

# NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH DAKOTA



GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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Game and Fish



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Burrowing owls keeping watch on their surroundings in southwestern North Dakota. The nesting season for these unique owls is mid-May through September. They nest in abandoned dens of prairie dogs, ground squirrels, badgers and other animals. The same burrow may be used from year to year.

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# NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS

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*The mission of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department is to protect, conserve and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their habitats for sustained public consumptive and nonconsumptive use.*

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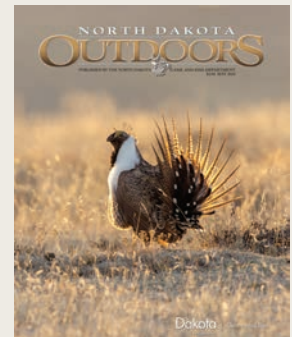
## CONTENTS

- 2** Last of the Leks
- 8** Tagging for Science
- 12** Soaring Out of Obscurity
- 16** Draw of a Lifetime
- 20** Buffaloberry Patch
- 25** Back Cast

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### Front Cover

*Male sage grouse displaying on a lek in early April in southwestern North Dakota.*

PHOTO BY JESSE KOLAR.



*Driven by photoperiod  
and other cues, a male  
sage grouse displays on  
a lek in Bowman County  
in early spring.*



# Least *of the* Leeks

**By Ron Wilson**

While it's premature to write an obituary for sage grouse in southwestern North Dakota, wildlife biologists have seen few, if any, indicators signaling a comeback in a population in slow decline for nearly two decades.

"I know some people have said the sage grouse population in North Dakota is on hospice, and I think that's probably an accurate thing to say," said Jesse Kolar, North Dakota Game and Fish Department upland game management supervisor in Dickinson. "I think the only saving grace we have is that Montana and South Dakota still have sage grouse connected to our population, so we could hope that those birds would source into our population. However, in the last couple of years, those populations haven't been doing as well. South Dakota shut down their hunting season like us due to declines, and Montana has seen similar declines right across the border."



**“Sage grouse are very emblematic, iconic, beautiful birds that have unique dancing rituals that surprise those people lucky enough to have seen them display.”**

To get the best population estimate of sage grouse in southwestern North Dakota, wildlife biologists have for years started “listening runs” in mid-March looking for sage grouse leks, followed by counting the number of birds in attendance on those strutting grounds beginning April 1.

“Unfortunately, today we’re down to just two remaining leks that we know of,” Kolar said on April 3 in southwestern Bowman County. “Last year there were 23 males on those two leks. This year our preliminary counts have been even lower. The lek where we saw 13 birds last year had about three so far. It’s early, so maybe we’ll see more later in the season, but it doesn’t seem promising.”

North Dakota is on the eastern edge of the birds’ range where habitat and climatic factors limit sage grouse success and expansion, so their numbers in the state have never been staggering. Even so, the birds have been around for eons and even considering their end is disheartening.

“Sage grouse are very emblematic, iconic, beautiful birds that have unique dancing rituals that surprise those people lucky enough to have seen them display,” Kolar said. “Like the struggling prairie chicken population in northeastern North Dakota, it’s hard to think of letting go of sage grouse in this part of the state.”

Kolar said biologists measure North Dakota’s sage grouse population through spring lek counts because the birds are sparse on any landscape and measuring them in summer or fall is difficult.

*While North Dakota doesn’t harbor near the numbers of sage grouse it once did, these big birds, weighing in at about 7 pounds, are hard to miss when displaying.*





*A hen sage grouse watches male grouse display on a lek.*

"In the spring, they're territorial, they'll go to the same territorial leks and we're able to monitor males from year to year to year," he said. "The population in North Dakota could blip out according to our lek counts, but we'll still probably have sage grouse wandering in from South Dakota and Montana leks even after ours would zero out. We're probably going to have sage grouse quite a few years into the future, but just not the numbers that we used to have and potentially no more breeding population, just vagrants."

The last time more than 100 males were counted on leks in North Dakota was 2007 when 199 were in attendance. Since then, their numbers have dropped significantly and there were years the totals never reached double digits.

So, what gives?

"Around 2006 to 2008, their numbers dropped pretty precipitously, and we think it's because West Nile virus showed up on the landscape," Kolar said. "But in the grand scheme of things, there are a lot of causes to the sage grouse decline. We've lost sagebrush, we've had fragmentation with oil and gas development and other human development in their core habitat. Sage grouse like great big areas of predominantly undisturbed sagebrush and grass-

lands. And we don't have a lot of that left in their core range."

Sage grouse have been secreted away in southwestern North Dakota for eons because of the species' fundamental tie to the aromatic plant — Wyoming big sagebrush — found in its name.

Grouse look to sagebrush for food, cover from the weather and predators, and nesting and brood habitat. Sadly, about half of the big sage habitat in North Dakota that hasn't been fragmented from the landscape has at one time been sprayed, burned, disked or otherwise removed from the grasslands.

When the stars do align and both sexes show up on the leks in spring, what follows isn't an immediate, influential boost to the population like you sometimes see with other upland birds.

