

# NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT  
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# NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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

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SANDRA JOHNSON

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### Front Cover

Two young ring-necked roosters and a hen pheasant in mid-September. *Photo by Ashley Peterson, Bismarck.*

# My 2 Cents

*By Jeb Williams, Director*



Writing my first column as the new director of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department comes with a bit of reflection.

My career with the Department began as a temporary employee back in 1998 and at that time, Dean Hildebrand was the director. For those of you who knew Dean, you know what a charismatic individual he was. He loved crowds and loved to tell stories to anyone willing to listen. That didn't change right up until his retirement in 2005. There wasn't much that could take the energy and enthusiasm away from Dean, but an unfortunate bout with cancer did just that as he sadly passed away in 2008. Dean was a people person, who had a big impact on the state and many people along the way. Myself included.

Following Dean's retirement, Terry Steinwand was appointed director in early 2006 and led the agency for 15 years. I'm not sure which is more uncommon, Terry's tenure as Game and Fish director for 15 years or my career as a Department employee only working under two directors over a 22-year career. Either way, most Game and Fish agencies across the country aren't accustomed to the length of careers that either Terry or Dean had while occupying the director's chair.

Terry served under three governors, supported programs that led to some of the best hunting and fishing opportunities the state has ever experienced, navigated the Department through debates over wildlife impacts associated with various energy development projects, and was determined to find a reasonable solution to the long-standing disagreement on North Dakota's private land posting laws. Just to name a few.

While I'm excited as to what the future holds, I'm grateful for the service of my (your) previous directors and the expectation of serving the public with respect and professionalism that people deserve from a public agency.

Dean and Terry did some things differently, as will I, but the one simple commitment that will remain consistent is our customer service and the importance of the Department working directly with our interested and impacted public on fish and wildlife management issues that are so critical to our residents and the state.

# PROTECT THE HERD

Your actions matter

Know the regulations to help fight  
Chronic Wasting Disease

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Creating opportunities for people to enjoy the bounties found across North Dakota's landscape is something Jeb Williams, Department director, takes seriously.

# NORTH DAKOTA NATIVE LEADS AGENCY

By Ron Wilson

Jeb Williams was appointed director of the Game and Fish Department by Gov. Doug Burgum in late August after more than 20 years with the agency, the last seven as wildlife division chief.

"Jeb has a strong track record as a highly capable leader on issues affecting fish and wildlife resources and as an effective communicator in relating those issues to North Dakota's hunters and anglers and the general public," Burgum said. "His extensive background, commitment to public service and trusted leadership within Game and Fish will benefit North Dakota citizens and the management of our state's abundant wildlife resources."

Williams replaced Terry Steinwand, who retired July 31 after nearly 40 years with the Department, 15 years as director.

Williams joined the Game and Fish Department in 1999 and served in a variety of roles including natural resource technician and biologist, outreach biologist and wildlife resource management supervisor. He was named chief of the Department's wildlife division in 2014 after having served as assistant wildlife chief since 2011.

"I've served the agency in several different capacities, from a seasonal employee, to a biologist, to a supervisor, to an administrator of a division and now, which is something I'm proud of," Williams said. "Taking that route, I believe, just puts me in a decent position to have good understanding and knowledge of the Department and the way it works."

Williams is a North Dakota native, grew up in Beach and earned a bachelor's degree in biology from Dickinson State University.

Stepping away from his role as wildlife division chief, the Department's largest division, wasn't easy, he said, but Williams embraces his new position, which is certainly saddled with elevated expectations.



Jeb Williams (right).

ASHLEY PETERSON

CARLA BENDIS



ASHLEY PETERSON



ASHLEY PETERSON

North Dakota's hunting heritage is strong, and Williams believes that's one of the reasons why many people choose to live here, despite the lure of packing up and relocating elsewhere.

*"...whether it's fishing, hunting, waterfowl hunting, upland game hunting, big game hunting ... you name it, we have it in North Dakota,"*

"The wildlife division chief position is a tremendous job because you work with really passionate people, a very professional staff, and just being able to support them in the role that I had was very rewarding," Williams said. "And now to be able to support the entire agency from the director's role is, again, something that I don't take lightly ... it's a responsibility that I'm really looking forward to."

As timing would have it, Williams was appointed director as drought conditions across much of the state caused hardship and left many wondering when it was going to rain again.

Yet, as a native North Dakotan he understands the sometimes-volatile nature of life on the Northern Plains, and how the weather, no matter the time of year, can influence the state's wildlife and human populations.

"We know in North Dakota that we will have weather swings that can be very challenging for agriculture producers, ranchers, wildlife, wildlife habitat and our fisheries," he said. "It's going to be interesting moving forward to see if

the drought of 2021 turns into a long-term drought situation or if we're going to break out of it in the short-term. That's going to be the big question moving forward."

Safeguarding North Dakota's natural resources and creating opportunities for people to enjoy the bounties found across the landscape no matter the weather, is something Williams takes seriously.

"As you look across North Dakota, you see a lot of passion. You see a lot of people who choose to make North Dakota home because of our outdoor resources," he said. "We know North Dakotans are hard working. We know they're well-educated and can go just about anywhere in the country to make a home, but to choose here, in part, because of our outdoor opportunities is a really powerful thing.

"North Dakota's diversity plays a role in that, whether it's fishing, hunting, waterfowl hunting, upland game hunting, big game hunting ... you name it, we have it in North Dakota," he added. "Understanding that it's very attractive



to a lot of different people is something I definitely take very seriously.”

Williams said it’s often lost on biologists, himself included, the economic impact hunting and fishing have in the state.

“But it has been something that I’ve taken a keen interest in, as far as looking at some of those details in the last number of years and just seeing the economic impact that the outdoor recreation industry has on small towns and big towns in North Dakota, which is significant,” he said.

There’s no doubt that outdoor recreation is not the economic engine in North Dakota, Williams added, but it’s a cylinder in that engine.

“And if that isn’t continued in the relationship that it has been, I think that you start seeing some problems with that engine. I think that we definitely play a role in that,” he said.

While attention to chronic wasting disease, aquatic nuisance species, wildlife habitat, the Department’s R3 program and other initiatives on land and water will continue under his leadership, Williams said focus should also center on the state’s private landowners.

