

**NORTH DAKOTA
STATE REPORT**
June 2009

Terry Steinwand, Director
North Dakota Game and Fish Department
100 N. Bismarck Expressway
Bismarck, ND 58501

Theodore Roosevelt Park Elk Plan

North Dakota Governor John Hoeven and the State Game and Fish Department say they will continue to push for a proposal to involve North Dakota citizens in any upcoming effort to reduce the number of elk in Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

In December, the National Park Service released its draft Elk Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement listing alternatives for addressing the park's elk population, recently estimated at slightly less than 900 animals. The alternatives are designed to reduce the park elk population to approximately 360 animals within five years or less.

The alternatives listed in the draft EIS do not include the Game and Fish Department's plan to allow "certified volunteer sharpshooters" to remove elk from the park. Under this proposal, citizens who volunteer considerable time and expense to help the park remove elk could keep a portion of the meat.

"We have always believed that the elk are a resource of the state and therefore state citizens should be directly involved in the population management process inside park boundaries," Game and Fish Director Terry Steinwand said. "We have reviewed the EIS and do not support any of the options the Park Service is now considering because there is no alternative that allows qualified people a chance to participate and keep a portion of the elk meat."

In addition, Gov. Hoeven has personally discussed the issue on several occasions with the U.S. Department of Interior in Washington, D.C., in an effort to find an alternative that accomplishes the goal of reducing elk in the park both effectively and economically by allowing North Dakota hunters to participate.

The Game and Fish Department views the Park Service alternatives as too expensive, too complex and not sustainable over time, Steinwand said. "We believe the EIS should be amended to allow for the Game and Fish alternative," he added, "and if necessary, we support congressional action to change the law or agency policy so our alternative can be included."

Recently, both the North Dakota Senate and House of Representatives passed a resolution supporting the alternative promoted by Gov. Hoeven and developed by the Game and Fish Department.

Legislation Lowers Age for Deer Hunters

North Dakota's 2009 legislative session ended in early May after state lawmakers gathered for 78 days. After hearing discussion on 34 hunting and fishing related bills the Game and Fish Department was monitoring, legislators passed 17 that were signed into law.

Director Terry Steinwand said even though this was a relatively light session compared to 2005 and 2007 when 57 and 39 bills were tracked, agency personnel were busy just the same.

The legislative body had young deer hunters in mind when it passed two bills that change the minimum age to hunt deer in North Dakota.

Individuals ages 12 and 13 are now able to receive an antlerless whitetail license valid statewide, but only during the nine-and-a-half day youth deer season. However, this is not considered a youth season license because of the age of the hunters and the license is specific to whitetail does.

The youth deer season remains the same as past years except that 13-year-olds who turn 14 by the opening day of the November deer gun season can now participate. Youth deer season licenses are specific to hunters who are 14 (by opening day of the regular deer gun season) or 15. There will be separate license applications for 12-and 13-year-olds and 14-and 15-year-olds.

A complete list of hunting and fishing related bills that passed the house and senate and were signed into law is available on the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website at gf.nd.gov.

Deer Samples Negative for CWD, TB

Samples taken from North Dakota deer, elk and moose during the 2008 hunting season have tested negative for chronic wasting disease and bovine tuberculosis, according to Dr. Dan Grove, wildlife veterinarian for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

Last fall, samples for CWD testing were taken from nearly 2,300 deer (with 1,600 taken from the targeted area of the central third of the state), 53 elk and 24 moose.

"In addition to our CWD surveillance, we started routine bovine TB surveillance in the northeast, and random sampling throughout the state," Grove said. "Altogether, 850 deer, moose and elk tested negative for bovine TB."

Since January approximately 160 moose and deer that died or were showing clinical signs of disease were sampled for CWD and TB as part of the Game and Fish Department's year-around targeted surveillance. To date, all animals have tested negative for CWD, and bovine TB test results are still pending.

The Game and Fish Department's three-year cycle of sampling the entire state for CWD will conclude this fall by testing deer from the western third of the state. Grove said a new cycle will begin in 2010 in the eastern third of the state. "We will also continue to test animals in northeastern North Dakota for TB until it has been eradicated from the adjacent Minnesota herd," Grove added, "and will continue to sample suspect or high risk cases of CWD and TB throughout the year."

Since 2002, more than 12,300 North Dakota deer, nearly 360 elk and 60 moose have tested negative for CWD. To date, CWD and TB have not been diagnosed in wild or farmed cervids in North Dakota, although these diseases have been found in surrounding states and provinces.

