

# NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

\$2.00 May 2025



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Game and Fish



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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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## CONTENTS

**2** April 3

**8** Stopover State

**12** Thoughts on Fatheads

**16** 2025 Legislative Review

**20** Buffaloberry Patch

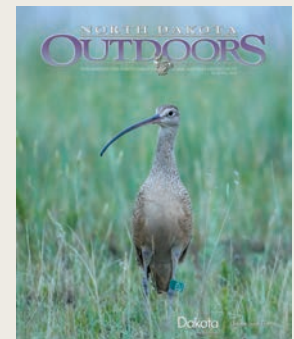
**25** Back Cast

A ring-necked pheasant photographed in early spring as it flushes from cover.

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### Front Cover

*An adult long-billed curlew, sporting leg bands and GPS or satellite transmitter technology hidden from the viewer, is one of 11 birds marked in ongoing research in southwestern North Dakota.*

PHOTO BY ASHLEY PETERSON.





Lake Oahe's Beaver Bay.



# APRIL

By Ron Wilson



# 3

It was a Thursday. Ice was off Lake Oahe's Cattail and Beaver bays and there was work to be done. The to-do list for this one day seemed long.

Knowing northern pike and other Missouri River System fish species were nosing into the shallows to dump their eggs, feed or do other fish things, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel needed to be there to greet them. Following cues provided by Mother Nature, the clock for these fish was ticking and those on shore dressed in waders and waterproof gear could hear it.

From their trap nets, fisheries biologists unloaded an impressive number of fish. First, let's start with the pike.

While the northerns weren't ready to give up their eggs to help meet this spring's 4.5 million egg goal, 175 male pike (with many more to follow in coming days) were loaded, hauled and released into Cottonwood Park Pond in Bismarck.

Second, 200 channel catfish trapped in nets were loaded and then hauled to Braddock Dam in Emmons County to provide fishing opportunities to anglers and help clean up a nuisance bullhead problem.

Third, about 100 walleyes captured in trap nets were fitted with metal jaw tags as part of a study with South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks.

Fourth, biologists collected shortnose gar from nets and then garnered weights, lengths and other samples from these prehistoric-looking fish to learn more about a Missouri River species that biologists know so little about.

And fifth, fisheries personnel used heavy equipment to push a courtesy dock into the water at Beaver Bay to be used by anglers and others.

"Whatever needs to be done in spring, we get it done," said Paul Bailey, Department south central fisheries supervisor.

And sometimes a lot of that gets done in one day.

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*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*





Walleye captured in nets were fitted with metal jaw tags to monitor exploitation of this species throughout the Missouri River System from Garrison Dam to Lake Oahe Dam. Several thousand channel catfish were netted and transported and released into several waters around the state.











On April 3 and days that followed, more than 2,000 northern pike caught in trap nets were hauled to Cottonwood Park Pond in Bismarck to provide opportunities for anglers. Samples were taken from shortnose gar, a primitive fish that is often referred to as a living fossil, for research purposes. A courtesy dock is pushed into place at Lake Oahe's Beaver Bay.





# STOP- OVER STATE



**NORTH DAKOTA IS AN INCREDIBLY  
IMPORTANT STOPOVER SITE FOR CRANES  
MAKING LONG-HAUL MIGRATIONS TO  
BREEDING GROUNDS.**





**BY RON WILSON**

Beginning sometime in February, the majority of the world's sandhill cranes collect on Nebraska's Platte River to feed and rest in preparation for laborious journeys north to Alaska, Siberia and elsewhere where these tall, unmistakable birds will breed and raise a chick or two if the stars align.

With hundreds of thousands of sandhill cranes staging along the shallow, meandering Platte, you'd think if the wind was right, it would be almost possible to hear these enthusiastically vocal birds here in North Dakota before they even commit to winging it in our direction. Yet, with patience and assurance that we remain in their age-old flight plan, we'll encounter them soon enough.





Blessed with long, coiled windpipes that boost their distinctive, rattling, far-reaching calls, we'll hear the first wave of sandhills in, say, early April. With necks craned we'll look skyward in search of cranes that are always circling at altitudes that are seemingly too high. But with persistence, and a lucky break in the cloud cover, we'll eventually spot them.

"While sandhill cranes typically take their time when they're heading south to wintering grounds in fall, their spring migration through North Dakota is a lot faster by comparison as they're hustling to get to the breeding grounds and get that process kicked off," said John Palarski, North Dakota Game and Fish Department migratory game bird biologist. "By the end of April, the bulk of the cranes have migrated through North Dakota."

