

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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Timely rains in spring, and so far this summer, have influenced a major green-up in the badlands and elsewhere in North Dakota.

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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.

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

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Front Cover

An increase in pheasant crowing counts in 2024 is one piece of the puzzle that points to a promising hunting season this fall.

PHOTO BY SANDRA JOHNSON.



My 2 Cents

By Jeb Williams, Director

Our summer months, which typically slide by much too quickly, got a running start for me in June. A few out-of-state trips taking close to a week at each, and July showed up before I knew it.

I'm privileged to represent North Dakota and the rest of the Central Flyway states and provinces on the North American Wetlands Conservation Act council. As I was reflecting on my trip home, the history associated with NAWCA is pretty significant and the successes are as well. NAWCA is federally passed legislation signed by George H.W. Bush in 1989 after the North American Waterfowl Management Plan was signed in 1986. This visionary, transparent plan connected Canada, the United States, and then Mexico joined a few years later. This connectivity allowed for coordination and planning on the breeding grounds to the wintering grounds and all areas in between.

NAWCA was the implantation arm that provided federal dollars toward this science-based conservation effort which matches local, non-federal dollars to ensure conservation efforts to benefit migratory waterfowl and, incidentally, other wildlife.

The council meets twice a year, and the summer meeting rotates to various areas across the country where an always enlightening field trip accompanies the meeting. Being able to see the area and hear from local landowners, agency personnel, and volunteers sure does help to provide an understanding of the

conservation needs in those particular areas and how NAWCA can continue to partner with state and private interests to ensure migratory bird conservation continues.

After the council approves a slate of projects, the final approval comes at the migratory bird conservation commission chaired by the Secretary of Interior and other members including the Secretary of Ag and two members from the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate. The increase in waterfowl populations seen in the last 35 years is hard to envision without the actions of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan supported by the North American Wetlands Conservation Act.

June finished up with an annual meeting with my counterparts in the Midwest. Due to our similarities, I am always inspired and humbled to hear of how others are succeeding and working through the many challenges that impact our agencies which are privileged to manage fish and wildlife resources for all. As we were listening to the many state and committee reports, I couldn't help but think about the focus of "working as one," something Gov. Burgum has intensely encouraged over the last eight years. Whether it's within the state, country, or an international effort, the collaboration and information sharing that we can utilize is a blessing when agencies are managing fish and wildlife resources that don't recognize a jurisdictional boundary.

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NEW SPECIES ADDED TO
SWAP

BY SANDRA
JOHNSON



*Hudsonian godwits
take a break in North
Dakota during their
spring migration.*

Each spring, North Dakota wetlands are bustling with temporary guests from faraway places, and others that choose to make it their home for summer. Many are easy to recognize, like the killdeer, great blue heron, and of course, the unmistakable mallard.

But have you ever seen a Hudsonian godwit? This shorebird is about the size of a blue-winged teal, but with much longer legs. The males are particularly handsome, sporting a dark rufous belly and a bright orange, slightly upturned bill. After leaving the wintering grounds in southern South America, they fly over the Pacific Ocean toward the Texas Gulf Coast, then up the Great Plains to the Prairie Pothole Region, which may be the first place these birds decide to rest. They've been flying nonstop for several days for 5,000 or 6,000 miles.

It's estimated there are around 75,000 Hudsonian godwits, at most. For comparison, the killdeer population is estimated at about 2 million birds. After refueling in our wetlands for a few days, these far-ranging birds continue to the Hudson Bay, Alaska, and other far northern arctic breeding grounds. In the fall, most make a nonstop trip south over the Atlantic Ocean back to South America.

The Hudsonian godwit, along with 10 other migrant shorebirds that also complete astonishing journeys spanning the globe, are being added to the North Dakota Species of Greatest Conservation Need list (Note: This list was previously referred to as Species of Conservation Priority). These shorebirds are of concern because it's estimated their population has declined by 70% or more over the past 40 years.



Every state wildlife agency has identified a list of species known to be at-risk or declining as part of their State Wildlife Action Plan. The SWAPs must identify and focus on the recovery and conservation of SGCNs, yet address the full array of wildlife and wildlife-related issues. The goal of the SWAP is to conserve and recover declining species and prevent additional species listings under the Endangered Species Act. However, it's really a comprehensive strategy for conservation of all our treasured wildlife.

North Dakota's first State Wildlife Action Plan was completed in 2005, then revised in 2015. Currently, state Game and Fish Department staff are working on the third revision, with an anticipated completion in fall 2025. While the SWAP is a habitat-based plan, an important first step is updating the species list. The 2005 plan identified 100 species, the 2015 plan had 115 species, and our draft list for 2025 is at 133 species. However, for this revision, we are also looking at a list of Species of Greatest Information Need. While SGCNs

are known to be at-risk or in decline, SGINs face uncertainty in terms of their status, range or level of risk. We are proposing to add 99 species to the SGIN list. Thus, the total SGCN and SGIN on the list is 232 species, some of which you may be very familiar with, and others you perhaps never knew existed in the state.

