

After a very dry summer and fall in 2022, a snowy winter helped wetland conditions rebound nicely going into breeding season. However, precipitation was spotty across the Prairie Pothole Region following the spring thaw, with the southern and central areas of the Missouri Coteau having received more consistent rainfall. Habitat conditions in uplands and wetlands were in good shape for a majority of the breeding season. A relatively strong number of ducks present in May helped to support breeding efforts that, despite a late thaw, were not delayed to a great degree.

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 respond to excellent nesting conditions where available. These birds have struggled continentally, and it was good to see them respond to areas with good habitat conditions in the state.

The number of broods observed during the Department's July brood survey were up 79% from 2022, and 88%

above the 1965-2022 average index. The average brood size was 6.5 ducklings, down 10% from 2022.

The estimated number of Canada geese (297,914) in North Dakota during the May survey was down 23% from the 2022 estimate, which was a record. Nesting efforts appeared to be reduced and delayed as few Canada goose broods and lower than normal numbers of nests were observed during the survey. Waterfowl biologists said 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.

The 2023 fall flight forecast for ducks from North Dakota was expected to be up 23% from 2022.

MULE DEER DECLINE

Mule deer declined across the western edge of the state following relentless winter conditions. The 2023 spring index for mule deer in the badlands was 29% lower than the 2022 index and 5% below the long-term average, making it the lowest spring index since 2014.

Consequently, licenses were significantly reduced for 2023. The Game and Fish Department made available 1,600 antlered licenses and 650 antlerless licenses in 2023, which was 3,500 fewer licenses than 2022.

There remain many challenges facing the future population recovery of mule deer in the badlands. Encroachment of juniper in mule deer habitat, direct and indirect habitat loss due to oil development, predators and weather, including extreme winters, are all challenges facing long-term population recovery of mule deer in the badlands.

CWD EFFORTS CONTINUED

Notable adjustments were made by Department officials in the effort to combat chronic wasting disease, an always fatal disease to deer and other cervids.

Big game hunters were told to note the 2023 chronic wasting disease proclamation for baiting and transportation requirements for deer, elk and moose as a precaution against the spread of chronic wasting disease.

Noteworthy items included:

- Whole carcasses of animals harvested in North Dakota could have remained in the deer unit, or now could have

been transported anywhere in the state. However, carcass waste must have been disposed of via landfill or waste management provider. This did not apply to heads dropped at CWD collection sites or lymph nodes submitted for CWD surveillance. Taxidermists and game processors could also accept intact carcasses of animals harvested within North Dakota but assumed responsibility for disposal.

- A new management strategy that allowed baiting restrictions to be removed in a unit if the number of adult deer equivalent to at least 10% of the gun licenses allocated in the unit were tested for CWD within a year, and all the results were negative. If the sampling goal was not met or CWD was confirmed in the unit, the baiting restriction remained.
- No new units were added to the baiting restriction list for 2023-24. Due to the timing of finalizing the proclamation, a one-year pause was placed on adding new units. Units 2K1 and 3B2 are scheduled to be added to the restriction list in 2024 due to a positive CWD detection during the 2022 hunting season within 25 miles in an adjacent unit. They would not be added if the 10% goal was reached in 2023 and all CWD test results were negative.
- Hunters were prohibited from transporting into North Dakota the whole carcass or parts, except the lower-risk portions, of deer, elk, moose or other members of the cervid family harvested outside of North Dakota.

State Game and Fish Department officials will conduct surveillance of the state by region on a four-year rotation. In 2023, the CWD surveillance effort consisted of deer gun units in southeastern North Dakota. Outside of that area, hunters could still have their animal tested by taking it to a Game and Fish district office, any deer head collection site (primarily located in the surveillance area) or by using a mail-in self-sampling kit. A unit outside the annual surveillance zone was still eligible to have a baiting restriction removed if the sampling goal was met, or can be added as a restricted unit if a positive was found.

2022-23 LICENSES AND PERMITS ISSUED

	Resident	Nonresident
Individual Fishing	40,823	16,721
Married Couple Fishing	11,297	5,491
Senior Citizen Fishing	15,234	
Disabled Fishing	255	
Short-Term Fishing		
10-Day		6,289
3-Day		23,345
Paddlefish Tags	3,202	556
Commercial Tags	10	
Retail Bait Vendor	210	
Wholesale Bait Vendor	27	5
Fish Hatchery	3	
2022 Boat Registrations	8,218	
<i>(Third year of 3-year decal)</i>		
General Game Hunting	41,635	42,750
Small Game Hunting	13,201	21,996
Combination License	61,888	
Waterfowl Hunting		24,627
Furbearer Hunting/Trapping	6,434	2,609
Fur Buyer	28	4
Deer Gun Hunting	50,960	627
Deer Gun Hunting (Gratis)	11,987	304
Deer Bowhunting	24,395	3,301
Moose Hunting	341	
Moose Hunting	41	
<i>(Preferential Landowner)</i>		
Elk Hunting	472	
Elk Hunting	95	
<i>(Preferential Landowner)</i>		
Turkey Hunting (Spring)	8,025	
Turkey Hunting (Fall)	3,708	
Turkey Hunting (Gratis Spring)	629	
Turkey Hunting (Gratis Fall)	285	
Habitat Stamp	103,523	
Shooting Preserve	10	
Fishing/Hunting Guide	312	55
Taxidermist	267	7
Falconry	2	
Scientific Collector	32	39
Swan	1,280	917
Sandhill Crane	2,857	2,686

