

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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This mink, a member of the weasel family, was photographed at Reule Lake in Stutsman County. Mink are semi-aquatic mammals and are found in close association with permanent water. These meat-eaters prey on both aquatic and terrestrial animals.

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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Front Cover

Pronghorn in western North Dakota.

PHOTO BY JESSE KOLAR, DICKINSON.



My 2 Cents

By Jeb Williams, Director

Fall has a way of sharpening our senses. The cool morning air carries the smell of harvested fields. Leaves rustle underfoot. Waterfowl stir on a quiet slough before first light. Deer slip through shelterbelts as if they know what time of year it is.

For those of you who appreciate North Dakota's diverse wildlife populations, this season is the heartbeat of our year, a reminder of why we live here and stubbornly defend our state as being so special.

All things Game and Fish are in full swing now. Biologists are putting the finishing touches on wildlife population surveys, game wardens are in the field ready to transition from summer to fall patrol, and fisheries crews are wrapping up projects before the ice comes. Our education staff is working with schools, clubs and volunteers to bring new people into hunting, fishing and trapping. Every tag issued, every regulation set, and every habitat project completed is tied to the same goal of keeping North Dakota's outdoor heritage strong.

A catchy phrase — Hunt for Tomorrow — created by one of our talented staff has given the Department an opportunity to deliver a wide variety of messaging related to hunting and how our actions of today impact what our tomorrow looks like. Hunt for Tomorrow isn't just a campaign slogan; it's a mindset. It's about recognizing the relationships you are willing to build with landowners, the pheasant cover you walk this fall, and the boat ramp at your favorite fishing hole that simply didn't materialize by chance. They exist because someone before you cared enough to protect them, invest in them, and pass them on.

Over the last several years we have utilized this campaign to remind hunters of dry conditions, traveling in rural North Dakota during busy fall harvesting, and taking the extra steps to show your appreciation to landowners who have provided you with the opportunity to hunt.

These are just a few examples, but it is rewarding when I hear comments from the public who are appreciative of these pieces of information and how they feel it has had an impact.

Nobody likes to be lectured. These messages are intended to be educational, and our hope is to provide a heads up to those who may be traveling from afar and aren't as familiar with rural North Dakota and existing conditions, which could have an impact on your hunting opportunities.

We have a new governor who is extremely passionate and committed to the outdoors, and passing on the opportunities to our young hunters. We are pretty good at that in North Dakota, but we can always do a little better. That means bringing a new hunter or angler along this season, whether it's your son or daughter, a neighbor kid, or a friend who's always been curious but never had the opportunity. It means sharing not just the "how-to," but the "why" — the early mornings, the patience, the respect for the resource, and the satisfaction that comes from putting in the work.

It also means remembering that our hunting and fishing license dollars directly fund the management, conservation and access programs that make our seasons possible. Each purchase is a small investment in the future of the resource.

If we do this right, the next generation won't just inherit healthy wildlife populations and access to great hunting and fishing, they'll inherit the values that make our outdoor culture worth protecting. And they'll choose North Dakota as their forever home. So, as you lace up your boots, oil your shotgun, or check your bowstring this fall, remember that every day in the field is more than a hunt. It's a chance to invest in tomorrow. And the best part? That investment pays back in memories you'll treasure for a lifetime.

THE FUTURE OF HUNTING DEPENDS ON OUR ACTIONS TODAY



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2025 HUNTING OUTLOOK

By Casey Anderson

This is my last fall outlook article for *North Dakota OUTDOORS* as I have stepped into a new position with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department as deputy director.

So, from a personal note and beyond, some interesting happenings from the last year, including the second relatively mild winter in a row, which was good news for critters and people; a newly elected governor in Kelly Armstrong who has a passion for hunting, probably only matched by a small number of hunters in the state; and a legislative session that seemed to swirl at a faster pace than I can remember.

The Department also continued to ramp up its habitat message at the North Dakota Habitat and Access Summit in December to remind North Dakotans of the importance of having quality habitat on the landscape and its positive influence on wildlife populations. In concert with that effort, we also gathered input on ways to improve our hunting and outdoor traditions that many hold so dear. We have folks in the Department working tirelessly on many of the recommendations from the summit with Gov. Armstrong and his staff, to help turn the tide.

In the interim, I encourage readers to build a better

understanding of the reality that not all our wildlife species are created equal, especially when it comes to their habitat needs and distribution.

The big game hunting world is an interesting one. Deer licenses were obviously drastically cut again for 2025. Adequate habitat is in short supply for deer in North Dakota. To stimulate a rebound, deer, compared to other hunted species, not only need larger expanses of habitat during the hunting season, but need it year-round. While Mother Nature helped us out with back-to-back mild winters, the process is slow, and without adequate habitat that process is even slower.

Mule deer are holding their own but some drought conditions, epizootic hemorrhagic disease, and maybe even some competition from elk in the badlands, is slowing their rebound. Elk and moose are doing well, and those unique hunting opportunities are still good in the state. Pronghorn should have benefited from the easy winter, but they did have some EHD problems last summer and fall that influenced the number of licenses made available to hunters this fall compared to 2024.

On another note, pheasants have done extremely well and those who pursue them will likely see that this fall. While biologists at this time of this writing have yet to

complete the Department's brood counts, the possibility is there to have an impressive 2025 pheasant season. So, why is that? Habitat is in short supply you said. Well, pheasants don't require massive expanses of habitat, although that doesn't hurt them. They thrive on the edge with adequate habitat, small grains and decent winters. If these stars align, they can bounce back extremely fast, and it looks like that might be the case.

Gray (Hungarian) partridge are on the same edge but like it a little drier, and their numbers are looking good as well. Our native sharp-tailed grouse, however, are holding their own, but need much larger expanses of grass with a more native grass/forb component to thrive. Sharptails are showing more signs of the reduced habitat conditions on the landscape in certain areas but have not quite taken the population dive as some other species.

Waterfowl are still struggling as well. Although they migrate to avoid winter conditions, it's all about nesting and brood rearing for them. North Dakota is called the Duck Factory for a reason. We raise a high proportion of the ducks people see in the Central Flyway. Yet, without wetlands and grasslands to accommodate the birds, the difference is noted throughout the entire flyway.

Now don't get me wrong, there are ducks to harvest, and I will make sure to have a few plucked mallards for the smoker myself, but the long-term trend is down and needs to be reversed to provide quality hunting opportunities in the future.

So, if you didn't draw a deer tag, it's a good year to put a few rounds through your shotgun and spend some time hunting upland game. For those who drew a big game tag, relish the opportunity. Just know that the Department is working hard and exploring new avenues to improve these populations, as well as their habitats, and help maintain our hunting heritage. The Department can't do it alone, but North Dakota can if it wants too. Happy hunting.

CASEY ANDERSON is the Game and Fish Department's deputy director.

Sharp-tailed grouse



UPLAND AND SMALL GAME

RING-NECKED PHEASANTS

Opens: Oct. 11

Closes: Jan. 4, 2026

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Pheasants in North Dakota had back-to-back mild winters, beginning in 2023-24, with most of the state receiving little to no snow.

Results of the spring crowing count survey showed higher numbers of breeding roosters throughout the entire pheasant range. The number of roosters heard calling was up anywhere from 8-30% throughout the state's good pheasant range, reinforcing the Department's results from last summer's roadside brood counts that showed improved production of all upland birds.

Cover for nesting hens was above average in spring due to excess precipitation from timely fall and spring rains. Habitat was lush and green for early nesting attempts to be successful. However, summer had its fair share of severe weather events that included hail, heavy rain and damaging winds. It is expected that conditions during peak hatch were not favorable for high chick survival in some parts of the state, especially northwestern North Dakota.

As of this late August writing, Department personnel are conducting late summer roadside brood counts, and preliminary numbers indicate hunters will see a similar number of adult birds and fewer juveniles this fall compared to 2024.

As always, hunters need to be mobile and willing to move to different locations to find localized optimal hunting opportunities. It's expected the southwestern part of the state will provide the best opportunities this fall.

Rodney Gross, Upland Game Management Biologist, Bismarck



YOUTH PHEASANT

(For legally licensed residents and nonresidents ages 15 and younger.)

Opens: Oct. 4

Closes: Oct. 5

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 6

Shooting hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

WILD TURKEYS

Opens: Oct. 11

Closes: Jan. 4, 2026

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

The turkey population in many of North Dakota's hunting units has been higher than normal the past few years due to increased production in the western half of the state.

Last year, conditions were favorable for a successful turkey hatch, and surveys showed that. Turkey production was good last spring. Coupled with a high breeding population of hens, fall numbers were higher in parts of the state. The eastern part of the state has seen decreasing numbers of birds the last few years in response to the loss of quality turkey habitat.

Early reports from brood surveys indicated a slight decrease in the number of turkey broods on the ground, and fewer adults in the west. Turkey production numbers are expected to be slightly lower this year due to extreme weather during the nesting season.

The Department decreased fall licenses for wild

turkeys slightly this fall in response to low brood observations. It's suspected the central and west-central parts of the state along river corridors will provide some of the better turkey hunting opportunities in the state this fall.

Rodney Gross

RUFFED GROUSE

Opens: Sept. 13

Closes: Jan. 4, 2026

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

The spring ruffed grouse survey in the Turtle Mountains indicated a 23% decrease from 2024 in the number of drums heard, but 2024 was the highest number of drums in the Turtle Mountains since 2009-10. Ruffed grouse drums heard in the Pembina Hills were almost identical between 2024 and 2025.

Ruffed grouse hunting should be average to above average in North Dakota this year.

Ruffed grouse are an uncommon grouse in North Dakota because they live almost exclusively in aspen forests. They are only found in the Turtle Mountains and Pembina Hills. Although there was a small population in the J. Clark Salyer Wildlife Refuge (McHenry County), ruffed grouse have not been heard there since 2006.