Spring Mule Deer Survey Complete

The severe winter didn't have much of an impact on North Dakota's mule deer population, based on observations taken during the state Game and Fish Department's annual spring mule deer survey in April.

Bruce Stillings, big game biologist, Dickinson, said the badlands mule deer population index for western North Dakota was down only slightly from 2008, but remains higher than the long-term average.

Biologists counted 2,483 mule deer in 291 square miles, compared to 2,649 in 2008. Mule deer density per square mile was 8.5, a slight decrease from 9.1 in 2008.

North Dakota's Deer Season Set

North Dakota's 2009 deer season has been set, with 144,400 licenses available to hunters this fall, a decrease of 5,000 from last year.

Randy Kreil, wildlife chief for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, said progress toward reducing deer numbers was evident this past year in the northwestern, north central and southeastern portions of North Dakota. As a result, these areas will have stable to lower license numbers.

"The significant decline in deer numbers in several hunting units resulted from multiple years of high harvest on does," Kreil said. "In addition, the difficult winter of 2008-09 resulted in significant deer mortality in northern and eastern North Dakota, and creates a potential for lower reproductive success in 2009."

However, mule deer and white-tailed deer in the southwest (outside the badlands) have increased to above management goals, Kreil said. "Winter in this area was not as severe and losses are expected to be much lower," he added. "Additionally, the impending loss of most CRP in the southwest by 2012 will reduce habitat and will not be able to sustain the current population."

The mule deer population in the badlands remains at or above management goals. The 2009 population survey indicates a stable to slightly lower number of mule deer than in 2008. As a result, the number of mule deer licenses available is nearly the same as last year.

In addition to a second special herd reduction season for antlerless deer in the northeast in units 2C and 2D, the 2009 deer proclamation also offers a special herd reduction season in the southwest in units 3E1, 3E2, 3F1, 3F2 and 4F. The early season in the northeast runs from Sept. 25 – Oct. 1, and the one in the southwest is Oct. 2-9.

“Special herd reduction seasons are intended to reduce deer populations in the area,” Kreil said. “It was successful last year in the northeast, and we anticipate the same success in the southwest.”

The number of licenses available for 2009 includes 8,700 for mule deer, an increase of 100 from last year; 2,714 for muzzleloader, down 102 from last year; and 345 restricted youth antlered mule deer, the same as last year.

North Dakota’s 2009 deer gun season opens Nov. 6 at noon and continues through Nov. 22.

2008 Deer Gun Season Statistics

North Dakota deer hunters took more than 91,000 deer during the 2008 deer gun hunting season, a 7 percent decline from the 98,000 harvested in 2007, according to statistics released by the state Game and Fish Department.

The Game and Fish Department allocated 149,400 deer gun licenses in 2008, and more than 96 percent were issued to hunters. Overall hunter success was 70 percent.

Hunter success for antlered white-tailed deer was 79 percent, and antlerless whitetail was 77 percent.

Mule deer buck success was 72 percent, while mule deer doe hunters had a success rate of 83 percent.

Hunters with any-antlered licenses had a success rate of 68 percent, while any-antlerless license holders had a success rate of 70 percent.

Winter Wildlife Woes

North Dakota Game and Fish Department biologists indicate the final 4-6 weeks of winter will be critical to the health of the state’s wildlife.

Reports of pheasant losses continue, especially after the statewide rain experienced in early February. "Reports across the state vary from birds doing okay to areas with considerable losses," said Stan Kohn, upland game bird supervisor. "In some instances, landowners are reporting 75 percent fewer birds than they did in the beginning of winter."

The Game and Fish Department receives phone calls on a regular basis from hunters inquiring about what this winter will mean in terms of pheasant hunting opportunities next fall. "We've even had people ask if we are going to lower the bag limit," said Randy Kreil, wildlife chief. "At this point it is far too early to make any such predictions. We will closely monitor the results of the spring pheasant crowing count surveys, and this will give us our first real definitive information on just how difficult the winter was and what sort of losses we incurred."

The department continues to receive reports of dying or dead deer in some areas of the state. Kreil said mostly fawns and older deer are affected by the cold and wind, which is not uncommon. In addition, heavy snow cover that prevents deer from accessing their usual food sources has resulted in at least five separate incidents of grain overload, with seven to 50 deer dying in each incident.

Dr. Dan Grove, wildlife veterinarian, said grain overload is a result of deer overeating on corn and/or other grains. "Their diet typically consists of grasses and browse; they are not adapted to indulge only on corn, wheat and oats," Grove said. "But with the constraints they have this winter, this is what food is readily available to them."

