

NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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North Dakota’s deer gun season opened on Nov. 7, running for 16 ½ days. The deer muzzleloader season opens on Nov. 28, the day after Thanksgiving.

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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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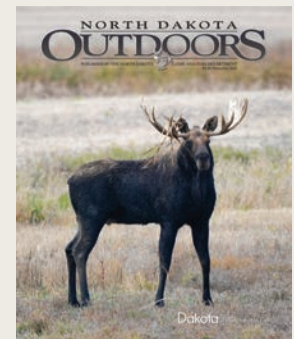
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Front Cover

A bull moose pauses in early October somewhere in McLean County a week prior to the opening weekend of North Dakota's regular moose hunting season.

PHOTO BY ASHLEY PETERSON, BISMARCK.

MY 2 CENTS

from
The

DIRECTOR

If there's one constant in North Dakota's outdoors, it's that change is always somewhere on the horizon. Whether it's the turn of the leaves or a new line in the regulation's booklet, we're reminded that wildlife management is a living, breathing process — one that never truly stands still.

Two topics have taken center stage at recent advisory board meetings: the desire to see more deer on the landscape and the pros and cons of the new zoning structure for nonresident waterfowl hunters. Both come from the same place — a deep love for North Dakota's hunting heritage and a shared responsibility to keep it strong.

When it comes to deer, nobody disagrees on the goal. Hunters, landowners and biologists alike would all like to see more whitetails and mule deer. The challenge, of course, is that deer numbers don't rise just because we want them to. Habitat conditions, weather, disease and hunter harvest all play a part. After several years of tough winters and losses in some western units to epizootic hemorrhagic disease, the Department continues to take a careful, conservative approach.

License numbers reflect that caution. It's not about limiting opportunity — it's about rebuilding the foundation. A few mild winters, solid fawn survival, and good habitat conditions could turn that trend around faster than we think. But as any hunter knows, patience in the field pays off. The same applies to wildlife management.

The other hot topic — nonresident waterfowl hunting zones — is a change aimed at improving balance as well. By adjusting where and when nonresidents can hunt, the goal is to relieve pressure in some of the most heavily hunted areas and distribute opportunities more evenly across the state. It's a move that's been talked about for years, and while it's drawn plenty of opinions, both good and bad, it reflects a willingness to adapt for the long-term health of the resource and the quality of the experience for residents and nonresidents alike.

In the end, both issues — deer and ducks — boil down to the same thing: stewardship. The goal isn't to protect the past, but to prepare for the future. Regulations may shift, populations may rise and fall, but North Dakota's hunting spirit remains steady.

So, as we step into another fall, let's remember that every change, even the tough ones, comes from the same shared hope — that our kids and grandkids will have some of the same hunting and fishing experiences that North Dakota has long been known for.

That's a goal worth working toward.



Jeb Williams

DIRECTOR,
NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

KEEPING
CWD
RARE IN STATE





BY RON WILSON

I've been writing about deer and deer hunting since 2003 for the Game and Fish Department, long enough that I don't have to look up how to spell epizootic hemorrhagic disease.

Like EHD, caused by a biting midge that has been hard on deer over the years, life on the Northern Plains for deer and deer hunters for the last 20-plus years has been somewhat of a roller coaster. From the days — 2001 through 2011 — when the Department made available more than 100,000 licenses per gun season to today's allotment of just 42,300 tags, the extremes are telling.

With respect to the deer gun season opening in November, which has been the one constant over the years, what follows are snippets from *North Dakota OUTDOORS* over the last two-plus decades, the odds and ends that help tell the story of our most celebrated hunting season and the animals that garner so much of our attention for 16 ½ days.

2003

In many hunting units in the state today, biologists can conservatively estimate the buck-to-doe ratio at one buck to two adult does. Which is a good thing, at least where it's true, because scientists figure that the females are getting bred at roughly the same time of year, thus optimizing reproductive potential and the promise of survival.

The 2-to-1 ratio hasn't always been the case in North Dakota. One of the reasons the Department went to a unitized deer hunting system in 1975 was that bucks in some parts of the state were getting overharvested. Which meant that some does, because of a lack of suitors, weren't getting bred in November, but as late as January.

"This late breeding resulted in the does having fawns not until August instead of June," said Bill Jensen, North Dakota Game and Fish Department big game biologist.

UPS AND DOWNS IN DEER COUNTRY





"Deer born as late as August go into the upcoming winter too small, reducing their odds of survival. The fawns that are born late are going to be the first ones coming into farms to feed in the winter and are going to be getting into trouble."

2004

A shot hasn't even been fired, and this fall's deer season has already been dubbed historic by some. And rightly so, at least in terms of the number of licenses — an all-time high 145,250 tags — made available to gun hunters.

That number is certainly celebrated when you review the history of deer hunting in North Dakota. During a 22-year stretch starting in 1931, for example, deer camps were empty 10 times. The last time there wasn't a deer season in the state was 1953 — an unfathomable occurrence that would give today's most ardent hunters the shakes.