2022 SPECIAL BIG GAME LICENSES

	Licenses Available	Applications Received
Moose	253	26,386
Elk	599	24,091
Bighorn Sheep	5	20,290

FINANCIAL STATEMENT

July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023

Income	\$43,927,048
Expenses	\$46,846,255
FUND BALANCES, FIXED ASSETS AND LONG-TERM DEBT	
Game and Fish General Fund	\$25,630,369
Habitat and Depredation Fund	\$5,801,360
Nongame Wildlife Fund	\$145,821
Aquatic Nuisance Species Program	\$826,733
TOTAL ALL FUNDS	\$32,404,283
FIXED ASSETS	\$60,318,315
DEPARTMENT NET WORTH	\$92,722,598

800,000 Approximate number of PLOTS acres on the landscape in 2023.

30% Statewide increase in roosters heard crowing during the Department's spring pheasant crowing count compared to 2022.



OVERALL WINNER



Bobcat

Lisa Buchweitz, Langdon

Photo taken in Pembina County

By Patrick T. Isakson

Guidebooks describe the bobcat as a large-footed cat with short ear tufts and short “sideburns.” They add that their tracks are round and large, much like a domestic dog, but without the claw marks.

What they don’t say outright: “Good luck spying one in the wild.”

Lisa Buchweitz of Langdon did just that and had only seconds on a photo outing in the Pembina Hills to take the winning photograph for the 2023 Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest.

She nailed it.

This animal, furtive by nature, was on her bucket list of

wild photo subjects, which she can now check off her list.

Bobcats in North Dakota, biologists tell us, weigh between 15 and 25 pounds, with males being slightly larger than females. When standing, bobcats measure about 19 to 23 inches at the shoulder. Overall body length, including the short tail, is about 34 inches.

In 1977, North Dakota lawmakers listed the bobcat as a furbearer, allowing the Game and Fish Department to manage this species.

PATRICK T. ISAKSON is a Game and Fish Department conservation biologist.



WATCHABLE WILDLIFE

Photo Contest



GAME WINNER



Sharp-tailed Grouse
Kevin Hice, Washburn

Photo taken in McKenzie County



GAME RUNNER-UP

Elk
Dean Rummel, Dickinson
Photo taken near Medora



GAME RUNNER-UP

Pronghorn
Dale Rehder, West Fargo
Photo taken in Theodore Roosevelt National Park



GAME RUNNER-UP

Bighorn Sheep
Stewart Opland, Williston
Photo taken in Theodore Roosevelt National Park



GAME RUNNER-UP
Hungarian Partridge
DeVane Webster, Bismarck
Photo taken near Center



GAME RUNNER-UP
Mule Deer
Nels Kilpela, Dickinson
Photo taken near Medora



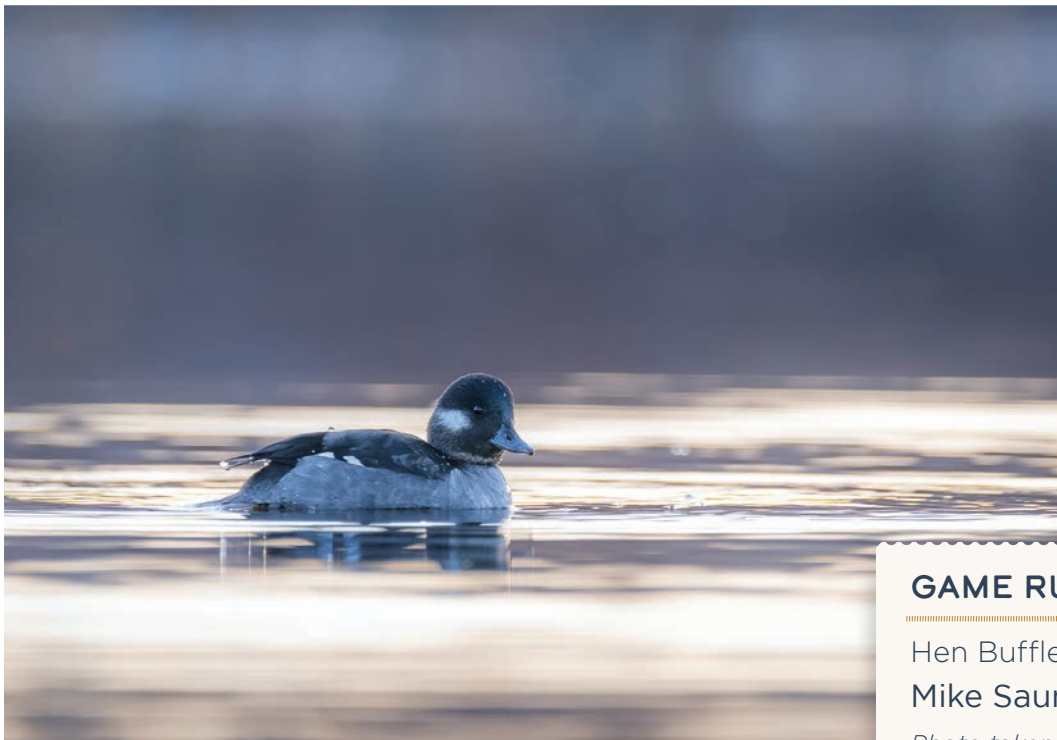
GAME RUNNER-UP
Whitetail Fawn
Tom Krebs, Regent
Photo taken in Hettinger County