Palarski said there are four populations of sandhill cranes that migrate through the United States — Rocky Mountain, Lower Colorado River, Eastern and Mid-continent. The latter population of birds are those that color North Dakota's skies gray in spring and fall, and to the pedestrian looking for, say, color or size differences between one group to the next, there's not much to distinguish one population of sandhills from the others.

"Most are differentiated just by where they are breeding and where their migratory paths take them," Palarski said.

Biologists conduct sandhill crane population surveys when the birds are congregated along the Platte River. This year's late March survey indicated the Mid-continent population is stable to increasing.

"What's interesting about the Mid-continent population of sandhill cranes is that they have four main breeding affiliations or areas where they're breeding," Palarski said. "Some of those birds go up to western Alaska and eastern Siberia to nest, while some go into eastern Alaska and western Canada. Another group goes to far northern Canada, and the fourth breeding affiliation is kind of in that northwestern Minnesota area and eastern and central Canada as well."

North Dakota is an incredibly important stopover site for cranes making long-haul migrations to breeding grounds.

"What the cranes are looking for in North Dakota are our shallow wetlands where they can rest and refuel," Palarski said. "Considering that some of these birds are migrating a couple thousand miles to places like Siberia, Alaska and northern Canada, North Dakota



plays a key role during their migration."

The menu to refuel for the long flight north is diverse for these birds.

"Sandhill cranes are technically omnivorous. While we think of them eating a lot of grains, wetland seeds, vegetation, wetland plant tubers ... they're also known to eat amphibians, reptiles and small mammals as well," Palarski said.

Passersby viewing sandhill cranes from a distance during their abbreviated layovers in North Dakota in spring may encounter the birds displaying their dancing skills, as courting cranes spread their wings, pump their heads, bow, jump and sometimes toss tufts of grass into the air to strengthen pair bonds and get ready for what lies ahead on breeding grounds.

Cranes mate for life, biologists tell us, and hang with their dancing partner year-round.

"Typically, their clutch size is two. The chicks will leave the nest and begin foraging right after hatching," Palarski said. "But it takes around 65 to 75 days for them to actually fledge and be able to fly."

While North Dakota and its Central Flyway

location plays a key role in helping shuttle cranes from wintering to breeding grounds in spring, the list of sandhills reportedly nesting in North Dakota over time is not long. Much of that has to do with an absence of large, shallow marshes, or bogs, in North Dakota that the cranes prefer for nesting.

"North Dakota has an affiliation with birds breeding in northwestern Minnesota, so we'll still have birds that occasionally drift over into North Dakota to nest," Palarski said. "I don't think it's a function of a declining nesting effort in North Dakota, it's just that they've never really done it here to a really large extent."

And that's OK.

"While sandhill cranes are breeding somewhere else, some in a different continent, virtually all of them are funneling through North Dakota and we get to witness that," Palarski said. "North Dakotans really have a front row seat to a pretty spectacular migration every year."


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*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*



**CRANES MATE FOR LIFE,  
BIOLOGISTS TELL US, AND  
HANG WITH THEIR DANCING  
PARTNER YEAR-ROUND.**



A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a grey hoodie and a baseball cap, is holding a large walleye fish. The fish has a green and white patterned body and a large, spiny dorsal fin. It is holding a lure with a jig and a fathead minnow in its mouth. The background shows a body of water and a distant shoreline with trees. The entire image is framed by a green dashed border.

A Missouri River walleye  
fooled by a jig and fathead  
minnow.





# Thoughts on **FATHEADS**

By Scott Gangl

Anglers in North Dakota often base their bait selection on the season: leeches and nightcrawlers tend to be the choice in the summer, while minnows are more popular during the spring, fall and winter months when cooler water temps make it easier to keep your minnows alive and feisty.

Growing up in rural North Dakota, a spring fishing trip usually required some planning to make sure we had minnows for our outing. Like my parents and their parents before, I trapped my minnows from the local creek. Starting a couple of days before each fishing trip, I would bait our minnow trap with dried bread “borrowed” from grandma’s pantry and head to the creek. From experience I knew which







Most anglers buy their minnows in North Dakota from retail bait shops.

holes held the best numbers of fathead minnows, where I could catch the biggest minnows, where I might get some suckers in my trap, and which holes to avoid because my trap would be filled with bullheads or sticklebacks. Most of the time an overnight set blessed us with enough minnows for a fishing trip, but occasionally the minnows didn't cooperate, and planned trips had to wait a day or two until we had enough bait to make the outing worthwhile.