There's no question: The good old days are today.

By 1915, whitetails were so scarce in the state they could be counted in small bunches. Four or five deer here, two killed there, three seen at a farmhouse north of town during a heavy snowstorm ... Wildlife managers at the time feared, what would be an unthinkable notion today, that North Dakota's deer were nearing extinction.

2004

The spark that ignites the rut, a whitetail buck's enthusiastic preoccupation with the opposite sex, is not frost on the pumpkin, falling leaves or snow. It's the animal's response to the fading light of autumn — a happening known as photoperiodism — that stirs hormonal changes.

"What may allow it to happen more one day than another is maybe a cold snap or perhaps a full moon that allows deer to be active longer at night," Jensen said. "But what drives the rut is photoperiod."

While deer start showing signs of breeding behavior as early as September, the peak of the rut in North Dakota, he said, is Nov. 20-25. As fall slips into winter, rutting activity continues into December and January.

2006

During the daylight-shortened days of fall, both whitetail and mule deer bucks become different animals. They're no longer hanging with other males, discarding the bachelor group lifestyle as testosterone levels climb. Bucks become single-minded loners, concentrating exclusively on staying alive and breeding does.

(Not necessarily in that order, it would appear at times.)

When a buck's head goes back, wrinkling its nose and exposing teeth, it's performing what scientists have dubbed the "flehmen" behavior. In some circles, it's called the lip curl.

As a doe approaches estrus, she provides clues to suitors as to her readiness. Some of the clues are behavioral and some are chemical — the latter found in urine she deposits during frequent stops. This is where the lip curl comes in.

The purpose of the lip curl, scientists tell us, is to expose the scent from urine to an olfactory organ called the vomeronasal, located on the roof of the mouth near the nasal passage. This organ aids the buck in his evaluation of the doe's reproductive stage and willingness to mate.

2008

Roughly one in six North Dakotans — it's more like one in five if you discount those not old enough to legally secure a license — hunt during the state's deer season. That's significant, especially when you try to come up with another single activity that fosters as much attention from 100,000 or so people wearing the same colored outfits.

North Dakota's first "official" deer season — the first time a specific deer license was required — was in 1931, and just 2,061 licenses were sold to hunters. (In mid-October of this year, more than 125,000 had already been issued, with additional licenses still available in some units.) Yet, because there were so few deer back then, it wasn't guaranteed there'd even be a season most years. And when there was, it likely lasted less than a week, sometimes just 2 ½ days.

Starting in 1954, the state's deer season has run annually for more than a half-century. Thank heavens for that, a chorus of devoted deer hunters would

shout. North Dakota's deer gun season is about tradition, about revisiting places you've been going to for years — grandpa's farm, a tree stand in a chunk of woods where you shot your first deer, or maybe a deer camp that makes up in memories what it lacks in curb appeal.

2009

While hunting from natural blinds — deadfalls, thickets and tall vegetation — or tree stands has long been a tactic for deer gun hunters in heavily-wooded states, this approach was not common in North Dakota, except with bowhunters.

"Whether it was due to relatively low deer densities, short seasons and/or wide-open country, it seemed deer hunters of old in our state were too antsy to sit and wait for deer to come by," said Greg Link, Department assistant wildlife division chief. "In the last decade or so, more and more hunters I know and visit with have gravitated to elevated stands or ground blinds and other methodical hunting methods because of success experienced while bowhunting from a stand, or because they're trying to maximize their chances with limited hunting access."

2010

After several seasons of some hunters carrying a pocketful of whitetail doe licenses, North Dakota has its lowest deer population in about a decade.

Game and Fish will make available 116,775 deer licenses for the 2010 season, which is about 27,000 fewer licenses than 2009, and about 33,000 short of the all-time high of 149,400 in 2008.

Deer license numbers broke 100,000 for the first time in 2001, surpassing a mark longtime North Dakota deer hunters and wildlife managers thought they might never see. It's not like it was that long ago, less than 60 years, that there wasn't even a deer season.

While an abundance of CRP acres played a role in adding to the wealth and quality of habitat on the landscape, an unprecedented decade or longer string of mild winters was likely the biggest factor contributing to record high white-tailed deer populations. Deer that would typically have had one fawn, or none, during tough winters, were having twins and triplets during this lenient stretch.



2012

North Dakota held its first modern deer rifle season in the early 1930s, but it's hard to imagine much of a deer camp culture taking root initially, considering the season wasn't open with much consistency until the early to mid-1950s. Yet, sometime between then and now, hunters started gathering in areas they'd chosen to hunt, knowing with some certainty that the state would hold a season the next year and the year after that. Traditions were built between family and friends, many of which would last for years, passed from generation to generation.

2014

While the urge to measure this fall's deer gun season with one 34 years ago rests in the numbers — the 48,000 licenses made available today is the lowest since 1980 — the comparison could end there.

For instance, the deer gun season in 1980 was a week shorter than today's 16 ½-day season. And most hunters 34 years ago were still wearing red caps and clothing as they were a year away from being required by law to don 400 square inches of fluorescent orange in the field.

