NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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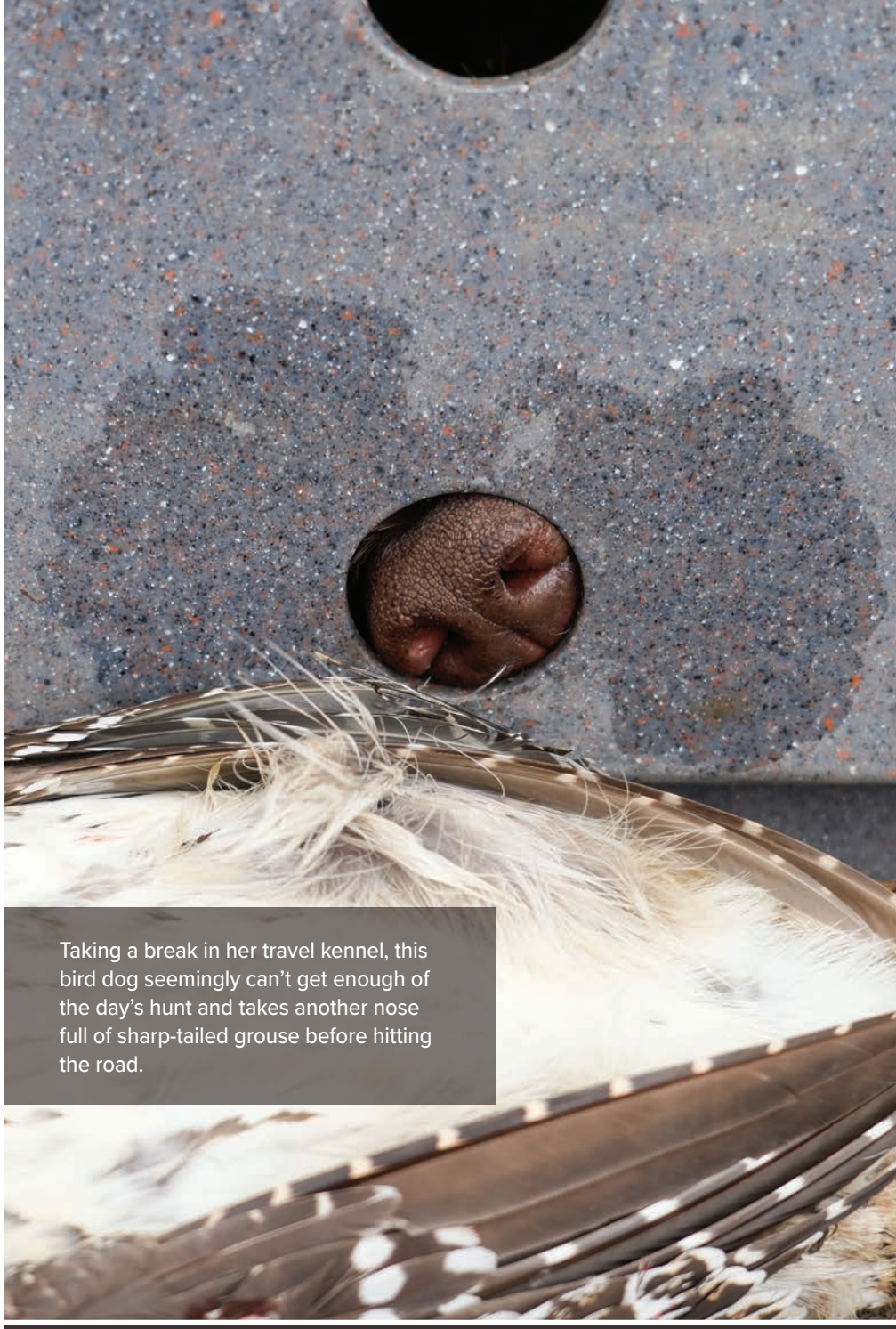
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Taking a break in her travel kennel, this bird dog seemingly can't get enough of the day's hunt and takes another nose full of sharp-tailed grouse before hitting the road.

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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

Bachelor group of mule deer bucks.

PHOTO BY ASHLEY PETERSON, BISMARCK.



MY 2 CENTS *from the* DIRECTOR

If you've paid much attention to North Dakota's outdoors lately, you've probably read a few headlines that aren't exactly encouraging. An outbreak of epizootic hemorrhagic disease has, again, created challenges for our white-tailed deer population, and the recent discovery of zebra mussels in Lake Sakakawea is another reminder of the challenges facing our aquatic resources.

Neither is particularly good news, and neither is something we take lightly.

The EHD outbreak is especially concerning given that our deer population was already working its way back from significant losses in recent years. We've made some difficult decisions, including restricting antlerless harvest in several hunting units to give those local populations an opportunity to recover. Those decisions aren't easy, particularly when you understand how much deer hunting means to North Dakotans. But managing wildlife sometimes means looking beyond a single hunting season and making decisions with the future in mind.

The discovery of zebra mussels in Lake Sakakawea is another concern. While initial findings indicate the infestation is limited to the eastern end of the reservoir, additional surveys are necessary to better understand its extent. It's a reminder that aquatic nuisance species remain a serious threat and that every water user has a role in protecting our waters. Clean, drain and dry should never become an afterthought.

But here's where I want to shift gears a little. Despite these challenges, I don't want anyone to lose sight of the tremendous outdoor opportunities North Dakota continues to offer. We're fortunate to have outstanding hunting opportunities for pheasants, grouse, partridge and waterfowl, along with the chance to pursue many big game species for those who drew licenses. Our fishing opportunities spread across the landscape remain something to be proud of, with hundreds of managed lakes and the Missouri River System to explore. Add in wildlife watching, hiking, camping, boating and simply spending time outside, and there really is something for everyone.

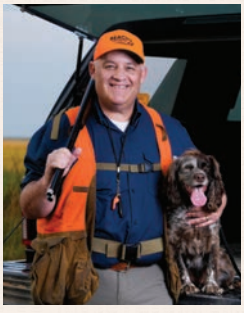
Fish and wildlife management has never been a business of eliminating every challenge. Weather, disease, invasive species, habitat changes and other factors will always influence the resources we manage. What matters is how we respond, what we learn and how we work together to protect those resources for the next generation.

As we inch closer to the legislative session, we continue to hear from both agriculture and conservation folks that expanding the Governor's Legacy Soil Health and Habitat Program is a "must-have" for the session. We are excited about the opportunity to have those discussions and be able to expand a program that has so much support from all walks of life.