“As you know, 93% of North Dakota is in private land ownership, as an agency we need to make sure

we have as good a relationship as we possibly can with private landowners, because those outdoor opportunities are a lot of times on the backs of private landowners,” he said. “We need to make sure that we continue to improve those relationships the best way possible. We need to make sure we look at different programs that are available for private landowners to give them additional options for their operation.

“I know an awful lot of people in North Dakota from the sportsman side of things that are very passionate, but I know a lot of landowners, agriculture producers in North Dakota who are also very passionate about hunting and fishing, too,” he added. “So, there doesn’t necessarily have to be a divide. As an agency, we just need to acknowledge that those challenges do exist, but through lots of communication, opportunities, programs and discussions that include landowners, we can continue to make sure that relationship is a positive one.”

*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*



BRIAN SCHAFER

A North Dakota native, Williams is proud of the state’s diversity in hunting and fishing opportunities. With a record number of managed waters on the landscape, for example, anglers can pursue big smallmouth bass (pictured) or pitch jigs to walleye and a number of other species in the state’s 440 waters.





# PROTECTING

THE

# HERD

By Ron Wilson

While managing chronic wasting disease is a long-term effort, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department continues to take steps to lower the risk of it spreading across the landscape.

TY STOCKTON



MIKE ANDERSON

Glassing for mule deer in western North Dakota.

Department personnel first started finding deer with CWD in hunting unit 3F2 in Grant and Sioux counties in 2009, and they've found positive deer in that unit ever since.

"In 2018 we found it for the first time in Divide County, unit 3A1 and since then, we found it farther south as well in Williams County in unit 3B1 and then unit 4B in 2019," said Dr. Charlie Bahnson, Game and Fish Department wildlife veterinarian, of the always fatal disease of deer, moose and elk that can cause long-term population declines as infection rates climb.

Department officials reported that 18 deer tested positive following the 2020 hunting season. Fourteen were from hunting unit 3F2, two were from unit 3A1 and one was from unit 4B.

A white-tailed deer harvested in unit 3A2 also tested positive and was the first detection in the unit.

Fortunately, Bahnson said, while a number of deer have tested positive for the disease in North Dakota, the prevalence of CWD remains low, from 2-5% in affected units.

Bahnson said one way that CWD can be artificially spread is by improper disposal of high-risk carcass parts. Biologists know that CWD is especially concentrated in the brain and spinal column and hunters who unknowingly discard those carcass parts on the landscape have the potential to introduce that disease into a new area.

Understanding this, deer hunters should note that beginning this year, there is an exception to the regulation that reads "a deer carcass or boned-out meat must be accompanied by the head to the final place of storage."

The exception is this: Tag the deer as required, then take two photographs using a cellphone with location, date and time stamp turned on. One photograph of the entire animal at the kill site with tag attached, and a second photograph of a close-up of the tag so that the tag information is readable.

Bahnson said hunters can then bone or quarter the animal as they

typically would and take the head to a CWD collection site or leave it at the harvest site.

If a hunter leaves the head in the field at the kill site, after taking photos and saving them, the ear or antler with the tag attached must be cut off and accompany the meat or carcass while in transport. The photographs of the tagged deer must be shown to any game warden or other law enforcement officer upon request.

"We know that this disease, if allowed to spread across the landscape could cause some major impacts in years to come," Bahnson said. "So, this is a great thing that hunters can do to lower the risk of spreading this disease."

Bahnson said if you're hunting private property and plan on leaving the carcass at the harvest site, to make sure you have landowner permission to do so.

In this ongoing effort to lower the risk of spreading CWD, there are other requirements big game hunters must follow when transporting deer, elk and moose carcasses and carcass parts into and within North Dakota.

Hunters are prohibited from transporting into or within North Dakota the whole carcass of deer, elk, moose or other members of the cervid family harvested outside of North Dakota.



ASHLEY PETERSON

Taking a close-up photo of a deer tag so the tag information is readable.

In addition, hunters harvesting a white-tailed deer or mule deer from deer hunting units 3A1, 3A2, 3B1, 3F2, 4B and 4C, a moose from moose hunting units M10 and M11, or an elk from elk hunting unit E2, cannot transport the whole carcass outside the unit. However, hunters can transport the whole carcass between adjoining CWD carcass restricted units.

North Dakota Game and Fish Department district game wardens will be enforcing all CWD transportation laws.

Hunters are encouraged to plan accordingly and be prepared to quarter a carcass, cape out an animal, or clean a skull in the field, or find a taxidermist or meat locker within the unit or state who can assist.

Game and Fish maintains several freezers throughout the region for submitting heads for CWD testing.

The following lower-risk portions of the carcass can be transported:

- Meat boned out.
- Quarters or other portions of meat with no part of the spinal column or head attached.
- Meat cut and wrapped either commercially or privately.
- Hides with no heads attached.
- Skull plates with antlers attached and no hide or brain tissue present.
- Intact skulls with the hide, eyes, lower jaw and associated soft tissue removed, and no visible brain or spinal cord tissue present.
- Antlers with no meat or tissue attached.
- Upper canine teeth, also known as buglers, whistlers or ivories.
- Finished taxidermy heads.

"These regulations are all intended to protect the deer herd," Bahnson said. "They can be found in the hunting guide and, the 2021 deer proclamation. But if hunters have any other questions, the best thing to do would be to contact their local game warden or other Game and Fish Department staff who can explain what the expectations are."

*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*

## BAITING RESTRICTIONS IN NORTH DAKOTA

Restrictions are in place prohibiting hunting big game over bait, or placing bait to attract big game for the purpose of hunting, in several deer units and other lands to slow the spread of chronic wasting disease.

The deer units include 3A1, 3A2, 3A3, 3A4, 3B1, 3C west of the Missouri River, 3E1, 3E2, 3F1, 3F2, 4A, 4B and 4C.

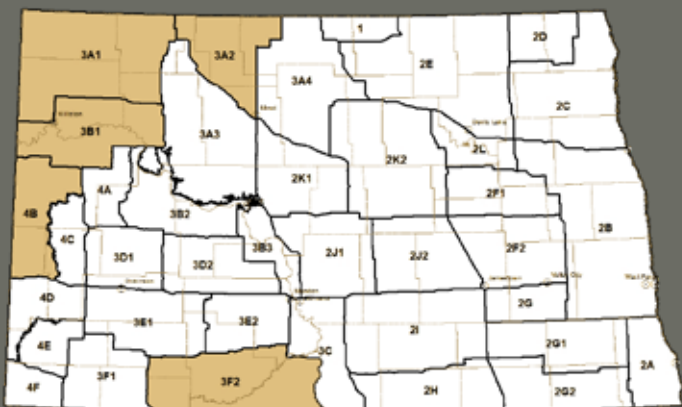
In addition, baiting for any purpose is prohibited on all North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife management areas.