Deer often gather or "yard up" in winters near farms and ranches, but this year has been more extreme. Department personnel are working with approximately 250 livestock producers to alleviate deer damage to stored feed supplies. While this is the highest number in more than a decade, it is still below the winter of 1996-97 when Game and Fish staff worked with more than 1,000 different producers on deer depredation issues.

While deer and pheasants garner the most attention, species such as bighorn sheep and pronghorn also feel the sting of the long, hard winter.

"We recently documented the loss of six mature radio-collared bighorn sheep in the northern badlands due to exposure and severe winter weather," said Brett Wiedmann, big game biologist. "These are big, hearty animals that should survive North Dakota winters, but apparently the severe conditions got the better of them."

While there hasn't been any winter-related mortality of pronghorn documented yet, Bruce Stillings, big game biologist, said there is little doubt they are in a vulnerable state due to deep snow, and in some cases have limited movement because herds are prevented from moving south of Interstate 94. "One of our biologists saw a herd of 200 pronghorn belly-deep in snow, and other large groups have been observed bunched together north of Belfield and east of Dickinson," he added. "This is not a good situation."

It is nearly impossible for them to cross the interstate and migrate to areas with less snow.”

With animals not as resilient as they were in the beginning of winter, late season storms with significant snowfall, or those that cause an ice layer to form, make foraging very difficult.

Mountain Lion Season Summarized

The eighth mountain lion was harvested last week in western North Dakota, filling the state Game and Fish Department’s predetermined quota and bringing to an end the hunting season in Zone 1.

The final cat was harvested Feb. 23; the sixth and seventh lions were taken Nov. 15. “At this point, it’s hard to say for certain why the three-month lag between cats,” said Dorothy Fecske, furbearer biologist. “It may have been the bitterly cold weather and deep snow causing limited road access, or that people had trouble finding lions.”

How this winter will affect the lion population remains to be seen, but Fecske said several factors may impact the North Dakota cougar population. “This was an interesting year,” she added. “Three of the cats examined had shortened tails from past frost bite damage, and ears on two of the animals were also damaged by frost bite. In addition, lion kittens are susceptible to extreme weather conditions and this winter could reduce survival of this age class.”

Most of the cats harvested were young animals, indicating continued breeding activity in the badlands. Only one breeding-age female was taken this year (a 107 pound, 4-5-year-old lion). Based on the exam, Fecske said that cat had nursed one litter in the past and would have had her second litter in September.

Five males and three females were taken in Zone 1. Seven cats were harvested in McKenzie County, and one was taken in Williams County.

No cats were taken in Zone 2 during the 2008-09 hunting season. “This is not unexpected, because most of our lion habitat is in the western part of the state,” Fecske said. “Lions that disperse from this region apparently don’t settle down on the prairie, so the chances of harvesting a lion in Zone 2 are much smaller than taking a lion in Zone 1.”

Moose, Elk and Bighorn Sheep Seasons Set

The 2009 moose, elk and bighorn sheep proclamation has been finalized, and for the second consecutive year changes to North Dakota’s elk hunting season highlight the special big game seasons.

A total of 561 elk licenses are available to hunters this fall, the same as in 2008.

A total of 148 moose licenses are available in 2009, an increase of six from last year.

The number of bighorn sheep licenses has been reduced by one due to winter mortality in the northern badlands. Five bighorn sheep licenses are available in three units – one license in Units B1 and B3, two in Unit B4, and one license auctioned through the Minnesota-Wisconsin Chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep.

\$65,000 Received for Bighorn Sheep Management

Two checks totaling \$65,000 were given to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department at the March 14 Minnesota-Wisconsin Chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep annual meeting in Bloomington, Minn.

North Dakota's 2009 bighorn sheep auction license, which allows the winning bidder the rare privilege of pursuing a North Dakota bighorn on a self-guided hunt, sold for \$40,000. In addition, the department received an annual grant of \$25,000.

Bighorn Sheep Survey

Based on observations during the state Game and Fish Department's annual bighorn sheep survey, biologists believe North Dakota's tough winter didn't significantly harm the state's bighorn sheep population. In fact, statistics show the population likely increased from last year.

Brett Wiedmann, big game biologist, Dickinson, said lamb recruitment was at 35 percent, about average in North Dakota, but lamb survival was exceptional as 80 percent of lambs counted during summer survived the winter.