2017

To many of today's hunters, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's peel and stick deer tags are as conventional as, say, fluorescent orange hunting gear.

Give or take a few years, both have been standards with the deer hunting ranks for roughly 40 years.

Before today's peel and stick tags, hunters in North Dakota tagged harvested deer with metal locking seals. What remains somewhat of a mystery is exactly when Game and Fish employed this type of tag.

2018

While the statewide deer population remained relatively stable through the 1960s and early 1970s, Department biologists noted a marked increase in the number of buck-only licenses sold. Changes were necessary because biologists felt whitetail bucks were being overharvested in parts of the state.

The Game and Fish Department first began issuing buck-only licenses via lottery in 1975. Prior to that, hunters could buy a buck license straight from license vendors up until noon on the opening day of the deer season. These buck licenses were not limited in number.

2019

Considering the whims of Mother Nature, changes in the landscape, rising and falling deer populations, deer hunter expectations and differing landowner tolerance levels, managing deer in North Dakota isn't easy.

North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife managers certainly understand this. They also recognize the enormity of the task because many North Dakotans have a vested interest in a celebrated outdoor activity that seemingly takes so long to get here but is over before you know it.

2020

Chronic wasting disease takes its time, and the outcome is always the same.

Once a deer, elk or moose is infected with the disease, it can take on average 18 months or longer before the animal rapidly loses body condition, starts to act strange, becomes emaciated and dies.

"It's important to remember that for the most of that period of time that infected deer will look perfectly healthy, feed with other deer and travel across the landscape as a normal deer would," said Dr. Charlie Bahnson, North Dakota Game and Fish Depart-



ment wildlife veterinarian. "The fact that you have this seemingly healthy deer on its way to death is what makes this disease particularly challenging to manage."

2021

North Dakota's deer gun season is, in part, held starting in early November to increase hunter success as deer are more active at that time. Plus, odds of a winter storm not hampering hunters are better at this time of year.

"That's part of it, because people do have higher success during the rut, but we also structure it around tradition," Jensen said. "We schedule it for the first Friday before Veteran's Day. That way it does not always overlap the Thanksgiving holiday."

For more than 30 years, the state's deer gun season has opened on the Friday before Nov. 11, which means the range of opening dates is Nov. 4-10. The season has consistently spanned 16 ½-days during that same three-plus decades and when it does happen to be open over Thanksgiving, it's simply a coincidence of the calendar.

2022

In 2021, amid significant drought conditions that hamstrung much, if not all, of the state, the Game and Fish Department received its first report on Aug. 1 of deer dying from epizootic hemorrhagic disease near Mandan.

And reports of the fallout of the naturally occurring virus spread by a biting midge that is often fatal to white-tailed deer, and less commonly to mule deer, pronghorn and elk, continued to pour in to Game and Fish for many weeks thereafter.

"I'm going to temper my strong statement, but it's safe to say the EHD outbreak in 2021 is on par with the worst year that we've witnessed in terms of EHD attributed mortality," Bahnson said. "Devastating is probably a good word for it."

2022

Mule deer have sort of a distinctive gait where when alarmed they bounce across the landscape. It's called stotting, a Scottish term for bounce. Whereas whitetails just tend to have an all-out, bolt run.

Jensen said there's some evidence that stotting is a

signaling mechanism for young or other members of the family group that there's danger nearby. There are other theories, too, that it's a better means of traveling across the landscape and being able to get above the vegetation and see. But that's yet to be determined, he added.

2022

An always fatal disease to deer and other cervids that has found some footing in North Dakota, yet has a smaller footprint compared to some other states, will forever remain on the landscape. The reality of this, the certainty that chronic wasting disease is going nowhere and has the potential to significantly impact our big game populations if left unchecked, is sobering.

2023

There are multiple generations of North Dakotans that don't have any idea it was a rarity at one time in North Dakota to see a whitetail deer outside of your traditional riparian areas. Not that long ago if you saw a whitetail running around, it was something you told your neighbor, said Jason Smith, Department big game management biologist.

"We've got to remember that we are on the Northern Plains and winter at times can be a pretty big equalizer no matter what we do," he said. "We're lucky to have deer where we have them, but it's not surprising that they run into the struggles that they do."

2024

When I moved to North Dakota nearly 40 years ago, I felt as green as that 12-year-old sitting on a stump. I'd never seen a white-tailed deer before. I didn't know where the deer hid for the lack of trees, didn't know how people hunted them, was quick to learn that I couldn't just buy a deer license over the counter but had to apply, and not only was it mandatory to wear fluorescent orange during the season but fashionable in a way to wear around town when the season was in swing or not.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



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Zach Kjos, Missouri River System fisheries biologist, said the average size of the Chinook salmon shocked and netted for the Department's annual spawning operation averaged about 9 pounds, which is up from the 5- to 6-pound average the last couple of years. Kjos credits the salmon weight gain to a good prey species year-class in Lake Sakakawea. "This is what we get when we have a good cisco year-class ... we get big salmon," he said.