Hunting big game over bait is also prohibited on all U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service national wildlife refuges and waterfowl production areas, U.S. Forest Service national grasslands, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers managed lands, and all North Dakota state trust, state park and state forest service lands.



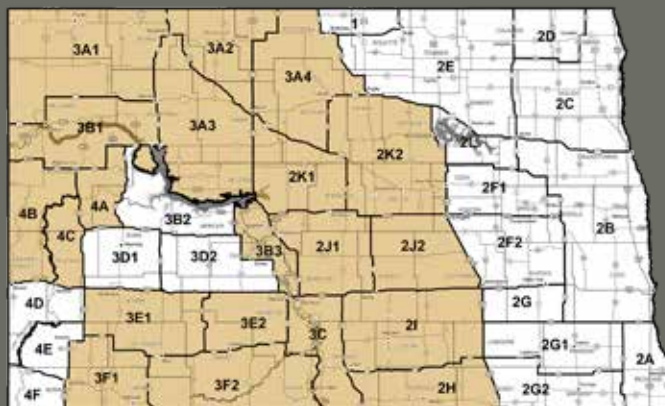
MIKE ANDERSON

## CWD POSITIVES



Deer hunting units in North Dakota shaded where deer tested positive for chronic wasting disease.

## 2021 CWD SURVEILLANCE UNITS



Deer from the shaded units will be tested in 2021 for CWD as part of the Department's Hunter-Harvested Surveillance program.

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# BIGHORN

## — SUCCESS STORY —

By Ron Wilson

**T**here are likely more bighorn sheep sure-footing their way along the rugged and equally gorgeous badlands in western North Dakota today than in the last 150 years.

Equipped with concaved, sharply edged hooves to grip the slightest footholds, these animals are certainly on solid ground.

"The last native bighorn confirmed in the state was killed in 1905 at Magpie Creek," said Brett Wiedmann, North Dakota Game and Fish Department big game management biologist. "And we know that in the late 1800s Theodore Roosevelt hunted bighorns in North Dakota and killed a bighorn at Bullion Butte, but the animals were scarce by then."

Currently, between the population managed by Game and Fish, which totals about 330 animals, and those managed by the National Park Service and Three Affiliated Tribes, Wiedmann said the overall bighorn sheep population is getting closer and closer to 500 bighorns.

Bighorn sheep in North Dakota are a success story. When you think about it, there was only a 50-year gap between the time when the last confirmed bighorn was killed at Magpie Creek to their reintroduction by Game and Fish in 1956.

"A lot of credit goes to Game and Fish staff back in the mid-1950s," Wiedmann said. "We were one of the first states the bighorns were extirpated, and they took the initiative way back then to reintroduce

---



LARA ANDERSON

Now a staple on western North Dakota's landscape, bighorn sheep were absent for a half-century before their reintroduction in 1956.

that species. And since then, it's just been a progression of introducing bighorns to the badlands."

The turning point, certainly, was when Game and Fish introduced bighorns from Montana to the badlands in 2006 and 2007.

This is what Wiedmann had to say in 2006 about bringing bighorns in from Montana: "You try to find the closest match in terms of habitat that you can, and this is the first time since 1956 that we've transplanted bighorn stock from habitat so similar to ours. Bighorn sheep are creatures of habit, so this is important. Our hope is that when the sheep jump out of the trailer, they realize the badlands offer the same grasses they're used to eating, it's the same clay soils they've walked on ... it's just like home."

Wiedmann today: "A real catalyst is when we introduced those bighorns from Montana. They are just perfectly adapted to our cold winters, and they have done so

well as far as adult survival, lamb survival and population growth. They're really just taking off."

Life for bighorn sheep in the badlands isn't simply feeding on secluded grassy plateaus and living large. Like for many big game animals, life on the Northern Plains can be difficult.

"A common issue and challenge throughout the United States and Canada is disease from introduced pathogens that cause pneumonia, and we had an outbreak in 2014," Wiedmann said. "Fortunately, that strain of Mycoplasma was not as virulent as feared. We lost 15-20% of our adult population. Lamb recruitment was suppressed for a few years, but now it has come back, now we have very good recruitment."

The strain is still in the population, Wiedmann said, because he noticed a few lambs coughing during this year's summer survey.

"But despite that, we're still seeing pretty encouraging population growth," he said.

Pneumonia in a bighorn population can have a greater impact than the outbreak in 2014. The state's bighorn population south of Interstate 94 was hit hard by pneumonia in the late 1990s and just never recovered.

Game and Fish introduced bighorns south of the interstate three or four times since then, but both adult and lamb survival have been very low.

"About 10 years ago, we just decided there'd be no management actions in the southern badlands because the sheep just can't work the pathogens out of this population," Wiedmann said. "The ultimate goal long-term would be

to depopulate the entire southern badlands and then reintroduce healthy bighorns and start over again."

Wiedmann started working with the agency's bighorn sheep program in the early 2000s and never thought the state's population would be where it's at today.

"Honestly, it was pretty discouraging. After the die-off in the southern badlands in the late 1990s, there was a lot of talk in the Department about maybe giving up on bighorns because they're just so much money, such an investment, and the population was declining because of die-offs," he said. "So no, I didn't think we'd be seeing the type of bighorn numbers we're seeing today. It's really encouraging that they're doing so well. To see big groups of 35-40 bighorns together, when for years it was five or six in a herd, it's encouraging."

The Game and Fish Department manages the bighorn sheep population primarily for hunters. The state held its first hunting season in 1975 and about 260 rams have been harvested in nearly a half-century.

The Department allocated five bighorn sheep licenses for the 2021 hunting season. A record 19,126 applicants applied for the once-in-a-lifetime licenses.

While it's only a guess how this fall's season will play out, it will be difficult to compare to the 2020 bighorn season.

"In 2020, hunters shot the new number one, number two and number five all-time bighorns in the state, so it was an incredible year," Wiedmann said. "Again, that's the result of these Montana genetics. They're just a bigger



Surefooted bighorn sheep don't have any issues negotiating the rugged up and down landscape in the badlands.