GAME RUNNER-UP

Red Fox Pups
Kevin Hice, Washburn

Photo taken in Burleigh County



GAME RUNNER-UP

Hen Bufflehead
Mike Saunders, Fargo

Photo taken near Fargo



NONGAME WINNER



Porcupine

Dean Rummel, Dickinson

Photo taken near Medora



NONGAME RUNNER-UP

American White Pelican

Xinyi Li

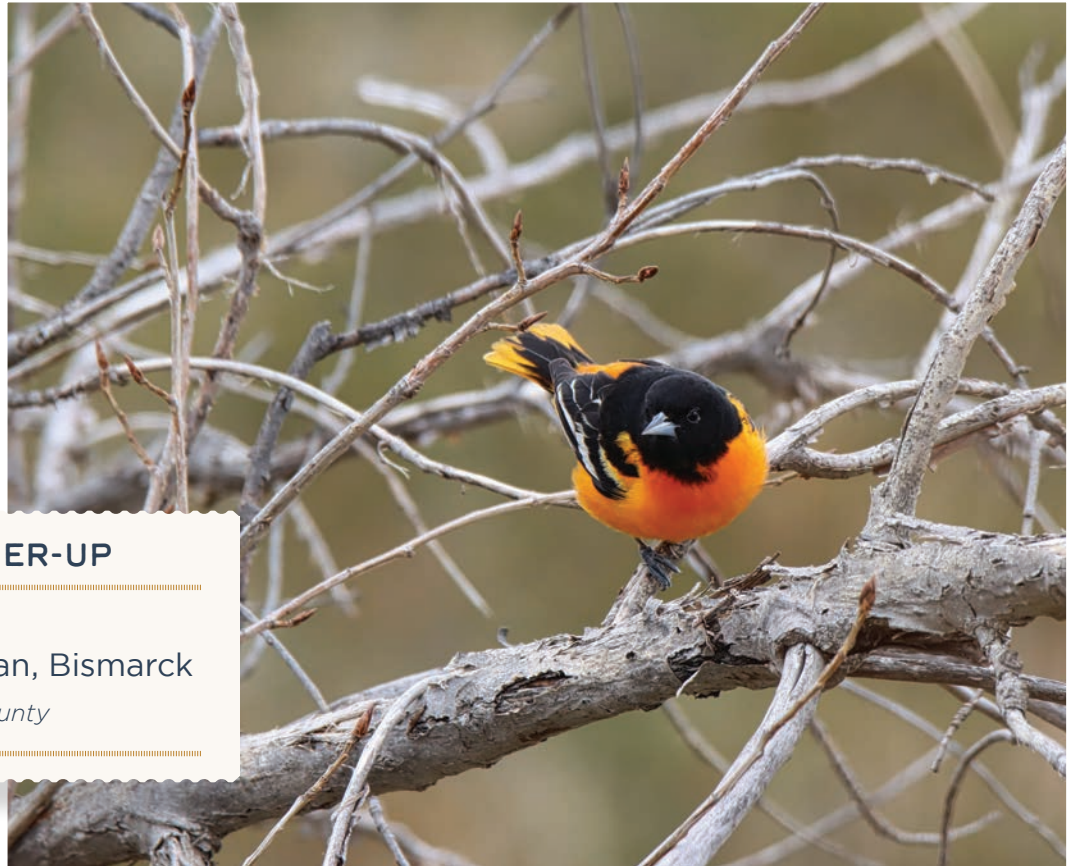
Residence not provided



NONGAME RUNNER-UP

Long-eared Owl
Daniel Mason, Fargo

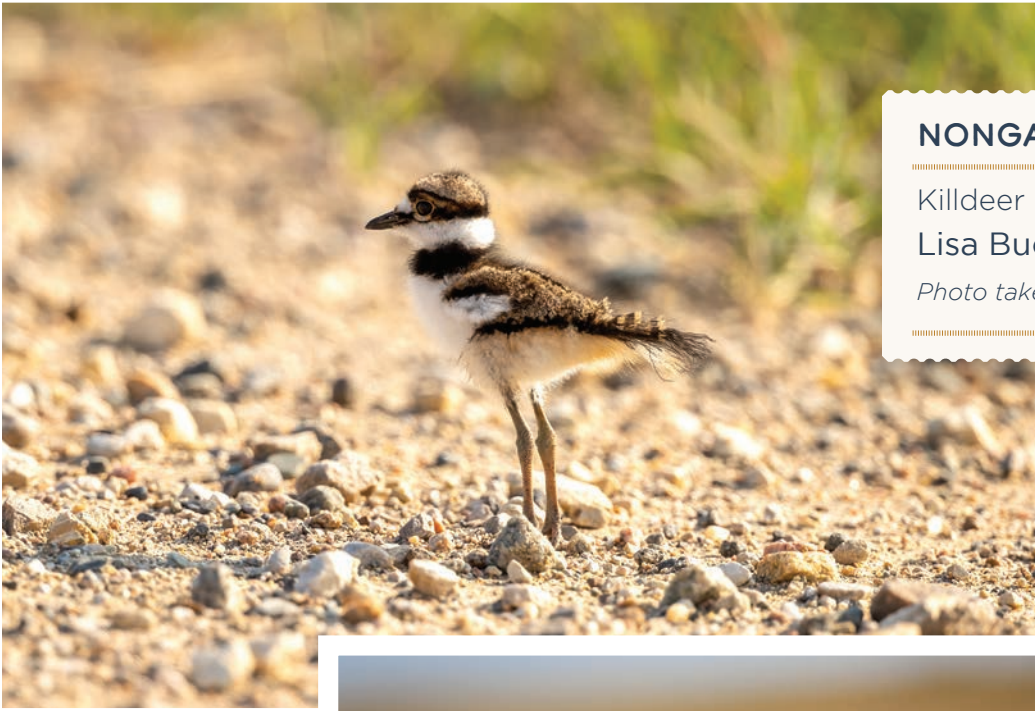
Photo taken near Fargo



NONGAME RUNNER-UP

Baltimore Oriole
Michael Zimmerman, Bismarck

Photo taken in Grant County

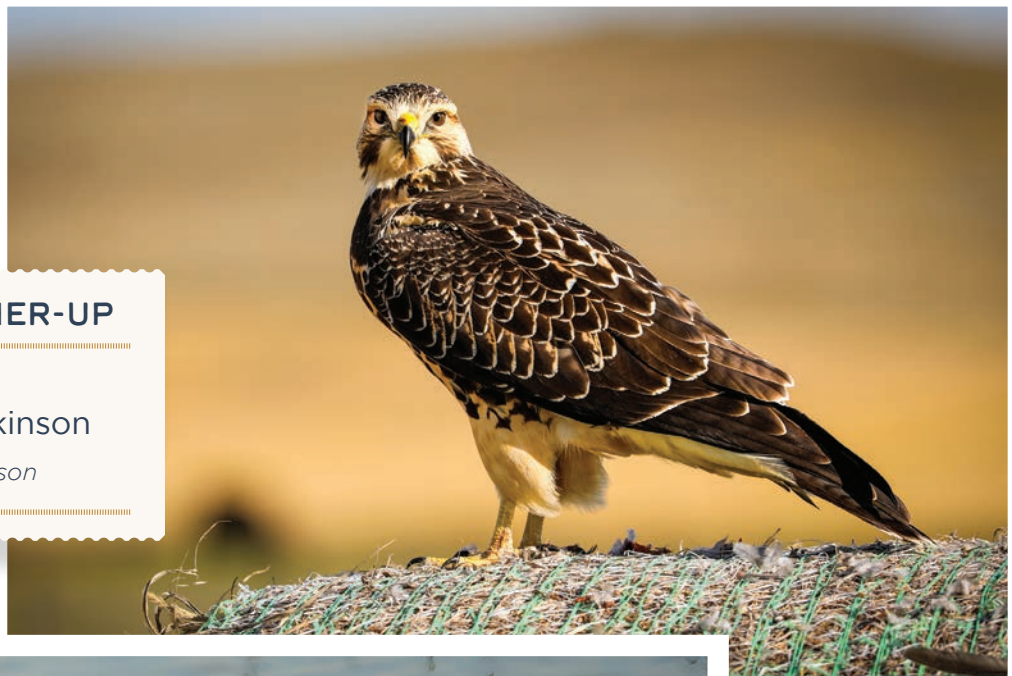


NONGAME RUNNER-UP

Killdeer Chick

Lisa Buchweitz, Langdon