Jesse Kolar, Upland Game Management Supervisor, Dickinson

SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

Opens: Sept. 13

Closes: Jan. 4, 2026

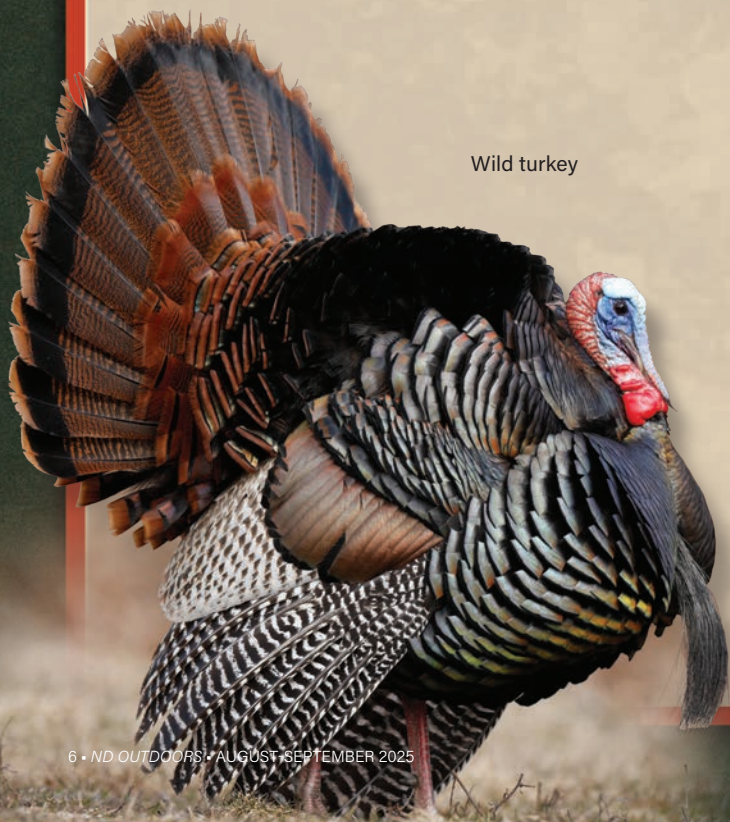
Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

The sharp-tailed grouse index (weighted average by area surveyed) for 2025 was down 13% statewide from 2024. The mild winter facilitated the fairly stable population from 2024.

Although Department 2025 brood routes are still ongoing at the time of this writing in late August, preliminary results are showing about 40-50% declines in grouse density, brood sizes (average fewer than 4 chicks per brood), and age ratio (about 1.4 chicks per adult). These numbers are quite concerning heading into fall, and either indicate relatively poor detectability this year (possibly due to exceptional vegetation cover; fingers crossed), or a statewide die-off, which is also possible considering increased



Wild turkey

rates of West Nile virus in North Dakota this year.

Department brood routes are not designed to measure grouse density like spring lek counts are, but even if we only have 13% declines in the adult population, the small brood sizes and low juvenile-to-adult ratios are likely to be noticed since most sharptails harvested for a given year are juveniles.

Lower reproduction is likely due to extreme rain and cold weather events at the onset of nest incubation dates (mid-May) and extended wet weather throughout the reproductive season. Sharptails are adapted to drier climates, so they might not have been able to withstand the moisture as well as pheasants and partridge.

Statewide, sharptail populations are back to their 10-year average. The numbers appear to be declining in the northwest, where we had above-average densities from 2019-23, and the southwest had remained stable until the poor reproduction this year. The eastern third of the state continues to hold very few grouse, as sharptails primarily reproduce on pastures and other grasslands.

Sharptail nest almost exclusively in native prairie, pastures and planted grasses, so even though they move between nesting season and fall, the best places to find them are in areas near grasslands resembling native prairies. In the fall they can often be found in shrub patches on hillsides, alfalfa fields, sunflower fields, and near harvested canola fields.

The sharp-tailed hunting regulations changed last year, no longer being closed to hunting in northern Grand Forks County. This area had been closed to prevent incidental take of greater prairie chickens after they were reintroduced to the area. However, sharptails have taken over the area, and prairie chickens have all but disappeared, so the area will be re-opened. The season remains closed for prairie chickens, so hunters in Grand Forks County are encouraged to see identification pages on the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov, and they should be prepared to pass up anything they are not able to identify as a sharp-tailed grouse with certainty.

Jesse Kolar

GRAY PARTRIDGE

Opens: Sept. 13

Closes: Jan. 4, 2026

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Although the Department does not have a spring index for gray partridge, commonly referred to as Hungarian partridge, biologists continue to hear reports across the state of how many partridge people are seeing. However, this is the second year since 2019 that Department reproduction surveys for partridge are lower than where they were from 2019-23.

So far, biologists are seeing similar brood sizes, number of broods, and densities compared to 2024. Partridge reproduction had been excellent from 2019-23, so despite declines, the population still looks healthy with higher-than-average numbers of partridge across the state.

Hunters rarely go "partridge hunting," but like last year, upland hunters could expect to put up a covey of partridge every one to two days (or more in some areas). One downside with lower reproduction is that coveys will be smaller. Instead of seeing coveys of 12-15 birds, it's likely hunters will notice many more coveys with fewer than 10 partridge.

Partridge overlap with pheasants and sharptails in North Dakota, but their preferred habitat is weedy edges, so focus on rock pile islands in the middle of harvested fields, lone trees or shrub patches in ditches, field edges, fence lines, and so on.

Rodney Gross

TREE SQUIRRELS

Opens: Sept. 13

Closes: Feb. 28, 2026

Daily Limit: 4

Possession Limit: 12

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Tree squirrels may be taken statewide with firearms loaded with shot, rimfire rifles, or with bows and arrows legal for taking upland game.



Gray partridge



BIG GAME

WHITE-TAILED DEER

Archery Opens: Aug. 29

Archery Closes: Jan. 4, 2026

Youth Gun Season Opens: Sept. 19

Youth Gun Season Closes: Sept. 28

Regular Gun Season Opens: Nov. 7

Regular Gun Season Closes: Nov. 23

Muzzleloader Opens: Nov. 28

Muzzleloader Closes: Dec. 14

The Game and Fish Department made available 42,300 licenses for the 2025 deer gun hunting season, a decrease of 7,800 from 2024. Statewide hunter success for the 2024 regular gun season was similar to 2023 at 55%.

Hunter observations and harvest indices indicate deer populations are stable to decreasing with populations below objectives in most hunting units. Several units south and west of the Missouri River were affected by epizootic hemorrhagic disease late last summer resulting in lower success rates for white-tailed deer and a reduction in whitetail tags for this season.

Big game biologists were unable to conduct winter aerial surveys last winter due to lack of conditions required to effectively survey white-tailed deer. Back-to-back mild winters have resulted in minimal winter losses, though any benefits gained from these winters were tempered due to drought conditions and lack of quality habitat.

Loss of quality habitat, particularly winter cover and fawning habitat, continues to be a challenge for deer throughout the state. These losses limit carrying capacity resulting in an overall lower population and slow the potential for population growth after disturbances such as EHD and severe winters. Without a significant increase in the amount of quality white-tailed deer habitat, lower deer numbers and slower recovery after disturbances will likely be the "new normal" for the state's deer population.

A total of 17 deer tested positive for chronic wasting disease in 2024, 15 of which were harvested by hunters during the regular gun season. CWD was found in two new units: 3B2 (one mule deer) and 3B3 (one white-tailed deer). Other units where deer tested positive include 3A1 (seven mule deer), 3E1 (one mule deer), 3E2 (one mule deer) and 3F2 (four mule deer and two white-tailed deer).

Surveillance for the 2025 season will focus on units in the northwestern portion of the state in units 3A1, 3A2, 3A3, 3B1, 3B2, 4A, 4B and 4C. Hunters wishing to have their deer tested regardless of the hunting unit may

Mule deer



request a sampling kit online at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov, visit a Game and Fish district office, or drop the head off at one of the Department's drop-off sites.

Landowners interested in having more antlerless deer harvested are encouraged to call the Game and Fish at 701-328-6300, and Department personnel will direct the number of doe hunters that landowners are comfortable hosting.

Summary of deer licenses for 2025:

- Any antlered licenses decreased by 2,700.
- Any antlerless licenses decreased by 2,150.
- Antlered white-tailed deer licenses decreased by 950.
- Antlerless white-tailed deer licenses decreased by 1,750.
- 806 muzzleloader licenses were made available – 403 antlered white-tailed deer licenses and 403 antlerless white-tailed deer licenses. This is a decrease of 150 muzzleloader licenses from 2024.
- 160 "I" licenses were made available for the youth deer hunting season (ages 14 and 15). "I" licenses are limited in number for units 3B1, 3B2 and 4A-4F, and are valid for any deer. There are unlimited "H" youth deer hunting licenses valid for any deer statewide except antlered mule deer in the above restricted units.
- 100 "N" licenses were made available for the youth deer hunting season (ages 11, 12 and 13). "N" licenses are limited in number for units 3B1, 3B2 and 4A-4F, and are valid for any antlerless deer. There are unlimited "O" youth deer hunting licenses valid for any antlerless deer statewide except for antlerless mule deer in the above restricted units.
- 300 nonresident any deer archery licenses were made available, down 37 from 2024.

Benjamin Matykiewicz, Big Game Management Biologist, Bismarck

MULE DEER

Archery Opens: Aug. 29

Archery Closes: Jan. 4, 2026

Regular Gun Season Opens: Nov. 7

Regular Gun Season Closes: Nov. 23

The 2025 spring index for mule deer in the badlands was 14% lower than 2024 and 18% below the long-term average. Mule deer in the badlands have been stable to declining since 2018 due to below average fawn production.

For the 2025 season, 1,600 antlered and 400 antlerless licenses were made available. A mule deer buck license remains one of the most difficult licenses to draw, but for those lucky few, it should result in a very

high-quality hunt. Hunter success for mule deer buck hunters was 80% in 2024.

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

Bruce Stillings, Big Game Management Supervisor, Dickinson

PRONGHORN

Archery Only Opens: Aug. 29

Archery Only Closes: Sept. 21

Gun/Archery Season Opens: Oct. 3

Gun/Archery Season Closes: Oct. 19

North Dakota hunters will have similar opportunities to hunt pronghorn this fall compared to 2024 with 45 more licenses issued this season. Also, a new unit with limited hunting opportunities will be opened east of the Missouri River in Emmons, McIntosh and Logan counties for the first time due to a change in law regulating allocation of licenses.

Although last winter was mild, range-wide increase of pronghorn did not occur in 2025. The population estimate of 7,138 was down slightly from 2024. The lack of range-wide population growth was due to record low fawn production. Fawn production in 2025 was 39 fawns per 100 does, which is well below the 20 year-average of 56 fawns per 100 does.