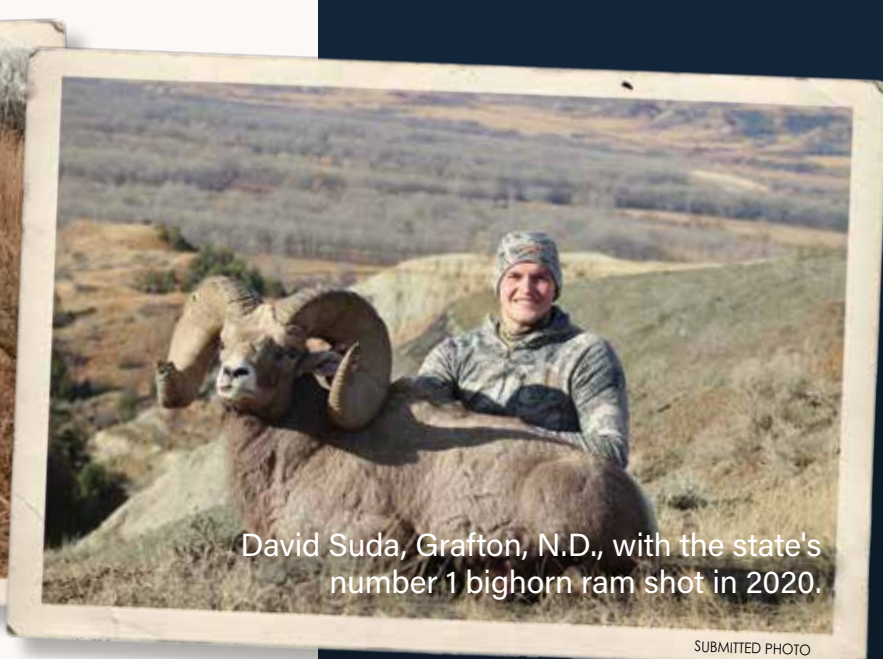
LARA ANDERSON





Sawyer Burchill, Hunter, N.D., with the state's number 2 bighorn ram shot in 2020.

SUBMITTED PHOTO



David Suda, Grafton, N.D., with the state's number 1 bighorn ram shot in 2020.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

bodied, bigger horned animal. And the rams were actually young ... all three were only 7 years old and that's not a real old ram. We typically want them harvested at 8 to 10. They were just three tremendous rams, and we still have some real nice up-and-comers as well."

Wiedmann added that those 2020 bighorns made up the youngest group of rams harvested in North Dakota in 26 years.

During some of the first bighorn hunting seasons in the late 1970s, Department personnel accompanied hunters in the field. Today, and for years, the once-in-a-lifetime hunts are DIY.

"Hunters now just meet with me, and we'll sit down with a map and kind of show them those areas where bighorns inhabit and then hunters got to go out and find them," Wiedmann said. "The season occurs during the rut, so the rams are much easier to find than back 10-20 years ago when the season was in September."

Hunter success today is typically 100%. The 2021 season runs from Oct. 29 through Dec. 31.

The Department auctions one bighorn sheep license annually through the Midwest Chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation, from

which all proceeds are used to enhance bighorn sheep management in North Dakota.

"This year our auction license sold for a record \$135,000. That money is well used for GPS collars, airplane time, gas for the pickup, all the survey gear ... bighorns really fund their own management within the state," Wiedmann said.

There have long been some misconceptions concerning the sheep auction hunters in North Dakota.

"The only advantage the auction hunter has is that they can hunt in all open units, where the lottery hunters must stick to their hunting unit," Wiedmann said. "And, no, we do not tie the biggest ram in the state to a tree for the auction hunter. There is no favoritism in that regard. In fact, in the vast majority of hunting seasons, the largest rams are taken by resident hunters. In 2020, the three big rams all were taken by resident hunters who drew those tags."

*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*

## DROUGHT TOLERANT

While biologists lament the negative influences of an ongoing drought on fish and wildlife in North Dakota, Brett Wiedmann, Game and Fish Department big game management biologist, doesn't worry about the hot, dry weather impacting bighorn sheep in the badlands.

"Bighorns are adapted to dry climates, so it does not affect them very much. I just finished a summer count of bighorns and had a record summer lamb count. I counted 76 lambs, so they're very well adapted to drought," Wiedmann said. "However, what was strange is the bighorns we released on the reservation, we actually found one ram that was stuck in the mud trying to get to the water in the Little Missouri Arm and died. I never would have dreamt that with all that water, that the sheep couldn't get to it."

Nature is a cruel place sometimes, Wiedmann said.

"For the most part, the bighorns know where these little seeps of water are located," he said. "But unlike some other species, drought isn't an issue for bighorns."

# THE FALLOUT OF

# DROUGHT

By Ron Wilson



Biologists fear that with lower quality food sources on the landscape because of drought, deer might not be in good enough shape to carry fawns until birth in spring if the winter is tough.

**A** decade ago, with high water over much of the state from the Devils Lake basin to the Missouri River corridor and in between, North Dakota was as wet as it had been in more than a century.

Crop fields were flooded. High waters washed out roads. The lives and livelihoods of many were challenged. Flood waters from Garrison Dam south along the Missouri River that inundated homes, infrastructure of river-bound communities and an untold number of acres of wildlife habitat, was called a 500-year event.

Today, following a hot, dry summer that featured little precipitation and a record number of days over 100 degrees, farmers, ranchers and wildlife managers are wondering if there is an end in sight.

"It's a pretty bad drought ... realistically, we've been looking at almost two years of it," said Casey Anderson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief. "Because we're coming on a second year of this thing, it really starts to add up.

"If you get one year of drought, a lot of stuff out there, whether it's wildlife or vegetation, deals with that fairly well in this kind of country," he added. "But when you start getting into multi-year droughts, things start to get really taxing across the landscape for wildlife, habitat, agriculture producers ... everybody really."

Life on the Northern Plains, if you hang around long enough to experience the unpredictable weather ups and downs, will stagger even the hardiest.

Some of the fallouts for wildlife during a drought, Anderson said, is a decline in habitat, which means lower quality food and scarce to lower quality water sources.

"Because of this, the critters out there are unable to thrive like they normally would in spring and summer when they add fat and have large broods with the good available nesting cover," he said. "While it doesn't seem like it now because there are grasshoppers everywhere, we had pretty low insect numbers in spring. During that time in the spring is when pheasant and grouse chicks

are hatching, they depend on a high protein diet of insects, and they just weren't there."