The list ranges from some of the most globally imperiled species, whooping crane and pallid sturgeon, to more common species for which North Dakota represents an important portion of their remaining range, such as Richardson's ground squirrel and sharp-tailed grouse. While the latter species show stability in numbers, a large portion of them are found in North Dakota, underscoring our responsibility for their conservation.

The surge in the number of species on the list is in part a result of having Department staff who are more knowledgeable and experienced in our native invertebrate species. In 2015, we listed a total of 14 invertebrates (four butterflies and 10 freshwater

Western grebe.



mussels). For the 2025 list, we conducted a more thorough assessment of bumble bees, solitary bees, beetles, butterflies and skippers, moths, spiders, grasshoppers, caddisflies, stoneflies, mayflies and dragonflies. A total of 101 terrestrial and aquatic invertebrates have been identified as being at-risk or declining, or in need of more information to determine their status. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is the state agency with primary authority over the conservation and management of all wildlife in the state, including invertebrates.

Chances are you've read or seen stories about the diminishing populations of pollinators, namely the monarch butterfly. But have you ever heard of an Edwards' hairstreak, nude yellow loosestrife bee, plains stripetail, or giant case maker? Invertebrates can be generalists, specialists or predatory. You may find Edwards' hairstreak (which is a butterfly, by the way) feeding on the nectar of milkweed, goldenrod, or sweet clover. Others are specialists, like the nude yellow loosestrife bee, which is entirely dependent on one species of wetland plant, fringed loosestrife. This native bee collects oil, not pollen, from the plant's yellow flowers to line its nest for the young bee larvae to feed on. The plains stripetail is a stonefly species, and the giant case maker, a type of caddisfly, which are well known aquatic invertebrate families among fly anglers. Finding these species in a river, stream or wetland is a good indicator of water quality. Not finding them is concerning, not only for their population sustainability, but also for all the other wildlife that feed on them. Fish eat the aquatic larvae, bats eat the flying adults, and birds eat both.

Perusing the list offers a broad perspective of the variety of wildlife in our state, going beyond the usual focus on walleye, deer and pheasants. What they all have in common, though, is the need for healthy, resilient habitat and sustainable landscapes. Most of the species on the list depend on grassland habitats, be it native or unbroken prairie, or planted/restored grass-



Regal fritillary.



When the first plan was developed in 2005, all the grassland in the state would fit into 20 of the 53 counties. Now, in 2024, all the remaining grassland in the state will fit into 16 counties. We've lost four counties worth of grassland in 20 years.



land. When the first plan was developed in 2005, all the grassland in the state would fit into 20 of the 53 counties. Now, in 2024, all the remaining grassland in the state will fit into 16 counties. We've lost four counties worth of grassland in 20 years. That's a lot less habitat for a wide range of wildlife that flourish in grasslands.



Smooth green snake.



Another popular habitat for species on the list is wetlands. The next time you look at a wetland, be it a wet or dry seasonal wetland in an agriculture field, a semipermanent hemi-marsh, or a large lake, try to imagine all the aquatic life below the surface. It's easy to focus on the benefits of wetlands to birds, but it's more challenging to consider the life cycle needs of the aquatic communities we can't see.

The most picturesque places in the state, like the badlands or native forests, are not just advertisement worthy, but unique habitat where a handful of species on the list can only be found.

There were five recurrent conservation actions identified in the 2015 plan that we still see as the top actions for the recovery and conservation of species in the 2025 plan: 1) offer incentives and programs to protect, enhance and restore habitat; 2) urge ecologically responsible ordinances

and suitable reclamation standards; 3) promote and support regenerative grazing and work with grass-based agriculture groups; 4) use best management practices or ecological site descriptions; and 5) public education and outreach.

The key to success is partners. State, local, NGOs and federal agencies are contributors and implementers, along with private landowners and tribal nations. Strengthening and diversifying conservation, agriculture and industry partnerships is also essential to successful implementation of the plan.

The State Wildlife Action Plan set the foundation for, or is an integral element, of many conservation efforts today. For example, the SWAP and its species or habitats are often referenced in Outdoor Heritage Fund proposals. The Meadowlark Initiative, a collective effort of conservation, agriculture and industry partners to



Upland Sandpiper



Franklin's ground squirrel.



Grasshopper sparrow.

enhance, restore and sustain native grasslands in North Dakota, originated because our state bird and SGCN, the Western meadowlark, is declining 1.3% per year. And the recently completed Landscape Forest Stewardship Plan for the Turtle Mountain Landscape highlights the importance of this unique forest for SGCNs and identifies goals and objectives to guide management toward sustaining forest for future generations.