"Sage grouse aren't as productive as sharptails, partridge or pheasants. They definitely are on the slow production, longer lifespan scale," Kolar said. "Some of our wildlife produces really rapidly — produces a lot of young and they die frequently. Sage grouse are more adapted to producing fewer young.

"Usually, a sage grouse nest of six to eight eggs might only produce two to three fledglings, which is far fewer than a brood of pheasants or partridge," he added. "The way they counter that is by having





longer lifespans. So, unlike a partridge or pheasant that might have 2- or 3-year lifespan norm, we could expect sage grouse to live 5 to 7 years and often longer."

The transition from egg to survival, however, is a difficult journey for sage grouse.

"The leading direct cause of mortality is usually predation for a lot of the chicks. A lot of the nests, they'd all hatch out if it weren't for predators," Kolar said. "Sometimes there are fertility issues in areas where we don't have enough males, so the hens aren't being bred. But for the most part, predation is the main reason that the nests don't hatch, and the young don't survive."

Other factors that decrease hatching rates and chick survival, he added, include cold or wet weather, disturbance to hens during incubation, and diseases.

While sage grouse have long evolved with winged and four-legged critters that want to eat them, Kolar said

it's a rockier road for the birds nowadays because the habitat needed to keep them safe from predators is in much shorter supply.

Game and Fish Department wildlife managers haven't sat idly by as sage grouse numbers slowly declined over time. In the last 20 years, for example, the agency was involved in habitat improvement and reclamation projects to help bolster the grouse population.

"Most recently, the Game and Fish invested quite a bit of time and money trying to translocate birds from Wyoming to North Dakota," Kolar said. "We brought in over 300 sage grouse in a period of four years, including broods that we moved with hens so they could acclimate young. While it didn't seem like it was enough to get our population back to where we wanted it to be, it did seem like it slowed the bleeding."

Kolar said the lesson learned was that the Depart-



*This hybrid, a cross between a sage grouse and a sharp-tailed grouse, was photographed a number of years ago in southwestern North Dakota. Game and Fish Department biologists have documented five hybrids over time. Hybrids compete with sage grouse and don't contribute to the declining sage grouse population.*





ment would have needed to translocate many more birds for many more years, which wildlife managers weren't willing to commit to without first improving larger blocks of habitat.

North Dakota had its first sage grouse hunting season in 1964 and it was closed just once, in 1979, before being shut down indefinitely in 2008. The season, a three-day hunt the majority of those years, never attracted a wide audience, maybe 100 or so hunters annually. Since 1980, the highest number of grouse harvested in one season was 71 birds in 1983. In 2007, conceivably the last season, only 21 birds were taken.

"As far as having a sage grouse hunting season again in North Dakota ... I guess I'm pretty pessimistic," Kolar said. "You never say never because all wildlife populations go through fluctuations and sometimes we do see unexpected spikes. But it doesn't seem promising that we'll open our season anytime soon. Although many studies have shown hunting is not a leading cause of mortality in sage grouse populations, when you get to this low point of a population, we can't afford any additional mortality."

Kolar would likely argue that aside from hunting seasons, maintaining a population of sage grouse to roam the landscape as they have for eons would be enough.

"Before I became an upland game biologist, I worked with the Department on a research project on pronghorn. A lot of collared pronghorn were down in Bowman County, overlapping our sage grouse core areas. And at that time there were still leks that had 20 to 25 males per lek," he said. "I remember one time I was so impressed, I told Dad we should go down and see the sage grouse in Bowman County.

"And we drove down in the morning without any knowledge of where leks were and we spotted a lek and were able to see sage grouse," Kolar added. "Nowadays, you wouldn't be able to go around and find sage grouse so easily. It's pretty thin pickings looking for the needle in the haystack that are the few remaining leks."

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*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*

**“But in the grand scheme of things, there are a lot of causes to the sage grouse decline. We’ve lost sagebrush, we’ve had fragmentation with oil and gas development and other human development in their core habitat. Sage grouse like great big areas of predominantly undisturbed sagebrush and grasslands. And we don’t have a lot of that left in their core range.”**