Drought also severely impacted breeding duck habitats across North Dakota in spring and summer. Breeding conditions varied from very poor to fair, and the Game and Fish Department's wetland index declined by 80%.

While 2.9 million ducks were estimated during the Department's annual breeding duck survey in May, Mike Szymanski, Department migratory game bird management supervisor, said behavioral cues suggested breeding efforts by those ducks would be low.

Conditions were not good statewide, he said, and after a high count in 2020, the decline in wetlands counted represented the largest one-year percentage-based decline in the 74-year history of the survey.

The number of broods observed during the Department's July brood survey dropped 49% from last year's count and 23% below the 1965-2020 average. The number of broods observed was the lowest since 1994,

ASHLEY PETERSON



...when you start getting into multi-year droughts, things start to get really taxing across the landscape for wildlife, habitat, agriculture producers ... everybody really.



yet the count in 2021 was still 62% above the long-term average. The average brood size was down 4% from last year's estimate.

With winter on the horizon, biologists reason that animals having dealt with lower quality food sources for an extended period will potentially go into North Dakota's leanest months without the proper fat reserves.

"And you're also going to end up with winter cover that is either short or nonexistent, so if winter gets bad it's going to be pretty hard for a lot of species to really thrive," Anderson said. "Also, think about the deer out there that might not even be in good enough shape to conceive a fawn, for example, or certainly not in good enough shape to carry one until birth in spring if the winter is tough. If these things happen, it's going to be an issue."

One of the remedies to help usher out drought conditions in North Dakota would be a white winter. Yet, getting what you wish for, Anderson said, will likely have some negatives attached.

"We need snow to give us that flush of green in the spring, maybe fill some wetlands and improve the quality of water on the landscape," he said. "Yet, the worse the winter gets, the harder it's going to be on the wildlife out there."

In the interim, Anderson said everyone would welcome more of the late August and early September rains that fell in parts of the state, turning the landscape greener than it had been all summer.

"That's maybe going to improve the quality of some of the food sources out there for wildlife as they're

trying to put on reserves to go into winter," Anderson said. "A few more of those rains would help give us some sort of soil moisture. The more rain we can get now, the better off we'll be in the spring, regardless of what the winter does to provide some nesting cover and other benefits."

## WAITING TO SEE WHAT WINTER BRINGS

While Greg Power, Department fisheries chief, describes the drought as a "tough one," he's quick to take the edge off any doom and gloom talk concerning North Dakota's fisheries.

"We got through the summer without really any substantial fish kills," he said. "Given how hot and dry it was, we totally expected to have half a dozen, 10 lakes with some type of, maybe even substantial kills, especially pike lakes. But we didn't see it, so that's good news."

Then again, depending on what happens this winter, his outlook may change.

"What often controls our fishery populations is winterkill, especially in those marginal waters, and we're set up for some serious winterkill potential if we get snowpack, especially if we get a snowpack in December and it stays," he said. "That early snow can really challenge a lot of our lakes. It's a double-edged sword. We need the moisture; we need that runoff come next spring and oftentimes it

Fisheries biologists assessing reproduction and stocking success in North Dakota waters earlier this fall say growth of young fish during the drought was, not surprisingly, down from the long-term average. On the other hand, there were a handful of lakes that were doing quite well according to survey results.



MIKE ANDERSON



comes in the form of snow. Even under the best-case scenario this winter, we're going to lose a few lakes. Worst case scenario ... Well, only time will tell."

For the most part, North Dakota's fishing waters were impacted equally across much of the state.

"We're down, as a general rule, 2 to 5 feet in our lakes from where we were two years ago," he said. "So, if the lake only has a maximum depth of 12 feet, that becomes very concerning."

If 2022 is a continuation of 2021, Power expects the state to possibly continue to feature hundreds of managed fishing waters. But in a couple of years if conditions persist, things could change significantly.

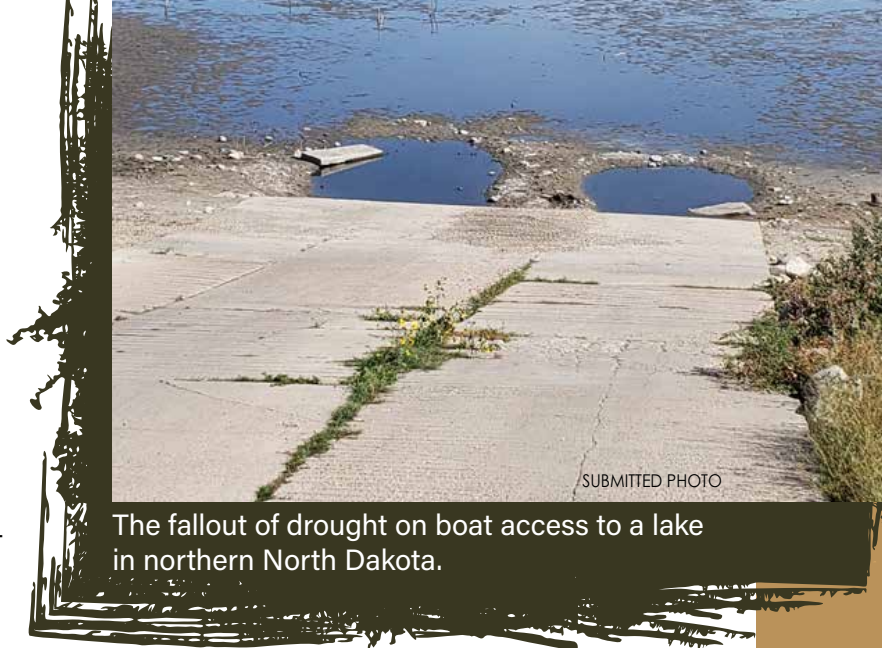
"We could lose a hundred waters," he said. "Of course, they're going to be your more marginal waters. Again, time will tell."

The other short- and long-term issue heading into 2022 is going to be boating access.

"We got through this summer in surprisingly decent shape," Power said. "We have a lot more boat ramps out on the prairies today than we did 20 to 30 years ago, but we're going to start finding where the bottom of those boat ramps are soon."

"It's possible if conditions continue like this, some boat ramps may not be available next year," he added. "Shore-fishing and ice fishing opportunities will still be out there on those waters, but we're going to be really challenged about providing boat access if we don't start getting some significant rain or snow."