You also play a crucial role in the State Wildlife Action Plan, as the actions you choose to take, whether it's creating a pollinator garden or managing grasslands with sustainability in mind, can have a significant impact. The North Dakota State Wildlife Action Plan is not just the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's vision for healthy and diverse wildlife populations and habitat resources. Wildlife is entrusted in the care of state wildlife agencies to be safeguarded for you, the public.

And not just for now, but for future generations to experience.

SANDRA JOHNSON is a Game and Fish Department conservation biologist.




The list ranges from some of the most globally imperiled species, whooping crane and pallid sturgeon, to more common species for which North Dakota represents an important portion of their remaining range, such as Richardson's ground squirrel and sharp-tailed grouse. While the latter species show stability in numbers, a large portion of them are found in North Dakota, underscoring our responsibility for their conservation.



The current draft list for the Species of Greatest Conservation Need and Species of Greatest Information Need can be found on the Department's website.

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Improving access
to Horsehead Lake
was just one of our
priorities this year.



REVAMP OF HORSEHEAD'S RAMP

BY RON WILSON

Boating access to Horsehead Lake in Kidder County, the state's third largest natural lake and go-to walleye fishing destination, was improved earlier this summer to the delight of anglers.

"Horsehead Lake has really taken off over the past few years. Historically it's been more of a pike fishery, but in the last five to six years it's been stocked with walleye, and they've really taken off and they're at a really good catchable size right now and it's a hot spot that everybody wants to get in to," said Wes Erdle, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries development project supervisor. "So, improving access to Horsehead Lake was just one of our priorities this year."

Erdle and the Department's fisheries development crew constructed a new concrete push-style ramp on the lake's west shore and built a peninsula in deeper water to combat siltation issues experienced the last few years.

"Horsehead Lake is kind of shaped like a soup bowl where the shorelines are really flat, and you have to get out quite a ways to get to some deeper water. Initially, we installed a slide-in steel ramp here, and that just helps us chase the water levels as it rises and recedes ... we can push and pull that ramp in and out," he said. "Another aspect of Horsehead Lake is the substrate is really sandy, and with the lake being so large and there being a lot of fetch whenever we get a high wind event, that substrate just kind of rolls along the shoreline causing a lot of maintenance issues with siltation on this ramp. So, the decision was made to build a peninsula out away from the shoreline, and then actually upgrade the ramp from the slide-in to a poured concrete ramp. And this should alleviate a lot of our siltation problems going forward."



The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's fisheries development crew at Horsehead Lake. From left, Joe Fladeland, Kyle Hoge, Wes Erdle and Jacob Heyer.

They also upgraded the ramp's entrance road, which was just a dirt two-track through the section line. The new road now has shoulders, gravel and a ditch, making access to and from the ramp much easier.

"The parcel that we're standing on right now is owned by the State Land Department. We got a 25-year easement with them to build this site to provide access," Erdle said. "If something should happen to this lake, let's say we go into a drought and the water recedes way back and we lose the fishery, we would come back in at that point and reclaim the area for them."

Improving access at Horsehead Lake, a four- to five-week project, isn't the only ramp project on the Department's to-do list this summer. Erdle said that list is about 10 ramps or more long, which includes work at Stober Lake in Sheridan County, Middle Eckelson between Valley City and Jamestown, the list goes on.

"Anytime we can add another ramp to a lake that has a robust walleye population, the anglers can't get enough of it," Erdle said.

Improving the infrastructure for anglers and other water users takes Erdle and crew to all four corners of the state and everywhere in between. North Dakota's boasts about 430 actively managed fishing waters today, which feature hundreds of ramps.

"We have about 350 boat ramps across the state, and we do the construction and maintenance of 400 docks, 160 fishing piers ... we build fish cleaning stations, do a lot of rock riprapping when it comes to some of our facilities getting eroded by wind action," he said. "We build a lot of roads, parking lots and we also do some signing and some fencing and cattle guard installs to keep livestock out of these access areas. So, at the end of the day, we're just trying to improve the access for the angler, the easiest way for them to get their boat on the lake and catch some fish."



A walleye from Horsehead Lake.



The careful process of pushing the new concrete ramp into Horsehead Lake.

While the construction phase of projects like the one in June at Horsehead Lake is the most obvious to passersby and anglers upon completion, the greatest amount of work happens when no one is looking.

"Most of the legwork happens long before that. In the winter months there's a set of steps that we must go through," Erdle said. "The first is identifying a fishery that's sustainable over time, and that justifies the cost associated with boating access."

Once that's established, they need to find a site on that lake with the proper slope into the water, about 11 to 15%, plus available land that allows for nearby parking.

"Also, a major factor is the proximity to a road. Roads are very expensive to construct, so we try to keep them as close as we can to existing roads," Erdle said. "The next thing is securing an easement for that parcel of land. And since North Dakota is 93% privately owned, this can be the most difficult part.