Pronghorn

It appears the lack of pronghorn population growth was due to the EHD virus. Six pronghorn were confirmed to have died from EHD across western North Dakota which accounted for 10% of EHD reports in 2024. EHD can cause direct mortality in pronghorn and negatively impact next year's fawn production due to fetal loss in pregnant does infected by the virus. Future population recovery will be dependent on upcoming winter conditions and fawning success in 2026.

Lottery licenses can be used during the archery season (Aug. 29 (noon) – Sept. 21) with archery equipment or during the rifle season (Oct. 3 – Oct. 19) using legal firearm or archery equipment for those who do not hunt or harvest during the archery season.

Last year's season was successful with 1,019 hunters harvesting 700 pronghorn for a success rate of 69%.

Bruce Stillings

BIGHORN SHEEP

For season details, refer to the Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2025 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

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.

Department big game biologists were 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.

Biologists were encouraged to see adult rams and adult ewes near record numbers. 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.

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. The state's adult ewes 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.

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 scheduled for 2025. Game and Fish issued seven licenses in 2024, and all hunters were successful in harvesting a ram.

Brett Wiedmann, Big Game Management Biologist, Dickinson

Moose



MOOSE

For season details, refer to the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2025 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

The number of once-in-a-lifetime licenses for moose increased in 2025 for this popular big game species. The increase in licenses is due to an observed increase in the population based on previous winter aerial surveys and a slight increase in hunter success.

The increases are from the northwest region of the state for moose management units M10 and M1. The number of moose licenses slightly decreased for moose unit M5 and remain unchanged for units M6, M8 and M9 based on a stable population and good hunter success.

Numbers of moose continue to remain lower in historical hunting units in the Turtle Mountains, Pembina Hills and along the Red River corridor. Moose unit M1C, located in the Pembina Hills region, has been closed since 2006 and will remain closed again this year. Moose unit M4, which encompasses the Turtle Mountains, was closed in 2013 and will also remain closed this fall.

The Department made available 296 licenses for the 2025 moose season. Expectations for the season are high as success for moose historically runs above 90%.

*Jason Smith, Big Game Management Biologist,
Jamestown*

ELK

For season details, refer to the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2025 bighorn sheep, elk and moose hunting guide.

North Dakota's 2025 elk season features an increase in licenses from 2024. The primary increase in licenses were for elk units E2 and E3. This was in response to an increasing elk population in those areas and landowner tolerance concerns. License numbers in elk unit E1E were reduced slightly for antlerless licenses due to low hunter success. Licenses in E1W, E4 and E6 remained the same as 2024. Elk numbers in these units appear stable based on aerial surveys of core habitat and minimum counts of winter herds.

A new unit, unit E7, was created to increase elk hunting opportunities and to accommodate landowners surrounding J Clark Salyer National Wildlife Refuge who have elk on their property. General lottery license holders in unit E7 can transition to E1W beginning Nov. 24, due to the uncertainty of elk behavior and movements with the opening of the refuge to elk hunting for the first time in 2025.

The Department made available 960 licenses for the 2025 elk season. Elk hunting in North Dakota can be very challenging, both mentally and physically. Although high compared to other western states, success rates for North Dakota elk hunters averaged just over 60% for the past five years. Antlerless licenses are easier to draw but are the most difficult to fill. Hunters with antlerless licenses should be prepared for a very challenging hunt with many days in the field. The season outlook for elk in 2025 is expected to be good with success similar to previous years.

As always, making landowner contacts and preseason scouting prior to the season opener is recommended and is an essential component to a successful moose or elk hunt.

Jason Smith



MIGRATORY BIRDS

As we look ahead to the 2025 waterfowl season, North Dakota experienced a wide range of weather conditions that influenced both wetlands and waterfowl populations. Considerable shifts in rainfall patterns shaped the landscape in different ways over the past year. While many population trends remain concerning, there are some positives, and hunters still have reasons to look forward to the coming season.

Much of the western half of North Dakota experienced significant dryness last year. By late summer 2024, most wetlands under five acres and some larger, shallow basins had dried up. With the exception of central and northeastern areas, much of the state faced drought or excessive dryness by mid-October. These conditions persisted into mid-November as warm, dry weather lingered. Winter brought below-average snowfall, and an early spring arrived with little snow cover and above-average temperatures in March.

Mallards and pintails were seen moving through North Dakota as early as mid-March, but the lack of meltwater in temporary ponds, coupled with frozen semi-permanent wetlands, meant that many early migrants simply passed through without stopping. Fortunately, April brought a welcome change; seasonal spring temperatures and widespread precipitation delivered 1.5 to 4 inches of precipitation across most of the state.

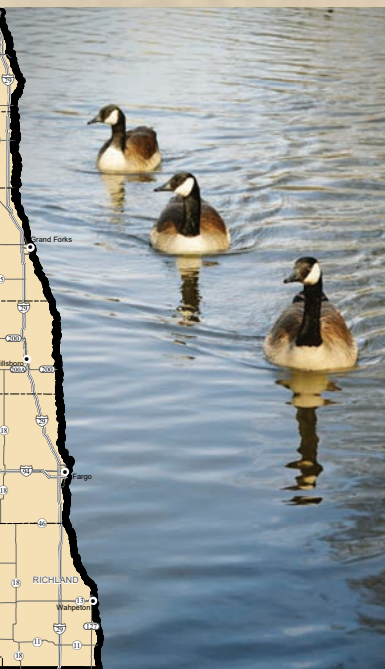
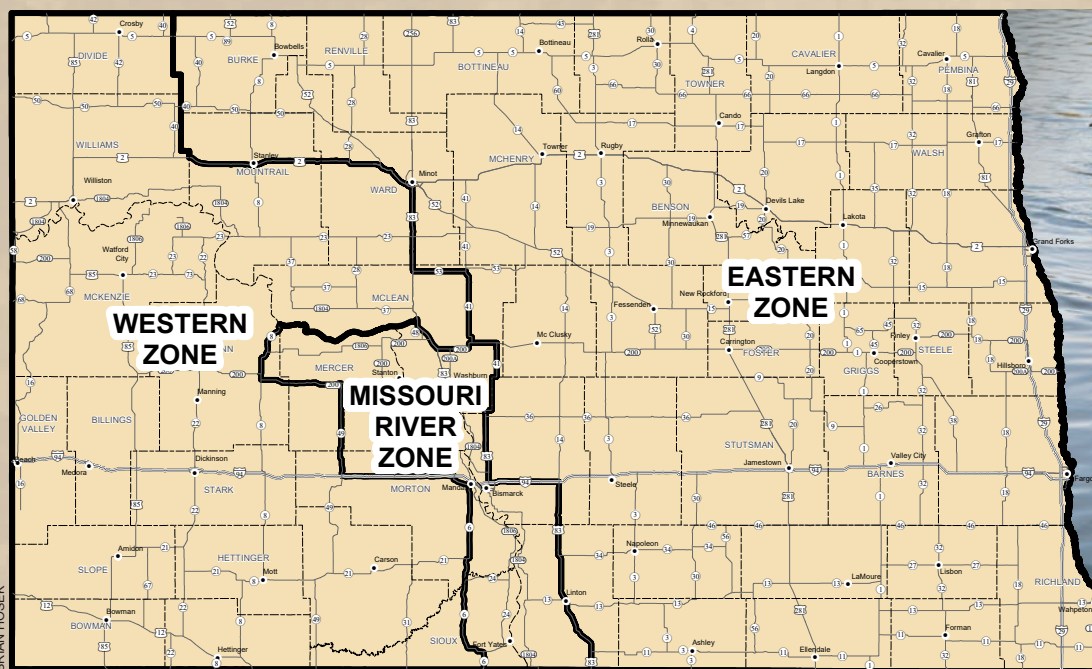
North Dakota's May breeding duck survey is carefully timed to match the settling patterns of waterfowl in the state. This year's 78th survey was the earliest on record, starting May 6. The May index was 2.6 million ducks; a notable drop and the lowest count since 1994. Still, this number sits 7% above the long-term (1948-2024) average, but is down 34% from the 1994-2016 average.

Breeding duck numbers typically follow wetland conditions. This year, the wetland index was down 38% from last year and 33% below the long-term average. Most dabbling species, with the exception of wigeon, saw declines compared to 2024. Mallards were down 26%, and blue-winged teal dropped nearly 16%. The mallard count, while lower than usual, was still the 33rd highest in survey history.

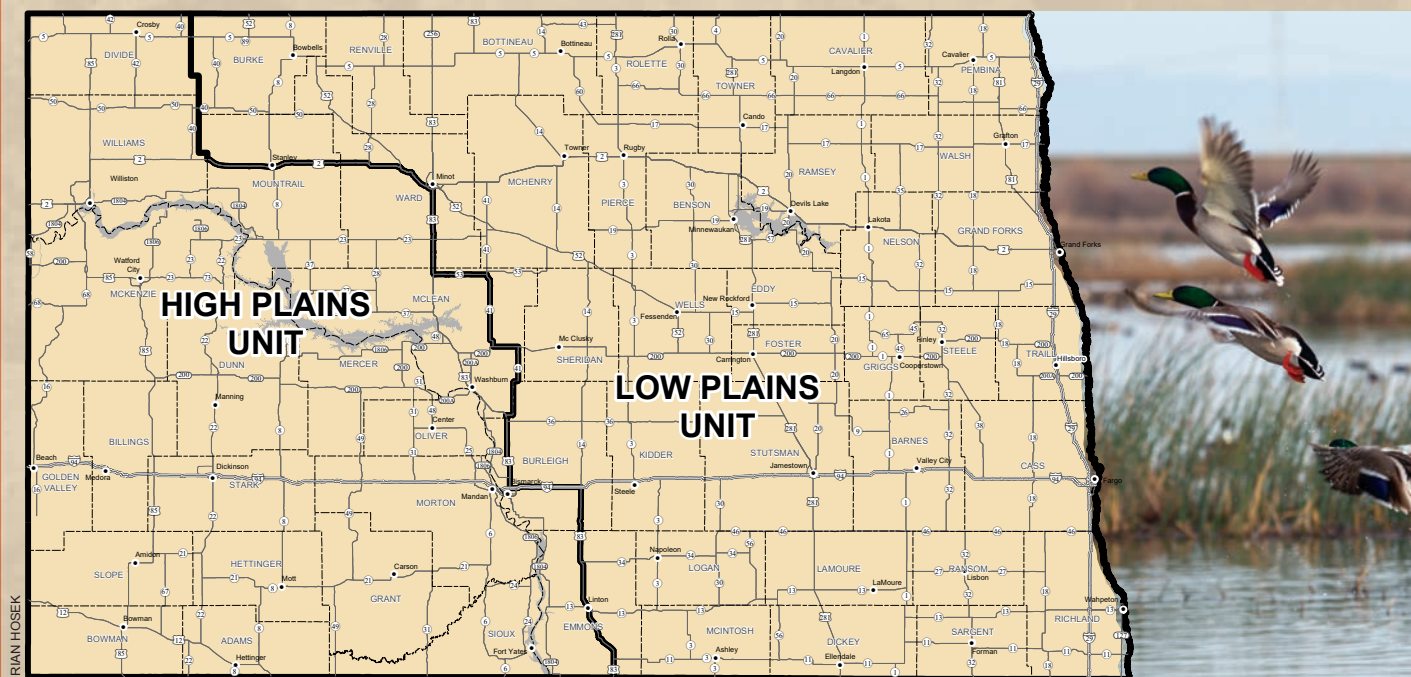
Not all the news was gloomy, though. Diving duck species showed a strong increase, with redheads up 23%, the highest count on record. The total diver index was the highest since 2020 and the second highest in the past two decades.

