

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS



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GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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Community fisheries across North Dakota provide angling opportunities for anglers of all ages, including this little guy who landed a yellow perch at the Game and Fish Department's OWLS Pond in Bismarck.

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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

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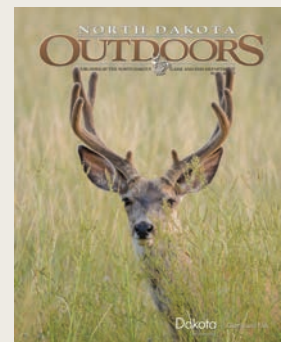
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Front Cover

Mule deer buck in velvet.

PHOTO BY JESSE KOLAR.



My 2 Cents

By Jeb Williams, Director

We're all familiar with the iconic "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!" line from "The Wizard of Oz." While it's been years since that 1939 classic has played over and over again in our house, that line has always stuck with me and I get reminded of it on various occasions, especially of late as black bear sightings are becoming more frequent in areas other than northeastern and eastern North Dakota.

My home area of southwestern North Dakota has been entertaining some bears over the last couple years and one most recently right in my hometown of Beach. Pretty safe to say that tigers are a safe bet not to be included in these conversations, but I didn't ever think black bears in western North Dakota would have been either. While we don't have Dorothy's variety of wildlife wandering our prairie, it's safe to say North Dakota's own version is starting to show up more often — and it's catching folks' attention.

In recent months, reports of black bears have made headlines across the state. And while we thankfully don't have wild tigers prowling the wheat fields, the theme still fits as sightings are up, awareness is up, and interest in wildlife is, too.

Let's start with bears. Black bear sightings, particularly in the northeastern and north-central parts of the state, have increased slightly. Most of these are young males on the move, likely pushed out by dominant adults in neighboring states and Canada. They're usually just passing through, but their pres-

ence is a reminder that we live in and on the edge of some pretty wild country.

Mountain lions have long been part of western North Dakota's landscape, especially in the badlands. I was a senior in high school (1992) and vividly remember seeing the harvested mountain lion in the back of a pickup after it had been shot and removed from a barn in a very remote area. That created a lot of discussion and was possibly the first hint of lions reestablishing into western North Dakota, and what followed was the first mountain lion season in 2005. Understandably, there was a lot of discussions about these predators "returning" to western North Dakota, and while most encounters remain fleeting and nonthreatening, they spark important conversations about habitat, awareness, and how we coexist with predators.

So, what does all this mean for North Dakotans? As previously mentioned, the state implemented a mountain lion season a little over 20 years ago. Is it time to have a larger discussion about a possible bear season in North Dakota? Second, it reinforces the need for education and preparedness. Whether it's securing garbage cans in bear country, understanding mountain lion behavior, or simply reporting what you see, awareness is key.

North Dakota may not be Oz, but our wild side is still very real. "Lions and tigers and bears?" Maybe not exactly, but "mountain lions and bears?" Absolutely. And that's worth paying attention to.

HELP KEEP
ND WATERS
(LEAN



EVERY SURFACE. EVERY TIME.



HIS DOOR WAS ALWAYS



SAYS OPEN





Scott Peterson and his golden retriever, Champ, with a hard-earned ruffed grouse shot a number of years ago at Wakopa Wildlife Management Area in the Turtle Mountains.

Following an extended run and an equally impressive reach into the state's natural resources community, Scott Peterson announced his retirement as deputy director of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department effective earlier this month.

Terry Steinwand, former Department director who retired in 2021, appointed Peterson as deputy director in 2014. Prior to that, Peterson, a 40-year employee with the agency, was the wildlife resource management section leader at the 32,000-acre Lonetree Wildlife Management Area in Sheridan and Wells counties. His management responsibilities also extended to public lands in Foster and Eddy counties.

North Dakota OUTDOORS staff interviewed Peterson about his decades-long career with the Game and Fish Department and what the future might bring.

NDO: Why did you choose the career that you did? And you never jumped ship, took your interests and talents elsewhere. Why is that?

Peterson: : I grew up with a love for hunting and at a young age I knew that's the only thing I wanted to do. In high school, when people typically start thinking about what they want to do for the rest of their life, I knew this is what I wanted to do, and I never seriously considered anything else. As I got closer to graduating from high school, I started doing a little research about what I need to do to work in this field. Fortunately, there was a gentleman, a local guy, working out of the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, which at that time was under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who I talked to several times, and he gave me some advice. He said if I wasn't a big college type kid, then spend a couple of years at Bottineau and see where that takes you. And that's what I did. So, I transferred from Bottineau after I got my associate's degree to Fargo, and the rest is history. The reason I stayed with the Department my entire career, and I know this is going to sound corny, but more than anything else the Department has been so good to us and they never gave me a reason to think about leaving. And I would say that for a

lot of aspects of my life. And, again, the Department is the only place I ever wanted to work.