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SHALLOW WATER GATHERING

BY
RON
WILSON

Chinook salmon were introduced into Lake Sakakawea nearly 50 years ago. Every fall, often starting sometime in October as daylight hours shorten, these fish head into shallow waters in an attempt to pull off the impossible, to naturally reproduce in an environment that simply doesn't provide suitable habitat no matter how dogged the pursuit.

That's where North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries biologists come into the picture. Armed with electrofishing equipment, biologists stun and then net the big lake's salmon, with the goal of relieving the mature fish of their eggs and milt.

To sustain a Chinook salmon fishery in Lake Sakakawea, the annual not-by-chance meeting between fisheries biologists and the salmon in fall is imperative.

"This is a yearly event, a yearly project to continue the salmon fishing on Sakakawea," said Zach Kjos, Missouri River System fisheries biologist in Riverdale. "If we didn't do this for three years, we wouldn't have salmon in the lake. They'd be gone."

Reason enough, for certain, the two sides will meet again next fall.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.





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While fisheries biologists say that Chinook salmon can likely be found in Lake Sakakawea's shallower waters any time after Labor Day, Game and Fish personnel don't target these fish to rid them of their milt and eggs until October because that's typically when their eggs are ripe.

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The Game and Fish Department has a long and often admired working relationship with Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery staff. The eggs are collected and hatched in the federal facility and then raised into 5-inch smolts that will be stocked into Lake Sakakawea in spring. The salmon egg goal this year was 1.2 million eggs. Fisheries staff reached that goal in mid-October.

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THE FABRIC OF
**NORTH
DAKOTA**

BY CAYLA
BENDEL



The Little Missouri River winds its way through a portion of the picturesque badlands in western North Dakota.

About this time last year, we were in the depths of planning the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's first Habitat and Hunting Access Summit. And while it seemed pretty trivial to spend time on meatball counts to feed attendees, AV equipment and table arrangements, as the Department's R3 coordinator I know no mentorship program, online resource or marketing campaign can impact hunting participation as much as improving habitat and hunting access.

Sufficient meatballs in hand, the Department, along with Gov. Kelly Armstrong and around 200 hunters, landowners and others with a vested interest in the future of our hunting heritage, gathered for the Habitat and Hunting Access Summit in mid-December.

Of course, habitat conservation and providing hunting access are not novel concepts to the Department. They've been the bread and butter of this agency since its inception, but the summit came in response to a building consensus that we're approaching a pivotal moment for wildlife habitat conservation and hunter-landowner relationships. The ship seems to be picking up speed in the wrong direction, and the Department can't steer it alone. And if we don't stand at the helm together, our hunting heritage is on the line. And as Gov. Armstrong said that night, "It's too big a part of the fabric of North Dakota to let that happen."

Since the summit, the Department has been working to collect and summarize the feedback and initiate plans to address



Gov. Kelly Armstrong addresses those in attendance at the Habitat and Hunting Access Summit in December 2024.

some of the key issues. A full list of issues can be found on the Game and Fish Department's website at gf.nd.gov.

We have been and will continue to make progress on many of these recommendations but notably five large action items rose to the top.

1. Reach 1 million acres of PLOTS by 2028 with an emphasis on new grass plantings.

This year hunters saw an additional 40,000 Private Land Open To Sportsmen acres on the landscape for a total of 880,000 acres. It's been almost 15 years since we've had that many acres on the ground. Included in that acreage total was 5,000 acres of new grass planted.

2. Governor's Legacy Soil Health and Habitat Program.

It's well known that the hunting heyday of the early 2000s was in response to a flush of new grass on the landscape from the federal Conservation Reserve Program. But since then, North Dakota has dropped from 3 million acres, to just 1 million acres with more expected to expire in the coming years. The CRP program, as successful as it was, is determined through the federal Farm Bill and can be difficult to be accepted into and somewhat restrictive for landowners. The Department has partnered with the North Dakota Association of Soil Conservation District to apply for Outdoor Heritage Fund monies to pilot the Governor's Legacy Soil Health and Habitat Program; a state-level program to improve wildlife habitat on

marginally productive cropland with broad support from agricultural groups. The goal is to eventually seek dedicated funding to implement the program on a larger scale.

3. Date customization within the electronic posting platform.

Many of you are familiar with the years of debate that led up to the 2021 legislative session and the resulting electronic posting system we've now adopted. Each year there has been an increase in use of electronic posting as hunters and landowners alike have gotten comfortable with the process and compliance. This year eposting topped 14 million acres. In an increasingly digital world, many have suggested allowing customization within this system, such as dates, species, reservations, and so on. I'll spare you the hundreds of hours of discussions about the data requirements, including terms unfamiliar to even me like "rest services," the enforcement concerns on proving what was clearly communicated and so on. Needless to say, it's complicated, and I can almost guarantee if you can think of it, it was discussed. Long story short, as a starting point, the most feasible option to begin to allow some customization, is to allow landowners to preselect the date windows they would like their land to be electronically posted versus an entire season. Hunters should note that if a property remains physically posted, this would not negate that, just as a currently electronically unposted piece could still be physically posted. This option will be available for the

2026 electronic posting season, which begins on Feb. 1 and ends July 1.