Spring started off dry, with poor to fair wetland conditions noted across much of the state in early May. After

CANADA GOOSE HUNTING ZONES



DUCKS HIGH PLAINS/LOW PLAINS UNITS



BRIAN HOSEK

the survey, another challenge arrived as several days of 90-degree temperatures and strong winds dried out the landscape even further. Fortunately for waterfowl, nearly a week of steady rain arrived in the third week of May. Many western and central areas received 4 to 7 inches. Although some large basins remained dry, smaller wetlands were replenished, providing good pair habitat for ducks that stayed in the state. These timely rains helped move wetland conditions back to fair-to-good levels for late-nesting birds, even if the earlier dry spell likely limited how many ducks settled here.

Total wetlands observed during the July duck brood survey were down 50% from an unusually wet 2024 and 22% below the long-term average. Many northern areas of the state remained dry through June and July, but south-central areas received enough rain for good brood habitat. The number of duck broods was up 28% from last year and just 2% below average. Overall, the fall flight forecast is up 2% from last year, ranking as the 30th highest in 61 years.

Canada geese that largely nest in North Dakota were down slightly from last year but remain plentiful. Goose production was fair across most of the state, with certain areas experiencing higher nesting success. Other goose species, such as Western Prairie and Tallgrass Prairie Canada geese, snow geese, and Ross's geese, showed similar trends; some recent declines, but populations are still robust. Hunters can expect good goose numbers this fall.

This season also brings a couple of important regulation changes. The daily pintail bag limit has increased

from one to three birds. While pintail numbers are still a concern, new science and adaptive regulations show that this increase is sustainable and that larger threats, like habitat loss, remain the primary challenge for this species. Additionally, the nonresident waterfowl license structure has been updated, removing the statewide license and creating new zones. This will help the Department track hunting pressure more effectively and distribute it more evenly across the state. Lastly, there will be an increase in shooting hours for geese. Starting Nov. 30, all day hunting for geese will now include Friday.

All told, hunters can expect a fall flight similar to last year, which will be further shaped by North Dakota's dynamic weather patterns. Fall conditions are famously unpredictable and can change quickly, so adaptability remains key for both hunters and birds. We'll have a clearer picture after the September wetland survey, but as always, a North Dakota fall promises variety, opportunity, and plenty for waterfowlers to look forward to.

John Palarski, Migratory Game Bird Management Supervisor

YOUTH WATERFOWL SEASON

(For legally licensed residents and nonresidents ages 15 and younger.)

Opens: Sept. 20

Closes: Sept. 21

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Daily Limit: Ducks and geese – same as regular season (does not include bonus blue-winged teal).

SPECIAL VETERAN AND ACTIVE MILITARY WATERFOWL SEASON

(For legally licensed veterans and members of the Armed Forces on active duty, including members of the National Guard and Reserves on active duty, other than for training.)

Opens: Sept. 20

Closes: Sept. 21

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Daily Limit: Ducks and geese – same as regular season (does not include bonus blue-winged teal).

EARLY CANADA GOOSE HUNTING

Opens: Aug. 15 (statewide)

Closes: Sept. 7 (Missouri River Canada Goose Zone), Sept. 15 (Western Canada Goose Zone), Sept. 22 (Eastern Canada Goose Zone)

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Daily Limit: 15

Possession Limit: 45

CANADA GOOSE REGULAR SEASON

Opens: Sept. 27 (residents only), Oct. 4 (nonresidents)

Closes: Jan. 2 (Missouri River Canada Goose Zone), Dec. 25 (Western Canada Goose Zone), Dec. 20 (Eastern Canada Goose Zone)

Daily Limit: 5 (Missouri River zone), 8 (all other zones)

Possession Limit: 15 (Missouri River zone), 24 (all other zones)

WHITE-FRONTED GEESE (Statewide)

Opens: Sept. 27 (residents only), Oct. 4 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 7

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 9

LIGHT (SNOW) GEESE (Statewide)

Opens: Sept. 27 (residents only), Oct. 4 (nonresidents)

Closes: Jan. 4

Daily Limit: 50, no possession limit

Shooting Hours for all Geese: Half-hour before sunrise to 2 p.m. Exception: Shooting hours are a half-hour before sunrise to sunset on all Saturdays and Wednesdays through the end of each season. Starting Nov. 30, all-day hunting is also allowed on Fridays and Sundays through the end of each season.

REGULAR DUCK SEASON

LOW PLAINS UNIT

Opens: Sept. 27 (residents only), Oct. 4 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 7

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

HIGH PLAINS UNIT

Opens: Sept. 27 (residents only), Oct. 4 (nonresidents)

Closes: Dec. 7

Opens: Dec. 13

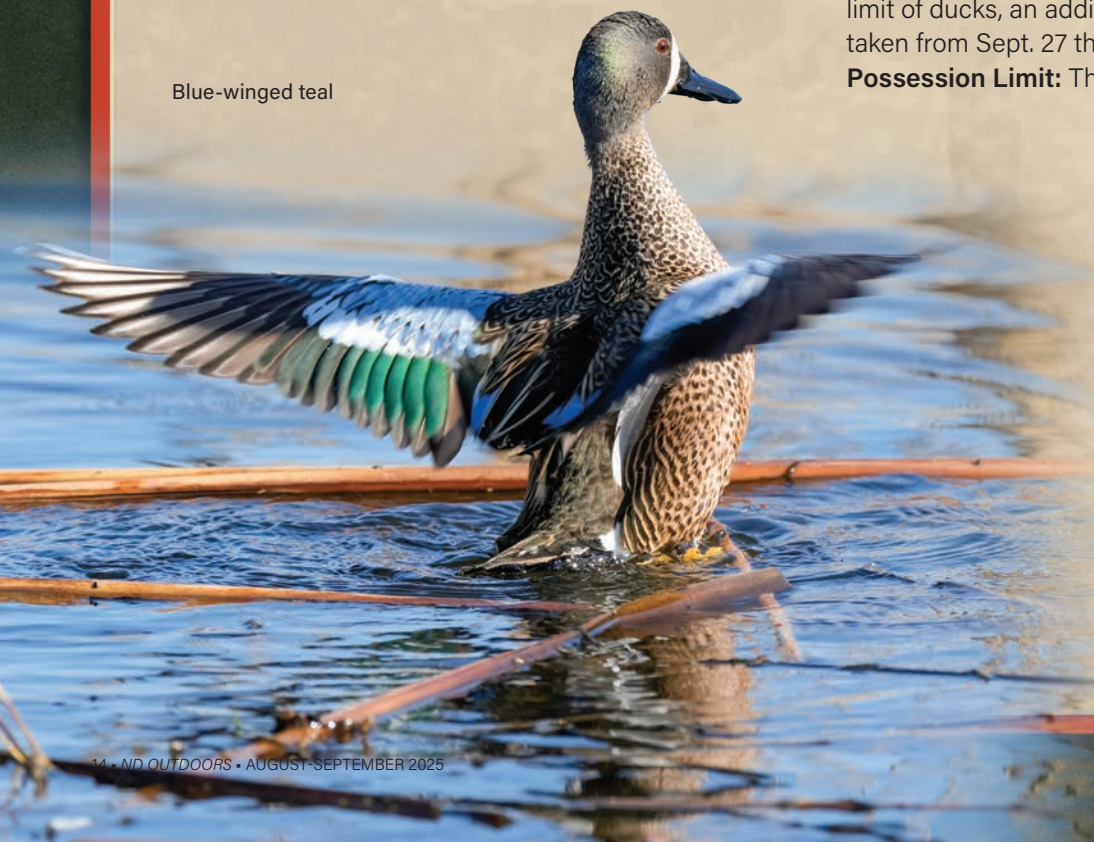
Closes: Jan. 4

Shooting-hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

Daily Limit: Six ducks (including mergansers), which may include no more than five mallards (two of which may be hens), three pintails, two redheads, two canvasbacks, one scaup and three wood ducks. In addition to the daily bag limit of ducks, an additional two blue-winged teal may be taken from Sept. 27 through Oct. 5.

Possession Limit: Three times the daily limit.

Blue-winged teal



SANDHILL CRANES

Opens: Zone 1 and 2: Sept. 20

Closes: Zone 1 and 2: Nov. 16

Daily Limit Zone 1: 3

Daily Limit Zone 2: 2

Possession Limit Zone 1: 9

Possession Limit Zone 2: 6

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to 2 p.m.

Exception: Shooting hours are a half-hour before sunrise to sunset on all Saturdays and Wednesdays beginning Sept. 27 through the end of each season.

The mid-continent population of sandhill cranes remains healthy heading into the 2025 fall hunting season. Each spring, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducts an aerial survey along Nebraska's central Platte River Valley. Although final 2025 numbers are still pending, preliminary data indicate another strong population estimate.

Over the past decade, this population has shown an upward trend. The three-year average population estimate, which guides regulatory decisions, continues to exceed management concern thresholds. As a result, North Dakota hunters can expect abundant opportunities to pursue sandhill cranes again in 2025.

The two zone — Zone 1 west of U.S. Highway 281 and Zone 2 east of U.S. Highway 281 — structure for sandhill cranes will continue. The two zones will have the same season lengths (58 days) and dates but will again have different bag limits. Zone 1 has a daily bag limit of three cranes; in Zone 2 the daily bag limit is two. The possession limit in Zone 1 is nine cranes, and six in Zone 2.

