

NDG&F July 12th Newsletter

Pronghorn Population Low, NDGF Will Not Recommend a Season This Year

North Dakota Game and Fish Department biologists recently completed the 2010 pronghorn population survey, and census data revealed the statewide population is 37 percent lower than last year and down more than 50 percent from 2008 as a consequence of recent severe winter weather. Therefore, the Game and Fish Department will not recommend a pronghorn hunting season in 2010.

Bruce Stillings, big game biologist in Dickinson, said two severe winters with high adult mortality rates, followed by poor production, has dropped the statewide population estimate to 6,500 pronghorn. Since 2003, the statewide population has been at or above 10,000 animals, including two years with more than 15,000.

“We need to give these populations an opportunity to recover. Our numbers are declining with few yearlings observed due to poor production in 2009, which was the lowest documented on record, followed by last year’s tough winter,” Stillings. “Production was better this year, but still below long-term averages in all management regions.”

The aerial survey is flown in early July after young-of-the-year are born and visible. “We have to fly surveys to find out how many animals are on the ground,” Stillings said. “We actually count individual animals so there is no extrapolating.”

Survey results indicate the northern badlands population is doing the best, while pronghorn in the western Bowman management area are in the poorest condition. “Pronghorn in the northern badlands are at higher numbers due to experiencing only one severe winter over the last two years, while the remainder of the range had back-to-back severe winters,” Stillings said. “Pronghorn in the western Bowman management region have not only had back-to-back severe winters, but experienced an abnormally cold and wet spring in 2009, which resulted in an unprecedented low production in 2009.” Northern Great Plains pronghorn are susceptible to dramatic population declines due to extreme winter conditions, Stillings said. The last two years have been a worst case scenario for pronghorn in North Dakota, similar to 1977-79 when three consecutive severe winters hit the region, resulting in closed seasons from 1978-1981.

“The last thing pronghorn need is another severe winter,” Stillings said. “A mild winter will increase adult survival and leave females in good condition for fawning.”

Biologists will continue to monitor pronghorn numbers in the future, and when the population returns to a level capable of withstanding a harvest the season will reopen. “The winter of 2010-11 will be pivotal in determining whether pronghorn begin to recover or if a series of closed seasons similar to the late 1970s are needed,” Stillings said.

The 2010 pronghorn season will be closed to both gun and archery hunters. Applicants who have accumulated preference points will maintain their current points. Individuals who have already purchased an archery license will be issued a refund.

Ruffed Grouse Spring Survey, 2009 Harvest Reported

North Dakota's spring ruffed grouse survey indicated a 10 percent population increase statewide compared to 2009, according to Stan Kohn, upland game bird supervisor for the state Game and Fish Department.

The number of male grouse heard drumming in the Pembina Hills was up 23 percent from last year, while the Turtle Mountains had a 4 percent increase. Overall, the 2010 count was 98 percent higher than two years ago. However, drumming males were not heard in McHenry County (J. Clark Salyer National Wildlife Refuge), and have not been since 2006.

"We are probably approaching, or are at the high end, of the cycle for bird numbers, although our highs are not as high as they once were, while our lows seem to get lower," Kohn said. "Habitat fragmentation continues to plague our ruffed grouse population, but with good bird production we should see some better ruffed grouse numbers this fall."

In 2009, a 37 percent increase in hunters did not correlate to more birds in the bag, as the total harvest fell nearly 11 percent from 2008.

Approximately 1,462 hunters took 1,929 ruffed grouse last year. In 2008, an estimated 1,061 hunters harvested 2,163 birds.

"This is surprising," Kohn said. "You would think with improved grouse numbers and more hunters the harvest would have increased."

Total hunting trips were up 30 percent, while birds-per-trip were down 31 percent. More than 78 percent of the harvest came from Bottineau and Pembina counties.

Game and Fish at State Fair

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department will host thousands of visitors to its Conservation and Outdoors Skills Park July 23-31 at the State Fair in Minot.

Visitors will be treated to an array of exhibits and useful information as the park will be staffed from 1-7 p.m. daily. Pathways to Hunting, Fishing and Trapping are major attractions where fishing, shooting, archery and furtaking are taught to interested kids and adults. Of course, the opportunity to catch a fish brings excitement to the littlest angler.

Don't forget to check out the live fish display, or stop by the furbearer exhibit and discuss trapping with the experts, or relax and enjoy native prairie plantings. An added incentive – it's all free.

The Conservation and Outdoors Skills Park is located on the north end of the grounds adjacent to the All Seasons Arena.