Trapping your own bait was a necessary part of the process for my parents and grandparents' generations. Bait wasn't always readily available, and even though bait shops existed, rural anglers simply didn't always drive to town just to buy a dozen minnows for their fishing trips.


Fast forward to today, trapping bait for personal use is much less common than it used to be. We live in a world of convenience, where we can make one trip to the store or internet browser and buy anything we need simply by putting it in our shopping cart.

For anglers heading out on the water, it just makes sense to buy your bait at the same place you stop to fill with gas, buy some snacks or pick up some extra fishing tackle. The convenience of having a steady supply of clean bait is something we all take for granted, until something disrupts the supply, and bait is hard to get. Earlier this year there were some grumblings from ice anglers that bait shops were running out of bait. While this is unusual, it does happen occasionally, and some anglers may wonder where the bait that is sold in bait shops comes from.

Retail bait shops possess a special license that permits them to sell live minnows to anglers. While a few of the smaller "mom and pop" bait shops still trap their own minnows, most of the minnows we buy in North Dakota are trapped by wholesale bait trappers and distributed to retail shops for sale. Wholesale bait vendors trap minnows throughout the year to keep up with demand, which is typically highest in the cooler months of spring, fall and throughout winter. Since all the fathead minnows in North Dakota are wild-caught, they are subject to the same environmental influences as other fish populations, like occasional winterkill. This can lead to shortages at times, but those shortages are usually short-lived. North Dakota had 34 wholesale bait trappers licensed to trap in 2024. Most of these trappers provided fathead minnows to retailers, with a few trapping leeches, creek chubs, or white suckers where they're allowed.

Fathead minnows are a hearty and prolific fish, capable of surviving in low oxygen environments present in many of the shallow wetlands scattered across the state. This widespread presence has been a boon for anglers as bait regulations evolved over the years. In the days when my grandparents and others were trapping their own bait from the creek, North Dakota had more liberal bait restrictions that generally allowed any "minnows" as bait and pro-





North Dakota had 34 wholesale bait trappers licensed to trap in 2024.

hibited game fish and a handful of nuisance species.

The consequence of having liberal bait regulations was that many of the anglers who trapped their own bait weren't well-versed at fish identification and this, inadvertently or intentionally, led to the introduction of unwanted fish species in some fishing waters. Changes were necessary to prevent problem introductions, and regulations gradually became more restrictive to limit what fish anglers could possess. Since fathead minnows were already present in most waters and rather easy to obtain, managers looked at them as the best species to maintain reliable and clean bait supplies for anglers across the state.

Other fish species allowed as live bait currently include brook sticklebacks, creek chubs to give anglers a larger bait option, rainbow smelt on the waters where they reside, and white suckers in the Red and Bois de Sioux

ivers. On a side note, while brook sticklebacks aren't regarded as premium bait minnows, they are as prolific and widespread as fathead minnows. So, while they weren't selected for their bait qualities, they are allowed as legal bait because they are often mixed in with fathead minnows.

Fathead minnows make excellent bait because they are a native forage, widespread and abundant. They are the main forage in many of our waters, and anglers can use them in a variety of presentations, from tipping a jig, to dead-sticking through the ice, to bottom fishing on the river in the spring. They're easy to catch and readily available at bait shops statewide, making them relatively inexpensive. For all these reasons and more, fathead minnows have firmly cemented their place in the bait buckets of anglers across the state.

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*SCOTT GANGL is the Game and Fish Department's fisheries management section leader.*






# 2025 LEGISLATIVE REVIEW

BY SCOTT PETERSON





**E**very other year in North Dakota, our elected officials gather in Bismarck to propose, review, debate, and ultimately vote on legislation that will set the course for the state and its citizens. Some of those bills are also related to how the North Dakota Game and Fish Department delivers services to its customers. That is partly why we closely track those bills and provide input or testimony as needed or appropriate.

Once bills are formally introduced, we sit down and discuss those bills and determine if they have a nexus to the Department and its customers based on their merit. A decision is then made to either take a position of support, opposition, or to remain neutral and simply provide relevant information when requested.

As the curtain fell on the 69th legislative assembly, it's important to take a step back, as we always do, and assess how the session went from the standpoint of the Department's customer base. We began the session by tracking as many as 20 bills that had the potential to affect, either directly or indirectly, how the Department conducts business into the future. Of course, not all bills ultimately become law. And, as is always the case, some bills generated more scrutiny and discussion than others.

The Department makes every attempt to represent our customer base when considering our position on all bills. However, that base is oftentimes divided on their specific perspective of legislation so it can be virtually impossible to represent all individual interests in a way that satisfies everyone. That's partly why we encourage people to get involved in the legislative process. That process in North Dakota is built around, and encourages, citizen participation. Understanding this, it's important to make your opinions known to your respective lawmakers.