NDO: You've been with the Game and Fish Department for 40 years, starting first as a seasonal employee for a number of years, and have seen and experienced a lot of change. What pops out when considering North Dakota's natural resources over those four decades?

Peterson: The obvious one would be the change in habitat ... not just the quantity, but the quality, too. The Conservation Reserve Program came in about the same time I got hired and grass was being put on the landscape in the late 1980s. For a lot of years, it was the land of milk and honey. Right? And it wasn't anything the Department did. It was just a benefit that was provided by the USDA and was kind of dropped into our lap. And then you look at it today ... we're losing habitat every day. And then when we go to advisory board meetings across the state, the people we're seeing at those meetings are getting frustrated because they can't get a deer license every year. It's real. But we try to do what we can, chip away and try to add acres. And we're doing that. The thing is, I think a lot of times people look back at the CRP days and that's what their vision is for the next 20 years, and I don't think in a lot of ways that's realistic. When I sit around a campfire and talk to my grandkids about the good old days, it's going to be CRP. I have older brothers who remember the soil bank days and it's the same thing. Anyway, I would say the biggest change from a natural resource standpoint is just the decrease in quality and quantity of habitat.

NDO: From Game and Fish constituents to people you've worked with, how do you think this various assemblage of people would describe your career?

Peterson: That I might have outkicked my coverage? But seriously, from a career standpoint I would like people to say that I was approachable. I mean, the Department is getting younger and I always encouraged people to come and ask questions. How do you learn the different aspects of your job if you're not encouraged to ask questions? I've long had an open-door policy, which I think is important. The other thing, and I think about this a lot, is that I believe I was accountable. In this day and age, especially when we have become more digitally connected,





there is a tendency not to return phone calls. I don't believe I've ever not returned a phone call to somebody, even when I knew it was not going to be a pleasant conversation. And I just think that's part of being accountable and responsive, which is not too much to ask of someone working for a public agency. I think people respect and appreciate a conversation even if you're giving them an answer they don't want to hear because a lot of the things we do at the Department are guided by state law. There is rarely consensus on the hot button topics.

NDO: What are some of the biggest challenges you faced as deputy director in managing North Dakota's natural resources?

Peterson: When I was at Lonetree, I had 22 years where it was just really fun to develop a piece of land, which was challenging, but in a good way. I was told, here's the canvas, you paint the picture. And a large part of that credit needs to go to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the people up there. But we had a lot of say in that. That was fun ... we had both the money and resources to do it. On another note, I don't think social media has helped us because people can disseminate information that isn't necessarily factual. I don't mind having a conversation with you if we have a disagreement, but let's make it fact-based. It's just so difficult because if something that's not true gets repeated a couple times, pretty soon it's accepted as fact.

NDO: When you take the time to reflect on your career with the Game and Fish, what are you most proud of?

Peterson: I'll always be proud of what we accomplished at Lonetree. We had a great staff, and they fit really well with what we were trying to do. When we moved up there, we became the

face of the government that's now managing the land that our neighbors use to farm and ranch but now they don't have access to it. I think what I am most proud of was eventually gaining acceptance of the project and a general understanding of what we were doing and why we were doing it. And I think we did that. I use this example of one of the biggest opponents of the project would, by the time I left, swing by, bring his family into the office for a tour and visit. He'd do that, even though I knew if he had a vote, he'd wish it were the old way where his neighbors and friends could farm and ranch that land again. At least he realized we had a job to do. And he understood why we're doing it and how we're doing it. I'll always be proud of that. A lot of those people are my friends today. I'm just extremely proud of what we accomplished because it did take a lot of work. And if you talk about a challenge, that was probably my biggest one, but I think we accomplished it.

NDO: The agency's constituents are many and it's certain some hold misconceptions about those who work here, and the decisions made. What's your take on what goes on behind the walls at the Bismarck headquarters, district offices and in the field?

Peterson: We work in a career where our constituents are very passionate about their hunting and fishing opportunities. The thing that I'd love for people to understand is that the people who work for Game and Fish are also passionate and they're doing it for the right reason. I want my kids and grandkids to have the same deer hunting opportunities that I did. I think we need to look 10, 20, 50 years down the road. And I would say it's the same thing for everybody who works at the Game and Fish Department. You know, you may not always agree with what we do, and some-

times even within our own walls we don't always have 100% consensus, but I think at the end of the day I can say that the decisions are made with the right reasons in mind, and with the best interests at heart of the people who hunt and fish in North Dakota.