# TAGGING FOR SCIENCE

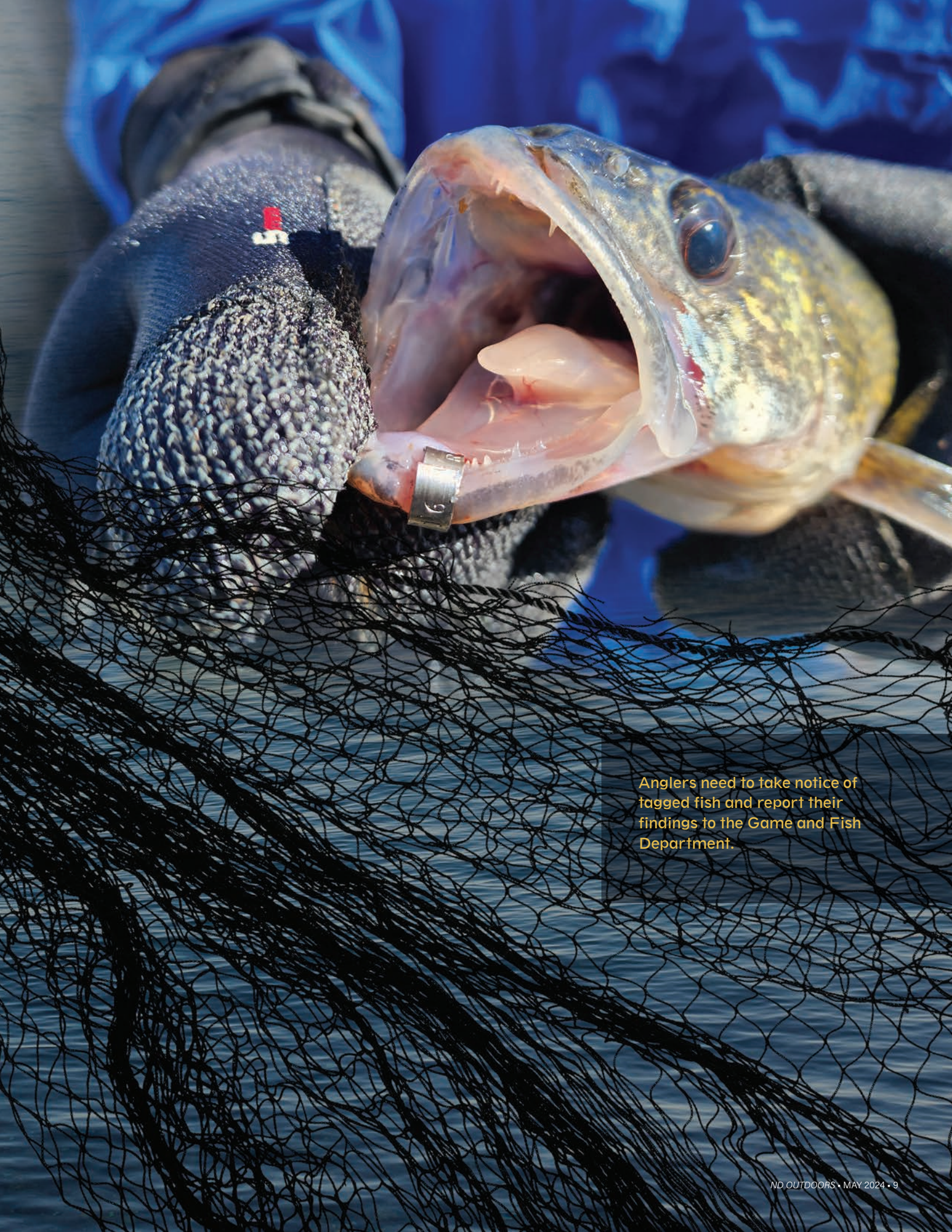
By Ron Wilson

Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel tagged thousands of walleyes earlier in spring in four prairie lakes across North Dakota to harvest additional insight into how anglers are utilizing these fisheries.

And if things go as planned, this effort is just getting started.


"Tagging studies are something that we typically use on a lake-by-lake basis, but this year for the first time we're collaborating on a statewide level. This is the first year of what we expect to be doing into the future," said Scott Gangl, Department fisheries management section leader. "This collaboration by all our staff on these multiple lakes will provide a broader picture of what's going on around the state, not just on a lake specific basis, but on an expanded statewide basis."





Anglers need to take notice of tagged fish and report their findings to the Game and Fish Department.





Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel net and tag walleyes at Coal Lake in McLean County.

This year, walleyes were tagged on Coal Lake (McLean County), Twin Lakes (LaMoure County), Lake Coe (Eddy County) and West Lake Napoleon (Logan County).

Dave Fryda, Department fisheries supervisor in Riverdale, was heading the tagging effort earlier this spring on Coal Lake where the goal, like the other waters in the tagging study, was to put metal jaw tags in 500 to 1,000 fish.

"There's a lot of fish up to 22-23 inches ... there's a lot of forage and the fish are in good condition," Fryda said. "We're fortunate the walleye in Coal have grown really well. There are several year-classes and last year they reproduced naturally on their own. This tagging study comes at a perfect time to take a look at how anglers are benefiting from this population."

Some of what fisheries managers hope to learn from the tagging studies is an estimate of exploitation, or a better understanding of the proportion of fish that anglers harvest every year from the walleye populations.

"Our philosophy for fishing regulations across North Dakota is to keep them as simple as possible. A lot of the smaller individual lake studies have shown that our statewide regulations are appropriate for those smaller waters, meaning that we don't have excessive exploitation. People aren't harvesting more fish than what the lake can provide," Gangl said. "Studies like this tell us whether fishing exploitation is high or low. And they tell us whether in some lakes we have more catch-and-release than others."





Gangl said angler demographics across the state are diverse. For example, some areas see more nonresident traffic, while others see more local pressure.