Nonresident sandhill crane hunters can pursue sandhill cranes with either a valid nonresident small game or waterfowl license, in addition to a crane permit. Nonresident sandhill crane permits are valid for use within the dates and zones of nonresident waterfowl or small game licenses selected during purchase.

Hunters are also reminded to be sure of their target before shooting, as federally endangered whooping cranes may be present throughout North Dakota during fall. Report all whooping crane sightings to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department in Bismarck at 701-328-6300.

John Palarski

DOVES

Opens: Sept. 1

Closes: Nov. 29

Daily Limit: 15

Possession Limit: 45

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

North Dakota continues to be an important breeding area for mourning doves within the Central Management Unit.

Field observations across the state suggest strong production and abundance this year. As with the previous season, favorable weather conditions, including timely spring rainfall across much of the state, supported successful nesting and likely resulted in solid recruitment.

While official data from the Game and Fish Department's late summer roadside counts are still pending for 2025, trends over the past five years have shown an upward trajectory in dove numbers. Furthermore, age ratios of juvenile to adult birds captured at statewide banding stations indicate productive breeding success this year.

Dove hunters can expect good to excellent hunting opportunities during early September, before cooler weather prompts migratory movement to the south. Scouting ahead of the season remains important to locate areas where birds are concentrated. Productive locations typically include harvested small grain or oil-seed fields situated near shelter belts or other stands of trees that provide cover. Proximity to water sources is also a key factor, as doves usually remain within a few miles of a water supply.

Eurasian collared doves continue to expand their range and are now common in nearly every city and small town in North Dakota. However, they are seldom found in rural areas and rarely harvested during typical dove hunts. Still, these birds may be taken during the dove hunting season and, if harvested, count toward the daily bag and possession limits along with mourning doves.

Some hunters may be randomly selected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to participate in a wing survey, which involves submitting one wing from each dove harvested early in the season for analysis. Additionally, hunters are reminded to check for leg bands on mourning doves and report any banded birds directly to the Bird Banding Laboratory at reportband.gov.

John Palarski

CROWS

Fall Season Opens: Aug. 16

Closes: Nov. 3

Spring Season Opens: March 14, 2026

Closes: April 26, 2026

Daily Limit: No limit on crows.

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

In addition to the crow season, crows may be taken when committing or about to commit depredations as specified in federal law.

SNIPE

Opens: Sept. 13

Closes: Nov. 30

Daily Limit: 8

Possession Limit: 24

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.

WOODCOCK

Opens: Sept. 20

Closes: Nov. 3

Daily Limit: 3

Possession Limit: 9

Shooting Hours: Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.



FURBEARERS

For more season details, refer to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov, or the 2025-65 Hunting and Trapping Guide.

Furbearer population trends are a mixed bag for this coming season. Coyote numbers are still good, but they trended downward in spring compared to the previous year and were 37% below their 20-year average. In areas where coyote numbers are down, foxes may be more plentiful, although their numbers remain largely suppressed by coyotes overall. Muskrats continue to be at the bottom of their population cycle and numbers will be similar to last year.

Department population data collected from river otter carcasses supported a slight increase in the harvest limit this coming season going from 25 to 30. As a reminder, the river otter trapping season is for residents only with a bag limit of one per trapper.

Population trends based on the rural mail carrier survey for other furbearers were a mix of increases and decreases compared to the previous year, illustrating the typical fluctuations expected in wildlife. Badger and beaver indices were low all around compared to last year

and below their long-term averages. Mink and raccoons saw increases in the eastern half of the state compared to the previous year but were still below their long-term averages. Skunks were up compared to the previous year in central North Dakota, particularly the Missouri Coteau region, and statewide their numbers were similar to their 20-year average.

Last year, hunters and trappers took 42 bobcats (36 in Zone 1 and six in Zone 2), 30 fishers, and seven mountain lions in Zone 1 (one in the early-season and six in the late-season). Population trends for these species are estimated using data collected from the carcasses of those animals taken during the hunting and trapping seasons. Trends indicate bobcat and fisher numbers are up slightly compared to the previous year and similar to their long-term averages. Mountain lions trended downward.

Another change to regulations this year was the extension of the night hunting season for coyotes and foxes from March 15 to May 31. Hunters are reminded that night hunting for coyotes and foxes must be done exclusively on foot. And, that care should be taken to properly identify your target before shooting, whether hunting during the day or night. At any given time, there is the possibility of a wolf or domestic dog wandering the state, which at first glance can look coyote-like if extra care isn't taken to properly identify them first.

Because many furbearer species are difficult to survey due to their secretive nature and naturally low densities, we continue to encourage anyone to report their sightings of black bears, bobcats, fishers, martens, mountain lions, river otters, swift foxes and weasels. Information about sightings can be submitted online at gf.nd.gov/hunting/furbearers/furbearer-observation.

Stephanie Tucker, Game Management Section Leader, Bismarck

MOUNTAIN LION HUNTING

Zone 1 (early) Opens: Aug. 29

Closes: Nov. 23

Zone 1 (late) Opens: Nov. 24

Closes: March 31, 2026

Zone 2 Opens: Aug. 29

Closes: March 31, 2026

The overall harvest limit on mountain lions in Zone 1 is once again 15, with an early season limit of eight, and a late-season limit of seven (or three females, whichever comes first). If the early season ends before eight mountain lions are taken, a conditional season could reopen after the late season, if the late season limit is reached prior to March 25.

There is no mountain lion harvest limit in Zone 2.

Mountain lions may be hunted statewide by residents using legal firearms or archery equipment during regular hunting hours. Beginning Nov. 24, mountain lions may also be hunted by pursuing with dogs. Cable devices and traps are not allowed. The limit is one lion per hunter. Kittens (lions with visible spots), or females accompanied by kittens, may not be taken.

Hunters must either contact the local game warden or Department field office or register their harvest online via their account and make arrangements to have their lion inspected and tagged.

RIVER OTTER TRAPPING OR CABLE DEVICES

Opens: Nov. 24

Closes: March 15, 2026

Limit of one per person. Total harvest limit of 30 statewide.

Trappers must either contact the local game warden or Department field office or register their harvest online via their account to report their harvest within 12 hours and make arrangements to have their river otter tagged. For more information, see the North Dakota 2025-26 Hunting and Trapping Guide.

Mountain lion



FISHER TRAPPING OR CABLE DEVICES

Opens: Nov. 24

Closes: Nov. 30

Open statewide except for the Turtle Mountains region, defined as the area bordered on the west by ND Highway 14, on the north by the Canadian border, on the east by ND Highway 30, and on the south by ND Highway 5. Limit one per person. Trappers must contact the local game warden or Department field office or register their harvest online via their account to report their harvest within 12 hours and make arrangements to have their fisher tagged. For more information, see the North Dakota 2025-26 Hunting and Trapping Guide.

BEAVER AND RACCOON TRAPPING, HUNTING OR UNDERWATER CABLE DEVICES

Open: Year-round.

For more information, see the North Dakota 2025-26 Hunting and Trapping Guide

BEAVER AND RACCOON CABLE DEVICES ON LAND

Opens: Nov. 24

Closes: March 15, 2026

From March 16, 2026, through May 10, 2026, cable devices must be within 50 feet of water; and must be no more than 4 inches off the ground.

Beaver dams may be dismantled when their presence causes property damage.

WEASEL TRAPPING, HUNTING OR CABLE DEVICES

Trapping Opens: Oct. 25

Hunting and Cable Devices Opens: Nov. 24

Closes: March 15, 2026

Weasels may be hunted statewide with rimfire or pre-charged pneumatic air guns of .22 caliber or smaller and archery equipment.

MUSKRAT AND MINK TRAPPING, HUNTING OR CABLE DEVICES

Trapping Opens: Oct. 25

Hunting and Cable Devices Opens: Nov. 24

Closes: May 10, 2026

Muskrat huts may be opened for insertion of traps or cable devices; however, the huts must be restored to their approximate original condition to prevent freeze-up.



Badger

Beginning March 16, 2026, non-floating colony traps must be under at least 2 inches of water, and trapping or using cable devices on the outside of any muskrat house or structure of any size is prohibited; traps may be placed completely inside a muskrat house or structure of any size; foothold traps must be submerged under water at all times or must have a protective covering (except when used on float sets); body-gripping traps used in water can have no more than 2 inches of the trap above the water or must have a protective covering.

Beginning May 1, 2026, float sets must have a protective covering.

Mink and muskrat may be hunted statewide with rimfire cartridges or pre-charged pneumatic air guns of .22 caliber or smaller and archery equipment.

BOBCAT TRAPPING, HUNTING OR CABLE DEVICES

Zone 1: Nov. 8

Cable Devices Opens: Nov. 24

Closes: March 15, 2026

Beginning Nov. 24, bobcats may also be trapped using cable devices and hunted by pursuing with dogs.

The pelt and carcass of each bobcat taken in Zone 1 must be presented to Department personnel for inspection and tagging prior to sale or transfer of possession, but no later than 14 days after the close of the season.

Zone 2: Nov. 24

Closes: March 15, 2026

Limit is one bobcat per person in Zone 2 and total harvest limit is eight.

In Zone 2, anyone who harvests a bobcat must either contact the local game warden or Department field office or register their harvest online via their account to report their harvest within 12 hours and make arrangements to have their bobcat tagged.

For more information, see the 2025-26 Hunting and Trapping Guide.

RED FOX, GRAY FOX, COYOTE TRAPPING, HUNTING OR CABLE DEVICES

Day Hunting and Trapping Open: Year-round

Night Hunting and Cable Devices Opens: Nov. 24

Closes: March 15, 2026

Red fox, gray fox and coyote may be hunted at any hour from Nov. 24 through May 31, 2026. Any hunter who engages in the hunting of red fox, gray fox or coyote during the time from a half-hour after sunset to a half-hour before sunrise, must hunt exclusively on foot.

Hunters can use night vision, artificial light, thermal vision, and infrared light equipment during the night hunting season. Hunters are prohibited from using archery equipment (including crossbows) for night hunting until after the close of the archery deer season.