"So, you might have a great site with great slope topography, with a bunch of parking right next to a township road, but the landowner just isn't willing to work with you," he added. "On the other hand, you might have a landowner who's willing to bend over backwards for you, accommodate you in any way

possible, but we just don't have the depth or maybe the existing road is a couple miles away ... there are a number of things that need to fall into place."

Following that, Erdle said the Department must secure permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, State Water Commission, and clearance from the State Historical Society.

"Once those are all in place, then it's finding a local entity to take care of the operation and maintenance of the facility after the initial construction phase. This is probably one of the most important parts. We rely on these local entities very heavily, whether it be a wildlife club, maybe a city park board, a county park board, water resource district, or maybe even just a local farmer or rancher," Erdle said. "These entities are the backbone of our boating access program, and without them, we would not be able to put all of these facilities on the landscape."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

On mid-June, at about the peak of the pheasant hatch in North Dakota, upland game bird biologists were all smiles about the possibilities of the coming fall hunting season.

They had good reason to be optimistic, considering hen pheasants were in terrific shape heading into nesting season following a mild winter; timely rains bolstered what remains of the state's grassland nesting habitat while also jumpstarting an important crop of insects vital to chicks after hatching; and the number of roosters heard crowing in the Game and Fish Department's spring pheasant crowing count was up 37% from 2023 when nearly 54,000 hunters shot an estimated 320,000 birds.

Barring a gully washer, hailstorm or some other unforeseen buzzkill event that can wipe out nests or kill vulnerable chicks, things are looking up, said RJ Gross, Department upland game management biologist.

The first good indicator, but not the tell-all for the upcoming season, are the positive results from the crowing count.

"Last year 14 crows per stop was the average and this year it was right at 20, which is one of the better ones we've ever had," Gross said. "It's not surprising considering last year we had such great production. We saw about a 70% increase in the number of pheasants counted during our July and August brood surveys."

Game and Fish Department personnel have been conducting crowing counts, getting a sampled look at the number of roosters in the breeding population, since the 1980s. They run about 100 routes in four management districts across the state from May 1 through June 10.

"They are 20-mile routes, usually through the best habitat. There are 10 stops on each route, so every 2 miles you stop, get out, walk away from your vehicle and count the number of crows you hear in 2 minutes," Gross said. "We repeat that 10 times, and we try to do them three times throughout the survey period."

"The areas that have pheasants and have grass, the pheasant densities are very high," he added. "The northwestern and southwestern parts of the state were the key areas where the densities had

the biggest increase. We had some routes where the crows doubled from the year before."

Again, the Department's crowing count survey is just one of the tools to get an inside look at the state's pheasant population to help predict the coming hunting season.

"With the crowing counts we're looking at the number of roosters that are coming into the breeding population. We're not looking at hens, things like that," he said. "So, as long as we can see that we have a surplus of roosters, the high density of pheasants, you can guess based on looking at habitat and weather that we should have good production."

A better indicator as the season nears is the Department's late summer roadside brood counts conducted July 20 through August when biologists are counting all upland birds, no matter the species or gender.

"That's what everyone's looking at when they're trying to plan their bird hunting trip to North Dakota," Gross said.

While crowing counts were up by nearly 40% statewide, not all of the management districts are created equal. For example:

"Pheasants aren't doing well in the counties in southeastern North Dakota. All upland birds are not doing well because they've lost the most CRP down in that area and a lot of crop conversions," Gross said. "Pheasants really key on agriculture, especially those small grains, wheat, barley, oats, things like that. Down in that area it's a lot of corn and soybeans. Mix that with the loss of a lot of grass, pheasants just aren't responding."

"A lot of hunters will remember our heydays of 2008, where we harvested almost a million birds and we had the most crowing counts on record," he added. "This year it's very different. Back in 2008, the northwest, the southwest and the southeast all were similar, about 30 crows per stop type of thing. Now, when you're looking at that, the southeast is right around 10, sometimes below 10. The southwest and northwest are the ones that are carrying the statewide average."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



 **IMPROVED
CROWING COUNT,**

a good sign

**BY RON
WILSON**



Horned lark.

Listening for Birds on Grasslands

By Ron Wilson

For a prairie state, North Dakota doesn't have as much of it as it used to. Scientists have been telling us for years that 75% of the state's native grasslands are no longer.

While the cry to safeguard what remains for the wellbeing of humans and the untold number of wild and domestic animals that utilize this vital landscape have mostly gone unanswered over the years, the formidable effort to conserve and restore grasslands in the state endures.

A major player in this effort is the Meadowlark Initiative, a statewide strategy that teams landowners, conservation groups, scientists and others to enhance, restore and sustain native grasslands in North Dakota.

Ashlyn Herron, a University of North Dakota master's in biology student, is one of those scientists using technology to determine if high-quality grassland habitat restoration through the Meadowlark Initiative is successfully occurring.