Notably, if just 5% of acres were opened via this option that would equate to 700,000 acres of additional hunting access for some portion of the season.

4. HuntLink

The Department has long worked to connect landowners with depredation issues to hunters seeking opportunity, specifically for coyotes, antlerless deer, and sometimes geese and turkeys. I'm imagining before my time that might have looked like opportunistic conversations at cafes, but eventually turned to phone calls, emails and at one time a Coyote Catalog on our website. New this fall, the Department developed an application called HuntLink that digitizes this process by providing a species-specific map for landowners who have expressed interest in wanting hunters. At any time, landowners can access their account and remove their listing if their needs have been met or they no longer want to be contacted. The application easily replaces these somewhat manual processes of connecting the two but also has the potential to expand to other species-specific landowner requests.

5. Habitat and Access Stakeholder Group

With a mission to increase transparency, understanding and communication regarding Department habitat and conservation programs and hunting

access initiatives on private lands, the Habitat and Access Stakeholder Group was formed. This group is made up of 24 individuals — six representatives, consisting of three hunters and three landowners, from four districts nominated by the Department. This group will serve as a sounding board for many of the aforementioned initiatives and those forthcoming. This group will serve only as an informational forum with no formal recommendations, voting or lobbying. District meetings were held in October and the first statewide meeting is slated for early 2026.

Without sounding too cheesy or intentionally political, the Governor's tagline has been to make North Dakota the best place to live, work and raise a family. Many of you familiar with my journey know I was born and raised in Minnesota, and the reason I'm here is because of that sentence. I can't imagine not having the means, ability, health and opportunity to pick up my kid from daycare and go hit a PLOTS tract for birds before sunset as a family. I am so personally and professionally committed to habitat and hunting access, and I just hope others feel the same and step aboard with us.

CAYLA BENDEL is the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's marketing and R3 coordinator.

Jens Johnson (right), with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, visits with Burleigh County landowner (left) Lewis Heaton.





a fall look into the **FISHING** future

BY RON WILSON

In the effort to help manage many of the fisheries around the state, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries biologists sampled young-of-the-year fish earlier in fall with a variety of nets to evaluate the survival of stocked and naturally reproduced fish.

Scott Gangl, Department fisheries management section leader, said what is learned in fall when most anglers have traded fishing rods for shotguns, is just one more piece to add to the management puzzle.

"In fall when we net these young-of-the-year fish, we know if we had good reproduction or poor reproduction. We know whether our stockings were good or whether they didn't work so well, giving us an idea of what's in the fishery now,"

Gangl said. "We still have to get them through their first winter, which is a huge bottleneck and a huge hurdle to jump over for a lot of fish. But once they recruit to the adult population, once they get through that first winter, then we'll have more comfort in knowing that they're going to survive and grow and be there for anglers in the future."

Considering the Game and Fish Department manages about 450 fisheries, it's unrealistic to think they can sample every water in fall for young-of-the-year walleye, yellow perch, bluegill, forage fish, the list goes on. Fisheries biologists prioritize lakes that are important to anglers, meaning that Devils Lake, lakes Oahe and Saka-kawea, and the Missouri River System are sampled every fall.

"And then we've got our smaller district lakes. Some of them are very important, some of them get a lot more use than others. So, we try to prioritize those as well," Gangl said. "And then as we get down to the lower end of the priority list to lakes that don't see much use, then we kind of pick and choose. If, say, one of the lakes lower down the list was stocked for the first time, biologists may want to see how that effort went. It all depends on what biologists want to learn out of that lake."

Gangl said results of this fall's survey efforts on district lakes were, overall, average to above average.

"It really varies from lake to lake on an annual basis what we see out there. There are going to be some years where it's going to be all good or all bad, but most years are going to be somewhere around that average if you're talking about the whole state," Gangl said. "There's going to be certain areas around the state where we may have seen better perch reproduction. I think that was one thing that I noted while going over some of the field staff notes. We saw a lot of natural reproduction of perch in some places, almost too good in some places where we already have abundant perch and we don't need more."

"That's the kind of thing to note, because we don't always need natural reproduction every year. We don't need good year-classes every year. It's nice to have some spacing in there to let a good year-class survive and grow up," he added. "If you have too many back-to-back year-classes, it results in too many smaller fish out there. And so, we're going to see some of that in our smaller bluegill and perch lakes."

News from North Dakota's higher priority lakes painted a brighter picture. At Devils Lake, for instance, biologists saw a record number of young-of-the-year

walleyes, which is significant considering both snowpack and runoff into the lake were down. The last time biologists encountered a catch like this year's was 2009, when Mother Nature provided a really good snowpack, followed by a lot of runoff.