NDO: *At the time of this interview in early June, your hand is still in the game. Do you have any insight into the challenges the agency is going to face in the near future?*

Peterson: In the near future, it's not going to change. It's going to be to try to put some habitat on the ground in a significant or meaningful way. And that's easier said than done. Even so, the agency will continue to chip away at adding habitat on the landscape with the resources we have. While every hundred acres of new habitat is meaningful, I think people always tend to look at those 3.5 million acres of CRP. I think we must adjust our expectations and our goals. We need to keep chipping away at it. The big conservation programs are always going to be part of the farm bill. In the past for those to become very popular with landowners, unfortunately, there was a substantial decline in commodity prices, and we don't want to see that. While we don't want that to happen to our farmer friends, we're going to be challenged in the meantime to put acres of habitat on the landscape. I always say habitat is like starting pitching in the major leagues. You can have the best shortstop in the world, but if you don't have a good lineup of starting pitchers, it's all for naught. And that's what habitat means for us in North Dakota. Until we get a quantity of quality habitat, it's going to be hard to get back to a point where everybody gets their deer choice every year.

NDO: *What's in store for Scott Peterson now?*

Peterson: In short, more time camping, more time fishing, and I'll have more time to spend with my grandkids. While we've been pretty good about it over the years, I really don't want to miss a significant grandchild event. Also, I got drawn for a cow elk tag, so that's going to be one of the things on my agenda. In fact, that's why I'm out here



Scott Peterson at the legislative session in 2025.

today sighting in my rifle. I'm already prepping for it in early June.

NDO: *What advice would you give to the person named to fill your shoes?*

Peterson: I think the first thing I would recommend is they spend a little time going through Chapter 20.1 of the Century Code ... it's our Bible that's amended by the lawmakers every two years. Even though we may not necessarily agree with every one of those laws, we have to abide by them. Also, get to know the staff if they don't already. And I think maybe more than anything, keep your door open. Keep an open-door policy. Be approachable.



ANDERSON NAMED DEPUTY DIRECTOR

Casey Anderson has filled a number of roles with the Department over the years, including NDO podcast host with Cayla Bendel.

Jeb Williams, Game and Fish Department director, announced in early June the appointment of Casey Anderson to the agency's deputy director position.

Anderson has been with the Department for 24 years, seven years as assistant wildlife division chief, and for the last four years he led the wildlife division as chief.

"Casey Anderson brings a combination of field and administrative experience, strong leadership, and an unwavering commitment to North Dakota's fish and wildlife resources," Williams said. "His ability to communicate with both the public and staff, coupled with a lifelong passion for our state, makes him exceptionally well-suited to step into the deputy director position."

North Dakota OUTDOORS interviewed Anderson about the promotion and what's around the corner.

NDO: First of all, congratulations. When you started as a wildlife seasonal in 2001 in Riverdale spraying noxious weeds and mending fences, did you ever imagine becoming deputy director?

Anderson: I did not, to be honest. Riverdale was close to home, and I thought that's where I wanted to stay, continue to get my hands dirty,

work with habitat, work with critters ... do the things that I studied in school.

NDO: You've held seven positions with Game and Fish, the last of which was wildlife division chief. Does your focus change now that you've taken yet another step up the ladder?

Anderson: As I gained more and more knowledge in the different positions I held, I've gotten to a point where it's a necessity to focus more on the big picture, focus more on the future of the Department versus what's going to happen this fall. This position just gives you somewhat of a different perspective, although the goal remains that I'm in it for the resource and maintaining North Dakota's outdoor opportunities.

NDO: You're no stranger to the hurdles the agency has had to face and will continue to face. Do those struggles remain the same?

Anderson: North Dakota's landscape has shifted. While private landowners have to make business decisions on the landscape, there's no mistaking that the overall habitat base, where 93% of the land in the state is privately owned, has shifted. We've lost habitat across North Dakota, but more so in some areas than others. We've seen this, maybe more than with anything else,

with our deer populations. We've been getting into more conservative deer license numbers — maybe not conservative enough for some people — with the intention of letting that population rebound as much as possible with the amount of habitat we have left. That's kind of the kicker. There's only so far they're going to be able to rebound before they're either causing too many conflicts on the landscape because there isn't enough habitat to spread them out, or they just can't reproduce beyond a certain point because of the available habitat. I also think we need to continue the effort of strengthening hunter-landowner relations. Hunter-landowner relations need to be continually worked on, but with the shift from rural to urban, which is happening everywhere in the nation, those relationships take a lot more effort, especially for the hunters than it used to. It used to be those relationships were with an uncle, grandpa or grandpa's dad's friends. You had those hunting contacts that were ingrained in your family system. And I think a lot of that has been lost. Today, it takes more work on the hunter's part to keep those relationships going.

NDO: Do you think as deputy director you'll have a bigger hand in influencing change than when you were wildlife division chief?

Anderson: I think there will be different opportunities to influence change. It will be just a different level of change. I'm going to be outside of my wildlife division realm that I've been in my entire career. I'm going to be dealing with things concerning fisheries or nongame species more than I was before. Considering the Department is so small and we work well together, the transition won't be difficult. For certain, I'll be working in different circles. I won't just be talking about hunting, or wildlife habitat type of things. So those are the different types of areas that I will be able to work on change if there needs to be.