Herron is the perfect fit for this task.

"Prairies have always been very near and dear to my heart. I grew up on the prairies of Alberta, so I'm a child of the prairies," she said. "Considering how endangered our grasslands are, what the

Meadowlark Initiative is doing is key to ensuring persistence of this ecosystem."

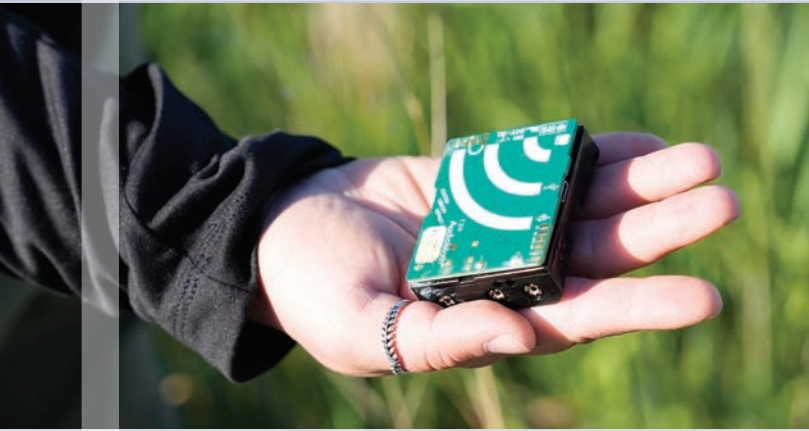
Herron's research employs the use of autonomous recording units, or ARUs, to record bird presence on reseeded grasslands.

"And we're also comparing bird response from the reseeded grasslands to intact grasslands in the area, as well as cropland, so we can kind of see how occupancy of vocal birds is changing through stages of restoration," she said.

The ARUs are basically a circuit board, microphone, battery pack and a computer chip housed in vacuum-sealed bags to protect them from the elements. The units are secured to a metal post and record 10 minutes of audio three times every morning from 5:50 to 7:50 a.m.

To decipher the many, many bird calls and accurately assign them to bird species using the survey sites, Herron said they use BirdNet, which is a deep neural network machine learning classifier.

"It goes through and converts these audio files into a sonogram or a structure of the call. And then it looks at it and says, 'Ok, this call is very similar to a meadowlark' and then scores it," she said. "I can process each unit in just 20 minutes. It's crazy. There are some considerations as



An autonomous recording unit, or ARU, used to record bird presence on reseeded grasslands in North Dakota.

we have to manually verify a subset to make sure we're actually getting proper accuracy. But so far so good."

During her first field season in 2023, a total of 9,523 10-minute audio files equaling about 1,587 hours of audio were recorded.

Eleven study sites selected from a database of landowners who actively partnered with the Meadowlark Initiative to restore grasslands were used during the 2023 field season, which is similar to the 2024 field season. Counties included in the study are Logan, Dickey, Burleigh, Sheridan, McLean, McHenry, McKenzie and Divide.

"I kind of joke that we spend more time in the car than we do in the field, but honestly, it's such a treat as we're getting to see the cool diversity of the grasslands within North Dakota because there is so much variation," Herron said. "There's so many different plant communities and bird communities, and it's really cool to have this on such a wide landscape level. There's not a ton of research being done on this scale, making this a really good opportunity to study how reseeding is affecting birds across the state."

Once placed in the field, Herron said they check on the ARUs every 10 days to two weeks. Because the recording devices are set to record for a limited time, the batteries last the entire spring and summer.

While the study is far from complete, Herron said she's noticed some things.

"While this is anecdotal at this point, what we're noticing is even a little bit of grass being planted is creating habitat for these birds. And we're not seeing

these dead zones that some croplands can be attributed to," she said. "In these reseeded areas, birds are singing, they're defending their territories ... there is a use here that's going on. And it's also going to be creating grazing opportunities for these landowners in the future."

Speaking of landowners, Herron said these individuals are key to what she is trying to accomplish across the state.

"North Dakota is primarily privately owned so their partnership is what makes this possible. And I'm personally indebted to every single one of my landowners who partnered with me," she said. "They are a great, great group of people and I've learned so much from working with them that I will take with me for the rest of my career."

The amount of information Herron is gathering across several counties wouldn't be possible without the high-tech gadgets attached to metal posts. To fund a field staff, and it would take many individuals to equal what the ARUs accomplish, just doesn't make financial sense.

"The ARUs really get to be our ears on the ground for a period of time," she said. "I have 108 units on the landscape doing three-point counts a day for the entire summer. To have a field staff do that wouldn't be feasible. And we also have a high degree of data standardization with these units that you just don't get with field teams."

Kevin Kading, Game and Fish Department private land section leader, visited one of Herron's Burleigh County study sites in early June that he guessed to be about 80 acres.