"In 2009, with the good snowpack and runoff, we kind of felt like that may have contributed to a good year-class that year. Well, now this year we had the opposite, and we had a record year-class. So, we're kind of learning as we go about what produces these record year-classes," Gangl said. "Other lakes connected in the system also saw pretty good production, like Stump Lake downstream. Also, on Devils Lake we saw a pretty good year-class of yellow perch, which is significant because it's been a few years since we've had good perch reproduction."

Taking a lake-wide look at Lake Sakakawea, Gangl said biologists reported the eighth highest catch of young-of-the-year walleye on record.

"We saw really good natural reproduction and the sites that we stocked on the lower end had really good survival. We also saw pretty good reproduction of some of our forage fish ... the goldeye had a pretty noteworthy catch rate this year," Gangl said. "The one thing that is missing and that anglers have been starting to notice is a downturn in our northern pike populations because they require a lot of flooded vegetation for spawning and they haven't had that in a few years."

Lake Oahe has produced a number of good back-to-back walleye year-classes and 2025 wasn't any different.

"It's almost getting to be too much, but at least the forage base is starting to come back. In Oahe in South Dakota, they're starting to see more smelt and lake whitefish have been producing some forage," Gangl said. "We also saw some gizzard shad reproduction on the river and in Lake Oahe this year, which is something our biologists noted as being better than it has been for a number of years. Gizzard shad are sensitive to cold water and hard winters, and their populations declined when we had some harder winters, but they're slowly rebuilding their numbers throughout the reservoir and river."



Young-of-the-year walleye from Lake Sakakawea's Douglas Bay.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



Watch for Deer on Roadways

Motorists should watch for deer along roadways this time of year as juvenile animals disperse from their home ranges.

Beginning in October through early December is the peak period for deer-vehicle accidents. Motorists are advised to slow down and exercise caution after dark to reduce the likelihood of encounters with deer. Most deer-vehicle accidents occur primarily at dawn and dusk when deer are most often moving around.

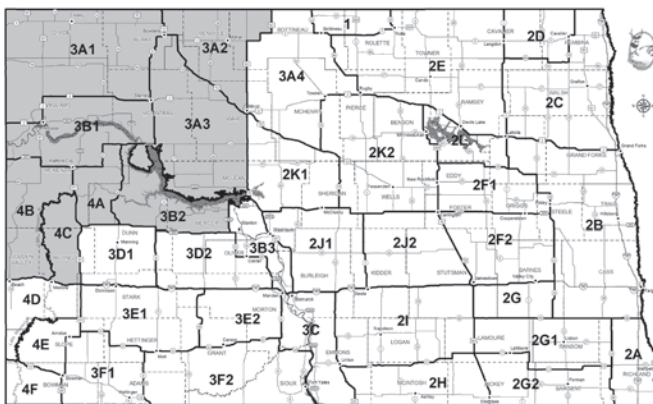
When you see one deer cross the road, look for a second or third deer to follow. Also, pay attention on roadways posted with *Deer Crossing Area* caution signs.

Deer-vehicle accidents are at times unavoidable. If an accident does happen, law enforcement authorities do not have to be notified if only the vehicle is damaged. However, if the accident involves personal injury or other property damage, then it must be reported.

In addition, a permit is required before taking possession of a roadkill deer. Permits are free and available from game wardens and local law enforcement.

A few precautions can minimize chances of injury or property damage in a deer-vehicle crash.

- Always wear your seat belt.
- Don't swerve or take the ditch to avoid hitting a deer. Try to brake as much as possible and stay on the roadway. Don't lose control of your vehicle or slam into something else to miss the deer. You risk less injury by hitting the deer.
- If you spot deer ahead, slow down immediately and honk.



CWD Testing, Disposal Requirements

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department will continue its Hunter-Harvested Surveillance program during the 2025 hunting season by sampling deer for chronic wasting disease from select units in the northwestern portion of the state.

Samples will be tested from deer taken from units 3A1, 3A2, 3A3, 3B1, 3B2, 4A, 4B and 4C. Outside of this area, hunters can still have their animal tested by taking to a Game and Fish district office, deer head collection site or by using a self-sampling kit.

CWD is a slow-moving brain disease of deer, moose and elk that can cause population-level impacts under high infection rates.

Hunters are encouraged to drop off heads of adult or yearling deer at collection locations listed on the Department's website at gf.nd.gov. Fawns and head-shot deer cannot be tested. Hunters wishing to keep the heads can bring them to a Game and Fish district office during business hours to have them sampled.

Self-sampling kits are available for hunters who wish to have their deer tested but are unable to drop the head at a collection site. The do-it-yourself kit allows hunters to remove the lymph nodes and ship them to the Department's wildlife health lab for testing. The kits can be found on the Department's website and at district offices.

Results can be expected within four weeks and will be sent to your Game and Fish My Account inbox.

More information on CWD is available at the Game and Fish website.



Calling the RAP Line

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department encourages hunters, anglers and landowners who witness a fish or wildlife violation to file a report with the Report All Poachers program.