BADGER TRAPPING, HUNTING OR CABLE DEVICES

Hunting and Trapping Open: Year-round

Cable Devices Opens: Nov. 24

Closes: March 15, 2026

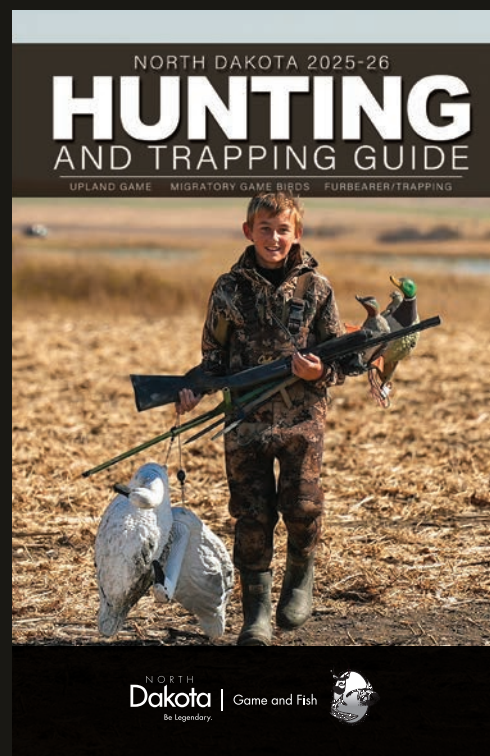
SMALL GAME, WATERFOWL, FURBEARER REGULATIONS

North Dakota's 2025 small game, waterfowl and furbearer regulations are set, and most season structures are similar to last year.

Noteworthy items include:

- Opening day for ducks, geese, coots and mergansers for North Dakota residents is Sept. 27. Nonresidents may begin hunting waterfowl in North Dakota Oct. 4.
- The number of nonresident waterfowl zones increased to six, and a statewide nonresident waterfowl license is no longer available.
- A waterfowl habitat restoration stamp is required to hunt waterfowl.
- Migratory game birds can be pursued with a floating craft. If the craft is propelled by a motor, it must be at rest with the motor turned off.
- Fridays will be included in extended shooting hours for geese, beginning Nov. 28.
- River otter harvest limit increased to 30.
- Night hunting for fox and coyote is extended to May 31.

In addition to these changes for 2025, in 2026 the resident-only waterfowl dates will increase from the first seven days to the first nine days. Hunters and trappers can find upland game, migratory game bird and furbearer/trapping.



RAP (REPORT ALL POACHERS) PROGRAM. This program encourages people to report wildlife violations, remain anonymous if they prefer, and receive monetary rewards for convictions based on their information. Anonymous callers will be given a special code number and are not required to give their name. Rewards range from \$100 to \$1,000 depending on the nature and seriousness of the crime. **Call 701-328-9921.** Call this number only to report game and fish violations. The reward fund is supported by private donations. If you wish to donate to the RAP program, tax deductible contributions can be sent to RAP, Box 1091, Bismarck, ND, 58502-1091.

IF DOGS COULD
TALK, THERE'S NO
DOUBT IN MY MIND
THAT CHASING
PHEASANTS IN
DECEMBER WOULD
BE HIS SELF-
PROCLAIMED
FAVORITE.



Cayla and Fins.

the BIRDS we favor

AN ODE TO PHEASANTS

BY CAYLA BENDEL

When I moved to North Dakota in 2017, for a job with none other than Pheasants Forever, I had just one pheasant to my name, and not much of an affinity for the notoriously colored, nonnative bird. I'd always kind of associated pheasant hunting as a rich man's sport. Waterfowl and archery hunting had my heart at the time.

But I hadn't yet set foot on this vast North Dakota landscape. My heartbeat hadn't yet been frozen (nor my eyelashes) from that moment between point and flush on a late-season day in the cattails.

And I hadn't yet felt the way I do when feathers hit hand, begrudgingly gifted from the clutches of my beloved Finners.

New to North Dakota, the workforce, pointing dogs, wing shooting, the uplands, marriage and eventually motherhood, pheasants found their way into my life not because of a profound admiration for long tails or red and green hues, although that came, but because of the formative years I got to spend hunting them.

Regardless of how it started, you can now find me right there with the rest of the rooster connoisseurs, touting that they're smarter than they



look, that trudging through cattails in December builds character, and that their signature flush and cackle is unmatched for excitement among game birds.

But if I had to boil it down, I think for me, an ode to pheasants, is really an ode to Fins.

If dogs could talk, there's no doubt in my mind that chasing pheasants in December would be his self-proclaimed favorite.

I've had the privilege to hunt with some die-hard upland hunters and bird dog junkies who have commented on his ability to hunt late-season pheasants, specifically to locate roosters in an endless sea of cattails. I just smile big and agree, accepting none of the credit. I think Fins was just born for this specific life, in this moment of ours.

It's nothing short of impressive to watch Fins tremble on point for the often several minutes it takes me to navigate to whatever tangled mess of cattails and deadfall he's pinned a cagey rooster in.

You too would have a newfound respect for ditch parrots if you could watch Fins track a specific bird for over 500 yards that has slyly circled back behind us. While impressive, these late-season birds that have seemingly seen it all are no match for Fins.

And I can assure you nobody can deny a piece of my warm, homemade pheasant pot pie after a bone-chilling evening on the wind-whipped prairie. I might even look away if Fins wants to sneak a bite.

So, you can turn your nose up at the measly ring-necked pheasant, mocking its gaudy colors and favoring "harder" to hunt gamebirds in "wilder" landscapes. Or you can put aside judgments and join in the pursuit. It's shaping up to be an excellent year for it based on the spring crowing counts.

I know where Fins and I will be come October. But I have a hunch I won't be seeing too many of you when the snowdrifts are knee-high and the temps below zero.

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

AN ODE TO SHARPTAILS

BY RON WILSON

Sharp-tailed grouse have long held a degree of sway in North Dakota over other popular upland game birds because of their deep-running roots.

Unlike Hungarian partridge that got a toehold into the state after filtering in from neighboring Canadian provinces in the 1920s, and ring-necked pheasants that were first introduced in 1910, sharp-tails have seemingly been here forever, for thousands of years prior to European settlement.

I dig that about sharp-tailed grouse, that they're native to a vast landscape that has changed significantly in some areas and less so in others. Like little bluestem that colors the prairie reddish when the native grass matures, sharp-tailed grouse belong here. Found today in every county in the state, they are icons of the Northern Plains.

While these hardy birds are feathered from head to toe to help them survive during North Dakota's leanest months, I favor them in early fall when Mother Nature is at her best. Those days when a flannel shirt is plenty in the morning but shed not long after that. Those days that we fantasize about equally in summer and winter when we surrender indoors to the heat, humidity and cold.

It also doesn't go unappreciated that the grouse are their most civil in early fall. They often hold tighter than we deserve and frequently flush individually rather than collectively, providing a fair shake to the hunter (me) who often has little to brag about once the smoke clears.

I understand this early season conduct has much to do with the coveys being made up of young, first-year birds not yet hip to the program. But that will change. By season's end, or maybe just a month or more removed from the opener depending on the hunting pressure, they're just



Ron and Larry.

enough and my hunting partners and I know full well there is no need to bust through the cattail-ringed wetlands because it's habitat the grouse ignore. Instead, we stick to the rolling terrain, making sure to hit hilltop flat spots where we know the sharptails dance in spring and loaf during the hunting season.

And if it's hot, and our flannel shirts are off, stuffed into game bags with a dead grouse or two, or tied around our waists, we hit the buffaloberry patches where the berries are as red as lipstick and the tangle of branches offer cool shade for the birds.

While there are times it all comes together, and we find birds and shoot relatively straight. There are those hunts we don't figure things right and never shoulder our shotguns, which isn't the end of the world because it's often difficult to beat the view.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

as likely to flush well out of shotgun range when you're in the field or simply wing it to the next quarter-section when you shut the door on your pickup.

No matter, I will still make my way into the field and hunt. Similar to pheasant and partridge hunters, I would guess, we hunt with the hope — fingers crossed — that not all the birds flushed wild, that there might just be a straggler or two because we've seen it play out that way before.

Plus, much of the beauty of hunting sharp-tailed grouse is the prairie playing field. The hiking is easy

**MUCH OF THE BEAUTY OF
HUNTING SHARP-TAILED
GROUSE IS THE PRAIRIE
PLAYING FIELD.**



WORKING WITH PARTNERS



More Private Land Open To Sportsmen acres will be available to hunters this fall compared to last year. That's always good news for the walk-in access program that has been a fixture in rural North Dakota for nearly three decades.

Kevin Kading, North Dakota Game and Fish Department private land section leader, provided an update on the PLOTS program in mid-July with an eye on the upcoming hunting season.

NDO: Let's start with what hunters really want to know about the PLOTS program. How many PLOTS acres will be found across North Dakota's rural landscape this fall?

Kading: At the time of this interview in mid-July, we're at 876,000 acres. We anticipate being around 880,000 acres sometime in the next month or so when the hunting season starts. Heading into fall 2024, we were at about 836,000 acres, so roughly 880,000 acres is a nice, sizeable increase for the year. One thing to add is that not only did we have a nice sizable increase in acres this year, but we had a nice addition of about 5,000 acres of new grass planted. That's new habitat that's going to go in for 10 to 15 to, 20 years in some cases. So, these are nice additions to the PLOTS program. Kind of the premier PLOTS tracts, I guess you could call them. Those are the ones that they're a little higher dollar figure for us, but they're also paying dividends long-term.

NDO: What do you attribute to pretty significant gains in acres the last couple of years?

Kading: There's been a few things. We've increased our funding authority, so we have a little bit more money out there for the program. We've also promoted the program quite a bit more in different parts of the state, and we added some staff in the last legislative session so there are more boots on the ground talking to landowners. So, all of that equates to more acres on the landscape.

NDO: Doesn't this increase in acres also indicate that landowners around the state are still interested in the PLOTS program?

Kading: We still have a lot of interest in the program. As it stands right now, there's about 100,000-plus acres of what we call prospects. These are people who have reached out to us either on their own or through a promotion that we've done or some type of outreach ... they've expressed interest and we're working through that list as we speak. That's in addition to the 876,000 acres we have now. Even so, doesn't mean that every one of those acres will qualify for the program. Or maybe some of the landowners may decide the program is not for them. But there's good interest in the program and people are still interested in pursuing PLOTS, which is a good thing.

NDO: Is putting 1 million acres of PLOTS on the landscape still a legitimate goal?

Kading: Yes. We have a goal of reaching 1 million acres by 2028, and I think we're going to get there. It's not as easy as it was back in that 2007-08 timeframe when we had 1 million acres in the PLOTS program because things have changed on the landscape. But again, with all the additional effort, manpower and funding going into the program, I think we can get there, even though it takes a lot more work than it did back in the day.