"It's kind of like that old saying that if you build it, they will come. A lot of birds will find these restored grasslands, expand into them and set up new territories," he said. "These restored grasslands mean a lot especially with habitat conditions the way they are right now in our state. These acres can make a difference for a lot of grassland birds."

And other wildlife, too.

"From the smallest insects to big game animals like white-tailed deer. There is great fawning habitat that we're creating here. Great bedding habitat, escape cover. It's all those things," Kading said. "These acres of restored grassland will be on the landscape for years to



Chestnut-collared longspur.

come and will benefit the landowner and wildlife for a long time."

Kading said the restored grasslands are not uniform in size and they don't have to be. Size doesn't matter, especially if new grass is added to existing grassland habitat adding to the patch size.

"I would go as far as to say the status of habitat right now in some parts of the state is probably at its lowest point that I've seen in my career. We've lost a lot of grass, not just CRP, but native grasslands. North Dakota only has about 25% of its native grasslands remaining, and maybe over half of our wetlands are remaining," he said. "When you combine the loss of grass and wetlands with the loss of tree rows, fence lines and the little odd areas that people are used to seeing, it's significant. A lot of those are not on the landscape anymore. And so, every one of these projects like this really does help. And whether it's a smaller project or a larger project, every acre helps and every acre counts."

Even so, participation in programs to put more wildlife habitat on the landscape in North Dakota needs to increase.

"I've been saying for a while that there are more programs and partners and dollars available right now than ever before. I would say if a landowner is simply interested and wants to find out more, they can always call Game and Fish and start asking questions of one of our private land biologists," Kading said. "Another thing that's kind of handy for some people is the Dakota Legacy Initiative website that ag and conservation partners put together a couple of years ago that is meant to be the one stop shop for landowners and people like

us who are working in these programs. For example, if someone wants to look at what wetland practices are available in Burleigh County, they can do a search and it will spit out a number of different partners and programs and contact information, which is handy for people wanting to do some searching on their own. Or, again, they can call Game and Fish anytime and we'll guide them in the right direction."

Kading added that landowners don't always have to enroll in whatever programs to make a difference on the landscape.

"They may not want to be in a program and have a contract with USDA, Game and Fish or someone like that, but simply want to receive some technical assistance," he said. "Someone can come out and say, 'Here's what we suggest, here's some good grass species, here's what might be good for your operation.' And there's no contract involved with that. It's just helpful advice."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



Upland sandpiper.



Grasshopper sparrow.



BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



Decline in Breeding Duck Numbers

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 77th annual spring breeding duck survey conducted in May showed an index of about 2.9 million birds, down from 3.4 million last year.

The 2024 breeding duck index was the 30th highest on record and stands at 17% above the long-term (1948-2023) average, according to Mike Szymanski, Department migratory game bird supervisor.

"By and large, all species were flat to down. Mallards, for instance, were down about 19%, pintails were down about 29% and blue-winged teal down roughly 13%," he said. "These species being down from last year is one thing, but when you compare it back to what we consider to be one of our best periods for breeding ducks in North Dakota (1994-2016), we're down a lot more than that. So overall, mallards, pintails, blue-winged teal, gadwall, wigeon and northern shovelers are down anywhere from 24-49% from that 1994 to 2016 time period."

Szymanski said the decline in breeding duck numbers has a lot to do with the loss of CRP and perennial grasses on the landscape used for nesting cover by ducks.

"While our overall duck population count this year was about 2.9 million birds, that hardly compares to 5.4 million in 2002, our record-high," he said. "So, we're down considerably and were getting into this realm of a lower average where we probably won't be above 3 million breeding ducks very often based on our landscape conditions."

As always, spring is always interesting as Szymanski and crew run more than 1,800 miles of transects counting wetlands and waterfowl down to the species and social grouping on both sides of the road. This spring, the wetland count was the 32nd highest out of 77 years.

"Coming out of winter, we were certainly quite dry after having a mostly open winter across the state, but it rained a fair bit in the 30 days leading up to our survey, so that kept it from being really dry," Szymanski said. "At the time

of our survey, wetland conditions were considered 'fair.' We had a lot of new water on the landscape during the survey that really wasn't there when ducks were moving through."

On the bright side, Szymanski said, rains in later May and into June will be a boon for renesting opportunities and nesting probability in general for ducks.

"There should be a pretty good nesting effort by ducks this year in what upland nesting habitat is available," he said. "Wetlands are in much better shape now and there should be a really good renesting effort for those birds that had nests destroyed by predators."

Szymanski cautions waterfowl hunters about reading too much into survey numbers just yet. He said that while the mid-continent duck populations aren't what they once were, we'll know more once the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service releases their survey results sometime in late August.