So, while we certainly have some challenges in front of us, I would encourage everyone to take advantage of what North Dakota has to offer. Get outside, take a kid hunting or fishing, explore a new piece of public land or spend an afternoon on the water.

There will always be something to work on, but there is also plenty to appreciate. For My 2 Cents, that's a pretty good reason to head outdoors.

I don't want anyone to lose sight of the tremendous outdoor opportunities North Dakota continues to offer.



Jeb Williams
DIRECTOR,
NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

THE FUTURE OF HUNTING DEPENDS ON OUR ACTIONS TODAY.

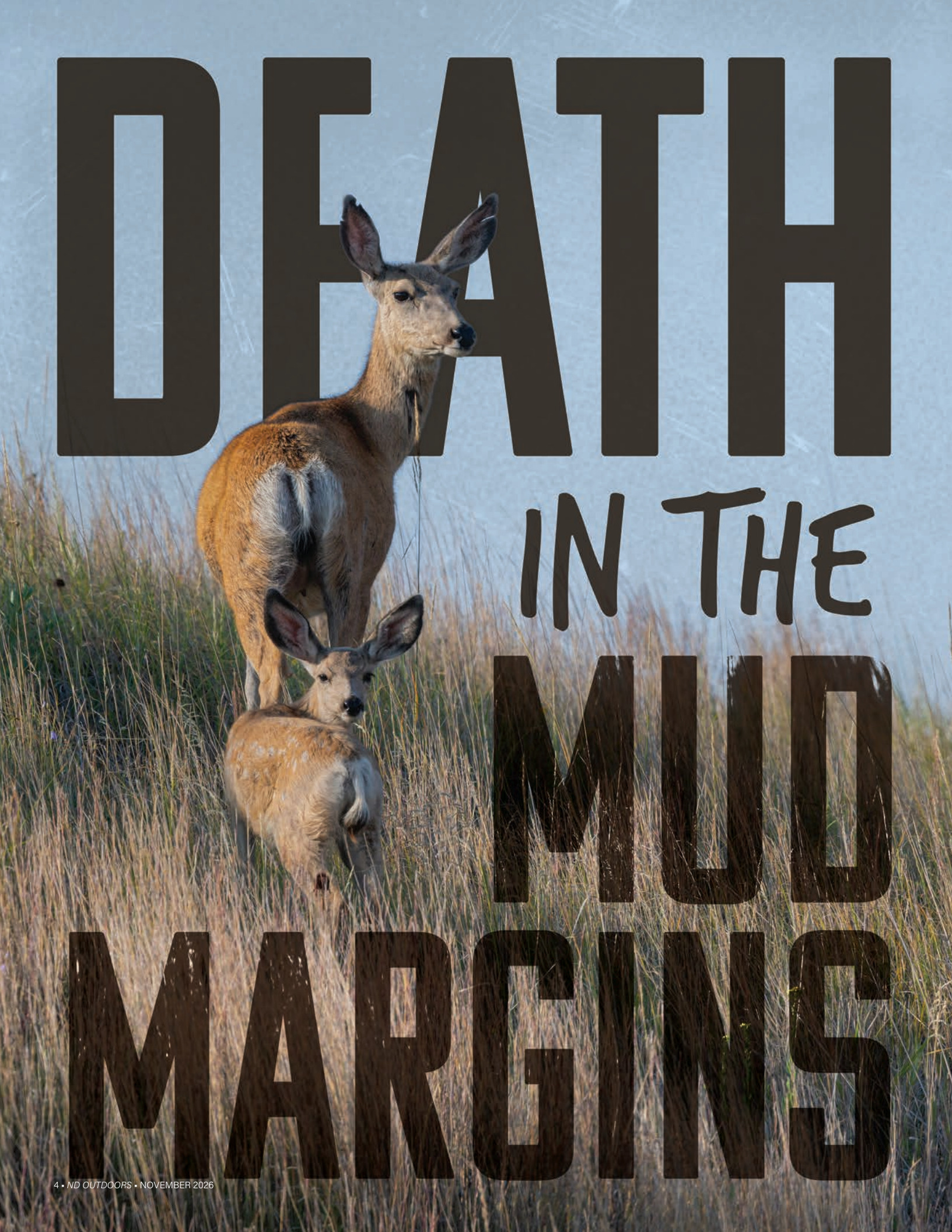


Hunt for TOMORROW

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DEATH IN THE MUD MARGINS



BY RON WILSON

There are a number of things that get in the way of big game animals in North Dakota, especially white-tailed deer, in their effort to reach the numbers wildlife managers and hunters would like to see.

First, there's the weather where drought and tough winters can hit with equal severity in this neck of the Northern Plains. Then there's the lack of suitable habitat on the landscape to safeguard deer and other animals during the state's leanest months and provide sanctuaries for adults to birth and raise young in spring and summer.

Then there's disease. The silent killers that aren't as in-your-face as a January blizzard, but at times can pack a significant punch.

North Dakota Game and Fish Department officials confirmed the state's first case of epizootic hemorrhagic disease in 2026 on Aug. 8 from a whitetail doe near Lake Tschida, said Dr. Logan Weyand, Department wildlife veterinarian.

Starting in early August, Weyand said agency staff fielded 184 reports that tallied 425 mortalities of ungulate species including white-tailed deer, mule deer and pronghorn. The bulk of the fall-out was to white-tailed deer in southwestern and south-central North Dakota, with some association along the Missouri River. The hunting units hit hardest were 3F2, 3C, 3E1 and 3E2.



Mule deer aren't hit as hard as white-tailed deer during EHD outbreaks and wildlife biologists believe its because mule deer spend much of their time in the drier, more arid areas on the landscape where the midges don't survive as well.

In response to the outbreak, state officials announced in October several conservative harvest strategies in southwestern and south-central North Dakota to safeguard an already slow-to-rebound deer population hit hard by weather and disease in the last five years. One of the strategies, for example, was to prohibit harvest of antlerless whitetails in the hardest hit deer gun units.

EHD is a naturally occurring virus spread by biting midges that is often fatal to whitetails, and less commonly to mule deer, pronghorn and elk. EHD is no newcomer to the landscape as Game and Fish Department officials reported the state's first documented outbreak decades ago.

"North Dakota suffered its first EHD outbreak in 1962 ... between the two units of Theodore Roosevelt National Park along the Little Missouri River," Department wildlife officials reported in 1988 in *North Dakota OUTDOORS*. They continued, saying that EHD reared its ugly head again in 1970, 1976, 1981 and 1987.

