

NDG&F August 8th Newsletter

Healthy Fish Populations in the Missouri River System

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department recently completed its annual fish population sampling on the Missouri River System and found positive results in both Lake Sakakawea and Lake Oahe. The Missouri River from the Garrison Dam to Bismarck was not sampled due to high water.

Scott Gangl, fisheries management section leader, said when Lake Sakakawea began to refill in 2009, all fish populations started to rebound, beginning with the smelt forage base. "The drought of the early 2000s hurt fish populations because low water reduced spawning habitat and the available forage base," Gangl said. "Now after a couple years of higher water we are seeing a turnaround."

After years of drought, higher reservoir levels gave fish access to gravel and cobble spawning areas that were dry just a few years ago. There is also much more sheltered shallow-water habitat in the backs of bays that are important nursery areas for many fish species.

Recent netting operations in Lake Sakakawea found abundant walleyes, with many in the 18-22 inch range. Biologists also noted substantial numbers of yearling walleye in the nets, an indication of good reproductive and stocking success in 2010.

Northern pike, yellow perch and sauger were also plentiful in the survey nets. Sauger numbers have been good in recent years, and the size structure is favorable for anglers. Meanwhile, northern pike and yellow perch reproduction has flourished since the return of water to the reservoirs. Although their size is still on the smaller side due to their younger age, Gangl said they are growing well.

Smallmouth bass are rebounding with the water levels as well, Gangl said, with good numbers of moderately-sized fish in the nets.

"All fish are in excellent condition and plump, a huge turnaround from a few years ago when drought conditions resulted in extremely skinny fish," he said.

On Lake Oahe, the walleye population is still strong, with numbers similar to the past three years.

Although larger walleye remain in Oahe, many fish in the nets were less than 14 inches in length. Gangl said the high numbers of small walleye is the result of strong reproduction since the lake refilled in 2009.

"Northern pike numbers on Lake Oahe are also through the roof, higher than we've ever documented," Gangl added. "Like in Sakakawea, these fish are still growing in size and will produce some exceptional fishing opportunities in the coming years."

Catfish were the most predominant fish in the Oahe nets.

Hunters Advised to Check Water Conditions

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department advises hunters to be cautious with their dogs around water this time of year, due to potential health hazards associated with blue-green algae.

Dr. Dan Grove, wildlife veterinarian for the Game and Fish Department, said late summer and early fall offer prime conditions for blue-green algae growth in many state waters. Ingestion by a hunting dog while perhaps retrieving a bird during the early goose season, or just practicing retrieving, can lead to severe illness and potential death.

“Conditions are right this year for stagnant water to become contaminated, especially with all of the overland flooding that has occurred,” Grove said.

Potentially toxic algae blooms occur under conditions of hot, dry weather. Shallow, stagnant water with moderate to high nutrient content provides an optimum environment for algal growth. Water or wind movements often concentrate the algae, and eventually the bloom appears as a blue-green “scum” floating on the water’s surface. The threat disappears once the weather turns colder.

“Hunting dogs shouldn’t drink or swim in discolored water or where algal blooms are apparent,” Grove said. “If dogs retrieve in these conditions, they should be rinsed off immediately and shouldn’t be allowed to lick their coat.”

For additional information about the effects of blue-green algae blooms on hunting dogs, contact the Animal Health Division, North Dakota Department of Agriculture, at (701) 328-2655; or a local veterinarian.

To see a related North Dakota Department of Health news release with more information, access ndhan.gov/media/news/.

Landowners Seek Early Canada Goose Hunters

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is starting a pilot program for matching early Canada goose hunters and landowners in much the same way antlerless deer hunters are paired with landowners.

Waterfowl biologist Mike Szymanski said the Game and Fish Department is currently working with approximately 40 landowners across the state who would like to host Canada goose hunters during the early season. Enrolled producers are also a part of the department’s depredation permit program during spring and summer.

“These landowners are experiencing Canada goose depredation problems,” Szymanski said. “We are using the same technique as the highly successful antlerless deer program, but we do realize the hunting situations for the two species are different.”

Interested hunters can get their name on a list of possible participants by accessing the Game and Fish Department’s website at gf.nd.gov. Hunters who do not have Internet access can call the department’s main office in Bismarck at (701) 328-6300.

Hunters must provide their name, address and telephone number, and in the drop-down menu choose the “early Canada goose” season selection. In addition, in the comments section hunters must list up to five counties where they would like to hunt. From this list the department will select the number of hunters landowners have agreed to host. These hunters will be sent the landowner’s name, phone number and hours available for contact. If selected, hunters will receive landowner contact information after opening weekend.

Szymanski said landowners may or may not have harvested cropland for hunting early Canada geese, but could have hunting opportunities over water or other situations available.

“The hunter has to abide by the schedule and stipulations presented by the landowner,” Szymanski said. North Dakota’s 2011 early Canada goose season opens Aug. 13. The season closes in the Missouri River zone Sept. 7, while the rest of the state has an ending date of Sept. 15.

HIP Certification Required for Migratory Bird Hunters

With opening day of early Canada goose season set for Aug. 13, migratory game bird hunters are reminded to register with the Harvest Information Program prior to hunting in North Dakota.

HIP certification is required for all migratory bird hunters, regardless of age, before hunting ducks, geese, swans, mergansers, coots, cranes, snipe, doves or woodcock.

Hunter compliance is essential in order to obtain reliable national and regional estimates of annual harvest of all migratory game bird species. These estimates provide information biologists need to make sound decisions concerning hunting seasons, bag limits and population management.

Hunters who purchase a license through the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's electronic licensing system (gf.nd.gov) or instant licensing telephone number at (800) 406-6409 can easily get HIP certified.

Otherwise, hunters can access the department's website, or call (888) 634-4798 and record the HIP number on their fishing, hunting and furbearer certificate.

Those who registered to hunt the spring light goose season in North Dakota do not have to register with HIP again, as it is required only once per year. However, hunters must HIP register in each state for which they are licensed before hunting migratory game birds.