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

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





**[PASSED]**

**HB 1017** – Appropriates \$114,864,690 to the Game and Fish Department for the biennium beginning July 1, 2025, and ending June 30, 2027.

**HB 1082** – Defines farmed elk as mammals of the North American elk genus and species (*cervus canadensis*) confined in a manmade enclosure designed to prevent escape.

**HB 1094** – Nonprofit organizations eligible to apply for special allocation big game hunting licenses for fundraising must be exempt from federal income taxation under section 501(c)(3) or 501(c)(19), and must contribute at least 20% of the net proceeds of any raffle of a license to a conservation-related project.

**HB 1147** – A resident disabled veteran who has at least a 50% service-connected disability qualifies for the \$3 combined general game, habitat, small game and furbearer license.

**HB 1174** – The Department may establish educational and community outreach programs to promote public understanding of fisheries and wildlife management and promote interest in pursuing careers in fields employed by the Department, including by job shadowing of field activities.

**HB 1260** – Fifteen percent of the total mule deer gun licenses made available in the current year must be made available as nonresident any-deer bow licenses.

**HB 1412** – The director shall provide that each application for a deer lottery license contain the option for an unsuccessful applicant to donate the license fee to the Private Land Open To Sportsmen program.

**HB 1470** – Increases the fees of some hunting and fishing licenses, and changes hunting guide and outfitter requirements.

**HB 1598** – An individual, while hunting big game or small game, other than waterfowl or cranes, may not use a motor-driven vehicle on any land other than an established road or trail without the written permission of the landowner, unless that individual has reduced a big game animal to possession.



Jeb Williams, Game and Fish Department director, addresses lawmakers in 2025.



**SB 2137** – The Department may not adopt a rule or implement a policy prohibiting or restricting the use of supplemental feed on private property for hunting a big game animal. Has a sunset clause of July 31, 2029.

**SB 2155** – The number of pronghorn gratis licenses issued may not exceed one-half of the any pronghorn licenses available. In addition, if the individual is unsuccessful in the landowner lottery, that application may be included in a lottery for remaining licenses.

**SB 2216** – A waterfowl habitat restoration electronic stamp is required for every resident and nonresident to hunt waterfowl at a fee of \$5. In addition, creates a waterfowl habitat improvement fund for improving and restoring waterfowl habitat and supporting youth hunting programs.

**SB 2245** – Allows the hunting of waterfowl from a floating craft without a motor propelled exclusively by paddle, oars or pole; or with a motor if the craft is at rest and the motor has been turned off.

**SB 2309** – Allows the statewide antlerless white-tailed youth deer license to be issued as an antlerless license through governor's proclamation.

**FAILED**

**HB 1236** – Hunting and fishing license fees and application fees may be used only for departmental programs and administration unrelated to chronic wasting disease.

**HB 1237** – A nonresident may purchase a nonresident upland and small game license to hunt upland and small game, except waterfowl, during the entire upland and small game hunting seasons. In addition, eliminates the nonresident 14-day or two 7-day small game licenses.

**HB 1325** – The director shall keep a record of and make available to the public all positive detections of chronic wasting disease for four years, including a microscopic slide of the prion and necropsy report.

**SB 2168** – An individual may not hunt or pursue game within 440 yards of a building, occupied structure, or storage structure without the consent of the property owner.

**SB 2197** – An individual over the age of 75 may use a crossbow during the bow season.

**SB 2199** – A resident disabled veteran who has a 100% service-connected disability is entitled to receive an additional bonus point when applying for a deer license issued by lottery.

A bill that passed allows the statewide antlerless white-tailed youth deer license to be issued as an antlerless license through governor's proclamation.







# BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



## 2024 CWD Test Results

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department tested 1,456 animals for chronic wasting disease during the 2024 sampling season, and confirmed 17 deer tested positive for CWD, 15 of which were taken by hunters and two were clinical deer confirmed through diagnostic examination.

Positive cases came from units 3A1 (seven mule deer), 3E1 (one mule deer), 3E2 (one mule deer), 3F2 (four mule deer and two whitetails), 3B2 (one mule deer) and 3B3 (one whitetail). CWD was not previously detected in units 3B2 or 3B3.

Sampling efforts fell short of the 10% goal in units where CWD surveillance was concentrated.

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

More information about CWD can be found by visiting the Department's website, [gf.nd.gov/cwd](https://gf.nd.gov/cwd).