"With that diversity of anglers across the state, we wanted to get a bigger picture and see if from one area to the other if things are consistent in terms of our fishing quality and whether our fishing regulations are appropriate to meet the needs of all of our lakes, not just some of them," Gangl said. "Our fisheries crews will tag fish this year and then they'll collect tag returns from anglers over the course of the next year, giving us an estimate of angler harvest and exploitation for the year. And then next year we'll likely go in and tag fish at other lakes and based on conditions in the future."

Spring is a busy time of year for fisheries crews. To tag from 500 to 1,000 walleyes on four lakes, nets were sunk between the season's two biggest events — pike and walleye spawning.

"When nets were set it was pre-spawn for walleye ... the fish are typically roaming the shorelines in shallower water, making them easier to catch at that time of year," Gangl said. "Luckily, the spring that we had was pretty nice. We had an earlier ice off than last year, and the guys were able to finish northern pike spawning in a couple of days. Having that done and the perch trap and transport behind us, our crews had a little bit of extra time to get some of the walleye tagging done."

Of course, anglers play a large role in the tagging studies and it's imperative they report tagged fish, no matter if they end up in livewells or back in the lake.

Fisheries managers say when it comes to reporting these tags, they'd like anglers to treat the tagged walleyes just as they would treat any other fish they might have caught. So, if it's a fish an angler was planning on harvesting, go ahead and harvest that fish. If it's a fish an angler was planning on releasing, go ahead and release that fish. Just record the tag number and leave the tag on the fish.

Anglers can report any tagged fish they encounter by logging into their North Dakota Game and Fish Department account or use the "tagged fish reporting" feature on the Department's website at [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).

"What we're studying is how anglers treat the fish in these fisheries, so every bit of information is important to us," Gangl said.

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*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*

Justin Mattson with a nice West Lake Napoleon walleye. West Lake is one of three lakes where Department fisheries crews tagged walleyes in spring for study purposes.







# SOARING

## OUT OF OBSCURITY

**By Ron Wilson**

When a McLean County landowner discovered an occupied bald eagle nest along the Missouri River nearly four decades ago, it was news.

Before that day, it had been 12 years since a pair of adult eagles successfully nested and fledged an eaglet in the state.

*"The nest was first discovered in mid-June ... the historic event was later documented by a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist and Army Corps of Engineers personnel while surveying the Missouri River between Garrison Dam and Bismarck for the federally endangered least tern and threatened piping plover," according to an article in North Dakota OUTDOORS in November 1988. "Two adult bald eagles, and one fully feathered eaglet were observed perching amidst towering cottonwoods along the riverbank."*

Once a common sight, bald eagles were severely affected in the mid-20th century by a variety of factors, among them the thinning of eggshells attributed to use of the pesticide DDT. The bald eagle was placed on the endangered species list in 1978 and remained there for nearly three decades.





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While at the time, discovering a successful eagle nest along the Missouri River didn't signal the recovery of our nation's symbol in North Dakota, it was a hopeful and newsworthy start.

"Historically, bald eagles did nest along the Missouri River, Red River and likely the Devils Lake area and the Turtle Mountains," said Sandra Johnson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department conservation biologist. "When bald eagle populations really declined throughout the 1900s, we didn't know of many active nests. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were probably fewer than three nests in North Dakota."

But by the 1990s, they started increasing. By 2010, Johnson said, North Dakota had almost 100 active nests, and by 2020, that number jumped to about 300.

Today, Johnson said there are active nests in 47 of North Dakota's 53 counties. Yet, there is some speculation the six counties (Williams, Wells, Burke, Billings, Slope and Golden Valley) that didn't make the list likely harbor active bald eagle nests, but they simply haven't been reported.

"As Department wildlife biologists, we're not actively surveying every county," Johnson said. "We rely heavily on reports from the public and our conservation partners on where nests are at. While I'd guess there has to be an active bald eagle nest in almost every county, but without confirmation, that number stands at 47 today."

When you envision a bald eagle nest, it's easy to imagine it, say, along the Missouri River in a gigantic cottonwood that's seemingly been around forever. Yet, as time has shown, bald eagles have ventured out from our major river corridors into some unlikely places.