Power said that



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The fallout of drought on boat access to a lake in northern North Dakota.

projections are not good for the Missouri River System in 2022, which means access to the big lake could be somewhat of an issue.

"On Sakakawea, we have a lot of low-water boat ramps, which is the good news, but we also know that they are probably under tons of sediment from all the high water in the last 10 years," Power said.

Power hopes the agency can work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to clear those low-water ramps of sediment so anglers and other water users have access to the lake.

Today, North Dakota features about 440 managed fishing waters, which is a record for the state, thanks to an incredible wet period beginning in 1993.

"We're going on almost 30 years of way above normal moisture, but in the middle of that we had pretty tough drought for four or five years prior to 2008," Power said. "Right now, maybe this is just going to be a one-, two-, three-year anomaly and the wet conditions will continue over the long term. We'll find out in a few years, I guess."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



MIKE ANDERSON

“ We got through the summer without really any substantial fish kills... ”



# BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



Ring-necked pheasant brood.

SANDRA JOHNSON

## Upland Game Brood Survey

North Dakota's roadside surveys conducted in late July and August indicate pheasants were down from last year, while sharp-tailed grouse and gray partridge numbers were about the same.

Jesse Kolar, Game and Fish Department upland game supervisor, said results of the annual upland late summer counts were expected.

"Recent weather patterns have shifted toward a drier period, particularly this year with a warm, open winter and exceptional drought across much of the state," Kolar said. "Hunters should expect to find similar numbers to 2020, with the exception that there will be fewer acres of typical grassland cover to walk."

Total pheasants (45) observed per 100 miles was down 23% from last year and broods (5) per 100 miles were down 30%. The average brood size (six) remained unchanged. The final summary is based on 266 survey runs made along 102 brood routes across North Dakota.

Observers in the northwest counted eight broods and 68 pheasants per 100 miles, down from 10 broods and 80 pheasants in 2020. Average brood size was six. Results from the southeast showed three broods and 24 pheasants per 100 miles, down from five broods and 42 pheasants in 2020. Average brood size was four.

Statistics from southwestern North Dakota indicated six broods and 59 pheasants per 100 miles, down from seven broods and 65 pheasants in 2020. Average brood size was seven chicks.

The northeast district, generally containing secondary pheasant habitat with lower pheasant numbers compared to the rest of the state, showed three broods and 24 pheasants per 100 miles, compared to three broods and 22 pheasants last year. Average brood size was five.

Kolar said sharptail hunters should expect to find

mainly adult grouse this fall. He said numbers along the Missouri River are still high compared to long-term averages, so hunters who can find cover should have average to good hunting. The eastern part of the state has fewer sharp-tailed grouse, with isolated hot spots.

"Many rangelands that hold grouse on an average year will be too open to hunt this fall, and most grouse will likely be found in shrubland and woodland draws and/or near riparian areas," he said.

Sharptails observed per 100 miles were up 2% statewide. Brood survey results showed two sharptail broods and 19 sharptails per 100 miles. Average brood size was six.

Although partridge numbers have shown a slight increase, Kolar said most of the partridge harvest is incidental while hunters pursue grouse or pheasants. Partridge densities in general, he said, are too low to target.

Partridge observed per 100 miles were up 9%. Observers recorded one partridge brood and 10 partridge per 100 miles. Average brood size was 10.

## Zebra Mussels Found in Lake Elsie

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department confirmed the presence of invasive zebra mussels in Lake Elsie, Richland County, after a local cabin owner reported adult mussels attached to a boat lift in late summer.

Ben Holen, Department aquatic nuisance species coordinator, said follow-up sampling found zebra mussels at various locations and life stages throughout the lake. The 390-acre lake is a popular recreation destination located a few miles southwest of Hankinson.

Lake Elsie is now considered a Class I ANS Infested water, joining Twin Lakes, Lake LaMoure, Lake Ashtabula, the lower portion of the Sheyenne River, and the Red River in this designation. Emergency rules went into effect immediately to prohibit the movement of water away from the lake, including water for transferring bait. Notices are posted at lake access sites.

Zebra mussels are just one of the nonnative aquatic species that threaten our waters and native wildlife. After using any body of water, recreationists must follow North Dakota regulations:

- Remove aquatic vegetation before leaving the water access and do not import into North Dakota.
- Drain all water before leaving the water access.
- Remove drain plugs and devices that hold back water and leave open and out during transport.

- Do not import bait. For Class I ANS Infested waters, bait cannot be transported in water. In all other areas, bait must be transported in a container that holds 5 gallons or less. It is illegal to dump unused bait on shore or into the lake.
- In addition to North Dakota regulations, the Game and Fish Department strongly recommends the following:
  - Avoid mooring your watercraft in zebra mussel infested waters.
  - Clean – remove plants, animals and excessive mud prior to leaving a water access.
  - Drain – drain all water prior to leaving a water access.
  - Dry – allow equipment to dry completely or disinfect before using again. This includes boat docks and boat lifts brought from other waters/states. A seven-day dry time is recommended after recreating on a zebra mussel infested water at typical summer temperatures. This includes boat docks and boat lifts brought from other waters/states.

For more information about ANS in North Dakota, options for disinfection, or to report a possible ANS, visit [gf.nd.gov/ans](http://gf.nd.gov/ans).



ASHLEY PETERSON

## Waterfowl Hunters Reminded of ANS Regulations

Waterfowl hunters are reminded to do their part in preventing the spread of aquatic nuisance species into or within North Dakota.

Waterfowl hunters must remove aquatic plants and plant fragments from decoys, strings and anchors; remove aquatic plant seeds and plant fragments from waders and other equipment before leaving hunting areas; remove all water from decoys, boats, motors, trailers and other watercraft; and remove all aquatic plants from boats and trailers before leaving a marsh or lake. In

addition, hunters are encouraged to brush their hunting dogs free of mud and seeds.

Cattails and bulrushes may be transported as camouflage on boats. All other aquatic vegetation must be cleaned from boats prior to transportation into or within North Dakota.

Drain plugs on boats must remain pulled when a boat is in transit away from a water body.

In addition, hunters are reminded of a state law that requires motorized watercraft, including motorized duck boats, operated on state waters and not licensed in North Dakota, to display an ANS sticker, including an ANS fee of \$15 to be paid each calendar year.

More ANS information, including regulations, or to purchase the ANS sticker, visit the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).



ASHLEY PETERSON

## Motorists Warned to Watch for Deer

Motorists should watch for deer along roadways this time of year because juvenile animals are dispersing from their home ranges.