Photo taken in Cavalier County



NONGAME RUNNER-UP

Swainson's Hawk

Dayna Blauer, Dickinson

Photo taken near Dickinson

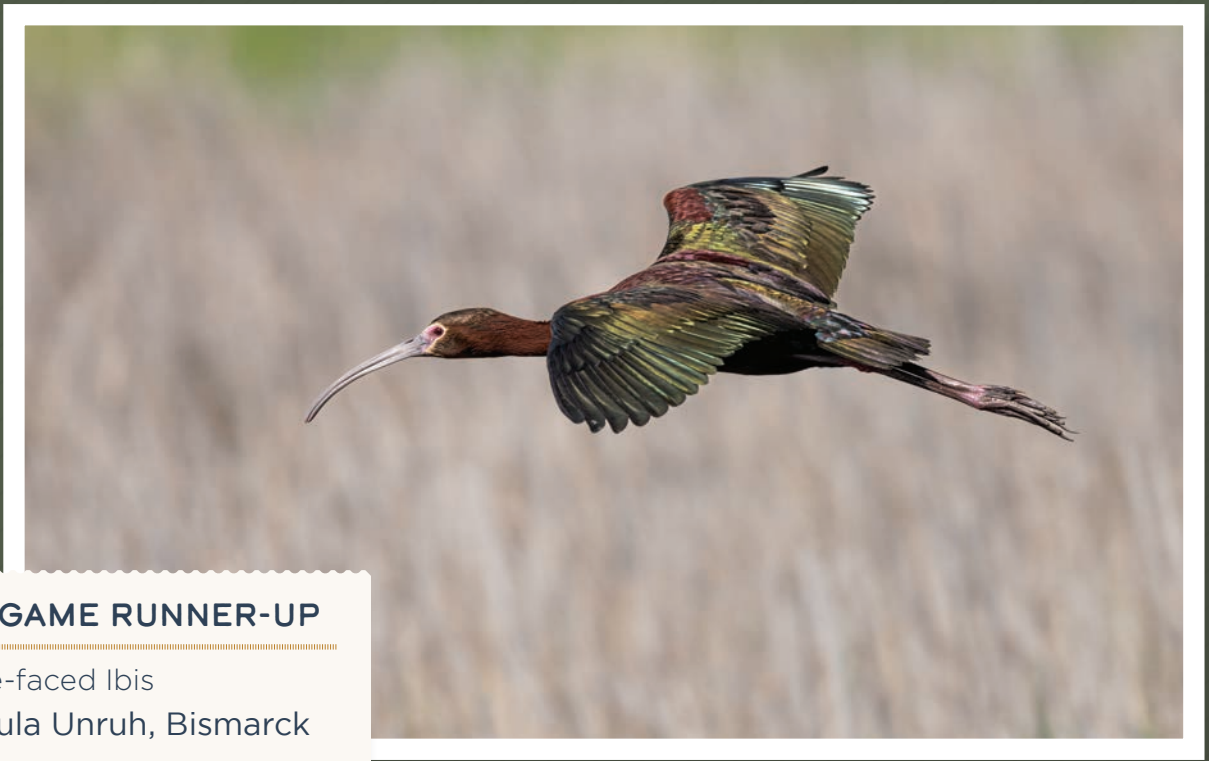


NONGAME RUNNER-UP

Wilson's Phalarope

Beverly Fiferlick, Jamestown

Photo taken near Jamestown



NONGAME RUNNER-UP

White-faced Ibis
Tangula Unruh, Bismarck

Photo taken at Long Lake NWR



NONGAME RUNNER-UP

Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel
Tom Krebs, Regent

Photo taken in Hettinger County



**PLANTS AND INSECT
WINNER**



Frozen Dragonfly
Nels Kilpela, Dickinson

Photo taken near Medora



**PLANTS AND INSECT
RUNNER-UP**

Pasque Flower Seed Head