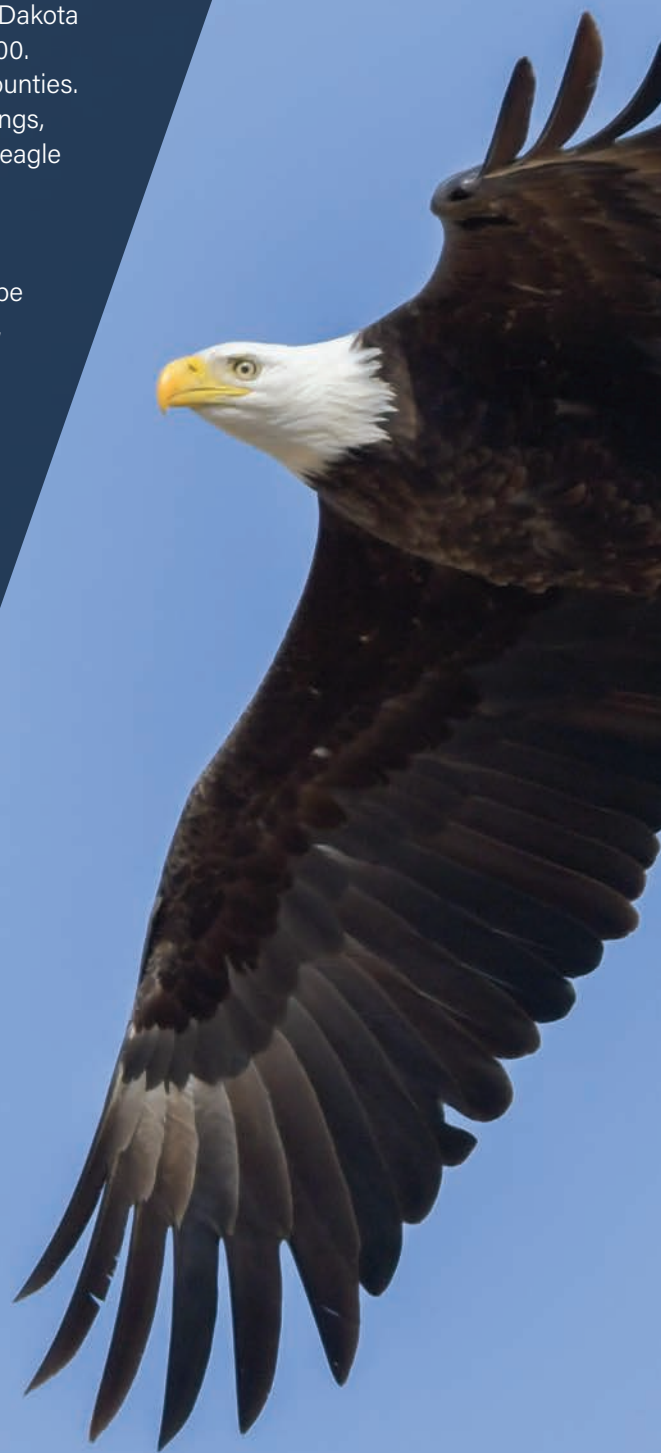
"They've proven to be quite adaptable, and they will nest in trees out in the middle of pastures, fields, really anywhere they've got a food source nearby and it doesn't necessarily have to be by water, either," Johnson said. "Nationally, there are some bald eagle nests that are more than 9 miles away from any type of water source. Because bald eagles are one of the top predators, if there is a large tree and a food source, it could potentially be bald eagle nesting habitat."

Bald eagle nests are often unmistakable because of their size.


"The first year they build a nest, it might be kind of small, but every year they keep adding to it," Johnson said. "There are some nests now in North Dakota that we've been tracking for more than 15 years that are just huge, up to 9 feet wide."

Wildlife biologists say monogamous nesting pairs initiate courtship and nest-building activities in January and February. Eggs are deposited in nests in late February to mid-March and incubated by both parents for 30-35 days until hatching.

The downy young grow rapidly and achieve fledging stage in about 10 weeks. Fledged eagles typically remain in the area of the nest throughout the first summer.







For bald eagles to rebound to where they are today, it took some time because it takes years before adults are ready to breed. And when they do, the female of the committed pair will lay just two to three eggs.

"Bald eagles are a really long-lived species ... they'll live up to 30 years, but they don't start breeding until at least 5 years, 6 years, probably older," Johnson said. "Because it's a species that takes quite a long time to mature, it just took a long time for the population to really start increasing. And now that it's increasing, the bald eagle population is growing exponentially."

Bald eagles seen nesting widely across North Dakota's landscape or spied feeding in bunches on winterkill carp during the spring migration isn't as newsworthy as it once was. No matter, because these big, beautiful, unmistakable raptors still stop passersby in their tracks no matter how pedestrian they've become.

"I don't know how many bald eagles or active bald eagle nests I've seen over the years, but what I do know is that it never gets old seeing them because they are our nation's symbol and are such cool birds," Johnson said.

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*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*

## REPORT NESTS ONLINE


The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is asking for help locating active bald eagle nests.

Sandra Johnson, Department conservation biologist, said the Department is looking for locations of nests with eagles present, not individual eagle sightings.

Eagles lay eggs in late February to mid-March, which hatch about a month later. Johnson said it's easy to distinguish an eagle nest because of its enormous size.

Nearly 350 active bald eagle nests can be found in 47 of the 53 counties in the state. Historically, Johnson said nests were found along river corridors, but that's not the case today, as bald eagles will nest in trees in the middle of pastures, fields or anywhere near a food source.

Nest observations should be reported online at the Game and Fish website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov). Observers are asked not to disturb the nest, and to stay a safe distance away. Johnson said foot traffic may disturb the bird, likely causing the eagle to leave her eggs or young unattended.



Sandra Johnson, Department conservation biologist, checks on a bald eagle nest in McLean County earlier this spring.