## 2024 Deer Season Summarized

A total of 42,416 North Dakota deer hunters took approximately 23,300 deer during the 2024 deer gun hunting season, according to a post-season survey conducted by the state Game and Fish Department.

Game and Fish made available 50,100 deer gun licenses last year. Overall hunter success was 55%, with each hunter spending an average of 4.7 days in the field.

Hunter success for antlered white-tailed deer was 49% and 44% for antlerless whitetails.

Mule deer buck success was 80% and 78% for antlerless mule deer.

Hunters with any antlered or any antlerless licenses generally harvest white-tailed deer, as these licenses are predominantly in units with mostly whitetails. Buck hunters had a success rate of 61%, while doe hunters had a success rate of 56%.

Game and Fish issued 11,920 gratis licenses in 2024, and 9,484 hunters harvested 4,199 deer for a success rate of 44%.

A total of 956 muzzleloader licenses were issued, and 790 hunters harvested 232 white-tailed deer (116 antlered, 116 antlerless). Hunter success was 29%.

A total of 27,102 archery licenses (23,993 resident, 3,109 nonresident) were issued in 2024. In total, 22,449 bowhunters harvested 5,794 deer (4,884 whitetails, 910 mule deer) for a success rate of 26%.

In addition to harvest rates and winter aerial surveys, Game and Fish staff monitor other population indices to determine license numbers, including depredation reports, hunter observations, input at advisory board meetings, and comments from the public, landowners and Department field staff.



## Tracking Grassland Birds

It's not uncommon for North Dakota Game and Fish Department biologists to put GPS or satellite transmitters on big game, upland game, waterfowl and furbearers in North Dakota for research purposes. In the last few years, biologists have been tracking a couple of nongame species, too.

"We have two projects now where we're tagging grassland birds. The first is on long-billed curlews, a large shorebird that nests in far southwestern North Dakota," said Sandra Johnson, Department conservation biologist. "Another project is on the Western meadowlark, our state bird."

Since 2022, biologists have fitted 11 long-billed curlews and 11 Western meadowlarks in North Dakota with transmitters. Johnson said tracking these grassland birds is important because it provides biologists vital insights into the full life cycles of these migrant birds and what could be impacting their populations.

"We're wanting to learn what type of habitats they're using in North Dakota, how long they're staying here and using those habitats, and where they are going when they leave the state," she said. "We also want to know if the birds are making stopovers in other states during their migrations, where they are spending winter and the types of habitats they're using on wintering grounds. Plus, when they return to North Dakota in spring, we want to know if they are returning to the same areas they used the prior year."

Concerning the latter: "These grassland nesting birds are coming back to the same areas in North Dakota that they nested the previous year. Knowing that, it's really important that we maintain grasslands, that we maintain ranching," Johnson said. "You know, you typically don't see a meadowlark unless there's cattle around, so it's really important that we keep grasslands on the landscape."

And where do these birds go in winter?

"Most of the meadowlarks are going to eastern Nebraska and eastern Kansas. We know from the data we're collecting from these tags that the meadowlarks are returning to North Dakota in about mid-April," Johnson said.

Unlike North Dakota's state bird, which has demonstrated a troubling slide in numbers over the years, curlews migrate even farther for winter to parts of Texas and central Mexico.

"The Western meadowlark is slowly declining, about 1% per year. But we know even from the public, people don't see meadowlarks like they used to," Johnson said. "While long-billed curlews are another grassland nesting bird that have definitely declined over the years, they're doing OK."

## 2024 Harvests Stats for Big 3

Harvest statistics released by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department show overall hunter success during the 2024 season was 100% for bighorn sheep, 92% for moose and 64% for elk.

The Department issued six bighorn sheep licenses and auctioned one. All seven hunters harvested a bighorn ram.

The Department issued 238 moose licenses last year. Of that total, 229 hunters harvested 210 animals – 125 bulls and 85 cows/calves. Harvest for each unit follows:

UNIT	HUNTERS	BULLS	COW/CALF	SUCCESS RATE
M5	8	5	0	63
M6	10	9	1	100
M8	15	13	1	93
M9	76	33	36	91
M10	78	43	31	95
M11	42	22	16	91

The Department issued 905 elk licenses last year. Of that total, 817 hunters harvested 526 elk – 220 bulls and 306 cows/calves. Harvest for each unit follows:

UNIT	HUNTERS	BULLS	COW/CALF	SUCCESS RATE
E1E	147	38	36	50
E1W	198	42	91	67
E2	149	37	60	65
E3	285	80	114	68
E4	24	19	1	83
E6	14	4	4	57

## Fish Challenge Underway

Anglers are once again invited to participate in the North Dakota Fish Challenge. The challenges, which started in 2022, encourage exploration of North Dakota's many fisheries, and this year, promote active stewardship of the resource.