In all, biologists counted 313 bighorn sheep, 11 percent above 2007 and 35 percent higher than the five-year average. The northern badlands' population was up 14 percent from last year, while the southern badlands' population saw a 4 percent increase.

All total, 96 rams, 167 ewes and 50 lambs were counted – record highs for each.

Paddlefish Snagging Season

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.

Mandatory harvest of all snagged paddlefish is required on Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. On these days, all paddlefish caught must be tagged immediately.

Snag-and-release of all paddlefish will be required on Mondays and Tuesdays. Those planning to participate during snag-and-release-only days will need to have in their possession a current season, unused paddlefish snagging tag.

Several North Dakota Lakes Suffer Winterkill

A long winter caused a prolonged ice pack, and coupled with near-record snowfall throughout much of the state, resulted in conditions that made it difficult for fish in some lakes to receive enough oxygen to survive.

Scott Gangl, fisheries management section leader for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, said 37 winterkills have been confirmed so far. The majority were in the western half of the state, where lake water levels were very low going into winter.

Fisheries personnel have already started restocking efforts on some lakes that experienced winterkill. "We are stocking with hatchery raised fish, or fish transported from another lake with an abundance of the preferred species," Gangl said. "These fish may take a while to grow to catchable size, but in two to three years there should be populations of fish for anglers to catch."

Spring Spawn Wrapped Up

Fisheries crews concluded a successful spawning season by nearly reaching the goal set for northern pike and far surpassing the target for walleye.

Jerry Weigel, fisheries production and development section leader for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, said department staff, along with personnel from the Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery, collected 22 million pike and 61 million walleye eggs during spring spawning. "We had a very good spring, with high quality eggs that are far above average," Weigel said.

Weather conditions dictated a quick, three-day pike spawn. In the end, fisheries biologists were short 1 million pike eggs, but the above-average egg quality provided more than enough eggs to meet hatchery goals. "We are in really good shape," Weigel said, "and we are still going to be able to meet our northern pike production goal, which is the highest in more than a decade."

Crews collected 11 million pike eggs from Alkali/Spiritwood Lake in Stutsman County, 8 million from Lake Irvine in Ramsey County, and 3 million from Beaver Bay on Lake Oahe. Weigel said pike eggs are hatching and many of the ponds at Valley City and Garrison Dam national fish hatcheries have already been stocked. After about three weeks of growing, fingerlings will be shipped to waters statewide.

Crews collected 35.4 million walleye eggs from Lake Sakakawea, the most from the big lake in a number of years. In addition, 18.4 million came from Devils Lake, and another 7.4 million from a couple other state lakes.

Water Enthusiasts Reminded of ANS Regulations

Anglers, boaters and personal watercraft users are reminded to abide by regulations that prevent the spread of aquatic nuisance species into and within North Dakota.

Robert Timian, chief of enforcement for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, said game wardens and fisheries personnel will conduct check stations this summer in an effort to ensure compliance. "It has been more than a year since prevention guidelines became law, so water recreationists shouldn't be surprised by this," Timian said. "Just be prepared and abide by the rules."

ANS include nonnative aquatic animals, plants and diseases that have the likelihood to become well-established if introduced. A good example of an aquatic nuisance species found in a number of North Dakota waters is the common carp, which have caused tremendous damage to the state's aquatic resources over the years.

To comply with regulations, water enthusiasts must:

- Inspect and remove all aquatic vegetation from boats, personal watercraft, trailers, and associated equipment such as fishing poles and lures before leaving a body of water.
- Remove all aquatic vegetation from bait containers when leaving the water.
- Drain all water from boats and other watercraft, including bilges, livewells and motors, at the ramp site before leaving a water body. The only exception is livewells used to transport game fish or baitfish, and potable water and sewage water which must be disposed of properly.
- Not transport live aquatic bait or aquatic vegetation into North Dakota. All water must be drained from watercraft upon entering the state.
- Not dump bait into any North Dakota water.
- Not introduce any fish into North Dakota water.
- Not transport nongame fish (other than legal live baitfish) in water away from the water body in which they were taken.

Missouri River System Boat Ramp Status

Rising water within the Missouri River System means more boat ramps are accessible now than at any time in the past decade.

Bob Frohlich, fisheries development supervisor for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, said all of the main recreation areas on Lake Sakakawea will have a usable ramp this summer, and every site but one is usable from the Garrison Dam to the South Dakota state line.

“Lake Oahe is back and anglers will again be able to enjoy many areas that have been high and dry for the past 10 or more years,” Frohlich said.