Ryan Herigstad, Department wildlife health biologist, said EHD is cyclical in nature. Considering the weather and the fact that it's been five years since the last outbreak, it wasn't shocking that the unwelcome midges, and the trouble they bring, were going to hit the fan.

"The writing was on the wall with the warmer, wet spring that we had that transitioned to hot temperatures and drought, making those mud margins (where the midges live) a lot more expansive on the landscape," Herigstad said. "It's been a half decade since our last bad outbreak. Why EHD is cyclical could be a combination of herd immunity that's left on the landscape and weather conditions and environmental factors ... it's likely a variety of those variables that are playing in into it and contributing to an outbreak."

The last EHD outbreak in North Dakota was 2021 and was said to be on par with the worst that Department officials had experienced in terms of EHD attributed mortality.

This year's outbreak is considered moderate by comparison, but significant nonetheless given how few deer were on the landscape to start this year compared to 2021.

Like EHD outbreaks in the past, white-tailed deer top the list of dead ungulates. Ben Matykiewicz, Department big game management biologist, said this is likely because whitetails frequent those mud margins considerably more than other big game animals.

"At this point, we think it's kind of an exposure thing. Whitetails are just more likely to inhabit those environments where the midges are," he said. "While pronghorn and mule deer will visit those areas to get free-standing water, they're more likely to be up in the more arid, drier environments where the midges can't survive as well. Whereas whitetails almost exclusively live in those creek beds, river bottoms, wooded areas where you see higher loads of midges."



This whitetail buck was photographed in the Missouri River in 2021 during the state's last, and likely worst, EHD outbreak on record.



NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT OFFICIALS REPORTED THE STATE'S FIRST EHD OUTBREAK IN 1962.

EHD is a well-studied disease phenomenon across the United States. Scientists know that the disease comes and goes and that whitetails can certainly survive in the long term with EHD. Even so, there's more to learn in an effort to manage the disease.

"North Dakota and a lot of other states deal with EHD and currently there are limited options on ways to manage this disease and reduce the impacts on white-tailed deer in particular," Weyand said. "Given the continuous impacts it is having in North Dakota, we are taking some new research approaches this year focused on the virus, and then soon to come the vector. The goal starting this year is to dive deeper into some of those different factors that are important from a research standpoint, to see what solutions may eventually be out there."

When described by scientists, EHD is a nasty disease, and an infected deer can die from the virus as quickly as one to three days.

"When the deer is bitten by a midge and then infected, that virus will enter the lymph system and it starts to replicate in the deer's body," Weyand said. "In a lot of these carcasses, what we see is buildup of fluid in the chest cavity and around the heart, sometimes in the abdomen. And that is because EHD results in a systemic issue where fluid leaks out of blood vessels due to inflammation."

While a killing frost or two will end this year's EHD outbreak, hurdles remain in the effort to rebuild North Dakota's whitetail population.

"The two biggest factors in this effort right now are time and habitat. These animals still need time to recover from the tough winter of 2023. We're still seeing the effects in the eastern end of the state, particularly where we have far less habitat," Matykiewicz said. "A rebound in the population, the subsequent growth after that disturbance, is just so much slower with there being a lack of resources on the landscape. But even where we have better habitat, better resources, particularly around river valleys, stream beds and riparian areas, it's still going to take time because we're going from a fairly low-density deer herd to a lower density deer herd."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

HABITAT SUMMIT 2.0

BY CAYLA BENDEL

Nearly two years have passed since the North Dakota Game and Fish Department hosted the inaugural Habitat and Hunting Access Summit. Nearly 200 people gathered for the event, including then brand-new Gov. Kelly Armstrong, to set the stage of the state of our game populations, hunting access and existing pathways for conservation delivery. Throughout the evening, and afterwards through participant feedback, a list of recommendations was compiled. More importantly, the evening spurred momentum and innovation that has resulted in several wins for hunters and landowners since that 2024 gathering.



GOVERNOR'S LEGACY SOIL HEALTH AND HABITAT PROGRAM

Much of the 2024 summit demonstrated the inarguable role the Conservation Reserve Program played in the pheasant, duck and deer heydays of the 2000s. But as successful as it is, the federally administered program lacks flexibility and current availability to North Dakota landowners.

Out of the summit, conversations led to novel partnerships that led to a $6.5 million Outdoor Heritage Fund grant to fund the Governor's Legacy Soil Health and Habitat Program — a state run program that provides five-year agreements, annual rental payments, cost-share on grass establishment and crop insurance credits with options for hunting access payments for landowners who turn unproductive crop acres to grass. The Soil Conservation District program was built on producer feedback, so it's no surprise the demand for the program exceeded funding in its first year, fully obligating the OHF monies available for 10,000 acres of new grass.

The question now will be how to continue to fund the demand, but the response clearly demonstrates there was a program gap for landowners interested in habitat establishment on more flexible terms.

NEW HUNTER LANDOWNER COMMUNICATION TOOLS

At the end of the day, access comes down to hunters communicating with landowners, and the Department continues to work on ways to facilitate that, especially in an increasingly digital world. This year we have just under 15 million acres of electronically posted land. But within that posting system, there is still room for communication, as 43% of landowners voluntarily provided a form of contact information. And new in 2026, about 180,000 acres were enrolled in one of the other posting date options, of either being posted only during the deer rifle season (Nov. 6-22) or being posted through the deer rifle season (July 1-Nov. 22). While that's only about 1% of e-posted lands, it's still a meaningful amount of additive access. Contact information and unique posting types can be found in the parcel information on mapping applications.



LEVERAGING OUTDOOR HERITAGE FUNDS

Speaking of the Outdoor Heritage Fund, the Legacy program was just one of many wins for hunters and habitat enthusiasts in the 2026 grant rounds. OHF was established in 2013 to provide monies from state oil and gas revenue for projects that provide access to sportsmen, improve soil health, water quality and plant health, or provide natural areas for recreation such as parks.

The grant has long been a tool for conservation delivery used by Game and Fish and other partners, but 2026 saw a number of funded grants bolstered by conversations and solutions from the 2024 Habitat Summit. Pheasants Forever's Public Access to Habitat program provides new or existing Private Land Open To Sportsmen cooperators an additive payment for establishing new grass, Ducks Unlimited's Wetland Access and Restoration Program similarly funds wetland enhancement projects on PLOTS lands, and Game and Fish applied to leverage sportsmen voluntary donation dollars with OHF monies to multiply funds available for PLOTS agreements.