A bighorn sheep tag is darn tough to draw in North Dakota. Typically, more than 20,000 hunters apply each year for just a few tags.



# DRAW

OF A LIFETIME

*BIG 3 Winner!*

By Ron Wilson

**N**orth Dakota's application deadline for moose, elk and bighorn sheep — rightly called the Big 3 in some circles — was in late March. By now, we know the outcome.

If you were drawn, congratulations. If not, there's always next year, but don't hold your breath.

"We call them the Big 3 because they're kind of a big deal in North Dakota, as moose, elk and bighorn sheep provide hunters once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for those who get drawn," said Casey Anderson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief. "Some people think that it's once in their lifetime they're going to get drawn, but realistically, many of us may never get drawn."

Residents, at least those lucky enough to draw, started hunting moose (1977), elk (1983) and bighorn sheep (1975) in North Dakota decades ago.

Yet, things look drastically different today when you consider the rise in the number of hunting opportunities and the number of people who cross their fingers in anticipation of possibly, maybe garnering the chance to pull the trigger.

In 1984, for instance, the Game and Fish Department made available just 50 moose licenses and 30 elk licenses, and roughly 8,600 hunters applied for the former and about 3,000 for the latter.

In 2023, on the other hand, more than 26,000 hunters applied for 253 moose licenses, while about 24,000 applied for 599 elk licenses.

"It's a different world out there today when you think about the hunting opportunities for moose and elk, in particular, compared to years ago," Anderson said. "And, certainly, you can't ignore the dramatic rise in the interest of hunters wanting their shot at these once-in-a-lifetime opportunities."



Conversely, with bighorn sheep, the Department makes available so few licenses (five in 2023) every fall by comparison, likely making it the most coveted draw of the three. Yet, unlike moose and elk, where the Department allocates both cow and bull tags, the licenses for bighorns are strictly for rams.

The hunting opportunities, especially for elk, continued to climb in 2024. The Game and Fish Department made available a record 833 elk licenses, or 230 more than last year.

"We increased elk tags a fair bit, mainly in northeastern North Dakota," Anderson said. "A lot of those were cow licenses, but there were some any elk licenses that were increased, too."

The increase came after the Department hired a company to conduct aerial infrared surveys during winter 2022-23 in the heavily wooded Turtle Mountains and Pembina Hills.

"Those elk, especially in the Turtle Mountains, are extremely difficult to survey with traditional survey methods because of the canopy cover," Anderson said. "What this infrared technology showed was that we've been underestimating the number of elk in that area."

Anderson said because the survey information came out after the release of last year's proclamation, the large bump in elk licenses in the northeast couldn't be made until the 2024 hunting season.

Moose populations in northeastern North Dakota aren't doing as well as elk as their numbers remain lower in historical hunting units in the Turtle Mountains, Pembina Hills and along the Red River corridor. Moose unit M1C, located in the Pembina Hills region, has been closed since 2006 and moose unit M4, which encompasses the Turtle Mountains, is also closed.

"While moose have not bounced back in Pembina Gorge, Bottineau County areas, they have really done well out on the prairie, which has been kind of an anomaly," Anderson said.

They've done so well, there has been an effort to push the population down just a bit, Anderson said.

"Moose are really big critters. They get in town, they get in farmsteads, and tolerance for them gets short. We as North Dakotans, if we want a lot of moose around, we must learn how to live with them at some level, but we also have to manage that population," he said. "And we felt like we had gotten to the point where the population was really robust and social acceptance had hit some sort of level that we needed to push that population down a little bit."

Even so, the Department still made available 242 moose licenses in 2024, providing plenty of once-in-a-lifetime opportunities.

To improve your odds of drawing a moose or elk license, Anderson suggests hunters should consider an antlerless license.

"The cow licenses are easier to draw, depending on the unit ... an elk unit may be higher than 50% draw for an antlerless tag. If you're adamant about going after the coveted bull tags, those are the ones that have a pretty low chance of being drawn," he said. "But, as they say, there's a chance. So, if you really want to just try to hunt elk in North Dakota and you don't care if it's a bull or a cow, those antlerless tags are a good opportunity to potentially get drawn."

Anderson warns that just because a cow elk isn't carrying six-point antlers, shooting one is nothing like shooting a white-tailed doe.



**Bull moose on the prairie.**



"It's probably more difficult to shoot a cow elk than it is to shoot a bull. Considering that they're usually herded up, it's not just one set of eyes, it's a whole bunch of eyes that you're dealing with," he said. "We just want people to be prepared for that because they are choosing to use their once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do that. We suggest doing a little research if you've never hunted elk before, talk to some people who have hunted elk, or call our biologists and they'll kind of help you with some information. It's a unique opportunity to try to get in on."

When it comes to hunting moose in North Dakota, Anderson said you can make that hunt as hard as you want or as easy as you want.