Casey Anderson kneels over a white-tailed doe that son, Jesper, shot in 2022 on the family farm near Turtle Lake.

NDO: The outdoor life means a lot to many people who live in North Dakota. Understanding that, do you feel even more responsibility to our constituents as deputy director than as wildlife division chief?

Anderson: I don't think about it in that way, because I truly believe that the outdoor experience is good for the heart, soul and mind. I live it, I breathe it. People enjoy the outdoors in different ways, not just hunting and fishing, which is something we have to understand and embrace. We always talk about balance at Game and Fish and how to work in that balance to maintain those opportunities in a way that people can enjoy them as long as we're still able to manage the resources to benefit those things. But, no, I don't look at this responsibility as a burden but more as a duty. We do add a pretty good footprint to North Dakota's economy as far as hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities go. To have a healthy state and a healthy economy, you have to have all of it. In many instances, our outdoor opportunities are what keeps people here ... it's part of North Dakota's appeal and attracts people to move here. While I think we talk way too much about the good old days, we need to focus on what we have now. Instead of beating on what it used to be to like, say, in the heyday of CRP, we need to focus on at least maintaining what we have and improving upon it where we can.



REJUVENATING


NATIVE PRAIRIE

BY RON WILSON

Morton County Wildlife Management Area has been around. The 640-acre WMA was purchased in 1917, making it the second oldest WMA managed or owned by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department behind Wakopa WMA in the Turtle Mountains.

For the last decade or so, the Department and an area rancher have been employing the age-old approach (envision free-roaming bison back in the day) of using cattle to invigorate the WMA's native prairie.

"Morton County WMA is pretty much all native prairie, except for about 50 acres in the southwest corner. Our goal is to have the cattle chew down the old grass and break up the duff layer. We try to get them in here early and moved through the different cells so the grass can recover," said Levi Jacobson, Department wildlife resource management supervisor in Bismarck. "Getting the cows out here early is important so

An aerial photograph of a vast, rolling landscape. The terrain is covered in green grass, with some areas appearing slightly drier or more yellowed. A dirt road winds through the lower left portion of the image, with a small vehicle visible on it. In the distance, there are clusters of trees and more hills under a hazy sky. The image is framed by a large, light-colored triangular shape in the top left corner and a dark grey triangular shape in the bottom right corner.

“Morton County WMA is pretty much all native prairie, except for about 50 acres in the southwest corner. Our goal is to have the cattle chew down the old grass and break up the duff layer. We try to get them in here early and moved through the different cells so the grass can recover.”



From left, Stran Ressler, Scott Ressler and Levi Jacobson talk about the benefits of cattle on the landscape to wildlife and hunters at Morton County Wildlife Management Area.

they target the cool season, invasive species such as smooth brome and Kentucky bluegrass. The cattle will get rotated through the cells according to the grazing plan. And then when we come back and do this again in two years, we'll rotate the cows through the cells in opposite order. The grazing regiment helps to provide diversity on the landscape."

Scott Ressler, the area rancher who runs cattle from the family's operation at Morton County WMA, said the positive influence the cows have on the landscape doesn't simply boil down to how and what the animals eat.

"That hoof action just rejuvenates the old, dead mats of grass," he said. "The native range is a tough, tough critter but you have to be able to utilize it and graze it."

According to Ressler's research, he said when the WMA's gate opened nearly a decade ago to his family's operation, it likely marked the first time cattle were released on the landscape for more than a century.

"When we first started, it really wasn't the best type of grass ... there was lots of thick, thick litter that had really integrated and just choked out the native ranges, and we're slowly starting to bring it back into good shape," said Ressler, environmental services director for the North Dakota Stockmen's Association. "I remember as a kid that this was a popular area to

come sit in the blinds and watch sharp-tailed grouse dance. And that was essentially eliminated because the birds just weren't here anymore. And now they're back dancing in those same areas. We're also starting to see some Hungarian partridge."

The cows, and the rotational grazing system being used, have made a noticeable difference on this WMA located 11 miles south of Mandan. The return of sharp-tailed grouse is proof of that.

"Without the cattle, I think our diversity would be lost, and Scott can vouch for that," Jacobson said. "The grass, the diversity has come a long way in just the 10 years that we've been doing this."

There was a time when hunters didn't embrace the idea of running cattle on land where they wanted to hunt because they thought the big, domestic critters did more harm than good. Yet, as Jacobson and Ressler pointed out, scientific research on the issue has proven otherwise.

"We proved that theory isn't true anymore. Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Game and Fish, all these wildlife groups have changed the mindset that integrating livestock from the beef cattle industry has been a great thing," Ressler said. "I think once hunters and the other people who use the area saw the work that was done out here in rejuvenating this native range has been nothing but positive because the wild-

life has come back.”

Jacobson added that the grasses growing on native prairie need some sort of management. If not, those cool season invasive species would take over and reduce the land’s diversity and the amount of habitat preferred by wildlife.