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 along roadways. Most deer-vehicle accidents occur primarily at dawn and dusk when deer are moving around.

Motorists should be aware of warning signs signaling deer are in the area. 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 to take parts or the whole carcass of a road-killed deer. Permits are free and available from Department game wardens and local law enforcement offices.

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 your horn.



MIKE ANDERSON

## Check Boat Lifts, Docks for ANS

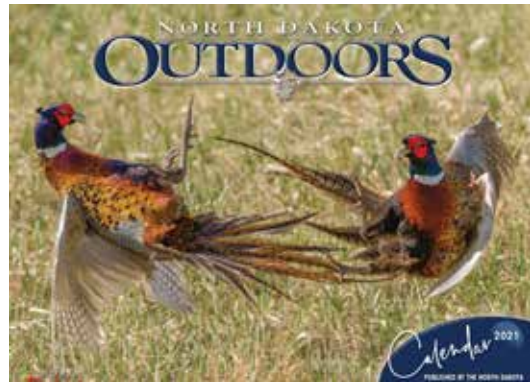
The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is asking water recreationists and property owners to check for zebra mussels and other aquatic nuisance species when removing boat lifts, docks and other equipment from state waters.

Ben Holen, Department ANS coordinator, said water recreationists and property owners play a vital role in ANS prevention.

"Zebra mussels attach to hard surfaces that are left in the water for long periods of time, first settling in tight spaces and areas that are protected from sunlight," Holen said. "Equipment such as boat lifts and docks are high risk vectors for spreading ANS, especially zebra mussels.

"It makes it easier to do a thorough search when equipment is taken out of the water in fall," he continued. "Pay special attention to wheel wells, right angles on frames, and areas otherwise protected from sunlight. Feel for attached organisms that have small hair-like structures holding them in place. Small mussels can feel like rough sandpaper and adults can be as large as 2 inches long."

Holen said if you think you've found a zebra mussel, take photos, write down any relevant information, such as how many were found and where, and report it online at the Game and Fish website [gf.nd.gov/ans](http://gf.nd.gov/ans), or email Holen at [bholen@nd.gov](mailto:bholen@nd.gov).



## Order 2022 OUTDOORS Calendars

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is taking orders for its 2022 North Dakota OUTDOORS calendar, the source for all hunting season and application dates for 2022. Along with outstanding color photographs of North Dakota wildlife and scenery, it also includes sunrise-sunset times and moon phases.

To order online, visit the Game and Fish website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov), or send \$3 for each, plus \$1 postage, to: Calendar, North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501-5095. Be sure to include a three-line return address with your order, or the post office may not deliver our return mailing.

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

## Hunting from Duck Boats Safely

Waterfowlers hunting from boats are encouraged to wear properly fitted life jackets while on the water.

Hunting jackets with built-in life jackets are light and comfortable to wear. In addition, wearing a life jacket will not only keep the overboard hunter afloat, but also slows the loss of critical body heat caused by exposure to cold water.

Capsizing and falling overboard from small boats are the most common types of fatal boating accidents for hunters.

## Prepping for the Deer Gun Season

With North Dakota's deer gun season opening in early November, many hunters will be looking for a place to sight in their firearms to get ready for the season.

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department manages five gun ranges on wildlife management areas in the state, and also partners with many local clubs around North Dakota to offer many other public shooting facilities.



The gun ranges managed by the Game and Fish Department include:

- Lewis and Clark WMA, located 6 miles southwest of Williston.
- Little Heart (Schmidt) Bottoms, located 12 miles south of Mandan off ND Highway 1806.
- MacLean Bottoms, located 2 miles south of ND Highway 1804, about 15 miles southeast of Bismarck.
- Riverdale WMA, located 2 miles southwest of Riverdale.
- Wilton Mine WMA, located 2 miles east of Wilton.

The Department may periodically close these ranges for routine maintenance and improvements. The status of each range can be found on the Department's website at [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov). The website also provides a detailed listing of other shooting facilities in North Dakota.

## Whooping Crane Migration

Whooping cranes are in the midst of their fall migration and sightings will increase as they make their way through North Dakota over the next several weeks. Anyone seeing these endangered birds as they move through the state is asked to report sightings so the birds can be tracked.

The whooping cranes that do travel through North Dakota in fall are part of a population of about 500 birds on their way from nesting grounds at Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada to wintering grounds in Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, a distance of about 2,500 miles.

Whoopers stand about 5 feet tall and have a wingspan of about 7 feet from tip to tip. They are bright white with black wing tips, which are visible only when the wings are outspread. In flight, they extend their long necks forward, while their long, slender legs extend out behind the tail. Whooping cranes typically migrate singly, or in groups of 2-3 birds, and may be associated with sandhill cranes.

Other white birds such as snow geese, swans and egrets are often mistaken for whooping cranes. The most common misidentification is pelicans, because their wingspan is similar and they tuck their pouch in flight, leaving a silhouette similar to a crane when viewed from below.

Anyone sighting whoopers should not disturb them, but record the date, time, location and the birds' activity. Observers should also look closely for and report colored bands, which may occur on one or both legs. Whooping cranes have been marked with colored leg bands to help determine their identity.

Whooping crane sightings should be reported to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service offices at Lostwood, 701-848-2466; Audubon, 701-442-5474; the North Dakota Game and Fish Department in Bismarck, 701-328-6300; or to local game wardens across the state. Reports help biologists locate important whooping crane habitat areas, monitor marked birds, determine survival and population numbers, and identify times and migration routes.



NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH PHOTO

*A wildlife crossing constructed to safely usher bighorn sheep and other big game animals from one side of U.S. Highway 85 to the other in western North Dakota is working. On Sept. 22, Game and Fish Department trail cameras photographed bighorns for the first time using the underpass located just south of the entrance to the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park near the Long X bridge. Mule deer, the first big game animals photographed in March 2021, have grown accustomed to the crossing. Game and Fish cameras, for example, documented 52 mule deer using the underpass in August.*

## Permit Required to Possess Dead Deer

North Dakota Game and Fish Department enforcement personnel are issuing a reminder that a permit is required before taking possession of a dead deer found near a road or in a field. Only shed antlers can be possessed without a permit.

Permits to possess are free and available from game wardens and local law enforcement offices.