Desariah Barrett, Williston

Photo taken in Williams County

**PLANTS AND INSECT
RUNNER-UP**

Spiderwort
Nancy Secrest, Hettinger
Photo taken in Hettinger County



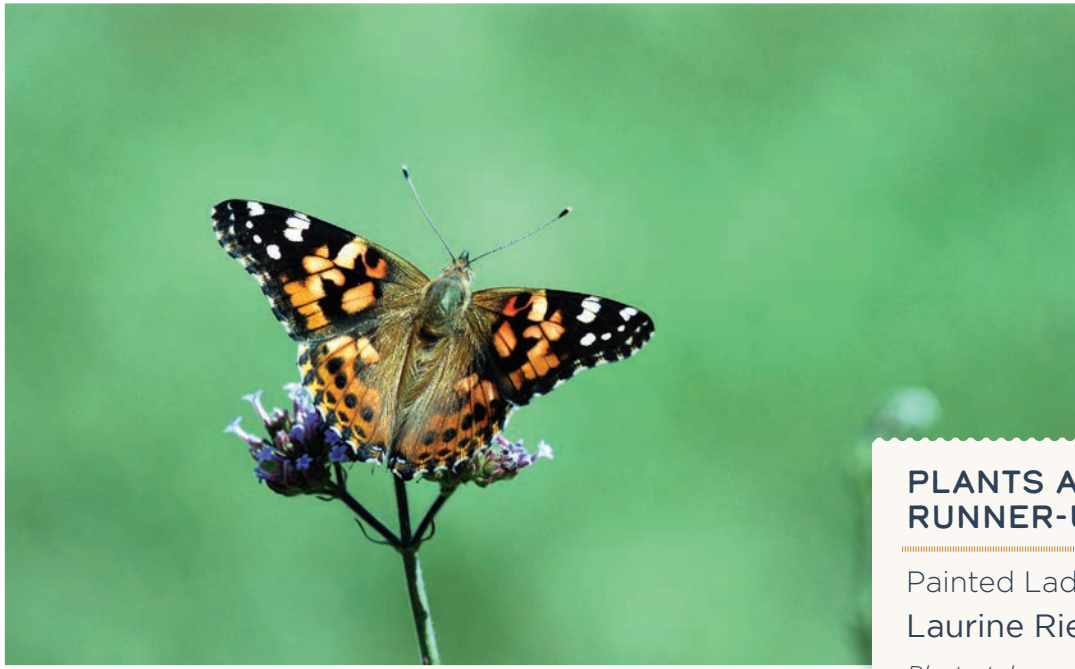
**PLANTS AND INSECT
RUNNER-UP**

Artist's Conk
David Leingang, Bismarck
Photo taken at Cross Ranch State Park

**PLANTS AND INSECT
RUNNER-UP**

Banded Garden Spider
Sharon Watson, Buxton
Photo taken near Buxton

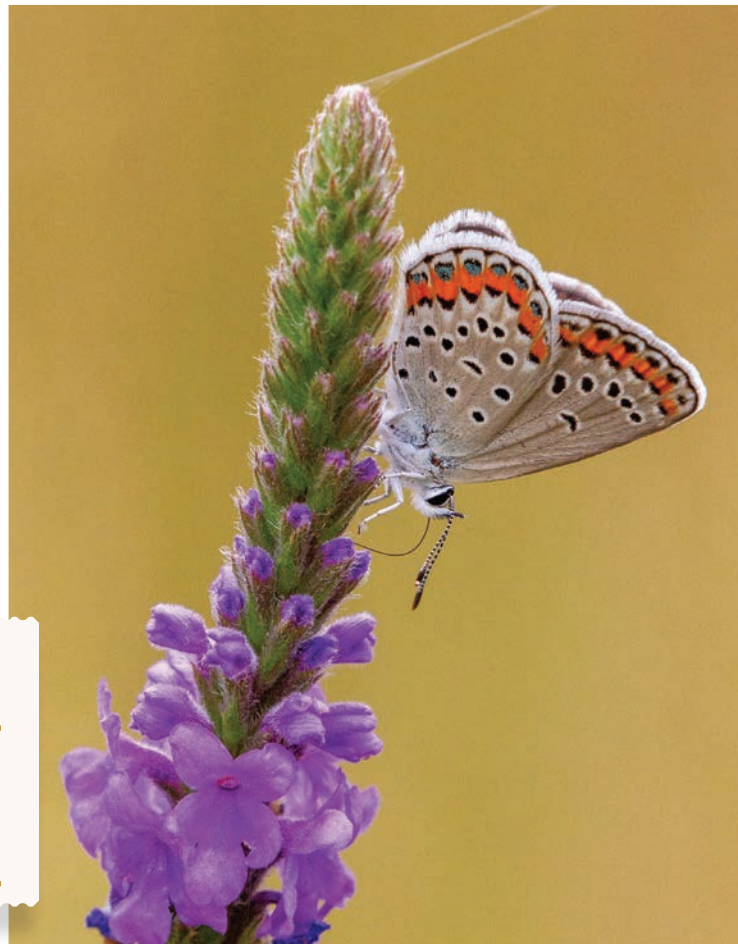




**PLANTS AND INSECT
RUNNER-UP**

Painted Lady Butterfly
Laurine Ries, Buffalo

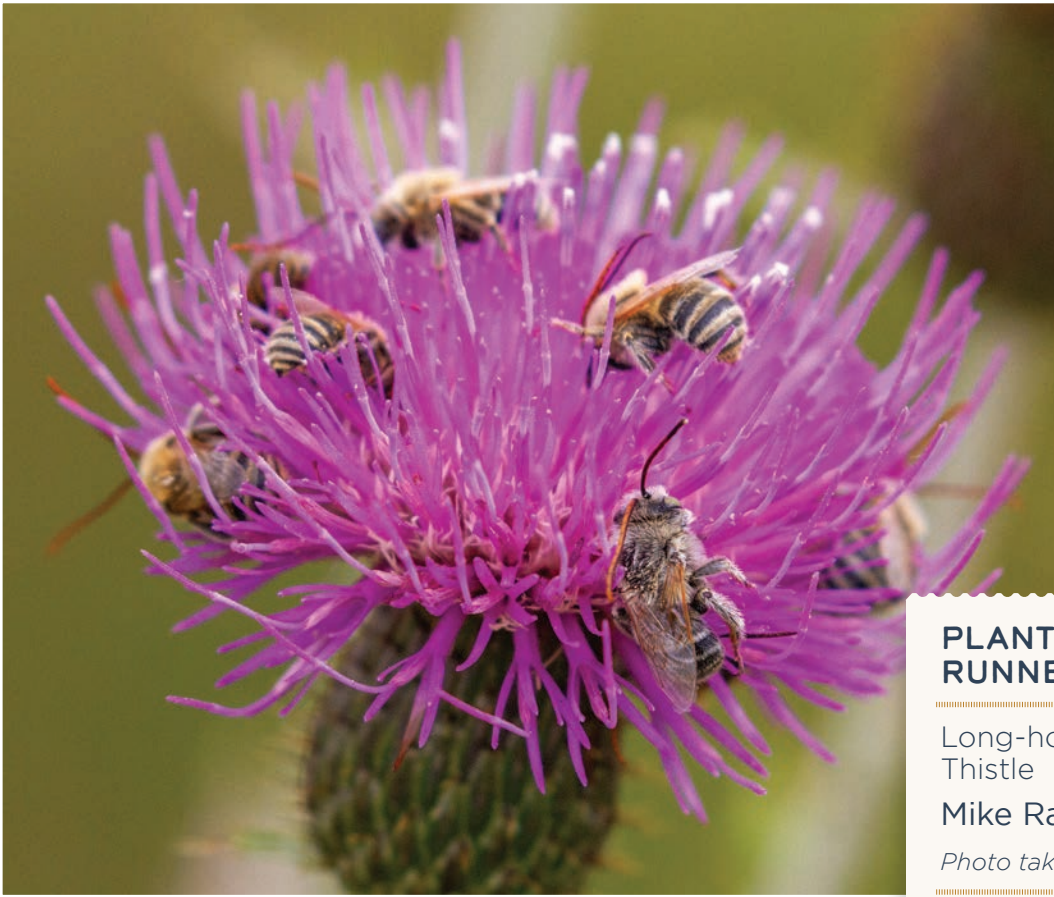
Photo taken near Buffalo



**PLANTS AND INSECT
RUNNER-UP**

Melissa Blue on Hoary Vervain
Mike Rabenberg, Bismarck

Photo taken at Long Lake NWR



**PLANTS AND INSECT
RUNNER-UP**

Long-horned Bees on Flodman's
Thistle

Mike Rabenberg, Bismarck

Photo taken at Sweet Briar



**PLANTS AND INSECT
RUNNER-UP**

Eight-spotted Forester Moth

Derrick Schiff,

Residence not provided

Photo taken Near Mandan



BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



Zebra Mussels Discovered in Lake Oahe South Dakota

Zebra mussels were confirmed in the lower end of Lake Oahe in South Dakota in fall after the species was detected at both the East Shore and Cow Creek boat ramps during inspection done by South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks staff.