“We try to manage most of our native prairie with cattle because, historically, that’s how native prairie evolved,” Jacobson said. “On some WMAs that consist of tame grasses, the upfront costs of water and fence development make it not worthwhile to graze cattle. There we can use other management practices or do a complete renovation to maintain diversity. But with native prairies, our options for management are limited. So, cattle and prescribed fire are our best tools.”

Ressler said they rotate the cattle from one fenced paddock to the next about every 20 days. While the paddocks differ in size, most are about 70 to 80 acres.

“We developed a grazing system with the Game and Fish where we rotate and set up these portable fences,” he said. “There are eight different paddocks out here and we do half one year and then move to the other half the next year. We work it with the water tank, so the cows know where they’re going so it’s not big of a deal to come out and rotate them.”

Jacobson said Ressler texts him when the cattle have been rotated and he checks every week or two to make sure the operation is moving along as anticipated.

“We do ask a lot out of our grazing cooperators, so we keep the cost for grazing down ... it needs to be beneficial to them,” Jacobson said. “They are required to do fence maintenance, put up and move temporary fence and move the cows when we want them to. It’s not exactly easy for them, but it’s beneficial for both.”

Jacobson said the main purpose of the Department’s 200-plus owned or managed WMAs around the state is to provide places for people to hunt and Morton County WMA is no different. Which is why only portions of this section of public land are grazed from year to year to ensure that there is ample hunting cover come fall.

“On a professional level as an employee of the North Dakota Stockmen’s Association, we’ve seen the openness from the Department’s wildlife management people across the state who understand that livestock and wildlife have a place,” Ressler said. “And I think the hunting public has figured it out as well.”

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.






E-STAMP

NEEDED TO
HUNT
WATERFOWL

BY CAYLA
BENDEL



NORTH DAKOTA FALL MIGRATION "DUCK FACTORY" 2025

Those of you looking to put eyes to skies for flocks of waterfowl this fall — be they greenheads, honkers, buffies or even Hollywoods — will notice an additional \$5 waterfowl habitat restoration electronic stamp is required effective Aug. 1.

The stamp is a result of Senate Bill 2216 that came out of North Dakota's 69th legislative gathering that wrapped up in May. The bill states the electronic stamp is required for residents and nonresidents to hunt waterfowl in the state. It also created a new fund called the Waterfowl Habitat

Improvement Fund. The money generated from the stamp will be deposited into the fund and "may be expended for improving or restoring waterfowl habitat and supporting youth hunting programs."

The bill, sponsored by Sen. Sean Cleary, Bismarck, and Reps. Glenn Bosch, Bismarck and Todd Porter, Mandan, was largely brought to life by the newly formed North Dakota Waterfowl and Agriculture Association. NDWAA formed in the spring of 2024 and according to their website, is "dedicated to fostering sustainable waterfowl hunting and agriculture in North



Dakota.” They advocate for balanced hunting opportunities and regulations that safeguard farmers’ interests.

The Game and Fish Department remained neutral on the bill, though Casey Anderson, Department deputy director, acknowledges it offers both financial benefits and data improvements for the agency.

Under the current system, state wildlife managers have no great way of tracking resident waterfowl hunters as a small game license or combination license both allow, but are not specific to waterfowl hunting, and the federally mandated duck stamp can be purchased in any state, at other license vendors, or even local post offices. The new North Dakota electronic stamp more accurately depicts resident waterfowl hunting participation and streamlines the Department’s waterfowl hunting harvest survey efforts, while contributing about \$500,000 a biennium into the Waterfowl Habitat Improvement Fund. This is one of those efforts where hunters and landowners want to improve hunting opportunities and give back to the

resource they are pursuing.

North Dakota now joins seven of 10 states in the Central Flyway that require a state-specific waterfowl stamp.

If you’ve spent any time in stubble fields or sloughs in the last few years, it’s no secret things have changed. In 2024, North Dakota had about 44,000 waterfowl hunters in the state, 28,000 of which were nonresidents limited to their two 7-day periods, and about 16,000 resident hunters, according to agency estimates.

It’s not uncommon for hunters to spend the night in pickups to ensure field access the following morning, send out scouting groups of five or more vehicles in hopes of securing just one spot to hunt or to lock up permission for multiple fields to save birds for consecutive days.

Likewise, wildlife managers hear from landowners about dozens of calls rolling in past sunset during peak migration, disputes over hunting permission, and conflicts over who got there first.

Needless to say, it’s competitive out there.

And for good reason. North Dakota is a special place for waterfowl connoisseurs. Not only does the state claim the name “duck factory” for our disproportionate contribution to duck production, but the state is one of the first stops during the fall migration. And anyone who has had the pleasure of witnessing those dark shadows weave their way into the decoys before legal shooting or heard the sounds of the prairie on a cold October day, would understandably go to great lengths to continue to experience just that.