New this year, anglers can choose to complete the Total Catch Challenge by coaching a new angler, cleaning up a local water body, cooking a catch, and casting a story.

In addition, anglers can complete the Rough Fish Challenge by catching a bullhead, carp and sucker, the Sportfish Challenge by catching a bluegill, walleye, bass and trout, or the inaugural Classic Challenge, which requires anglers to catch a northern pike, yellow perch, smallmouth bass and channel catfish.

No matter your choice, the process is simple. Snap a photo of each and submit your entry on the North Dakota Game and Fish website now through August 15.

Anglers who complete a challenge will receive a decal and certificate.

## Gratis Application Process Improved

North Dakota landowners applying for deer gratis licenses will notice improvements to the online application process.

The new system simplifies land selection by allowing users to click on property descriptions rather than manually entering lengthy details.

During the first year, applicants need to search and select their lands. In subsequent years, a convenient renewal button will speed up future applications. An additional link is available to reference previous years records.

These changes help validate eligible records more efficiently, ultimately reducing the time required to process



the deer lottery. By improving accuracy and preventing errors, the system ensures a smoother experience for applicants and a timely lottery for those eager to receive their results.

Step-by-step guidance is available on the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website by visiting [gf.nd.gov/buy-apply/help/gratis-application](http://gf.nd.gov/buy-apply/help/gratis-application).

General deer and muzzleloader lottery applications will be online in early May. The deadline to apply is June 4.



## Bighorn Sheep Population Stable

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 2024 bighorn sheep survey, completed by recounting lambs in March, revealed a minimum of 350 bighorn sheep in the grasslands of western North Dakota, down 4% from 2023 and 6% above the five-year average. Despite a slight decrease from the record count in 2023, the 2024 survey was still the second highest count on record.

Altogether, biologists counted 105 rams, 199 ewes and 46 lambs. Not included are approximately 40 bighorn sheep in the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park and bighorns introduced to the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in 2020.

Brett Wiedmann, Department big game biologist, was pleased to see the population remain near record levels for the seventh consecutive year.

The northern badlands population declined by 4% from 2023 but was the second highest count on record. The southern badlands population increased slightly but remained near its lowest level since bighorns were reintroduced there in 1966.

"We were encouraged to see adult rams and adult ewes near record numbers," Wiedmann said. "The streak of four consecutive record counts was broken due to below-average lamb recruitment in 2024, as lambs recruited into the population declined 21% compared to 2023."

Weidmann said the decline in lamb recruitment was likely not related to disease, but a combination of drought, predation and ewes recovering after several years of high lamb recruitment.

"Our state's females have invested a lot of energy in rearing lambs the last four years, so sometimes they just need to take a break and concentrate on improving body condition," he said.

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

Currently, about 480 bighorns make up the populations managed by the Game and Fish Department, National Park Service and the Three Affiliated Tribes Fish and Wildlife Division, just shy of the benchmark of 500 bighorns in the state.

A bighorn sheep hunting season is tentatively scheduled for 2025. The status of the season will be determined Sept. 1, following the summer population survey. Game and Fish issued seven licenses in 2024, and all hunters were successful in harvesting a ram.

## Earth Day Patch Contest Winners

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department announced the winners of the 2025 Earth Day Patch Contest. Over 1,600 students from 100 schools entered this year's contest.

Winners in four age categories are Tryg Klindworth, Beulah (K-3); Mariah Achtenberg, White Shield (4-6); Jazmin Vasquez, Minot Bishop Ryan (7-9), and Brielle Volk, Mohall (10-12). Achtenberg's design was chosen as the overall winner and will be made into the 2025 Earth Day patch.

Youth and adults who participate in cleaning up public lands receive the 2025 patch to celebrate Earth Day and their service. Projects that qualify for the Earth Day patch include refuse pick-up on local, state or federal properties and landscaping on public property including planting trees, bushes and pollinator plants.

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

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



## Summer Workshop for Educators

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is sponsoring Pollinators in the Classroom, a professional development workshop for educators.

Pollinators in the Classroom will be held June 10-11 at United Tribes Technical College in Bismarck. The workshop will explore pollinators, what they are, where they live, life cycles, importance, and how you can make a difference. It will be fun and fast paced with many hands-on activities educators can use in their classrooms and incorporate discussion of classroom and curriculum integration.

Students will receive a copy of the Urban Pollinator Program Curriculum and should be prepared for walking field trips in the area. All materials are included.

