

NDG&F April 16th Newsletter

Paddlefish Snagging Season Opens May 1

North Dakota's paddlefish snagging season opens May 1 and is scheduled to continue through the end of the month. However, depending on the overall harvest, an early in-season closure may occur with a 36-hour notice issued by the state Game and Fish Department.

Snaggers need to be aware that Sundays are now included in snag-and-release-only days. Therefore, snag-and-release of all paddlefish is required on Sundays, Mondays and Tuesdays. Those planning to participate during snag-and-release-only days need to have in their possession a current season, unused paddlefish snagging tag. Use or possession of gaffs is prohibited on snag-and-release-only days, and, if it occurs, during the snag-and-release extension period.

Mandatory harvest of all snagged paddlefish is required on Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. On these days, all paddlefish caught must be tagged immediately. The use or possession of a gaff hook within one-half mile in either direction of the Highway 200 bridge on the Yellowstone River is illegal at any time during the snagging season.

Legal snagging hours are from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily. One tag per snagger will be issued. Snagging is legal in all areas of the Yellowstone River in North Dakota, and in the area of the Missouri River lying west of the U.S. Highway 85 bridge to the Montana border, excluding that portion from the pipeline crossing (river mile 1,577) downstream to the upper end of the Lewis and Clark Wildlife Management Area (river mile 1,565).

If the season closes early because the harvest quota is reached, an extended snag-and-release-only period will be allowed for up to seven days immediately following the early closure, but not to extend beyond May 31. Only snaggers with a current season, unused paddlefish snagging tag are eligible to participate. Only a limited area at the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers is open to this extended season snagging opportunity.

All paddlefish snaggers must possess a paddlefish tag in addition to a valid fishing license and certificate that may be required. Cost of a paddlefish tag is \$3 for residents and \$7.50 for nonresidents.

Bighorn Sheep Population Holding Steady

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual bighorn sheep survey revealed a minimum of 283 sheep in western North Dakota, unchanged from last year and only 3 percent below the five-year average.

In total, biologists counted 86 rams, 158 ewes and 39 lambs. Not included are approximately 30 bighorn sheep in the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

Brett Wiedmann, big game biologist, said the northern badlands population remained stable and southern badlands herds stabilized following several years of declining numbers.

"Despite ewes enduring a brutal winter in 2010-11, lamb recruitment increased to 28 percent, which is about average in North Dakota," Wiedmann said. "Also, 83 percent of the lambs counted last summer survived the winter."

Game and Fish Department biologists count and classify all bighorns in late summer and then recount lambs in March to determine recruitment.

After three consecutive severe winters, mild conditions experienced this winter were needed, Wiedmann said. "We monitored 71 radio-marked bighorns last winter and didn't have a single mortality," he added. "Although spring lamb production was low in 2011 due to the severity of last year's winter, lamb survival through this past winter was exceptional. Adult ewes couldn't be in better condition right now so we expect a bumper crop of healthy lambs to begin hitting the ground within a couple of weeks."

Although most news was encouraging, Wiedmann was concerned with a 10 percent decline in the ram count from 2010, and continued low population levels coupled with poor lamb recruitment in the southern badlands, where only two were observed. The ram-to-ewe ratio declined to 54 rams per 100 ewes.

"Overall, we're quite pleased with the results of this year's survey," Wiedmann said. "Following three epic winters our bighorn sheep population is only 10 percent below our record count in 2008. Comparatively speaking, it appears our bighorns handled the recent harsh winters much better than our mule deer and pronghorn populations."

Four bighorn sheep licenses were issued in 2012, two fewer than 2011.

Game and Fish Using Airplane for Seeding WMAs

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is using an airplane to seed portions of wildlife management areas south of Bismarck-Mandan and near Lake Sakakawea.

Bill Haase, wildlife resource management supervisor, said seeding by airplane is needed because certain areas are inaccessible by ground equipment.

"We are seeding grass and some forbs species on 1,100 acres of the Oahe bottoms and another 500 acres on Douglas Creek, Detrobriand and Beaver Creek," Haase said. "Our intent is to have more desirable species out-compete nondesirable species for wildlife habitat."

The project is underway and will continue through April.