NDO: North Dakota's Outdoor Heritage Fund was established in 2013 as a multi-million-dollar program to provide grants to state agencies, tribal governments, political subdivisions, and nonprofit organizations, with higher priority given to projects that enhance conservation practices in this state by supporting one or more statutorily identified direc-



tives. The Outdoor Heritage Fund may receive up to \$40 million per biennium from oil and gas production tax revenue. The Department's private land initiative has thrown its hat into this ring for OHF funding, but it's been a while, correct?

Kading: In December of 2024, the Department hosted the North Dakota Habitat and Access Summit, and we received a lot of input before, during and after from hunters, landowners and people who attended. And some of the recommendations were that the Game and Fish Department should pursue the Outdoor Heritage Fund and use that to bolster the PLOTS program. And so, we did just that. In fact, we actively put together a grant and in June it was awarded and that's additional dollars that will go into the PLOTS program for long-term — 10- to 20-year agreements — in the western part of the state. In addition to that, we've partnered with a lot of different partners. Pheasants Forever has a nice OHF grant that they received this last grant round as well, which will provide additional incentives to people to put their land into PLOTS. We're working with Ducks Unlimited and some other partners as well and when you couple all those things together, it equates to some pretty good opportunities for landowners out there and great opportunities to put more habitat on the landscape and provide more access.

NDO: So, this Outdoor Heritage Fund grant is just for the western part of the state?

Kading: This OHF grant that we received is mostly just for the western part of the state ... it's for land that already has good quality habitat, like our badland's tracts, riparian areas, creeks and woody draws that are already good hunting habitat. While that will be a PLOTS access payment, we're working with partners like the North Dakota Wildlife Federation and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation to incentivize that even more to add a little kicker payment on top of their PLOTS payment. So, that was the emphasis for that grant. That doesn't mean we couldn't go into other parts of the state, but that was one that we felt would be well received by the Outdoor Heritage Fund board and well received by producers in that part of the state. The grant was awarded in July, finalized and we're actually doing the paperwork now. So those acres will be starting to be added to the program later this fall, or probably next year for hunters to be able to access.

NDO: Considering the growing need to put more wildlife habitat on the landscape and provide additional access to hunters, what role does the PLOTS program play in alleviating these concerns?

Kading: When we were at peak years of CRP, habitat was in better condition. There was more of it available, and the PLOTS program at that time focused more on just acquiring access to those lands. And in the last 10 years we've focused more on habitat development and these partnerships to put more habitat on the landscape. But still, it's really a small dent in the big picture. It's going to take more than the PLOTS program to get that done. Another point of the summit was how can we get more creative? How can the state of North Dakota and hunters and landowners get involved? Not just the North Dakota Game Fish Department with the PLOTS program. So, we all have to pitch in and figure out ways to do that. Again, that's where these partnerships come in, where the Outdoor Heritage Fund grants can come in. There's other dollars, other funds and other grants available that we're exploring new ideas, trying to get more creative. I'm trying to think a little differently than just the PLOTS program in terms of getting more habitat on the landscape.

NDO: Not all PLOTS tracts look the same. What do you say to hunters who wonder why some acres are even enrolled in PLOTS because they don't harbor the habitat some people were expecting?


Kading: PLOTS is meant to be for a lot of different species, and it varies depending on what part of the state you're in. Sometimes hunters wonder why we enroll a piece of cropland in the program and it might be because it's a good waterfowl hunting access area, or there might be some wetlands in the middle of that field that offers some waterfowl hunting or some late season pheasant hunting opportunities. In other cases, we wouldn't probably enroll those areas if it wasn't in the right spot or in the right part of the state. Other areas are exclusively set up more for deer and pheasant or upland type hunting. Those areas are going to be more grasslands or more of those woody areas or have a wetland, cattails component. It really does depend on what part of the state you're in, what species that we're enrolling that piece of property for. But I can say that there's a reason we put it in the program. It's because there's some hunting value out there for some species, it just might not be the one that you're looking for that particular day.





LICENSES **INCREASED** OUT WEST

BY RON WILSON



Because not all pronghorn hunting units are created equal, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department made available 45 more licenses than last year despite a decline in the overall population.

"We're going to have 1,310 licenses available for the 2025 season. Although we saw an overall decrease in the population, many units were relatively the same so we're able to issue the same number of licenses that we did in 2024. And we were able to bump up a few units that saw population increases," said Bruce Stillings, Department big game management supervisor in Dickinson.

Stillings said the number of pronghorn licenses to make available to hunters came after Department personnel conducted their annual aerial survey from June 28 to July 10. Five teams scattered across western North Dakota classified more than 6,300 animals in about 1,300 different pronghorn groups. That data was used to generate buck to doe and doe to fawn ratios.

"The population performance among pronghorn in different management regions varied. In the northwestern part of the state, pronghorn were down, and in the northern badlands, hunting units 10A, 1A and 1D, pronghorn were down," he said. "But in the southern badlands, hunting units 2A, 2B, 3A and 3B, numbers were pretty much the same as they were in 2024. In the Bowman Management Region, hunting unit 4A, numbers were up from last year, while they were relatively the same compared to 2024 east of U.S. Highway 85. So, there's some variability in how pronghorn did from 2024 to 2025."

Looking at the big picture, rewinding to summer and early fall in 2024, Stillings said the Department received a number of reports of sick or dead pronghorns. It was determined from samples collected from dead animals from the Dickinson, New England and South Heart areas that epizootic hemorrhagic disease was the culprit. EHD typically affects white-tailed deer but can also affect pronghorn, mule deer, elk and bighorn sheep to a

lesser degree.

"But last year we did document more pronghorn deaths due to EHD than any of the previous 25 years. So, that's kind of the first piece of the puzzle that EHD can take adults and fawns during that summer period and early fall when it's hot and dry," Stillings said.

Unfortunately, EHD can also have an impact on the next year's fawn production from adult females as they may have lost a fetus in the early stages of pregnancy or didn't get pregnant at all.

"When we did our count, and observed over 6,300 animals, the big takeaway was the lack of fawns on the ground, the low fawn to doe ratio of 39 fawns per 100 does," Stillings said. "The EHD outbreak in 2024 looks like it had a severe impact on fawn production in 2025."

On a more positive note, Stillings said the buck to doe ratio was 31 bucks per 100 does, which is a very healthy level, and the same ratio observed in 2024.

Licenses were made available this fall in all of the 17 traditional hunting units, plus a new unit, 17A, which includes Emmons County and portions of Logan and McIntosh counties west of ND Highway 3.

Stillings said unit 17A is considered a low-density area and it's been that way for the last 20 years. Ten licenses were made available, five for landowners and five for general lottery license holders.

"There's been interest from local landowners that they'd like to see a limited amount of hunting to take advantage of these animals that exit the population naturally. And they'd sure like to see some hunters be able to utilize those animals," Stillings said. "With that low density, I would certainly want to have some local intel where these little groups are at, maybe have some access to private land worked out. But it is a pretty unique hunting opportunity we'll have this year."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

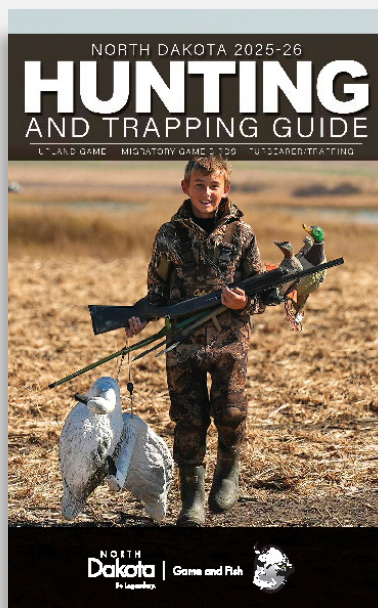


BUFFALOBERRY PATCH

New Hunting, Trapping Guide

Hunters and trappers can find the North Dakota 2025-26 Hunting and Trapping Guide, which includes upland game, migratory game bird and furbearer hunting/trapping regulations and other information, by visiting the state Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov. Printed guides are available at the usual license vendor locations.

The 50-plus page guide also features a colored duck identification guide, aquatic nuisance species information, Tom Roster's Nontoxic Shot Lethality Table and more.



The federal duck stamp costs \$25. An additional \$4 processing fee is added.

This year's stamps are available for electronic purchase through the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, or license vendors registered with the department's licensing system.

Get HIP Registered

Migratory bird hunters of all ages need to register with the Harvest Information Program prior to hunting ducks, geese, swans, mergansers, coots, cranes, snipe, doves and woodcock. Hunters must register in each state they are licensed to hunt.

Hunters can HIP certify when purchasing a license by visiting the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov.

Those who registered to hunt during the spring light goose conservation order in North Dakota do not have to register with HIP again, as it is required only once per year.

HIP registration is a cooperative program designed to determine a sample of hunters to measure harvest of migratory birds for management purposes.

Waterfowl Habitat Stamp, Federal Duck Stamp Requirements

A new North Dakota law requires all waterfowl hunters, regardless of age, to have a state-issued waterfowl habitat restoration stamp in possession while afield this fall. Waterfowl include ducks, geese, swans, mergansers and coots.

Senate bill 2216 requires every resident and nonresident waterfowl hunter to purchase an electronic waterfowl habitat restoration stamp for \$5. Money generated from e-stamp sales is earmarked for the Waterfowl Habitat Improvement Fund, which is aimed at improving and restoring waterfowl habitat and supporting youth hunting programs.

In addition, a federal duck stamp is required for waterfowl hunters 16 and older beginning Sept. 1. The federal electronic duck stamp is valid for the entire waterfowl hunting season. A physical stamp will be mailed in March 2026 to individuals who purchased the e-stamp.

Those interested in buying physical federal duck stamps can purchase them at many U.S. Postal Service offices or the Amplex website, and Amplex should be used for hunters wanting to support conservation by purchasing extra duck stamps.

Upland Game Wing Survey

Hunters can help in the effort to manage upland game birds in the state by collecting feathers from harvested birds and sending in wing envelopes.

Birds included in the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's upland game wing survey, which has been in practice for decades, are ring-necked pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, gray partridge (commonly referred to as Hungarian partridge), turkeys and ruffed grouse.

Collecting enough pheasant samples is typically never a problem, but securing enough sharptail and partridge feathers can be.