"It can be really hard to predict what our fall hunting is going to be like from what we see in the May survey," he said. "But throughout summer, we'll have our July duck brood survey, and we'll have a fall wetland survey in September to kind of give last looks at what production was like in the state, and then also what wetland conditions are like leading into the hunting season. It's always important to check back and see what our surveys are showing us that we do throughout the year."



Spring Turkey Hunter Success

Hunter success during the spring turkey hunting season was 49%, according to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

The Department issued 8,137 licenses for the 2024 spring season, and a record 6,847 hunters took 3,336 birds, the highest spring harvest on record.

RJ Gross, upland game management biologist, said spring turkey hunting success in North Dakota is usually driven by weather.

"This year the weather was very mild with no snow on the ground, and that led to more hunters out on the landscape," he said. "Also, turkeys had above average production last year, according to our late summer

roadside counts and hunter observations of large groups of jakes this spring. Along with high overwinter survival, this led to an abundant population of turkeys.”

Tips When Launching, Loading Boats

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

LAUNCHING

- Don't pull onto the ramp until your boat is ready to launch.
- Prepare for launching in the parking area. Remove covers, load equipment, remove tie downs, attach lines and put in drain plug before backing onto the ramp.
- When ready, pull in line to launch. Wait your turn. Be courteous.

LOADING

- Don't block the loading area with your boat until your tow vehicle is ready to load. Wait until you are clear of the launch area to unload gear.
- As soon as your trailer is in the water, load and secure your boat to the trailer.
- Remove boat and trailer from the water as quickly as possible.
- Get clear of the ramp. Pull into the parking area to finish securing your boat, unload gear, drain all water and inspect for and remove any vegetation. Remember to leave plugs out when transporting your boat.



Report Tagged Fish

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

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

and read it.

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

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

Report Boating Accidents

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

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

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

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



Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest

Photographers interested in sending photos for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Watchable Wildlife Photo Contest are asked to follow the guidelines for submitting their work.

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

Department staff.

The contest is now open and the deadline for submitting photos is Oct. 1. For more information or questions, contact Patrick Isakson, Department conservation biologist, at pisakson@nd.gov.

The contest has categories for nongame and game species, as well as plants/insects. An overall winning photograph will be chosen, with the number of place winners in each category determined by the number of qualified entries.

Contestants are limited to no more than five entries. Photos must have been taken in North Dakota.

By submitting an entry, photographers grant permission to Game and Fish to publish winning photographs in *North Dakota OUTDOORS*, and on the Department's website and social media accounts.

Boat North Dakota Course

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

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

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

Guide and Outfitter Exam

The next guide and outfitter written examination is Aug. 17 at 1 p.m. at the North Dakota Game and Fish Department office in Bismarck. Preregistration is required no later than Aug. 9 by calling the Department's enforcement office at 701-328-6604.

In addition to passing a written exam, qualifications for becoming a guide include a background check for criminal and game and fish violations, certification in cardiopulmonary resuscitation and standard first aid, and employment by or contract with a licensed hunting outfitter.

Hunting outfitter eligibility requirements include the guide qualifications, and an individual must have held a hunting guide license for two years and must have proof of liability insurance.



A North Dakota Game and Fish Department aquatic nuisance inspector checks for invasive species hitchhiking on boats about to be launched in Devils Lake. This ANS check station at Grahams Island State Park in late June is one of many run by the Game and Fish around the state in an effort to educate boaters about the dangers of invasive species and to keep our waters free of aquatic nuisance species.

Put Trash Where it Belongs

Outdoor recreationists are encouraged to keep it clean this summer by packing out all trash.

All garbage should be placed in proper trash receptacles. If trash cans aren't available, or full, dispose of trash at home.

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

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

Fur Harvester Ed Classes

The North Dakota Cooperative Fur Harvester Education Program is hosting fur harvester education classes July 30 and Aug. 1 and 3 at the North Dakota Game and Fish Department in Bismarck and Oct. 3, 4 and 5 at the Velva Wildlife Club in Velva.



Fur harvester education classes are 16 hours in length, free, voluntary, and cover topics associated with trapping and fur hunting. Much of the instruction includes

hands-on experience with traps and equipment commonly used for harvesting furbearers and properly caring for the pelts.

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

The North Dakota Cooperative Fur Harvester Education Program is also hosting a Using Cable Devices in North Dakota training seminar on Oct. 12 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Velva Wildlife Club.

The seminar is free and available to anyone who would like information and experience using cable devices. All aspects of cable device construction, care, use, ethics, responsibility and legal requirements are covered. Much of the instruction includes hands-on field application and set construction. Preregistration is required by contacting Rick Tischaefter at 701-460-1055.

Jeb Williams, Department director, addresses the crowd at the June dedication of the Hecht addition to Painted Woods Creek Wildlife Management Area in McLean County.