However, it's a bit of a misconception that North Dakota has more waterfowl hunters than ever out there. In 1975, there were 73,000 waterfowl hunters in the state, the highest year on record, with 67,000 residents and 6,000 nonresidents.

The difference is habitat availability and hunting strategies have changed. North Dakota once had 5 million acres of wetlands but has since lost 60% of those. The resulting loss of wetlands, many of which were semi-permanent wetlands, changes concentrations of waterfowl. Ten little ponds and one big pond that hold the same amount of water are two very different things to a duck and duck hunters.

Farms are larger, and therefore land ownership is more disproportionately distributed amongst fewer landowners. If a hunter had permission from a singular landowner, it may have been for 160 to 640 acres but today could mean thousands. And the hunt for decoying birds in a field feed has drastically grown in popularity, likely contributed to by the many industries who benefit from such a gear-intensive strategy.

"There used to be hundreds of people that sat along Lake Audubon and pass-shot birds, they called it the 'firing line,'" Anderson said.

And, of course, there is access. One could even argue it's a component exacerbated by all the others, less habitat and fewer landowners to grant permission makes the areas with habitat and those who are willing much more in demand.

All of this combined has contributed to growing concerns about the future of waterfowling in North Dakota. And much of it lies at the core of the creation of

NDWAA and Senate Bill 2216.

While limiting nonresident hunters is often suggested to address some of these dynamics, it's a difficult thing for the Department to assess, especially under the current licensing. And wildlife managers must keep in mind; the state is flush with avid hunters who also like to travel elsewhere. And like everything the Department does, it's a balance.

The full solution likely lies at the interface of waterfowl habitat improvements, wetland conservation, and private landowner relationships and partnerships. But coming together for the future of this special heritage is certainly a great start.

While some hunters don't quite have whistling wings on the mind yet, there are certainly die-hards counting the days to Aug. 15. Thus, if you're a resident and you've already purchased your small game or combination license, be sure to get the new e-stamp on the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, before heading afield.

And why an electronic stamp? It's because it's less of an administrative burden and follows closely with the new federal duck stamp move to electronic, easing enforcement concerns and hunter compliance.

"The waterfowl habitat restoration electronic stamp will ultimately help us better understand and manage the resource and thereby hunting opportunities," Anderson said.

CAYLA BENDEL is the Game and Fish Department's marketing coordinator.



BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



Breeding Duck Numbers Decline Again

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 78th annual spring breeding duck survey conducted in May showed an index of about 2.66 million birds, down from 2.9 million in 2024 and 3.4 million in 2023.

The 2025 breeding duck index was the 33rd highest on record and exceeded the long-term (1948-2024) average by 7%, according to Mike Szymanski, Department migratory game bird supervisor.

"Things are continuing to decline a little bit as far as duck populations go. The mallard population estimate was down 26% from last year and is the lowest estimated mallard breeding population on our survey since 1993," Szymanski said. "Blue-winged teal, green-winged teal and pintails also had significant population declines, whereas the declines for gadwall, shovelers and ruddy ducks were not as significant. We did have a few species – wigeon, canvasbacks, redheads and lesser scaup – that showed increases from last year on our survey."

Szymanski said there are a few things factoring into the declines, including poor wetland conditions for early migrating species like mallards and pintails. Many of these birds, which arrived in North Dakota before the nourishing rains in May, likely spurned the state because of dry conditions and headed to search for breeding areas farther north. Also, 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.

"We've lost so much grass on the landscape that it makes it really hard for duck populations and other ground-nesting birds to do well," Szymanski said. "One metric we look at is going back to 1994 to 2016 when we had really good wetland conditions and a lot of grass, a lot of CRP on the landscape. Our total duck population is now down 34% from that time period's average, and our mallard breeding population in North Dakota is down 57% from that average. Those are pretty significant declines."

Like in year's past, Szymanski and crew covered 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 52nd highest on record but was down 38% from last year.

"We do our survey based on phenology and migration ecology of ducks coming through the state and this year it happened to be timed before we got quite a bit of rain later in May. So, not having much snow melt in the spring, our wetland counts were down quite a bit," he said. "Conditions were pretty dry and that affected how ducks settled in the state. The western third of the state was very dry and then the eastern two thirds of the state was still quite dry, but a little bit better when we ran the survey."

Szymanski reiterated that for duck populations to rebound in North Dakota and provide good opportunities for hunters, more grass and water are needed.

"North Dakota is the duck factory of the United States and North America. We have a lot of folks relying on us to produce ducks, not just our hunters here in North Dakota, but hunters all across the Central and Mississippi flyways," he said. "When we have poor production in North Dakota, other folks feel it as well. Unfortunately, the direction we're going right now is smaller and smaller fall flights."

As always, Szymanski cautions waterfowl hunters about reading too much into our 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 fall survey area results sometime in early fall.