Game and Fish biologists will take as many sharptail and partridge feathers as they can get because the more collected, the better the data. Biologists can determine sex and age ratios from wings and tail feathers, survival, nesting

UPLAND GAME HUNTERS

We examine and measure feathers and/or legs from pheasant, grouse and partridge harvested by hunters to determine age and sex of each bird. We use this information to assess reproduction rates and sex ratios in our upland game populations. By contributing proper samples, you can help us monitor our upland bird populations to help improve future management of these species. Thank you!

DIRECTIONS: Place wings, feathers and legs in inner envelope, place up to 3 inner envelopes in this envelope and mail. Samples used by species are as follows:

Pheasant	Sharp-tailed Grouse	Partridge
Wing: cut at line B	Feathers: from top of head	Feather: cut at line B
Lower leg	2 winged tail feathers	Entire wing cut at line B

PLEASE DO NOT WRAP IN PLASTIC OR PLASTIC BAGS!

COUNTY WHERE SHOT: _____ DATE SHOT: _____

Pheasant _____ Sharp-tailed Grouse _____ Partridge _____

Name and Address of Hunter: _____

Check Here If You Want More Envelopes: ☐

success, hatch dates and overall production.

What biologists learn from the samples is vital to helping manage North Dakota's upland game birds.

Hunters interested in receiving wing envelopes should visit the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov, or contact the Department's main office in Bismarck at 701-328-6300 or email ndgf@nd.gov.

Hunters can also get wing envelopes at Game and Fish District offices in Devils Lake, Jamestown, Riverdale, Dickinson, Williston and Lonetree Wildlife Management Area near Harvey.

WMA Equipment Restrictions

While it was legal for hunters to place tree stands, ground blinds and game cameras on state wildlife management areas in late August, they are reminded that equipment set out prior to that date, or left on a WMA after January 31, is considered abandoned property and is subject to removal.

In addition, an equipment registration number, or the owner's name, address and telephone number, must be displayed on all equipment requiring identification.

Owners can generate an equipment registration number by visiting My Account at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov. One registration number will be issued that can be used on all equipment that requires identification.

Fall Fire Danger Index

As hunting seasons and other fall activities get underway, hunters and other outdoor enthusiasts need to be aware of the daily fire danger index.

There is a lot of fuel on the landscape, and hunters are urged to keep up with the daily rural fire danger index, which is issued by the National Weather Service, to alert the public to conditions that may be conducive to the accidental starting or spread of fires.

In addition, county governments have the authority to adopt penalties for violations of county restrictions related to burning bans. These restrictions apply regardless of the daily fire danger index and remain in place until each county's commission rescinds the ban.

Hunters should consider bringing along a shovel, fire extinguisher, extra water and heavy fabric for putting out accidental fires. However, individuals who are not trained firefighters should not attempt to fight a fire that is out of control. Instead, contact the nearest rural fire department immediately.

Also, hunters should stay clear of tall vegetation when parking a vehicle.

The fire danger index can change daily depending on temperature, wind and precipitation forecasts. If the index reaches the high, very high or extreme category, open burning is prohibited; off-road travel with a motorized vehicle is prohibited, except for people engaged in a trade, business or occupation where it is required; and smoking is restricted to inside of vehicles, hard surface areas, homes or in approved buildings.

Information on current fire danger indexes is available at NDResponse.gov.

PLOTS Guide Online

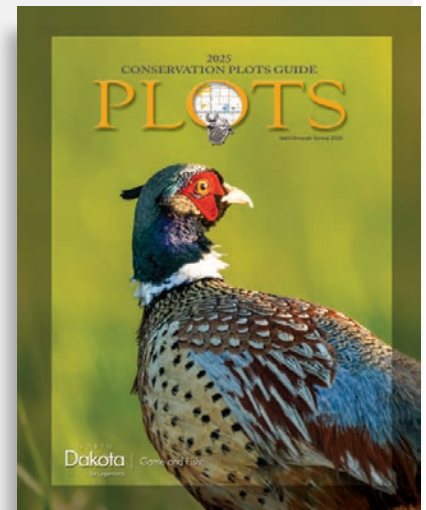
The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen Guide for 2025 is now available online at the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov.

The guide will feature about 880,000 PLOTS acres. Because PLOTS tracts can be added or removed from the program throughout the year, hunters are encouraged to use the Game and Fish mobile app or other mapping and browser-based applications to locate and identify these tracts. Map sheets are updated weekly on the Department's website.

The PLOTS guide features maps highlighting these walk-in areas, identified in the field by inverted triangular yellow signs, as well as other public lands.

To maximize the use of hunter dollars, fewer signs will be placed on PLOTS tracts in the future. The cost savings will be directed to the addition of more habitat and access.

The free printed PLOTS guides are available at most license vendors and other locations throughout the state. The guides are not available by mail, so hunters will have to pick one up at a local vendor or Game and Fish offices or print individual maps from the website.



Pull to the Right

North Dakota hunters need to be cautious of farm, ranch and other traffic when traveling on rural roads.

Fall is a busy time in the state as farmers and ranchers are harvesting crops, moving cattle, hauling bales and moving heavy machinery. Knowing this, hunters driving around on country roads should slow down when meeting another vehicle and pull well to the right when topping a hill.

To maintain positive landowner/hunter relations, Game and Fish Department officials said hunters should move to the right side of the road to allow wide farm vehicles to pass, park vehicles in a place that will not block a roadway, field approach or gate, pick up trash and empty shells, and not clean game in the road ditch or approach.



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.

Morris Earns WMA Award

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department recognized Mike Morris, with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, in July with its Wildlife Management Area Partnership Award

"It seems that Mike always works on very challenging and politically impacted projects ... and he always found a way to mitigate and lessen the impacts to wildlife and wildlife habitat," said Bill Haase, Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief. "Mike is always thinking about how to lessen the impact on wildlife habitat and gain something to make the situation more palatable, whether on a WMA or corps-managed lands. Mike is also very active in setting up our annual coordination meetings between our agencies and is always a champion of working together and building strong working relationships."

STAFF NOTES



Warden Skuza Retires

Ken Skuza, longtime North Dakota Game and Fish Department game warden, retired after 31 years with the agency.

Skuza started his career with the Department in the Kenmare enforcement district and spent the last 24 years in Riverdale.

"Ken was extremely hardworking and was dedicated to serving North Dakota, the Game and Fish Department, and those who enjoy hunting, fishing, boating, and trapping in the state. Ken's knowledge and experience will be missed," said Scott Winkelman, enforcement division chief.



Assistant Wildlife Chief Named

Levi Jacobson was hired in August as the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's assistant wildlife division chief.

Jacobson started his career with the Department in 2006 as a seasonal wildlife employee in Devils Lake. Before moving to his new position, Jacobson was a wildlife resource management supervisor in Bismarck for about four years.



Palarski Hired for Supervisor Role

John Palarski was named migratory game bird management supervisor for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department in August.

Palarski was hired in fall 2024 as the Department's migratory game bird biologist before making the transition.

BACKCAST



Ron Wilson

More than a century ago when it was reported that he was seriously ill and maybe dead, Mark Twain replied to the rumor that “the reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.”

Those same words, 128 years later, can be applied to published accounts earlier in summer that sage grouse in southwestern North Dakota are extinct.

Although Game and Fish Department biologists counted zero males on leks in spring 2025, an unfortunate first since the beginning of survey work in the 1950s, the Bureau of Land Management did observe a hen on a former lek. And Game and Fish also received verified observations of individual sage grouse remaining in Bowman County, according to Jesse Kolar, Game and Fish Department upland game management supervisor.

“Sage grouse certainly aren’t completely extinct nor extirpated, the more appropriate term for a population blinking out from a portion of the range,” Kolar said.

Historically, Department personnel found over 40 unique sage grouse lekking locations in the western part of the state, many of which were used year after year.

“The most unique leks used in a single year was 22 in the early 1980s, which coincided with intensive helicopter lek searches. We found sage grouse males on 15-20 leks following that period until 2009,” Kolar said. “In the early 1980s, we were counting 276-350 male sage grouse annually. Our peak was recorded in 1953, when biologists counted 533 males on 17 leks.”

While sage grouse numbers have declined slowly in the state since the 1950s, the declines became more precipitous around 2007, and the population ceased the cyclical pattern of peaks and troughs.

“Based on the steady declines since 2007, our population has probably not been self-sustaining for nearly 20 years. Most people familiar with sage grouse and sagebrush habitat loss should be surprised that our population lasted as long as it did, and this zero count of males has been fore-

seen for some time,” Kolar said. “That’s why we attempted a Hail Mary translocation project from 2017-21, hoping to slow the bleeding. Ultimately, it showed that it would take much larger efforts to reverse population declines, including large-scale sagebrush habitat projects and continued translocations.”

Currently, since zero breeding males were documented in spring, Kolar said southwestern North Dakota’s sage grouse population is now made up primarily of straggling individuals, or those wandering through from Montana or South Dakota populations in proximity to our state border, which are also declining.

In 2024, I encountered one of these straggling individuals just across the North Dakota border in Montana where I was able to sneak within 50 yards of a lone male.

I wrote: “Through binoculars at this range, it appears as if the bird is dancing at my feet, strutting just for me ... And, in a sense, it is because the big male, driven by photoperiod and the instinctive need to mate, to help perpetuate this century-driven ritual, sadly has the entire dance floor to himself.”

The sage grouse dance floors in southwestern North Dakota are empty, or nearly so, for a number of reasons, including disease and the fragmentation of sagebrush habitat caused by human development. These birds, it’s long been understood, are fundamentally tied to great big areas of predominantly undisturbed sagebrush and grasslands. Because so little of this habitat exists today, Kolar isn’t holding his breath for this iconic bird.

“Instead of holding on to false hope for sage grouse ever coming back, it’d be more practical to focus on the same pattern — lower peaks and deeper troughs — that is currently occurring for our more widespread, grassland-dependent species like sharp-tailed grouse, pronghorn, and nongame species like chestnut-collared longspurs and Western meadowlarks ... We should protect what we have left for those species,” Kolar said.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



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your address, call 701-328-6300 or
go to gf.nd.gov/buy-apply.

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department made available 1,600 mule deer buck licenses for the 2025 season. While this buck isn't so tough to spot while hiding in late summer in a sunflower field in western North Dakota, a mule deer buck license for the gun season remains one the most difficult licenses to draw.

PHOTO BY JESSE KOLAR

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