These are just a few examples of how partners have recently worked to maximize the OHF for collaborative habitat and access initiatives.



Like the first Habitat and Hunting Access Summit in 2024, this year's gathering will also be held on the Bismarck State College campus.

Additionally, the Department continues to grow and promote Hunt Link. This resource was rolled out at the end of 2025 and provides a species-specific map of landowners who have expressed interest in wanting hunters for either depredation issues or interest in providing youth deer access. At any time, landowners can go in and remove their listing if their needs have been met or they no longer want to be contacted. The application replaces the once manual processes connecting the two but also has the potential to expand to other species-specific landowner requests.

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 in 2026. This group is made up of six representatives, three hunters and three landowners, from four districts nominated by the Department. The group serves as a sounding board for many of the initiatives and those forthcoming, while providing a valuable pulse on regional challenges and opportunities for improved hunter-landowner relations.

We've made progress. Now, let's build on it. That's the theme for the 2026 Habitat and Hunting Access Summit which will be held on Dec. 15, once again at the Bismarck State College National Energy Center of Excellence. The evening will highlight what's been done since we last gathered but also continue to focus on collaborative solutions for expanding habitat and improving access in North Dakota. Some of which participants may have the opportunity to shape in the upcoming North Dakota legislative session. Space is limited and the public can register on the Game and Fish website, gf.nd.gov.

While I acknowledge there's a lot of work to be done, I hope you have found plenty to enjoy this fall. The Department isn't responsible for allocating the number of deer camp invitations, golden hour walks with your dog or first birds you help someone harvest. There's still plenty to be grateful for, especially on any given North Dakota November day. Go enjoy it, and I'll see you in December to talk about how to keep it that way.

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





BAD

This past summer I decided it was time to fill a gap in my knowledge as an outdoorsman and learn a little about hunting elk. I had never pursued them, and aside from a couple of chance sightings, I had basically no experience even observing elk in the wild. I felt intimidated by it and a little inadequate, especially as someone who works in the outdoor industry, so I set out to change that. With elk tags in the state being a rare thing, I figured I would hunt them with my camera for now, but that brought me to a bit of an ethical dilemma.

The best time to photograph elk is the rut, and that is also when the season is open. I wasn't about to be hustling after bugles on public land where somebody else might be making the same stalk.

That is what led me to Jesse Kolar, a friend and the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's upland game management supervisor in Dickinson. He filled his tag years ago, so now he gets his local elk fill with a camera in the backcountry of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. After a few conversations, I had some map pins, advice, and a general location he said I should start.

That is how, on a September afternoon, I found myself alone, dropping down a butte in the park's South Unit with a camera on my chest, an overnight pack on my back and a backcountry permit in my pocket. I worked my way around the bison and wild horses, spooked a couple of mule deer and turkeys, and used game trails to weave toward where I wanted to be. I was walking into my first lessons.

Maybe I was distracted by the hike and the amazing landscape, or maybe there weren't any elk near me, but I heard no bugles on my way in. I chose my campsite on a little plateau



LANDS CLASSROOM

BY ZACHARY ESHLEMAN

just as the sun set, and I slept under the stars in my hammock. It was a warm night, and my minimal packing worked out just fine.

The night was far from silent. Shortly after it was too dark to see, I heard crashing in the junipers below me. The sound of antlers against wood felt like it was right there, but I had no chance of finding it. Still, the sound was invigorating; there were monsters in the dark.

Then the bugling started. So close that I could hear the breathy trill off each note. The responses came echoing from far behind me. They could have been a few hundred yards or a mile away. The hills bent the sounds and disguised their location.

I slept lightly, waking regularly to more bugling throughout the night. I was newly motivated to experience what the morning light would reveal.

But was this all a waste of time? I mean, you can see elk from your car if you're lucky out here. And wasn't I just chasing "park elk?" I could probably just walk up and pet them, right? There is no way this would translate to any future hunting pursuits.

Well, it's complicated.



Jesse Kolar looking for elk in the badlands.

As of 2026, the herd inside the fence is not a separate tourist population. It is the source of a lot of the elk a hunter finds once the park boundary ends. For example, the elk on the October 2024 cover of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*, photographed by Kolar in the park, was actually killed by a hunter that same year outside the park's boundaries.

To understand the behavior of the elk here, as opposed to the mule deer in the park (which do behave completely differently from their exterior counterparts), you need to look at their history.

Elk were gone from the badlands by the late 1800s. On March 13, 1985, the park released 47 elk in the South Unit, eight bulls and 39 cows from Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota. The objective was to rebuild the population to around 400, but they blew past that goal. Once the population in the park grew past 1,000, something had to change. In 2010 and 2011, the park brought in volunteer hunters and culled roughly 900 elk, focusing heavily on cows, to get back toward its goal. Volunteer hunters were not allowed to pose with elk they shot, and meat was donated to tribes in North Dakota and to Sportsmen Against Hunger.

Before that, it was true that these were mostly park animals. Elk slipped out occasionally, but they spent most of their time inbounds. However, after experiencing the reduction and continued human hunting pressure in the form of continued culling, herds settled north and south of Medora and stayed out. The elk that did remain primarily in the park spent more time out than before. A 2019-23 Game and Fish study found that 60% of the elk collared inside the South Unit used land outside the park at least sometime during the year.

The elk in the park were also far more wary of people after the culling, and they spent their time in more remote areas of the park, and they stuck to the cover of junipers throughout the day.

I'm not going to argue that finding elk there and photographing them is the same as hunting. However, I do think you would struggle to find a better simulation anywhere else.

I woke up in the morning to fresh opportunity. It was nearly a full moon, and the bugles



A rut-fueled bull elk in the badlands.

were echoing long before the sun rose. I didn't need a headlamp to move around, so after sitting for a minute and only hearing them far off behind me, I decided to just go for it. I picked out a bugle and went in that direction.

I worked down a canyon and expected to see a bull around every bend. With continued disappointment, I followed a sound that seemed the same the whole time. I came to an abrupt end in the cut I was walking and made my way up the steep butte, still heading in the direction of the bugling.

A mile and a half in and starting to lose hope, I sat glassing from the edge of a coulee. In front of me the land dropped away for a few hundred feet before rising again with the far side covered in those impenetrable junipers. The bugles of one bull now sounded like he was standing in front of me on the other side, but I still couldn't get eyes on him.