"And we'll see how July goes when we do our duck brood survey," he said. "Wetland conditions are a little bit improved from where they were in early May, but they're still not great. We likely would have had disastrous production if we didn't get the rain we got. Hopefully, having some fair wetland conditions going into June will help us out and get a little duck production this year."



Launching and 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.

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 can report any tagged fish they encounter by logging into their North Dakota Game and Fish Department account or use the "tagged fish reporting" feature on the Department's website at gf.nd.gov.



Crowing Counts Up Statewide

The number of roosters heard during the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 2025 spring pheasant crowing count survey was up 6% statewide from last year.

"We basically have had two really easy winters, especially as North Dakota standards, with not much snow and really nice temperatures," said RJ Gross, Department upland game management biologist.

The primary regions holding pheasants showed 31.1 crows per stop in the southwest, up from 28.8 in 2024; 21.3 crows per stop in the northwest, down from 21.5; and 18.6 crows per stop in the southeast, up from 16.2. The count in the northeast, which is not a primary region for pheasants, was 6.5 crows per stop, up from 5 last year.

Barring untimely heavy rains, cool weather or hail, Gross expects more good news as the peak of the pheasant hatch is upon us.

"Entering the nesting season, residual grass cover looked good," Gross said. "The timely May rains caused increased growth in nesting and brood rearing cover across the state. Combined with high overwinter survival the past two years and near ideal nesting habitat conditions, things are looking good for upland birds in North Dakota."

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

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



Report Tagged Fish

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

In 2025, Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel initiated a three-year walleye tagging study on Devils Lake and one-year walleye tagging studies on six other waters: Lake Addie, Griggs County; Mosher WPA, Barnes County; Horsehead Lake, Kidder County; Davis WPA, Sheridan County; Heart Butte Dam, Grant County; and the Missouri River System from Garrison Dam to Oahe Dam.

Department fisheries biologists say it's important anglers report tagged fish from whatever waters they are fishing, no matter if their catch ends up in the livewell



Gov. Kelly Armstrong talks about the importance of prairie on North Dakota's landscape.

Prairie Day, Every Day

Gov. Kelly Armstrong proclaimed June 7 as Prairie Day in North Dakota to a gathering of ranchers and personnel from the Game and Fish Department and the Meadowlark Initiative last month.

While recognizing their commitment to keeping native prairie on the landscape and understanding the importance of this native habitat – not just one day in June but year-round – Armstrong said, “We don’t have huge swaths of federal land and public land like other states ... so any time we’re talking about maintaining grasslands, maintaining biodiversity, private property owners have to be at the table from the very first time you have those conversations.”

Cody Kologi, a Burleigh County rancher, was in attendance at the North Dakota Capitol in Bismarck when Gov. Armstrong officially made the Prairie Day announcement.

“The grasslands on our ranch are the cornerstone resource that we have here. Without it, we don’t feed our family,” he said. “We basically adopted the mindset of take care of the grasslands and the grasslands will take care of us.”

What’s good for the herd is good for the birds, as the saying goes.

“There’s so much value that grasslands provide. We have our ranchers and our landowners who are stewards of this landscape and help maintain it,” said Heather Husband, Meadowlark Initiative coordinator. “In addition, it provides resiliency for rural communities, water quality improvement, soil health improvement and natural carbon storage. And then, of course, the crucial, critical habitat for wildlife and for pollinators that are really important across the state.”



Go Hunt. Go Fish Go Eat!

For those turkey hunters who were lucky enough to wrap a tag around a spring gobbler, check out this installment of Cayla's Kitchen. This enticing turkey burger recipe is perfect for a summer night on the grill, paired with a lemon basil aioli, it's a fresh take on wild turkey meat. Simply top with your favorite veggies and enjoy. Find this easy wild game recipe and more on Game and Fish Department's website at gf.nd.gov/caylas-kitchen.



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*

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 supervisor, at pisakson@nd.gov.

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

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

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

Boat North Dakota Course

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

The course is available for home-study by contacting the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. Two commercial providers also offer the course online, and links to those sites are 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, there is 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. 16 at 1 p.m. at the North Dakota Game and Fish Department office in Bismarck. Preregistration is required no later than Aug. 8 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.



North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries biologists have been weighing, measuring and tagging paddlefish in the Garrison Reach of the Missouri River for nearly 20 years in an effort to monitor a species that provides good insight into the health of that section of river confined upstream and down by gigantic dams. Paul Bailey, Department south central fisheries supervisor, said fisheries personnel netted and handled roughly 1,000 paddlefish in spring. Approximately 450 of those fish were tagged in previous years and 550 received new tags. Since 2006, they have tagged about 13,000 adult paddlefish between Garrison Dam and the South Dakota border. Bailey added that the number of paddlefish in this population is much lower than the population that exists above Garrison Dam in Lake Sakakawea and the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers but the number of fish between Garrison and Oahe dams appears to be holding steady.



