

## **NDG&F January 31st Newsletter**

### **Another Tough Winter for Wildlife**

It may sound like a broken record, but North Dakota's weather in February and March will once again be critical to the health of the state's wildlife populations.

Randy Kreil, North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife chief, said wildlife populations have had to struggle with tough conditions through three consecutive winters. "Animals definitely could use a reprieve," he said. "They are not as resilient as they were in the beginning of winter. The longer winter drags on, the greater the impact to wildlife populations and next fall's hunting opportunities."

Record to near-record snowfall has blanketed much of North Dakota each winter since 2008-09.

Because of winter mortality, the number of deer licenses in 2010 was significantly reduced by nearly 30,000, and the pronghorn population was too low to sustain a hunting season last fall.

This winter, the Game and Fish Department has received reports of pheasant losses, but the extent is unknown. Kreil said birds seem to be doing okay in some areas, but no doubt have suffered losses in other areas. "What this winter will mean in terms of pheasant hunting opportunities next fall is hard to tell," he added. "For the most part, birds were able to adapt the past two winters under similar conditions. But then again, good nesting habitat in spring allowed them to rebound. However, with the continued loss of Conservation Reserve Program acres, their ability to rebound could be impaired."

Reports of dying or dead deer are not uncommon in tough winters, and this holds true this winter as well. Mostly fawns and older deer are affected by the cold and wind. In addition, heavy snow cover prevents deer from accessing their usual food sources, which can result in deer dying because of grain overload – a result of deer switching their natural diet to a diet comprised of mostly corn and/or other grains.

Because deer often gather near farms and ranches in winter, department personnel are working with approximately 200 livestock producers to protect stored feed supplies. This number is similar to last year at this time, but is still far below the winter of 1996-97 when Game and Fish staff worked with more than 1,000 different producers on deer depredation issues.

No wildlife species has suffered the harsh realities of winter more so than pronghorn, as the population has declined by more than 50 percent since 2008. Kreil said there is little doubt pronghorn are in a vulnerable state due to deep snow, and in some cases have limited movement because herds are prevented from moving to areas with less snow.

While this winter so far has been tough on wildlife, Kreil said the next several weeks are critical.

"Animals have been stressed for a couple months now, and they don't have the energy they had in early winter," Kreil said. "A mild February and March is much needed, and if we get a break we will see the benefits next fall. If not, then hunters will need to adjust their expectations in 2011."

### **Midwinter Waterfowl Survey Completed**

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual midwinter waterfowl survey revealed an estimated 7,300 Canada geese wintering on the Missouri River in early January.

Game management section leader Mike Johnson said numerous snowstorms in December with below zero temperatures pushed most waterfowl out of the state. "Late fall was generally warm and mild through Thanksgiving, but December's weather pushed a lot of geese through the area," he said. Johnson said it's likely this year's count is underestimated because of poor lighting conditions during the morning of the survey, and the tight flocking behavior of roosting geese.

Last year, 25,400 geese were staging on the Missouri River in North Dakota during the midwinter survey. In 2009, only 9,700 geese were counted. Between 2005 and 2008, a new record high was established every year, reaching 175,000 geese in 2008. Record numbers in the mid-to-late 2000s coincided with years of unseasonably mild winter weather.

From 1998 to 2004, the number of Canada geese on the river during the midwinter survey was between 2,000 and 89,000. Prior to 1998, the count was rarely more than 10,000.