

NDG&F September 12th Newsletter

Pheasant Numbers Down, Similar to a Decade Ago

North Dakota's roadside pheasant survey conducted in late July and August suggests poor production this spring, meaning a lower fall population in all areas of the state.

Stan Kohn, upland game management supervisor for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, said the survey shows statewide total pheasants are down 36 percent from last year. In addition, brood observations were down 38 percent, but the average brood size was up 4 percent. The final summary is the result of 222 runs made along 104 brood routes across North Dakota.

"Brood survey numbers from this summer match closely to numbers from 2001, when hunters harvested 420,000 roosters," Kohn said. "If fall weather conditions hold through most of the year, I could see a fall harvest of about 400,000 birds. But if winter weather sets in early, we could be much lower. Either way, this could be the first fall since 2001 that we harvest less than 500,000 roosters." Kohn said several factors contribute to the decrease in pheasant numbers: three difficult winters in a row with above average snowfall has reduced spring's adult breeding population; wet conditions during peak hatch in mid-June of 2008, 2009 and 2011 reduced chick survival; and the loss of nesting habitat on the landscape as more Conservation Reserve Program acreage is removed from pheasant range.

"Boiled down, hunters will likely have to put in more time in the field to find success," Kohn said. "But as always, there will be local areas within all four pheasant districts where pheasant numbers will be much above or much below what is predicted for the district."

Statistics from southwestern North Dakota indicate both the number of broods and number of birds observed were down 26 percent from 2010. Observers counted 14 broods and 118 birds per 100 miles. The average brood size was six. "Census numbers indicate this district will have the best pheasant numbers in the state this fall," Kohn said.

Results from the southeast show the number of birds observed down 54 percent from last year, and the number of broods was down 60 percent. Observers counted four broods and 36 birds per 100 miles. The average brood size was 5.7. "Removal of CRP in the southeast may have already affected the number of birds produced this spring, with weather conditions adding more pressure on spring production," Kohn said.

Statistics from the northwest indicated pheasants are down 53 percent from last year, with broods down 62 percent. Observers recorded two broods and 21 birds per 100 miles. Average brood size was 5.5.

The northeast district, generally containing secondary pheasant habitat with much of it lacking good winter cover, showed 0.4 broods and four birds per 100 miles. Average brood size was six. Both number of birds observed and number of broods recorded were down roughly 66 percent. "Hunters should concentrate their efforts in the southern counties of this district for the best potential to find birds," Kohn said.

The 2011 regular pheasant season opens Oct. 8 and continues through Jan. 8, 2012. The two-day youth pheasant hunting weekend, when legally licensed residents and nonresidents ages 15 and younger can

hunt statewide, is set for Oct. 1-2.

Bighorn Sheep Numbers Remain Strong

While three consecutive severe winters played a significant role in reducing many of the state's western big game populations, overall bighorn sheep numbers are strong, according to Brett Wiedmann, big game biologist for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department in Dickinson.

A July-August survey in western North Dakota showed 290 bighorn sheep, unchanged from last year and just 26 below 2008's record summer survey. "After recording dramatic declines in mule deer and pronghorn numbers, we were pleasantly surprised to see that our bighorns have remained stable," Wiedmann said.

Bighorn sheep can tolerate frigid temperatures, but deep snows can cause problems because of their short legs, Wiedmann said. "Low adult mortality last winter despite very deep snow conditions demonstrates just how hardy bighorns are," he said.

Survey results revealed 85 rams, 158 ewes and 47 lambs – 233 in the northern badlands (an increase of two from last year) and 57 in the southern badlands (down just one). "Bighorns are doing very well in the northern badlands, and, following three years of declines, have stabilized in the south," Wiedmann said, while noting that 43 lambs were observed in the north, but only four in the south.

Although the ewe segment of the population actually increased five percent from last summer's survey, rams saw a 10 percent decline. "Due to an abundance of forage, rams were scattered and in smaller-than-usual bachelor groups," Wiedmann said. "Consequently, I'm confident that poor detect ability had more to do with the lower ram count than an actual population decline."

The department's survey does not include an additional 30 bighorns that inhabit the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

Annual bighorn sheep survey statistics are not recorded using a calendar year, but instead are done over a 12-month period beginning each April and ending the following March. Each summer, Game and Fish Department biologists count and classify all bighorns, a process that takes nearly six weeks to complete as biologists locate each bighorn herd in the badlands by tracking radio-marked animals from an airplane, and then hike into each band in order to record population demographics using a spotting scope and binoculars. Biologists then complete the annual survey by recounting lambs in March to determine lamb recruitment.

North Dakota's bighorn sheep hunting season opens Oct. 21 and continues through Nov. 3. Six licenses were issued.

Swan Hunt Lottery Held, Licenses Remain

North Dakota's swan lottery has been held and more than 450 licenses remain. Only hunters who do not have a swan license for the 2011 season can apply, as regulations limit hunters to one license per year. [First-come, first-served licenses](#) are available online at the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, gf.nd.gov. Hunters may also request an application by calling the department's Bismarck office at (701) 328-6300.

The statewide tundra swan hunting season is Oct. 1, 2011 – Jan. 1, 2012. North Dakota residents and

nonresidents are eligible to apply. The fee is \$5 for residents and \$25 for nonresidents.

Public Asked to Report Whooping Crane Sightings

Whooping cranes are in the midst of their fall 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. Young-of-the-year whoopers are white with scattered brown feathers. 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 mistake 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. Young whooping cranes were marked during 1975-1988 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 (701) 387-4397, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's main office in Bismarck at (701) 328-6610, or to local game wardens around 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.

Space Available for BOW Waterfowl Workshop

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is still accepting registrations for the Becoming an Outdoors-Woman waterfowl hunting workshop Oct. 1-2 in Bismarck.

Participants will learn firearm and waterfowl safety, shotgun shooting, waterfowl identification, water/field decoys and gear, and techniques for decoying and calling waterfowl. Oct. 2 will feature a mentored hunt. Participants must possess a hunter education certificate, current hunting licenses and provide their own hunting clothing, boots or waders. Workshop fees of \$20 include instruction, program materials and use of equipment. No lodging is provided.

BOW workshops are designed primarily for women with an interest in learning skills associated with hunting, fishing and outdoor endeavors. Although open to anyone age 18 or older, the workshops are tailored primarily to women who have never tried these activities or who are beginners hoping to improve their skills.

To receive an [information brochure and enrollment form](#), access the Game and Fish website at gf.nd.gov, or contact Nancy Boldt, BOW coordinator, at (701) 328-6312; or email ndgf@nd.gov.

Landowner-Sportsman Council Signs Available

“Ask Before You Enter” and “Walking Hunters Welcome” signs are available to North Dakota landowners who encourage hunting on their land during upcoming fall hunting seasons. Landowners can order quantities of four, eight or 12.

The signs are free and sponsored by the North Dakota Landowner-Sportsman Council. To order, contact the North Dakota Game and Fish Department at (701) 328-6300, or email ndgf@nd.gov. Signs can also be ordered online at the department’s website gf.nd.gov.