“Expanding access to hunting and fishing is not just about recreation; it is a fundamental aspect of responsible land management and conservation. By opening more areas for hunting and fishing, we create opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts,” Williams said. “Access to quality resources is one of the greatest barriers to recruitment of hunters, anglers and outdoor recreationists. By involving our children and grandchildren in hunting and fishing, we can pass down traditions, knowledge and love for the outdoors that will endure for years to come.”



STAFF NOTES



Link, Bendel Honored

Greg Link and Cayla Bendel were recognized for their achievements at the annual conference of the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies in Stevenson, Wash., in June.

Link, Game and Fish Department conservation and communications chief, won the Special Recognition Award. A longtime agency employee, he was instrumental in spearheading the Department’s well-known Private Land Open To Sportsmen program in the late 1990s.

“His passion for developing habitat led him to the position of private land coordinator from 1997-2001 where he embraced the challenge of developing PLOTS, one of the most recognizable private lands habitat and access programs in the country,” said Kevin Kading, the Department’s current private land section leader. “Through Greg’s

leadership and collaboration, relationships with private landowners, conservation partners and agricultural entities were developed, and the program flourished. The PLOTS program has had far reaching impacts and is still providing opportunities for private landowners and hunters today.”

Bendel, Department R3 coordinator, won the Conservation Change Agent Award, presented to an individual who is catalyst for positive change, growth, or innovation in an agency.

“Cayla had the monumental task of taking on the R3 position that was new to the Department and presented a new way of thinking to North Dakotans,” said Casey Anderson, Department wildlife division chief. “She has come up with ways to reach new audiences that we honestly would not be doing and surely wouldn’t be excelling at if not for her forward thinking. Cayla brought the Department into the online media world, and it has quickly accelerated our programs outreach abilities.”



Fladeland Joins Agency

Joe Fladeland was named fisheries development specialist for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department earlier in spring.

Fladeland was a crew leader for a local fencing company in the private sector before joining the Department.



BOATING IS SERIOUS FUN

For more boat safety tips, visit our
website gf.nd.gov/education



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BACKCAST

By Ron Wilson

Talk around the office yesterday, no matter where the conversation started, eventually drifted to the possible looming ugliness of baseball-sized hail, 80 mile per hour straight-line winds, tornadoes and heavy rains.

Life on the Northern Plains this time of year.

Like a lot of folks I'm guessing, I tuned into the weather on TV, moved some outdoor furniture indoors, put garbage and recycling in the garage to keep it from blowing to South Dakota along with our shingles, and then hoped for the best.

It's in Mother Nature's hands now, I said to our bird dog, Larry, who has endured some of this foolishness, but not a lot, as this is only his second summer on the planet.

The fallout, at least in our neck of the woods, was, well, negligible. I didn't hear or read any dire reports the next morning from the various news services around the state, so maybe North Dakota mostly dodged it.

Sidestepping damaging weather is good for both humans and wildlife, and the more we can elude the ugly blows by Mother Nature the better. For instance, the stars have seemingly aligned for the promise of good things for fall's upland game bird season in North Dakota if the newly hatched pheasants and prairie grouse aren't cut down by crushing hail, heavy rains and prolonged, cool temperatures.

While you can read about the potential of a quality pheasant season in the guts of this issue of NDO, more good news hit my desk recently for those of us who can't get enough of chasing native grouse in short grass.

According to the Game and Fish Department's 2024 spring upland game bird survey summary, the sharp-tailed grouse index was up 51% statewide from 2023. From mid-March to early May, observers surveyed 24 census blocks, each about 36 square miles, to get these results.

Southwestern North Dakota had the strongest increases (plus 74%), followed by Grand Forks (plus 67%), Prairie Pot-hole Region (plus 58%) and the Drift Prairie (plus 24%). The density of male grouse counted on all census blocks in 2024 remains slightly below the 20-year average, but surpasses the 10-year average.



The survey, biologists tell us, provides an index of male sharp-tailed grouse counted each year, as observers are instructed to locate all dancing grounds within each survey block in an attempt at a complete census of males within each survey block.

There is a caveat to the positive sharptail findings, printed in red in the official summary for emphasis. Because survey conditions in spring 2023 were poor as plenty of snow hung around until mid-April hindering observer access to some dancing grounds, grouse increases in 2024 may be partially due to more favorable survey conditions this spring.

Then again, it should be noted that observers counted 4,185 male sharptails on all blocks in 2024 compared to 2,979 in 2023, and those totals only include those blocks and leks that were counted both years.

Sounds like good news to me.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

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Drew Johnson, Game and Fish Department district game warden in Finley, checks fishing licenses of Devils Lake anglers in late June. Jackie Lundstrom, enforcement operations supervisor, said Johnson has employed jet ski in his patrols the past couple of summers or so. While Johnson is photographed here using it on big water, Lundstrom said the jet ski has allowed Johnson to hit some of the smaller waters without having to trailer a boat around his district.

PHOTO BY ASHELY PETERSON.



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