

NDG&F March 21st Newsletter

Bighorn Sheep Population Increases

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual bighorn sheep survey revealed a minimum of 292 bighorn sheep in western North Dakota, up 8 percent from last year and 3 percent above the five-year average.

Altogether, biologists counted 88 rams, 160 ewes and 44 lambs. Not included are approximately 30 bighorns in the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

Big game biologist Brett Wiedmann said the survey is good news after an all-age die-off that began in 2014.

"This year's number was encouraging given the ongoing effects of bacterial pneumonia throughout most of the badlands," Wiedmann said.

The northern badlands population, which was hit the hardest from the die-off, increased 13 percent from last year. However, the southern badlands population was down 19 percent.

"Overall, rams, ewes and lambs all increased from last year," Wiedmann said. "We were also pleased to see that 76 percent of lambs counted during last summer's survey survived the winter, which is above average. The recruitment rate of lambs per adult ewes was 31 percent, equal to the long-term average."

Game and Fish Department biologists count and classify all bighorn sheep in late summer, and then recount lambs the following March, as they approach one year of age, to determine recruitment.

"Adult mortality slowed significantly in 2015, and we had a good number of lambs survive in 2014 and 2015 to compensate for most of the adult losses," Wiedmann said. "The bad news is that many bighorns are still showing signs of pneumonia, so next year's survey will be important in determining if the state's population is continuing to recover from the disease outbreak, or if the pathogens are likely to persist and cause a long-term population decline."

Dr. Dan Grove, Department veterinarian, said disease testing last winter revealed that deadly pathogens were still present in 16 of 22 bighorns tested. He said animals continue to succumb to pneumonia, albeit at a much slower rate.

A bighorn sheep hunting season is tentatively scheduled to open in 2016, unless there is a recurrence of bacterial pneumonia. The status of the bighorn sheep season will be determined Sept. 1, after summer population surveys are completed.

Whooping Crane Migration

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

Whoopers stand about five feet tall and have a wingspan of about seven 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 straight 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 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office at Lostwood, 701-848-2466, or Long Lake, 701-387-4397, 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.

Elk, Moose, Bighorn Sheep Apps due March 23

Elk, moose and bighorn sheep applications must be submitted online, or postmarked, before midnight March 23.

To [apply online](#), or to [print out an application](#) to mail, access the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's website, gf.nd.gov. Applications are also available at Game and Fish offices and license vendors.

Residents age 18 or older are reminded to prove residency on the application by submitting a valid North Dakota driver's license number or a North Dakota nondriver photo identification number.

Individuals mailing applications to the department are advised to mail early because some post offices use the following day's postmark for mail received after regular hours. The department's online application feature will be deactivated March 23 at midnight.

Hunters who have received a license through the lottery in the past are not eligible to apply for that species again.