Witnesses should report a violation by calling RAP at 701-328-9921.

Witnesses should note the vehicle description, including make, color, license plate number and state issued. Description of the violator should also be considered.

The RAP line offers rewards — from \$100 to \$1,000 depending on the nature and seriousness of the crime — for information leading to the conviction of fish and wildlife law violators. Reports can also go directly to game wardens or other law enforcement agencies. Callers can remain anonymous.



Help Manage Wildlife

North Dakota hunters receiving a survey this winter are encouraged to help with wildlife management by completing the survey online or returning it to the state Game and Fish Department.

Big game, small game, waterfowl, swan, turkey and furbearer questionnaires will be mailed to randomly selected hunters.

Hunters should complete and promptly return the survey, even if they did not hunt. The harvest survey allows Game and Fish to evaluate the hunting season, to determine the number of hunters, amount of hunting activity and size of the harvest.

A follow-up survey will be mailed to those not responding to the first survey.



Ice Fishing Regulations

Anglers are encouraged to refer to the 2024-26 North Dakota Fishing Guide or the Game and Fish Department's website at gf.nd.gov for winter fishing regulations.

Some winter fishing regulations include:

- A maximum of four poles is legal for ice fishing. However, when fishing a water body where both open water and ice occur at the same time, an angler is allowed a maximum of four poles, of which no more than two poles can be used in open water.
- Tip-ups are legal, and each tip-up is considered a single pole.
- There is no restriction on the size of the hole in the ice while fishing. When a hole larger than 10 inches in diameter is left in the ice, the area in the immediate vicinity must be marked with a natural object.
- It is only legal to release fish back into the water immediately after they are caught. Once a fish is held in a bucket or on a stringer, they can no longer be legally released in any water.
- It is illegal to catch fish and transport them in water.
- It is illegal to leave fish, including bait, behind on the ice.
- Depositing or leaving any litter or other waste material on the ice or shore is illegal.
- Any dressed fish to be transported, if frozen, must be packaged so that the fillets are separated and thus can be easily counted without thawing. Two fillets count as one fish.
- The daily limit is a limit of fish taken from midnight to midnight, and no person may possess more than one day's limit of fish while actively engaged in fishing. The possession limit is the maximum number of fish that an angler may have in his or her possession during a fishing trip of more than one day.



Register First, Spear Second

North Dakota's darkhouse spearfishing season opens whenever ice-up occurs. The season extends through March 15. Legal fish are northern pike and nongame species.

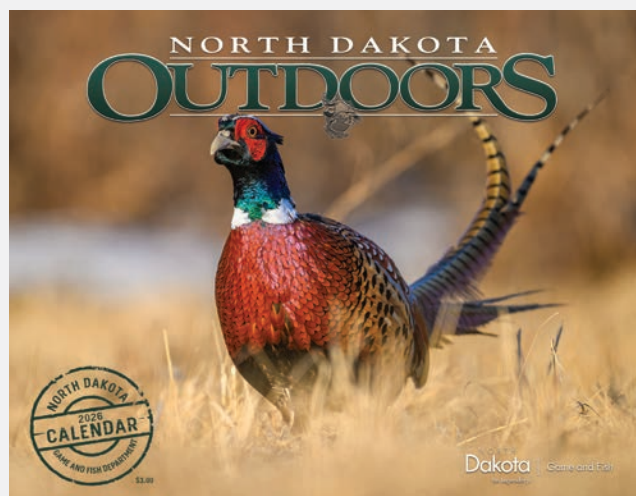
In addition, for Stump Lake and the Devils Lake complex south of U.S. Highway 2 and the Missouri River System (including lakes Sakakawea, Oahe and the Missouri River) up to the first tributary bridge, walleyes are also legal.

Darkhouse spearing is allowed for all anglers with a valid fishing license and for youth under age 16.

Individuals who are required to possess the needed valid fishing license to participate in darkhouse spearfishing must register with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department prior to participating. Registration is available at the Department's website, gf.nd.gov, or through any Game and Fish Department office.

All waters open to hook and line fishing are open to darkhouse spearing except: Lake Audubon, East Park Lake and West Park Lake, all McLean County; Heckers Lake, Sheridan County; Larimore Dam, Grand Forks County; McClusky Canal; New Johns Lake, Burleigh County; Red Willow Lake, Griggs County; Wood Lake, Benson County; Lake Ashtabula, Barnes and Griggs counties; and Whitman Dam, Nelson County.

Anglers should refer to the 2024-26 North Dakota Fishing Guide for more information.



Order 2026 NDO Calendar

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is taking orders for its *North Dakota OUTDOORS* calendar, the source for all hunting season and application dates for 2026. Along with color photographs of North Dakota's wildlife and outstanding scenery, it also includes sunrise-sunset times and moon phases.

Calendars must be ordered online by visiting the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov.

The calendar is the *North Dakota OUTDOORS* magazine's December issue, so current subscribers will automatically receive it in the mail.