Nothing Left Behind

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.



Lonnie Liebel caught a new state record lake whitefish that had been in the books for more than 40 years. The Riverdale angler reeled in his 9-pound, 3-ounce whitefish on June 2 from the Garrison Dam Tailrace in the Missouri River. The previous record of 8 pounds, 11 ounces was established in 1984 by Bill Mitzel, a Bismarck angler who was also fishing the tailrace.

STAFF NOTES



Haase Earns WAFWA Award

Bill Haase, North Dakota Game and Fish Department assistant wildlife division chief, received the Conservation Change Agent Award at the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies summer meeting in Provo, Utah.

This is WAFWA'S newest award that recognizes an individual who is a catalyst for positive change, growth or innovation in an agency. It especially looks for individuals whose uniqueness and creativity allows conservation professionals to engage with new groups or resources in new ways.

Haase was noted for recognizing top talent and spearheading efforts to engage college students in working for the Department by promoting temporary, seasonal positions so they can start gaining experience.

BACKCAST

RW

We're wandering slowly across a good-looking chunk of prairie somewhere in McHenry County, eyes trained mostly at ground-level and higher where the native grasses and wildflowers bend in the breeze.

There are eight of us from state and federal conservation agencies, all searching for the same thing on this piece of public land. To passersby, it might appear that we're looking for something of value. Maybe vehicle keys that fell out of an unzipped backpack or perhaps an iPhone that slipped from a back pocket.

They'd be correct because we are combing nearly 500 acres managed by the Department of Trust Lands for something of significance — a small and difficult to identify butterfly with a wingspan of about an inch — and seemingly harder to find than lost keys.

The rub, of course, is that there aren't nearly as many Dakota skippers as there once were. Listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act more than a decade ago, the species declined alongside the conversion and degradation of prairie habitat in the state and elsewhere that the butterfly needs to survive.

The other thing working against us this morning are cool temperatures and overcast skies that keep the skippers hidden where you typically can't see them. We're told to hope for the sun to break through the clouds to get the butterflies moving so the experts in the group can positively identify what we're in search of.

I was shown cellphone photos and images in a guidebook of male and female Dakota skippers before we set out, but I understand if I flush or spot anything small and brownish, I'll need to lean heavily on the insect whizzes for guidance.

I also understand that no matter how small or nondescript, I really, really want to see this threatened species that has simply blinked out in some historical strongholds but still has a toehold in parts of North Dakota where remnants of quality native prairie habitat still exist.

While our pace, a relaxed zigzag that splits the team the farther we take measured steps across the landscape, there is a sense of urgency because the window to happen upon adult Dakota skippers is narrow. Following the life stages of egg, larva and pupa, the adults live for only about three weeks before taking their last flight and fertilizing the prairie.

I learn quickly that I'm walking too fast compared to the others, and I'm likely viewing this ageless ecosystem all wrong. As a hunter, I gravitate to those areas where I'd expect to flush sharp-tailed grouse in fall. My eyes wander too often to the forested habitat bordering the trust land waiting for a white-tailed doe and young to step out and feed.

I finally slow and get into the rhythm of things and start seeing what I was missing — a mostly-unknown-to-me collection of wildflowers that provide the nectar, the go-juice the adult skippers need to fuel their short lives during the mating season. I learn by pestering the person closest to me that that's a black-eyed Susan and that's a prairie lily ... and on it goes.

The morning is warming now, and the sun periodically peeks through parted clouds and the skippers emerge from their hidey holes. The professionals, those individuals who annually survey as many native prairie sites as possible in North Dakota to see the true extent of the species, exude shared excitement.

They approach spotted skippers as if walking on eggshells so the butterflies don't flush from the vibration caused by heavy boot falls. They photograph confirmed Dakota skippers and snap images of those that need further examination on computer screens back in the office.

While I read in preparation for this outing that mating between Dakota skippers typically occurs the first day the female emerges, witnessing this act in nature, I figured, was a longshot.

I was right about it being a longshot.

The most veteran in our crew, the skipper whisperer who has been surveying Dakota skippers for about a decade and calls the privilege of doing so a gift, says he has witnessed the act just two times.

Today, right now somewhere in McHenry County, he can make it three.

Tired from navigating the prairie for a couple hours, but with a skip in our steps, we meet back at our parked vehicles and discuss what needs to be done to keep this threatened species from disappearing. The consensus is that we need to keep ranchers on North Dakota's landscape and safeguard the native prairie that remains.

Considering that we've lost more than 70% of our native prairie over time, the latter seems like a tough task, but so did finding a small butterfly this morning with just an inch-long wingspread in a sea of grass.



RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

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*A pheasant nest hiding in the tall
grass on a North Dakota Game
and Fish Department wildlife
management area in Oliver County.
Upland game bird biologists say the
peak of the pheasant hatch in the
state is about June 10.*

PHOTO BY SANDRA JOHNSON.

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