After about 20 minutes of watching and listening, I figured the echoes had thrown off my sense of direction. I moved farther along the edge so I could see more of the valley floor to my left, hoping he was there instead.

About 40 yards later, he came into view. A 6x6 bull, minding his business about 600 yards away. I watched him for 10 minutes as he moved from my side of the small valley to the opposite. Then he worked around a curve where a small rise blocked my view.

Time to close the distance.

I hurried into the draw. It took maybe 10 minutes to get down and over to the edge where he had gone out of sight. I turned the corner slowly, crawling to look over the little rise, expecting him at 100 yards or so.

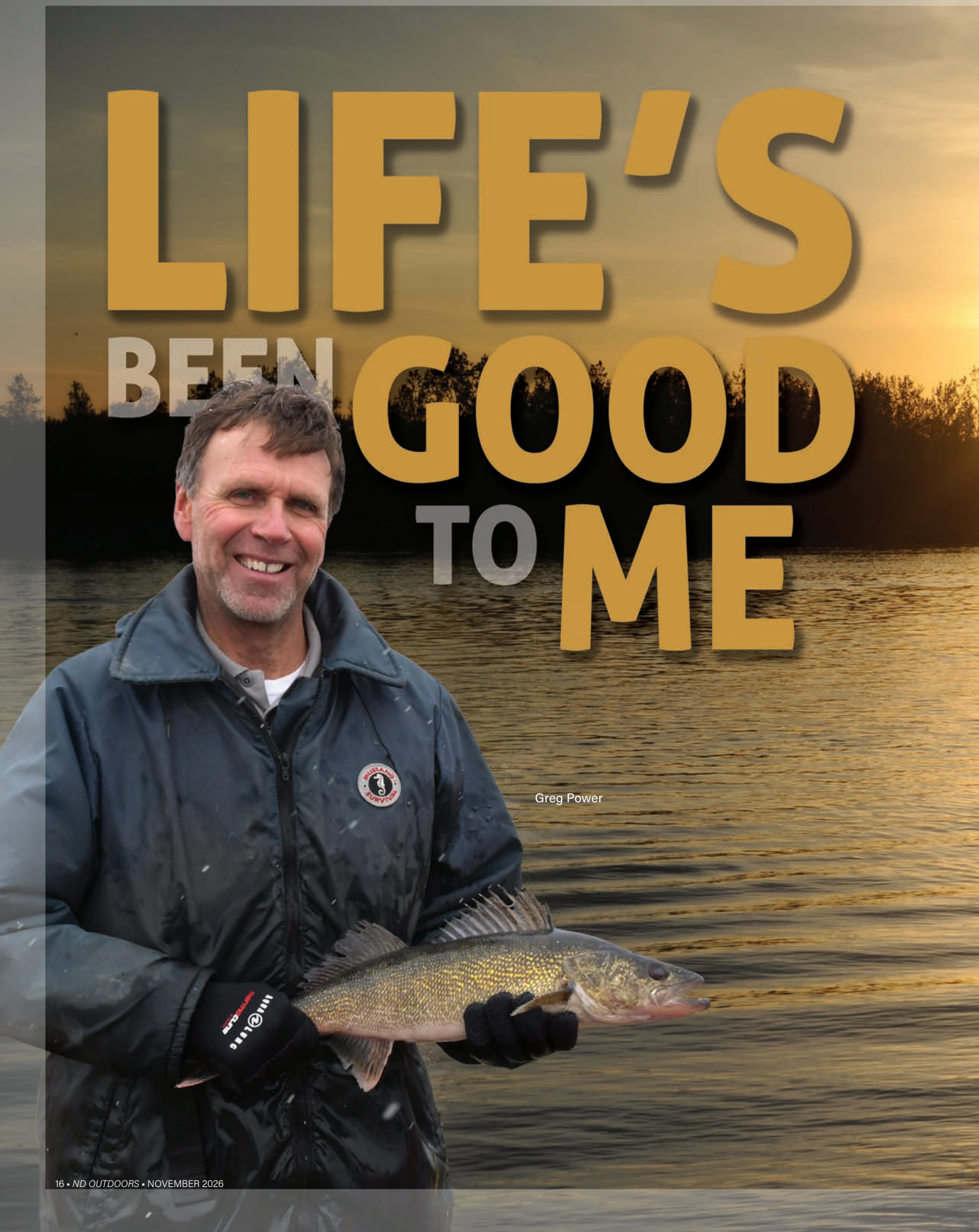
Nope. There he was at 25 yards, facing me. I froze. A small tree blocked his direct view of me. When he went back to grazing, I slowly brought my camera up, and I inched to the side to get an angle on him. He stood there long enough for a few frames and let out a bugle that I could feel in my chest. Then he continued slowly away into the junipers. I took no shot and left with no meat. It was just a heart-pounding stalk, and my first introduction to elk in one of the best classrooms our country has to offer.

ZACHARY ESHLEMAN is North Dakota Game and Fish Department's communications specialist