The course is suitable for K-12 educators.

For more information contact curriculum specialist Sherry Niesar at 701-527-3714 or [sniesar@nd.gov](mailto:sniesar@nd.gov). Those wanting to participant can register on the link on the Department's website at [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).



From left: Jeb Williams, Department director, Mark Weyrauch, Hunter Education Instructor of the Year, and Scott Peterson, Department deputy director.



From left: Jeb Williams, Department director, James Decker, Volunteer of the Year, and Scott Peterson, Department deputy director.



From left: Jeb Williams, Department director, Cody Hirschfeld, one of the members of the Hunter Education Team of the Year, and Scott Peterson, Department deputy director.

## Agency Volunteers Recognized

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

Mark Weyrauch, Ray, was recognized as Hunter Education Instructor of the Year, while the Hunter Education Team of the Year honor went to Cody Hirschfeld and Kenny Dvorak, both of Dickinson. James Decker, Bismarck, was awarded the Volunteer of the Year award.

Longtime volunteers were also recognized for their service:

**30 Years** – Clinton Baxter, Minot; Kevin Bishop, Kathryn; Roger Dienert, Hankinson; Karla Meikle, Bismarck; Gregory Odden, Rugby; Rick Olson, Garrison; Brad Pierce, Hatton; and Mark Weyrauch, Ray.

**25 Years** – Adnan Aldayel, New Rockford; Lynn Baltrusch, Fessenden; Stanley Cox, Jamestown; Don Ferguson, Jamestown; Donn Hancock, Emerado; Doyle Johannes, Underwood; Mitchell Kallias, Minot; Gary Knotts, Fargo; Rodney Parrill, Bottineau; Richard Petersen, Bismarck; Pam Podell, Velva; and Rickie Theurer, Mandan.

**20 Years** – Nathan Fitzgerald, Sterling, Colo.; Walter Helfrich, Lincoln; Michael Melaas, Minot; Dustin Neva, Hatton; Jean Oster, Lisbon; Joseph Schirado, Bismarck; Dallas Schmidt, Velva; Dan Spellerberg, Wahpeton; and Gary Wilz, Killdeer.

**15 Years** – Mathew Deal, Sutton; Jason Heinz, Rolette; Petrina Krenzle, Harvey; Richard Lehmann, Towner; Kellen Leier, Bismarck; and Corey Wysocki, Grafton.

**10 Years** – Kendall Bauer, Bismarck; Justin Campbell, Hannaford; Alan Haut, Fargo; Joe Beaufort, New Town; Joel Johnson, Mooreton; Shannon Johnson, Fargo; Leah Vantilborg, Mandan; and Priscilla Sauer, Glen Ullin.

**5 Years** – Bryton Allard, Williston; Dave Broadwell, Valley City; Cory Geiszler, Rugby; Nicholas Gustafson, Stanley; Daniel Hamman, Fairmount; Karna Johnson, Fargo; Brandon Laddusaw, Wyndmere; Samantha Mahn, Kulm; John Mazur, Pingree; David McCleary, Leeds; Jordan Mead, Casselton; Adam Miller, Bismarck; Todd Paintner, Valley City; Kirk Sather, Minot; and Robert Zafke, Thompson.



Front row, left to right: Scott Mart, Craig Bierman, Mattea Bierman, with Game and Fish Department, Dennis Peterson and Keith Hample. Back row, left to right: Rob Sandness, Dean Haberman, Ryan Wagner and Davy Bellin.

## Lake LaMoure Association Recognized

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department recognized Lake LaMoure Association with the 2025 certificate of appreciation for its involvement in public use areas and facilities for more than 40 years.

Each year the Department cooperates in the development and enhancement of public boating and fishing related



facilities throughout the state. Almost always, these activities and efforts would not be possible without the assistance and support of a local entity of some form. While most park boards, wildlife clubs, or water resource boards play a role, there are always a few boards or groups, like Lake LaMoure Association, that stand out above the others.

A few examples of the association's accomplishments include maintaining the parking lot area at the boat ramp; caring for several public use docks, access sites, and fishing piers; constructing a fish cleaning station; and updating camping facilities for visiting recreators.

## ANS Sticker for Watercraft

Boaters with watercraft registered outside the state must have a 2025 aquatic nuisance species sticker before operating watercraft in North Dakota.

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

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

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



## New Licenses Needed

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

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

## Pull Drain Plugs

North Dakota anglers are reminded that the drain plug must always remain out of boat during transport.

In addition, to keep waters clean of aquatic nuisance species, all water users should clean, drain and dry all equipment after every use.