In addition, hunters are reminded to properly dispose of dead deer. Carcass waste cannot be left on public property, including roadways, ditches or wildlife management areas. The best place to dispose of carcass waste is via a municipal solid waste landfill.

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## STAFF NOTES

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### Jensen Earns Governor's Award

Bill Jensen, North Dakota Game and Fish Department big game management biologist, was awarded in early September the 2021 Governor's Frontier Award for continuous learning.

"Bill was recognized by Gov. Doug Burgum for his efforts over his career to continuously strive to use the best available science to help guide management of wildlife in North Dakota, including some of the most renowned species of big game that we are responsible for," said Jeb Williams, Department director. "Bill has always been willing to go the extra mile, whether that means expanding his own knowledge base, diving into the literature, establishing cooperative working relationships within or outside the Department, or getting involved wherever needed."

Jensen has worked for Game and Fish for more than 30 years and is a wealth of information about the ecology of big game and a go-to source for information pertaining to the history of big game management in North Dakota, Williams said.

"This is apparent when considering that during his tenure, Bill has authored or co-authored over 25 peer-reviewed journal articles, over 40 popular articles, countless agency reports and one book. He was the principal investigator on over 10 research projects, which included mentoring as many graduate and post-doctoral students," Williams said. "Bill is the first individual from the Department to receive one of Gov. Burgum's excellence in public service awards. A very fitting award for an individual who has dedicated his career to continuous learning."



Gov. Doug Burgum (left) with Bill Jensen (center) and Lt. Gov. Brent Sanford.



Casey Anderson

### Anderson Appointed Wildlife Chief

North Dakota Game and Fish director Jeb Williams appointed 20-year department employee Casey Anderson as chief of the wildlife division.

"Casey has certainly proven himself as a leader," Williams said. "His experience and communication skills will serve the agency well as wildlife chief."

Anderson, assistant wildlife division chief since 2014, also held private land field coordinator and biologist positions.

A native of the Turtle Lake-Mercer area in McLean County, he has a bachelor's degree in the fish and wildlife management option of zoology from North Dakota State University.



Kristi Fast

### Fast New Graphic Artist

Kristi Fast of Mandan has been named the Game and Fish Department's graphic artist in Bismarck.

Prior to accepting the position, Fast was a graphic designer at Image Printing in Bismarck for 10 years.

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NORTH DAKOTA  
**OUTDOORS**  
PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

**WILLISTON**  
KUMV - Saturday - 6 pm  
KXMD - Saturday - 10 pm

**GRAND FORKS**  
KVRR - Saturday - 9 pm

**MINOT**  
KMOT - Saturday - 6 pm  
KXMC - Saturday - 10 pm

**DICKINSON**  
KQCD - Saturday - 5 pm (MT)  
KXMA - Saturday - 9 pm (MT)

**BISMARCK**  
KFYR - Saturday - 6 pm  
KXMB - Saturday - 10 pm  
CATV - Saturday - 9:30 am  
KNDX - Fox - Friday - 9 pm

**FARGO**  
KVRR - Saturday - 9 pm

**ON**

**WEEKLY VIDEO NEWS BROADCAST**



# BACKCAST

By Ron Wilson

**W**e're hunting sharp-tailed grouse on public land in western North Dakota in the rain. This isn't significant because it demonstrates our heroic indifference to the elements or simply lends credence to the fact that we aren't smart enough to come in out of the weather.

Rather, it just seems odd that we've spent the better part of the morning driving, looking for land that, by chance and whatever unseen forces, caught enough rain during a statewide drought to grow sufficient cover to satisfy the birds, and now it's raining.

We're out here for fun, of course, for our enjoyment, where the scenery is easy on the eyes and much of the land open to public access. Yet, you can't shake the obvious, and the rain is a reminder, that there are people out here – and elsewhere in the state – who make a living off the land and certainly haven't had an easy go of it.

So, the rain, while certainly tardy, is welcome. We can oil our shotguns when we get home.

Where we're hunting is familiar, or maybe more than that. In 2019, my youngest had a cow elk tag in this neck of the badlands where we burned enough boot leather and ate our fill of granola bars and jerky in the dirt miles from the pickup to say then, and now, that we gave filling the once-in-a-lifetime tag our best shot.

Our results, like the jerky, were tough to swallow considering we never saw one animal. Not an elk hightailing it two ridges over. Not an elk crossing in the headlights. Nothing.

Yet, today, while eating boiled eggs and fried chicken over our laps inside the pickup, we spotted some elk through rain-splattered windows playing hide-and-seek in a cedar-choked draw that would take a half-hour to hike to if we had a reason to do so.

For a minute or two, it felt like a big deal finally spying these animals on the hoof, in the wild. Two years too late, of course, but still.

What elk hunting out here revealed to us were a number of spots sharp-tailed grouse like to hang. Some were obvious – acres of native grasses, dotted by patches of buffaloberries that offered midday shade and a food source – and others, well, not so much.

We're hunting one of those latter spots because it's pretty, if you ignore the rusted, silent oil rig near where we park, and because it's off the beaten path and it's unlikely we'll bump into other hunters.

I'm wearing a backpack, carrying extra shotgun shells and two 32-ounce water bottles just in case our planned mile or so hunt turns into something more adventurous if we start bumping birds. My two boys – they will always be boys to me even though they passed that stage years ago – are traveling lighter. Shotgun shells stuffed into pockets and little else.

The leaves are already starting to change here and it's easy to get caught up in the scenery as we walk the edge of finger draws that drain into a much bigger, steeper draw that, if you took a misstep, you'd tumble for a while.

I hear a shot and see one of my boys carrying a grouse by its feathered-to-its-toes feet. I hear more shots, but trees now block my view and since neither hunter is much for hooting and hollering, I don't know the outcome.

I'll never tire of the flush of early season sharptails as long as I'm able to do this. They explode from grass close enough to give you a start, but leave you with ample time to gather yourself and pull the trigger.

This civil behavior won't last long as the young birds will over time garner that flighty, edginess that has served this native species so well for eons.

I know my boys hear me shoot, but what I can't hear as I stuff the dead bird in my backpack with the water bottles, is them joking about how the old man probably missed again.

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*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*

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*With North Dakota hunting seasons ramping up, life in the field gets significantly busier for Jonathan Tofteland, district game warden stationed in Bottineau, and his Game and Fish Department counterparts. With an untold number of hunters scattered across the landscape, Department wardens encourage hunters 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 the RAP telephone number at 701-328-9921.*



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