Of the boating access sites south of Garrison Dam, only the Sibley Park ramp south of Bismarck is unusable. However, depending on which way the wind is blowing, some ramps may become temporarily unavailable.

“Lake Oahe boaters need to exercise caution because of floating debris and logs,” Frohlich said. “Also, with the high water level boaters need to be aware of the hazards their watercraft can create.”

Trout Stocked in State Waters

North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel recently stocked roughly 54,000 rainbow and 7,000 brown trout in more than 50 waters throughout the state.

The catchable trout measure 10-14 inches long, according to Jerry Weigel, fisheries production and development supervisor. Included in the total were 3,500 one-pound rainbows from a state hatchery in Wyoming.

Spring Turkey Season

North Dakota’s wild turkey season is set and 7,135 licenses are available for the spring season, down 165 from 2008.

The 2 percent decrease from last year’s record high is a result of poor turkey production in 2008 – mostly in the badlands units – because of wet weather during the peak of the hatch. As a result, turkey numbers are lower going into this spring, and several units in western North Dakota have fewer licenses. In addition, Unit 21 (most of Hettinger and Adams counties) will remain closed due to lack of birds in the unit.

Spring Light Goose Season

North Dakota’s spring light goose season opens statewide Feb. 21 and continues through May 10.

North Dakota’s annual spring season opens in February in case weather conditions allow for an early arrival. Availability of food and open water dictate when snow geese arrive in the state. Early migrants generally start showing up in the southeast part of the state in mid-to-late March, but huntable numbers usually aren’t around until the end of March or early April. Movements through the state largely depend on available roosting areas and the extent of the snow line.

NASP State Tournament Results

Elementary and middle school teams from Griggs County Central and a high school team from Dunseith took top honors in North Dakota's inaugural National Archery in the Schools Program state tournament.

A total of 71 archers participated in the virtual state tournament, conducted in schools by local coaches and physical education teachers in February.

The first-place team and the top five boys and girls in each division – high school, middle school and elementary school – automatically qualify for the national tournament in Louisville, Kentucky. Additionally, teams that achieve minimum scores set by NASP also qualify for the national tournament.

Game and Fish Sponsors Earth Day Project

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is once again celebrating Earth Day by sponsoring a youth clean-up day on public-owned or managed lands in April and May.

Each member of a school, Girl Scout, Boy Scout, 4-H club or youth organization who participates in cleaning up public lands during April and May will receive a specifically designed conservation patch. Last year, more than 4,100 youth received a patch for their efforts in keeping public lands trash-free in North Dakota.

Groups participating in the Earth Day project are encouraged to take the following precautions to ensure safety: keep young people away from highways, lakes and rivers; and only allow older participants to pick up broken glass.

Keep Backyard Bird Feeders Clean

An unusually high number of songbirds found dead near backyard bird feeders across the country this spring is a strong message for homeowners to make sure bird feeders and bird baths are kept clean.

Dr. Dan Grove, wildlife veterinarian for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, said initial reports of dead songbirds – most notably pine siskins, common redpolls and gold finches – occurred in the southeastern United States in February. More recently, reports are coming from northern tier states. Salmonella has been identified as the cause of death in those birds that were sent to various labs.

Salmonella is a bacteria transmitted through bird droppings. As a precaution, Grove recommends cleaning feeders weekly and removing any seed debris from the ground.

The following steps should be taken to clean a feeder: remove all seed debris and deposit in the garbage; wash with warm, soapy water and rinse thoroughly; spray with a 10 percent bleach solution; let sit for 10 minutes; rinse completely and let sun dry.

Sandra Johnson, nongame biologist for the Game and Fish Department, said that potential problems associated with artificial feeders have prompted Game and Fish to recommend focusing attention on habitat and not feeders.

“Backyard bird feeding is more responsibly accomplished by using vegetation, such as fruit bearing trees and shrubs,” Johnson said. “Habitat in the form of trees, shrubs, native grasses and wildflowers, and vines benefits birds with necessary cover and natural sources of food.”

Becoming an Outdoors-Woman Workshop

Women who want to learn more about outdoor activities are encouraged to participate in the 15th annual Becoming an Outdoors-Woman Workshop Aug. 7-9 at Lake Metigoshe State Park, Bottineau.

The workshop, sponsored by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, offers 24 different seminars, each of which lasts more than three hours.

Women will learn the basics of hunting and fishing, shooting, navigation, and plants and animals. New classes offered this year include Dutch oven cooking, basic boating skills and intermediate archery. Other classes include decoy carving, canoeing, fly-fishing, kayaking, plant identification and predator calling.