Historical Look at Waterfowl in North Dakota

The storied past of waterfowl in North Dakota is uniquely revealed in the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's publication, "The Duck Factory — A History of Waterfowl in North Dakota."

Certainly of interest to waterfowlers and other outdoor enthusiasts, the 213-page, full color, soft-cover publication is authored by Mike Jacobs and Erik Fritzell. The book traces the history of waterfowl species and their habitats in North Dakota.

The book is sold only online for \$24.99, including shipping, on the Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov, by clicking on Buy and Apply, and then Shop.

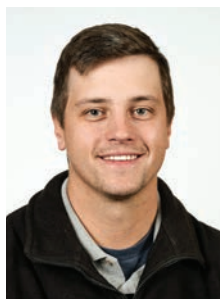


Go Hunt. Go Fish *Go Eat!*

Check out this installment of Cayla's Kitchen for a throwback venison pizza roll recipe, so nostalgic and tasty, the whole family will want some. And with hunting seasons in full swing and ice fishing just one freeze away, be sure to visit gf.nd.gov for Cayla's pheasant tortilla soup, venison pasty, spicy pike sandwich recipes and more ideas for turning your freezer full of wild game into delicious meals worth sharing over the holidays.

gf.nd.gov

STAFF NOTES



Johnson Named to Supervisor Position

Jens Johnson was hired as the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's wildlife resource management supervisor for the Bismarck district.

Johnson began his career in 2015 as a Department wildlife seasonal, then full time as a private land initiative biologist in Williston in 2019, before transferring to the PLI position in Bismarck in 2021. He was then selected as the wildlife resource management biologist in Dickinson in April 2025.



Weyand Named Wildlife Veterinarian

Dr. Logan Weyand was hired as the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's wildlife veterinarian.

Weyand previously served as the bighorn sheep biologist for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and worked with a variety of wildlife species across Wyoming, Washington, Idaho, Utah, Oregon, Nevada, California and Montana.



Ryckman Fills Migratory Game Bird Post

Mason Ryckman was named migratory game bird biologist for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department in October.

Ryckman started with the Department in 2018 as a game management technician. In 2023, he was hired as the Department's wildlife health biologist.

THE FUTURE OF HUNTING DEPENDS ON OUR ACTIONS TODAY



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BACKCAST

Ron Wilson



The last time I drew a whitetail buck tag was 2021. I haven't applied for one since and I couldn't tell you what possessed me to apply for one then. Feeling lucky, I guess, or figured my odds were decent considering the Department made available 72,200 deer gun licenses that year — the most since 2011 and a far cry from the 42,300 allotted to hunters this year.

For years I've applied for doe tags only because I can't settle on the idea of not hunting at all. While applying for a doe license as my first choice doesn't guarantee that I'll get drawn, it's worked out well so far.

With deer populations trending in the wrong direction due to regularly blamed troubles — disease, tough winters, drought, a lack of wildlife habitat on the landscape — there may come a time when a doe tag becomes even more difficult draw. If I'm stiffed by the lottery, I'll still go hunting because that's what we do in November. I'll shoulder the adjustable shooting sticks instead of my .30.06, lean against favorite rock piles waiting for the sun to come up or sit down, push heavy cover when needed, high-five the hunter(s) in our small party who does fill their tag, then get my hands bloody.

Twenty-plus years ago, I wrote a piece for this magazine that encouraged hunters to shoot does because sound management dictates that you harvest does to control the deer population. Of course, that was a different time as there were far more deer (and acres and acres of more habitat) on the landscape, and many hunters were carrying several antlerless licenses as the Game and Fish Department made available more than 100,000 deer gun tags annually from 2001 through 2011.

Wildlife managers today say it's highly unlikely we'll see those days again in North Dakota and I'm begrudgingly coming around to their way of thinking. Even

so, it's hard to conceive what the new normal will be. Hopefully, not today's 42,300 license number, the lowest we've seen in the state since 1978. But who's to know? Without a merciful, helping hand from Mother Nature and a coordinated effort to dramatically increase habitat across much of rural North Dakota, the outlook certainly isn't what many of us would like it to be.

Sometime during opening weekend last season, my daughter and I sat on a prairie hilltop not far from where she shot her first deer, a mule deer doe, a handful of years ago. While we waited for her brothers, who we knew would wander along eventually, we counted the number of deer the four of us had shot over the years on public and unposted private land we could see and easily hike to from our perch without much difficulty. The number wasn't heroic by any stretch but sounded like a lot at the time because, despite the miles and burnt boot leather, we had yet to see a deer ... not running with its ears pinned back away from other hunters in the distance; not bumped nearly at our feet from a cattail slough; not silently slipping back into cover before first light.

When we finally rendezvoused with her brothers, we made another plan because, well, it was deer season and that's what we do in November.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



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A coyote takes a break in western North Dakota. According to Stephanie Tucker, Game and Fish Department game management section leader, coyote numbers in North Dakota are good, but they trended downward in spring compared to 2024 and were 37% below their 20-year average.

PHOTO BY JESSE KOLAR, DICKINSON.

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