"We have moose that live along the Missouri River by the Yellowstone confluence south of Williston ... that's probably the moose hunt in North Dakota that's going to look like an Alaska moose hunt. You're going to be down in the willows. They're going to be hard to see. You're going to be close sometimes," he said. "When you get into some of these agricultural units where you can talk to some landowners who typically see moose, the hunt can be fairly easy if you can find them. Finding them is the biggest thing. They're big animals, but they hide pretty well."

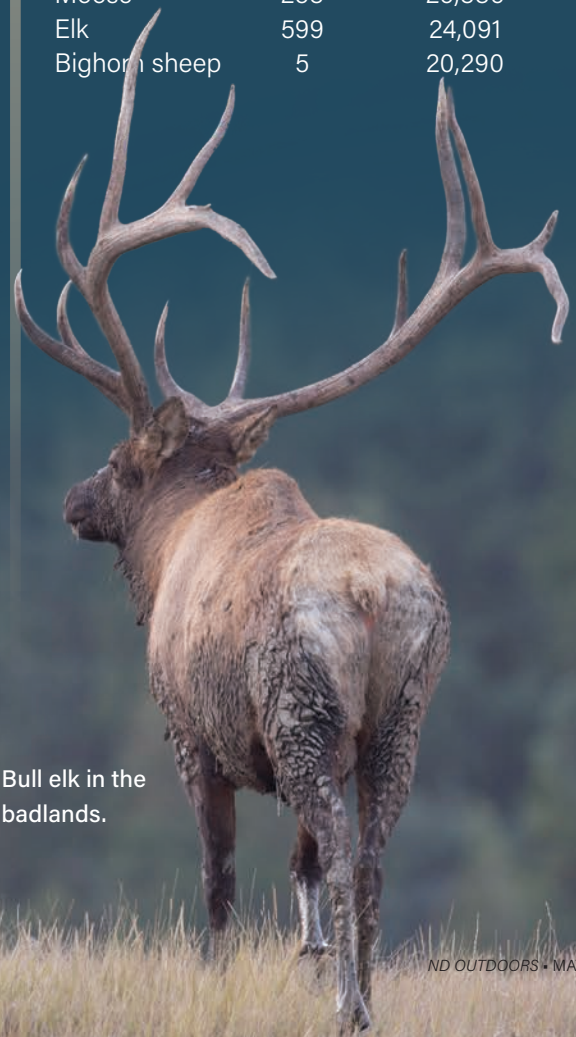
While the 2024 moose and elk hunters already know who they are, news of a 2024 bighorn season, which is anticipated, and the hunters who drew licenses won't be announced until sometime in early September. This process is nothing new as the Game and Fish announced in winter the status of the bighorn sheep hunting season would be determined after completion of the upcoming summer population survey.

"Our bighorn sheep biologist, Brett Wiedmann, is counting lambs in the badlands, counting reproduction, classifying rams to see how many we think we have that we can take out of the population," Anderson said. "So, hunters apply first, and then we generate the 'luckiest list in the world,' as some would call it, and start calling those folks and if somebody would turn us down, we'd go to the next one on the list. But nobody has yet."

*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*

## BIG 3 IN REVIEW

	LICENSES AVAILABLE	APPLICATIONS RECEIVED
<b>2018</b>		
Moose	330	21,041
Elk	404	18,082
Bighorn sheep	3	14,615
<b>2019</b>		
Moose	475	22,456
Elk	489	19,290
Bighorn sheep	4	15,520
<b>2020</b>		
Moose	470	24,027
Elk	532	21,069
Bighorn sheep	5	16,935
<b>2021</b>		
Moose	470	26,034
Elk	519	23,016
Bighorn sheep	5	19,126
<b>2022</b>		
Moose	400	26,038
Elk	559	23,427
Bighorn sheep	5	20,290
<b>2023</b>		
Moose	253	26,386
Elk	599	24,091
Bighorn sheep	5	20,290



Bull elk in the badlands.





# BUFFALOBERRY PATCH



## 2023 Deer Season Summary

A total of 45,927 North Dakota deer hunters took approximately 25,146 deer during the 2023 deer gun hunting season, according to a post-season survey conducted by the state Game and Fish Department.

Game and Fish made available 53,400 deer gun licenses last year. Overall hunter success was 55%, with each hunter spending an average of 4.7 days in the field.

Hunter success for antlered white-tailed deer was 54%, and 51% for antlerless whitetails.

Mule deer buck success was 80%, and 78% for antlerless mule deer.

Hunters with any-antlered or any-antlerless licenses generally harvest white-tailed deer, as these licenses are predominantly in units with mostly whitetails. Buck hunters had a success rate of 60%, while doe hunters had a success rate of 55%.

Game and Fish issued 12,188 gratis licenses in 2023, and 9,664 hunters harvested 4,216 deer for a success rate of 44%.

A total of 1,020 muzzleloader licenses were issued, and 890 hunters harvested 280 white-tailed deer (140 antlered, 140 antlerless). Hunter success was 32%.

A total of 27,607 archery licenses (24,237 resident, 3,370 nonresident) were issued in 2023. In total, 22,608 bowhunters harvested 6,436 deer (5,411 whitetails, 1,025 mule deer) for a success rate of 29%.