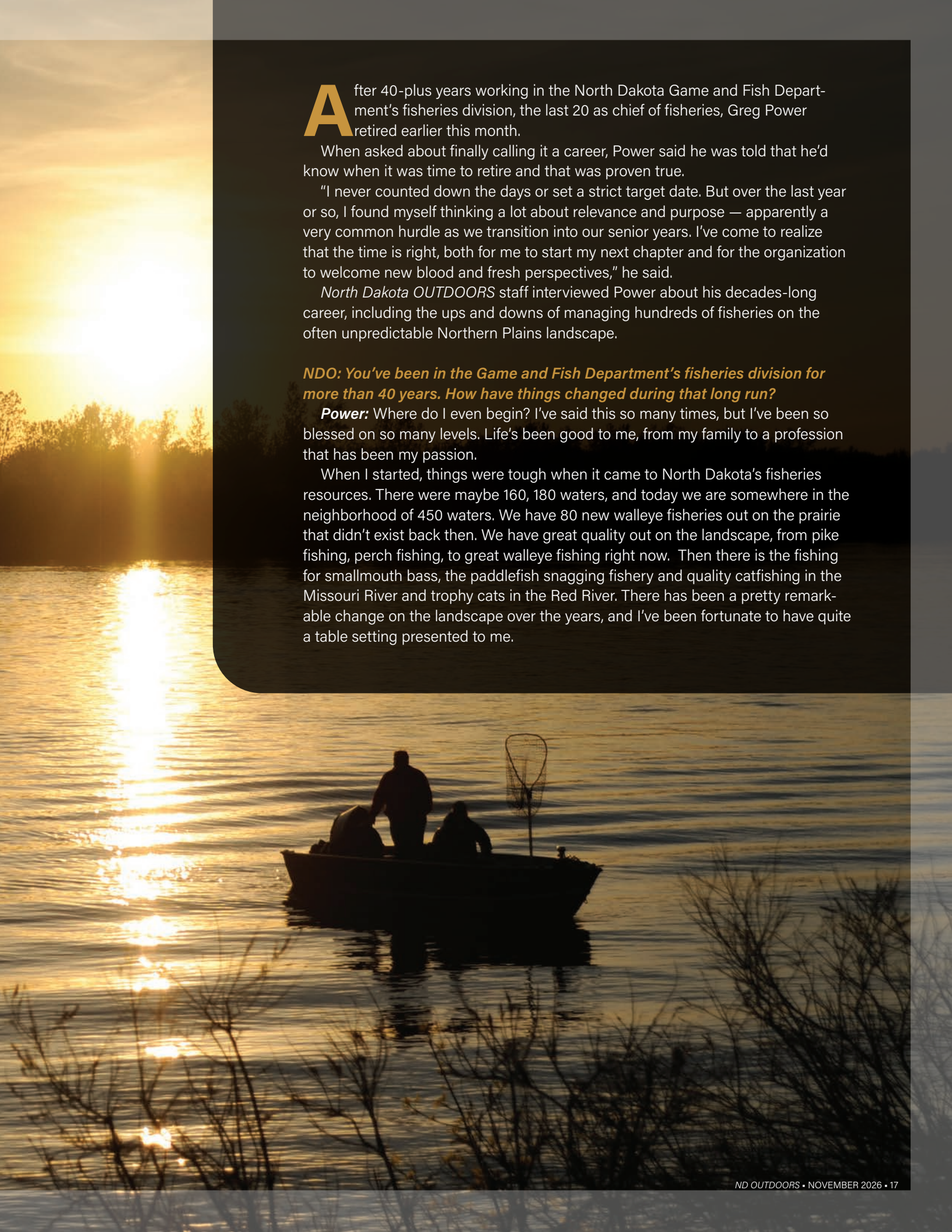


> Then the bugling started. So close that I could hear the breathy trill off each note. The responses came echoing from far behind me.

LIFE'S BEEN GOOD TO ME



Greg Power



After 40-plus years working in the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's fisheries division, the last 20 as chief of fisheries, Greg Power retired earlier this month.

When asked about finally calling it a career, Power said he was told that he'd know when it was time to retire and that was proven true.

"I never counted down the days or set a strict target date. But over the last year or so, I found myself thinking a lot about relevance and purpose — apparently a very common hurdle as we transition into our senior years. I've come to realize that the time is right, both for me to start my next chapter and for the organization to welcome new blood and fresh perspectives," he said.

North Dakota OUTDOORS staff interviewed Power about his decades-long career, including the ups and downs of managing hundreds of fisheries on the often unpredictable Northern Plains landscape.

NDO: You've been in the Game and Fish Department's fisheries division for more than 40 years. How have things changed during that long run?

Power: Where do I even begin? I've said this so many times, but I've been so blessed on so many levels. Life's been good to me, from my family to a profession that has been my passion.

When I started, things were tough when it came to North Dakota's fisheries resources. There were maybe 160, 180 waters, and today we are somewhere in the neighborhood of 450 waters. We have 80 new walleye fisheries out on the prairie that didn't exist back then. We have great quality out on the landscape, from pike fishing, perch fishing, to great walleye fishing right now. Then there is the fishing for smallmouth bass, the paddlefish snagging fishery and quality catfishing in the Missouri River and trophy cats in the Red River. There has been a pretty remarkable change on the landscape over the years, and I've been fortunate to have quite a table setting presented to me.



Greg Power during the spring walleye spawn on Lake Sakakawea.

NDO: What fisheries management changes have you seen, good or bad, over the last 40 years?

Power: There's been a lot of change, and most of the change has been positive. With fishing regulations, for example, we've always had the belief that we wanted to keep things simple. And I think for the most part, the fishing public likes what we've done as our regulations are some of the most straightforward compared to anywhere in the country. Undoubtedly, we could have done things a bit differently over the last 40-plus years. But there's always a negative to that. Even so, our regulations, I think for the most part, have been positive.

When you think about development, such as boat ramps, what a different world we are living in today. We have good roads, good parking lots, and concrete ramps in many cases. When I started, we had very few concrete boat ramps in the state. The trails into them were just that, trails.

Then there's fish production. The species and numbers of fish we stock today compared to what we were able to stock back in the early years has changed significantly. So, on so many levels there's been change. And again, I think most have been positive.

NDO: Has the angling public changed?

Power: They've probably changed more than the resource. There are three types of fishing most anywhere — shore-fishing, boat fishing and ice fishing. You can go back 50 years, and the shore-fishing hasn't changed much. But, wow, have we seen changes in boat fishing and especially ice fishing with all the technology, the toys and all the gadgets … and all the learning that's gone on out there. The difference is night and day from when I started. We had the green box, and it was truly nothing more than a depth finder. Back then, more than a 50-horse motor was not unheard of, but pretty rare out there.

The expectations in the angling community have also changed. We have this vocal minority that can get kind of ugly at times today that I never experienced back in the day. But, you know, most people I think are appreciative. One other thing I should mention too is a shift in public engagement. There were a lot of fishing clubs when I started, engaged fishing clubs, and I know it's been a struggle for many of these clubs nowadays to get more than three or four people to a meeting. The number of clubs has really dropped off because of the generational differences. So, that's kind of been a downside in 40-plus years of considerable change.

NDO: Moving forward, what are your greatest concerns with fishing in North Dakota or fisheries management?

Power: As always, I have a list of about 10. One of the leading ones is public engagement. They're competing today from a very, very active lifestyle back in the day to more of a passive lifestyle today, with screen time and all that goes along with it. You hear about the dwindling numbers with softball participation, bowling, whatever, and it's also impacted fishing. So, keeping the public fishing is probably my biggest concern. Commercialization of the resource, that's another that has changed so much over time. Water quality, that hasn't gone away. Another problem out there, is biota transfer. Aquatic invasive

species or aquatic nuisance species, ANS, those are terms, words you never heard of when I started. But the issue was still there. It was called biota transfer. There are a lot of issues with carp, zebra mussels and others. Moving forward, it's going to continue to be an issue.