- Clean and remove all plants and animals from watercraft or equipment prior to leaving any recreational area.
- Drain all water from watercraft and equipment before leaving designated access points. Not draining water can be extremely hazardous and may cause negligent transportation of aquatic nuisance species to other locations.
- Dry all equipment completely before using again.

## STAFF NOTES



### Gangl Earns Service Award

Scott Gangl, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries management section leader, was awarded The Dakota Chapter of the American Fisheries Society's Robert L. Hanten Distinguished Professional Service Award at the Chapter's Annual

Meeting in February. This award recognizes individuals who have made an outstanding contribution within the fisheries profession in the Dakotas.

In his position, Gangl supervises 15 permanent employees and is responsible for the development and implementation of numerous policies and operational guidelines including

strategic planning, fishing regulations, fish stocking and standard sampling guidelines, creel surveys, and commercial fishing and eradication policies.

"Scott has successfully tailored his leadership style to achieve the most from the diversity of employees he has supervised. His adaptability has allowed him to lead by example by obtaining and basing fisheries management decisions on the best available science," according to the nomination letter. "Scott's ability to build positive working relationships, interpersonal rapport, and sound reasoning has contributed to his effective leadership. His employees view him as someone with a broad knowledge base that provides thoughtful input without condescension. He takes mentorship seriously and encourages the professional development of his staff."



# BACKCAST

*RW*



42,300.

That's the number of deer gun licenses made available for fall's deer gun season in North Dakota, which is 7,800 fewer than last year. This continues a difficult-to-ignore drift in the wrong direction as licenses have steadily declined since 2021 when more than 72,200 deer tags were allotted to hunters.

The 42,300 number is the lowest we've seen since 1978. As hunters keenly invested in the November season for many reasons, including the draw of uniting families without the lure of a Thanksgiving turkey or Christmas goose, this number should trouble us, especially following back-to-back mild winters we were certain would help reverse the fall.

How did we get here? Is this the new norm?

After visiting at length with Casey Anderson, Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief, he could answer the first question but acknowledged the difficulty in predicting the latter.

We got here because the state's deer population continues its glacier-slow rebound from an unprecedented EHD outbreak in 2021 and the challenges of staying alive during the winter of 2022-23 that arrived early and stayed late.

While we were blessed with back-to-back mild winters, they were followed by drought conditions in summer and fall, which negatively influenced reproduction and recruitment into the population. However, the biggest limiting factor, and this is not the first time you've heard this, is the habitat conditions across the state have been greatly reduced in the last 10 to 15 years. So, a

bounce back, with the absence of quality habitat on the landscape, is slow at best.

The loss of quality habitat for deer and other wildlife continues. For example, if conservation reserve contracts continue to expire, 85% of the once 3.4 million acres of CRP blanketing rural North Dakota will be lost by 2026.

Without the budget and personnel to put something like a widespread CRP program on the landscape, Game and Fish and partners have been targeting resources on a smaller scale in areas that will provide the biggest bang for the buck to produce more deer, pheasants, grouse, the list goes on.

Game and Fish Department officials have been beating the lack-of-habitat-on-the-landscape drum for years and sometimes you have to question if anyone is listening?

Anderson thinks they are starting to, as Department wildlife managers are now hearing the topic raised again and again by sportsmen, women and others at public meetings and elsewhere because the writing on the wall is evident and concerning.

Deer hunters will notice that in some hunting units antlerless licenses aren't available for the 2025 season. While this move isn't unprecedented, it does make you wonder if positive changes aren't made on the landscape if this is part of the new norm.

While what I write next is unabashedly selfish, I'm guessing I'm not the only deer hunter in North Dakota with family living beyond our borders, nonresidents who will vie, per state law, for just 1% of the licenses made available. That means my nonresident hunting son will contend with an unknown number of other nonresidents (and outfitters as they are also included in this lot) in our hunting unit for one of just three doe licenses made available.

Unless the stars align, this will be the third or fourth year running that he, like others in the same boat, some resident hunters included, won't draw a tag. While he has continued to show up for the opening weekend of deer season because he still wants to be a part of it, that enthusiasm will likely fade or vanish altogether at this rate.

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*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*



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*North Dakota is an important stopover  
state for endangered whooping cranes  
needing to rest and refuel during their  
spring migration from wintering grounds  
in Texas to breeding grounds in Canada.  
These birds were photographed in April.  
According to John Palarski, Game and  
Fish Department migratory game bird  
biologist, the first report of whoopers in  
North Dakota this spring was March 25.*

PHOTO BY ASHLEY PETERSON.



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