Ben Holen, North Dakota Game and Fish Department aquatic nuisance species coordinator, said Cow Creek is over 100 lake miles south of the North Dakota-South Dakota border.

"It will likely take a little time before we see zebra mussels in the upper end of the reservoir, unless they are moved by another vector," Holen said.

ANS education, prevention and monitoring activities on Lake Oahe will increase, Holen said.

"In addition, we plan to work with our constituents over the next few months to discuss bait water regulations, while the upper end of the lake is uncolonized and cold water inhibits zebra mussel veliger production," he added.

Oahe recreationists should remember to follow North Dakota ANS regulations.

Tentative 2024 Season Opening Dates

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department annually provides its best estimate for opening dates to help hunters prepare for hunting seasons.

Dates become official when approved by governor's proclamation. Tentative opening dates for 2024 include:

Spring Turkey	April 13
Deer and Pronghorn Bow, Mountain Lion	Aug. 30
Dove	Sept. 1
Youth Deer	Sept. 13

Sharptail, Hun, Ruffed Grouse, Squirrel,	
Youth Waterfowl	Sept. 14
Early Resident Waterfowl	Sept. 21
Regular Waterfowl	Sept. 28
Pronghorn Gun	Oct. 4
Youth Pheasant	Oct. 5
Pheasant, Fall Turkey	Oct. 12
Mink, Muskrat, Weasel Trapping	Oct. 26
Deer Gun	Nov. 8
Deer Muzzleloader	Nov. 29



Salmon Spawn Completed

Fisheries crews completed their annual salmon spawning operation on the Missouri River System, collecting 944,000 eggs.

North Dakota Game and Fish Department Missouri River System fisheries supervisor Russ Kinzler said this year was more of a challenge to collect eggs.

"The spawn started about a week later than normal and then the cold weather at the end of October shut down egg collections before the spawning crew could meet the goal of 1 million eggs," Kinzler said.

The eggs collected should be enough to stock the 300,000 smolts planned for Lake Sakakawea in 2024.

In 2023, all eggs were collected from Lake Sakakawea, unlike past years when some eggs were taken from fish in the Missouri River. The average size of female salmon was 4.4 pounds, which is about half-pound smaller than last year. The largest salmon was 8.5 pounds.

Chinook salmon begin their spawning run in October. Since salmon cannot naturally reproduce in North Dakota, Game and Fish personnel capture the fish and transport them to Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery where they are relieved of their eggs.

Once the eggs hatch, young salmon spend about 6 months in the hatchery before being stocked in Lake Sakakawea.

Earth Day Patch Contest for Students

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual Earth Day Patch Contest is, in part, an effort to heighten the awareness about the environment in North Dakota and beyond.

Students who participate will develop a patch design using five colors incorporating an aspect of Earth Day such as environmental awareness, respect Earth, water quality, wildlife, or habitat conservation in North Dakota.

The contest is open to students in grades K-12. Winners are chosen from three grade categories (K-4, 5-8 and 9-12). Each winner will receive an outdoor kit, which includes a pair of binoculars and field guides. The

grand prize patch design winner is chosen from one of the three winning age categories.

In addition, the grand prize winner will have their design displayed on the recognition patch, be featured in North Dakota OUTDOORS and on the Game and Fish website. Contest entry deadline is March 1.

Details about the contest can be found on the department's website at gf.nd.gov. For additional information, contact Sherry Niesar, Earth Day Patch Contest coordinator, at 701-527-3714 or email sniesar@nd.gov.

STAFF NOTES

Bahnsen Named Game and Fish Employee of the Year

Dr. Charlie Bahnsen, wildlife veterinarian for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department in Bismarck, received the agency's Director's Award for professional excellence at the Department's annual staff meeting in December.

Jeb Williams, Game and Fish director, said Dr. Bahnsen is an incredible asset to our state who is not only recognized by his local peers, but nationwide as well.

"His expertise and knowledge of the issues are continuously expanding. He is an instrumental participant in many state and nationwide working groups pertaining to wildlife health and disease," Williams said. "Charlie spends countless hours collaborating with other agencies, such as the Board of Animal Health, and educating staff, the public and legislators on wildlife issues, including chronic wasting disease, epizootic hemorrhagic disease and avian influenza. He spearheaded a task force to revise our CWD management plan which will guide big game management into the future. In addition, he is one of the few wildlife veterinarians in the nation who is certified to surgically implant cellular GPS transmitters in birds to learn more about their natural movements. He successfully implemented these implants in mallards and in 2023, pintails."



Department staff pictured from left, Scott Peterson, deputy director, Dr. Charlie Bahnsen, wildlife veterinarian, and Jeb Williams, director.