NDO: Under your leadership, the Game and Fish Department has created 60-plus community fisheries around the state. Is that about, right?

Power: These community fisheries gets back what we call the R3 deal — recruitment, retainment and reactivation of anglers. It's one of the things I wish we could have done so much more, and it's something we'll need to do a lot more in the future to keep people fishing. One of the things we've tried, and will continue to do so, is bringing the fish closer to the people. A one-way fishing trip, on average, is 60 miles. Well, there are a lot of people who can't afford the time and especially can't afford the expense for a 60-mile fishing trip. Throughout the state, we have these little in-town community fisheries that are oftentimes nothing more than put-and-take fisheries, where we stock some fish in spring and hopefully people get to participate and catch some fish. And I think that's helped a lot. It's part of the long-term answer to public engagement.

NDO: What do you consider your biggest professional accomplishment in the last 40-plus years?

Power: That's a tough one. More than anything, I'd say, was keeping a team of professionals in the Game and Fish Department as a whole and specifically with the fisheries division. We've been so blessed with having top notch personnel out there. They're not storytellers but, holy cow, the work ethic, what they get done and some of the ideas that they come up with is impressive. I think this might be one of the best accomplishments because it is way more than me. It's a team effort that's gone on for basically my entire career.

NDO: And it's not like the fisheries division has grown that much over the last 40 years, yet you're managing more than twice as many lakes today compared to back in the day. Correct?

Power: Yeah. While the workload has increased significantly, you never hear the staff complaining about it. They just put their noses down and work with it. We are, I believe, the smallest fisheries division in the U.S. but you wouldn't know it by what our fisheries crews get done year in and year out.

NDO: Any disappointment in the last 40-plus years?

Power: I've been disappointed at times in the apathy of the public. Fishing in North Dakota, for example, generates millions in collectible state taxes, more than $800 million is spent annually on fishing equipment, and so on. Fishing is kind of a big player and you'd think there'd been less apathy and more engagement, but there isn't. On a fish species level, largemouth bass have been a disappointment. When I started, our largemouth bass fisheries were better than they are today, and we've tried a lot of different things. Water quality is another and that's a big picture issue. We had a program at one time called Save Our Lakes that tried to address water quality issues. But again, it's oftentimes just Band-Aids and it's an issue that's slowly hurting our fisheries. We continue to have blue green algae advisories that go on and we have sedimentation issues in some of our fisheries, especially our reservoirs, so there will continue to be water quality challenges in years to come.

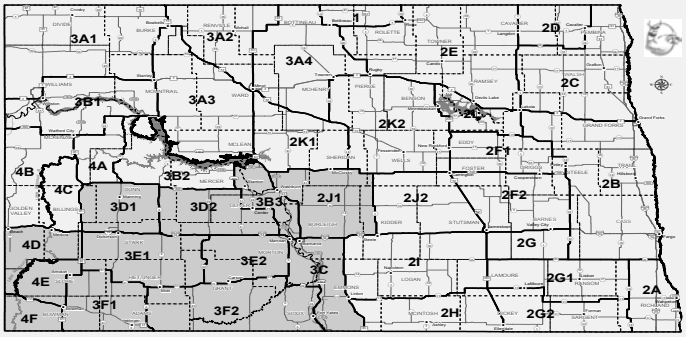
NDO: Speaking of water. There have been years where we've dealt with everything from drought to flooding. How has Mother Nature influenced things over the years?

Power: When it comes to the fisheries in North Dakota, that's what makes it special or unique. But when it comes to management, we're managing extremes. You know, they talk about climate change and stuff, but North Dakota has always had dramatic climate change. So, we've seen the peaks and valleys. Those floods and those dry years, probably short term, are not a good deal. But in the long-term, when you get revegetation of shorelines during times of low water followed by flooding, you can get dramatic swings in the perch and pike fisheries as the inundated vegetation provides a nutrient boost to the fisheries, while providing places for fish to naturally reproduce.

NDO: The stars aligned with your career, as some of best fishing anglers have ever seen in North Dakota have come under your time as fisheries chief. Would you agree?

Power: Certainly. With pike and perch, you got to live with those peaks and valleys, and their day will come again. But one thing we can sustain over the longer haul, especially with our production capabilities, is walleye. I used to write a lot for the *North Dakota OUTDOORS* and I would often say the good old days are today. It's a broken record, but that's been kind of my career and that's been a really nice thing. But again, I go back to the professionalism of the staff. I'm of that baby boomer generation where you worked hard, you played hard. But a lot of people say the younger generations, you know, there's some challenges there. But I don't see that within the Game and Fish Department. I tell you what, Gen Z, whatever they are now, the younger hires we have, their passion for the outdoors is high and I'm very optimistic about the future of the Department and the fisheries division. We have good young professionals who really care about the resource.

BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



CWD Testing, Disposal Requirements

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department will continue its hunter-harvested surveillance program during the 2026 hunting season by sampling deer for chronic wasting disease from select units in the southwestern portion of the state.

Samples will be tested from deer taken from units 2J1, 3B3, 3C, 3D1, 3D2, 3E1, 3E2, 3F1, 3F2, 4D, 4E and 4F. 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.

Hunters are also reminded that carcass disposal requirements apply statewide. The entire carcass can be transported outside of the gun unit where it was harvested. If transported out of the gun unit, the carcass waste (material left after processing) must be disposed of via landfill or waste management provider. This requirement does not apply to heads dropped at CWD collection sites, or lymph nodes submitted for CWD surveillance.

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

Zebra Mussels Found in Sakakawea

After detecting zebra mussel larvae in routine sampling, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department has confirmed the presence of invasive zebra mussels on the extreme eastern portion of Lake Sakakawea.

Ben Holen, Department aquatic nuisance species coordinator said, "Follow-up sampling found two adult mussels along the northern shoreline near the Highway 83 Embankment."

While current findings suggest the infestation is isolated to the far eastern stretch of the reservoir, Game and Fish personnel, working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, will conduct expanded surveys in the coming days to delineate the infested area.

Officials note that falling water temperatures this fall greatly reduce the immediate risk of zebra mussel spread. The Department will work with stakeholders over the winter to refine appropriate rules and implement best management practices to mitigate the spread of mussels before next year's boating season.

For more information on aquatic nuisance species, or to report a suspected sighting, visit gf.nd.gov/ans.

Preparing for Access Challenges on the MRS in 2027

Ongoing low water conditions across Lake Sakakawea, Lake Oahe and the Missouri River are projected to cause significant boating access challenges throughout the 2027 season. With further water level reductions anticipated, state and federal agencies are proactively preparing for less-than-optimal conditions at many popular recreation sites.

North Dakota Game and Fish Department, North Dakota Parks and Recreation Department, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and local partners are actively collaborating to address boating access needs immediately following ice-out in early 2027. However, officials caution boaters and anglers that, despite this work, many boat ramps and parking lots will be less than ideal.

To manage the anticipated congestion at viable ramp locations, the Game and Fish Department is implementing adjustments to the 2027 Missouri River System fishing tournament schedule.

No additional open water fishing tournaments will be permitted beyond those already approved during the 2026 scheduling cycle.

Water recreationists are encouraged to plan ahead and monitor official updates as the 2027 boating season approaches.

Complete the Survey

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.



Make the Call

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.

NORTH DAKOTA RAP REPORT ALL POACHERS



Ice Fishing Regulations

Anglers are encouraged to refer to the 2026-28 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.

No Registration Required

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 are required to possess the valid fishing license needed to participate in darkhouse spearfishing. But, unlike seasons past, participants do not need to register with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department prior to participating.

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 2027 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 2027. 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 the latest installment of Cayla's Kitchen featuring guest chef, Marty Egeland, as he walks viewers through an easy way to utilize a full deer shoulder for tender pulled meat that can be used for pot roast, tacos, sandwiches and more. Save yourself some time this deer season and put a whole shoulder in the freezer for a winter day. For more ways to enjoy your wild game, visit gf.nd.gov/caylas-kitchen for a full collection of recipes to make the most of every harvest.

STAFF NOTES



Fisheries Chief Retires

Greg Power retired in November after more than 40 years with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

Power's employment with the agency started in 1979 as a seasonal aide in Riverdale and he became a full-time fisheries research biologist in 1986. A University of North Dakota graduate, Power was appointed chief of fisheries in 2006, a position he held until his retirement.



Halstead Retires

Dan Halstead retired earlier this fall after 28 years with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

At the time of his retirement, Halstead was the wildlife resource management supervisor in Riverdale, a position he held for the length of his career with the agency.

"Dan has made lasting contributions to the Department and wildlife conservation," said Bill Haase, Department wildlife division chief. "His extensive knowledge, years of experience and unwavering commitment to wildlife management have made a meaningful difference and will benefit the Department for years to come."



Oster Named Section Leader

Jake Oster was named wildlife resource management section leader for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

Oster started working for the agency in 2013. Before his promotion, Oster worked as a wildlife resource management biologist in Riverdale.



Bandy Joins Agency

Logan Bandy has filled the Game and Fish Department's private lands biologist position in Williston.

Bandy has a Bachelor of Science in wildlife and fisheries resources from West Virginia University He worked for the Department as a seasonal employee in Riverdale and Williston beginning in 2024.



The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's private lands initiative team was recognized for their efforts in September by Gov. Kelly Armstrong and Lt. Gov. Michelle Strinden.

PLI Team Lands Governor's Award

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's private lands initiative team was awarded the Strength from the Soil Award at the 2026 Governor's Awards for Excellence in Public Service in September.

The PLI team was recognized for their efforts through innovation, partnership, and a commitment to keeping North Dakota's agricultural and natural landscapes productive, resilient, and healthy for generations to come.

While the team is responsible for the nationally recognized Private Land Opens To Sportsmen program, their impact extends beyond acres on a map. The PLI team has demonstrated that conservation and agriculture are not competing priorities. By listening to landowners, building partnerships and developing innovative programs, they have created a model in which healthy soils, productive working lands, abundant wildlife and public access reinforce one another.

SEARCH

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ND OUTDOORS PODCAST

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GF.ND.GOV/NDO-PODCAST

THE OFFICIAL PODCAST OF THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT.

BACKCAST

I took hunter safety more than half a century ago in a cramped, portable classroom that would be considered too small nowadays as an elevated deer stand if you were to attach four long legs to it.

While I recollect the smallness of the venue, I also remember the enormity of it all, the self-inflicted pressure of not fumbling on test day. If I didn't pass, I wouldn't get to hunt in the coming deer season. Simple as that. The pageantry of watching Dad buy my first deer tag over the counter, something I'd long envisioned carrying in my back pocket in one of those colored, plastic license holders that advertised the local sporting goods store on the front in white lettering, would be lost.

I shot my first deer, a small buck, that year. It was 1973. Like a lot of firsts, I'll likely never forget it.

This year, with North Dakota's deer gun season opening in about a week as I write this, I notched another first (with an asterisk). This is the first year in 50-plus that I won't be carrying a deer tag around in my back pocket. Just one of the unlucky many who, not surprisingly, didn't land one of the roughly 39,000 licenses made available across the state.

I say this with pause (here's the asterisk) because while I didn't draw in the unit where I've long hunted with family, I picked up a doe tag in the second drawing in southwestern North Dakota. I figured I could sneak down there sometime after hunting opening weekend with the kids if my work schedule and other stars aligned.

Yet, with the implementation of conservative strategies earlier this fall to safeguard an already slow-to-rebound whitetail population that was hit by an EHD outbreak in that neck of North Dakota, my back pocket, like some hunters who have already returned their deer tags to the agency, will likely remain empty.

When I was informed sometime in summer with the "unsuccessful" deer lottery notification via email, I wasn't surprised, nor was I bummed which, well, sort of surprised me. Maybe because two of my kids and newly minted son-in-law all drew doe tags, which is plenty. Or maybe it's an age thing. I've pulled the trigger during 50-plus consecutive deer seasons and now it's someone else's turn.

Yeah, I'm not buying that, either.

My desire, my want to participate in North Dakota's deer gun season with purpose — to shoot, skin and quarter what I eat — hasn't changed any since 1973.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



North Dakota Outdoors Magazine
North Dakota Game and Fish Department
100 N. Bismarck Expressway
Bismarck, ND 58501

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



Volunteer instructors are the backbone of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's hunter education program. Like many of the volunteer instructors, Kevin Lech of Mandan, pictured here teaching a hunter education student in Bismarck, have been donating their time for years to help guide young hunters down a safe path. Visit the Department's website at gf.nd.gov to find a hunter education class near you.

PHOTO BY ASHLEY PETERSON.

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