MRS Biologist Hired

Zach Kjos was named Missouri River System biologist for the Game and Fish Department in Riverdale earlier this winter.

Kjos was working as a fisheries development specialist for the agency in Bismarck prior to his move to Riverdale.



Migratory Game Bird Biologist Named

Jacob Hewitt was hired earlier this winter as a migratory game bird biologist for the Game and Fish Department.

Hewitt completed his bachelor's degree in wildlife ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and earned his master's degree at SUNY-Brockport in New York.

Game and Fish Recognizes Employee Efforts

North Dakota Game and Fish Department director Jeb Williams recently honored employees with performance-based awards. The following special recognition awards were presented during the Department's staff meeting in December.



Lisa Tofte, administrative assistant, Devils Lake, was recognized for her positive attitude, professionalism, knowledge and service to the public.



Alan Reile, technical operations lead, Bismarck, was recognized for his knowledge, attitude, commitment and dedication to his job and colleagues.



Alega Powers, wildlife division administrative assistant, Bismarck, was recognized for her willingness to help, knowledge within the Department, and her customer service with landowners and hunters.



Justen Barstad, fisheries biological technician, Bismarck, was recognized for his work ethic, positive attitude, mechanical skills and field expertise.



Jim Houston, wildlife biological technician, Bismarck, was recognized for his efforts in spearheading the Department's turkey trapping operation.



Cayla Bendel, R3 coordinator, Bismarck, was recognized for her outreach efforts with NDO podcast, The Drift blog, social media and marketing.



Melissa Long, administrative officer, Bismarck, was recognized for her knowledge of state government, accounting, human resources and legislation.

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

Location	Broadcast Times
WILLISTON	KUMV - Saturday - 6 pm KXMD - Saturday - 10 pm
MINOT	KMOT - Saturday - 6 pm KXMC - Saturday - 10 pm
DICKINSON	KOCD - Saturday - 5 pm (MT) KXMA - Saturday - 9 pm (MT)
BISMARCK	KFYR - Saturday - 6 pm KXMB - Saturday - 10 pm CATV - Saturday - 9:30 am KNDX - Fox - Friday - 9 pm
GRAND FORKS	KVRR - Saturday - 9 pm
FARGO	KVRR - Saturday - 9 pm

WEEKLY VIDEO NEWS BROADCAST



TAKE SOMEONE NEW *Ice Fishing*



WIN A FISH HOUSE

**TAKE SOMEONE NEW AND SHARE YOUR STORY
FOR A CHANCE TO WIN.**

GF.ND.GOV/TAKE-SOMEONE-NEW

Special thanks to Runnings for their donation of a fish house.



BACKCAST

By Ron Wilson

I have the woods to myself. Save for a single set of boot tracks that I cut earlier in the soft snow, it appears this chunk of public land in the Missouri River bottoms has attracted few visitors of late.

Considering it's the last day of the deer muzzle-loader season, I knew there was a chance to bump into blaze orange, but I get lucky.

There are other hunters around, however, well upriver of me as they repeatedly give themselves away with volleys of shotgun blasts. Canada geese, the target of the hunters, cut the silence between trigger pulls as they loudly chatter while moving both upstream and downstream without pause.

I welcome the noise made by both the hunters and the geese because it has a way of drowning out the aggravating and incessant buzzing in my ears that is likely the fallout of pulling too many triggers without hearing protection or simply age.

I've been in the woods for maybe two hours, wandering slowly down the paths of least resistance,

leaning against the cold bark of trees and sitting on logs for minutes at a time.

If someone was spying on me from the high ground above the floodplain, they might conclude age has stolen more than just some of my hearing. I move this slow, pause this often, not because I don't have another gear or two, not because my stamina has left me, it's because I want to make fox squirrel stew for the kids when they come home for Christmas. And the odds of doing that go way up by slowing down and employing some patience.

At least that's how I figure it.

Aside from the geese flying over the river well to my east and the everpresent nuthatches navigating around and around tree branches like highwire circus performers, the woods seem dead.

If it weren't for the squirrel tracks in the snow, sign that these animals do exist, I would have packed it in an hour ago. But I don't, knowing there are worse things I could be doing, and sitting on a log in the woods on a 40-plus degree day in mid-December isn't one of them.

I've been here before, not on this specific log, but here as in: Not seeing a single squirrel stretched out on a limb with its reddish tail fluttering lightly in the breeze; not seeing a single squirrel bounce from limb to limb 30 feet off the ground with nearly the same abandon and athleticism as the nuthatches; not seeing a single squirrel chase another squirrel in twister fashion around a tree trunk.

I've shot squirrels, lots of them it seems, doing exactly those things in seasons past. Caught unaware of my presence while they did squirrel things high above the ground, I doubt they ever heard the click of the safety being pushed from safe to fire.

I've also gone home empty-handed before, my waxed canvas backpack weighing the same as when I entered the woods.



RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

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

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Unlike last winter that snuck up on critters too early in November and hung around longer than tolerable, the mostly open winter heading into January has been a blessing for all walks of wildlife, this coyote photographed in the badlands included. According to Game and Fish Department biologists, heading into fall coyotes were the most abundant furbearer spotted by observers, while their numbers on North Dakota's landscape were estimated slightly below the 20-year average.

PHOTO BY ASHLEY PETERSON



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