As a result, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department is working closely with South Dakota to monitor the colonization of mussels in Lake Oahe during the 2024 open water season, according to Ben Holen, Game and Fish Department aquatic nuisance species coordinator.

“The nearest mussel that was found last year was over 100 lake miles south of the North Dakota border, so we will utilize various early detection techniques to track the leading edge of the zebra mussel population as it establishes up the lake,” Holen said.

In addition to monitoring efforts, the Department will launch a digital marketing campaign and will work with the North Dakota Department of Transportation to place highway signage to raise zebra mussel awareness and promote compliance with ANS regulations, Holen said. Also, expect a higher game warden presence along Lake Oahe this year.

“It is critically important that water recreationists comply with ANS regulations and remember to clean, drain, dry all watercraft and equipment between every use,” he added.

Lake Oahe recreationists and others can find facts about zebra mussels, ANS regulations and decontamination tips at [gf.nd.gov/ans](http://gf.nd.gov/ans).



## 2023 Bighorn Sheep, Moose and Elk Harvests

Harvest statistics released by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department show overall hunter success during the 2023 season for bighorn sheep was 100%, 89% for moose and 71% for elk.

The Department issued five bighorn sheep licenses and auctioned one. All six hunters harvested a bighorn ram.

The Department issued 253 moose licenses last year. Of that total, 246 hunters harvested 219 animals – 132 bulls and 87 cows/calves. Harvest for each unit follows:



## Reminders for Lake Oahe Recreationists

Zebra mussels were confirmed in the lower end of Lake Oahe in South Dakota in December 2023 by South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks staff.



UNIT	HUNTERS	BULLS	COW/CALF	SUCCESS RATE
M5	8	6	1	88
M6	10	6	1	70
M8	15	15	0	100
M9	84	33	43	90
M10	77	45	27	94
M11	52	27	15	81

The Department issued 649 elk licenses last year. Of that total, 589 hunters harvested 418 elk – 190 bulls and 228 cows/calves. Harvest for each unit follows:

UNIT	HUNTERS	BULLS	COW/CALF	SUCCESS RATE
E1E	128	36	54	70
E1W	104	21	45	63
E2	130	38	43	62
E3	194	73	81	79
E4	21	18	0	86
E6	12	4	5	75

## CWD Test Results

With the 2023 chronic wasting disease surveillance season completed, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department reported 11 deer tested positive.

“The good news is that all these cases came from units where CWD has already been detected. None came from the southeastern part of the state where we were focusing our surveillance efforts,” said Dr. Charlie Bahnson, Department wildlife veterinarian. “However, CWD was detected right across our border in eastern Manitoba near Winkler, and again near Climax, Minn., where it was first found in 2021.”

Positive cases detected in 2023 came from units 3A1, 3A2, 3E1, 3E2 and 3F2.

Casey Anderson, Department wildlife division chief, said that despite lower harvest success, the agency met its surveillance goal in units 2B, 2G and 2G1. The objective is to achieve a sampling goal of 10% of the allocated deer gun licenses for a given year.

Game and Fish will use its 2023 surveillance data to guide CWD management moving forward.

CWD is a fatal disease of deer, moose and elk that remains on the landscape and can cause long-term population impacts as infection rates climb.

More information about CWD can be found by visiting the Department’s website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).

## ANS Sticker for Watercraft

Boaters with watercraft registered outside the state must have a 2024 aquatic nuisance species sticker before operating watercraft in North Dakota.

State law requires a \$15 ANS fee for motorized watercraft not licensed in North Dakota to be paid for each calendar year, and the ANS sticker must be displayed on the watercraft.

In addition, Minnesota anglers launching boats on the North Dakota side of the Red River must have a current ANS sticker displayed on the watercraft.

The ANS sticker can only be purchased by logging into the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).



## 2024-26 Fishing Regulations Set

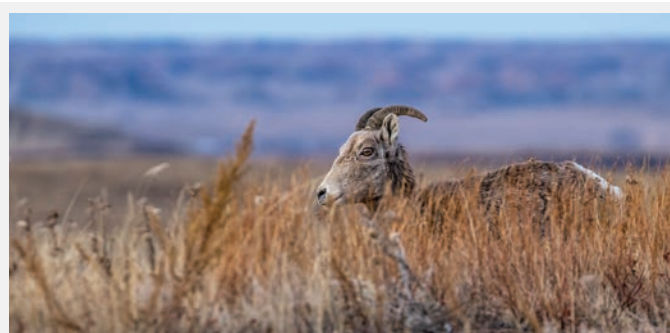
North Dakota’s 2024-26 fishing proclamation is set, with regulations effective April 1, 2024, through March 31, 2026. New fishing licenses are required April 1.

Anglers can find the North Dakota 2024-26 Fishing Guide online at the state Game and Fish Department website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov), or at Game and Fish Department offices and license vendors throughout the state.

Noteworthy regulation changes include:

- Allows the use of bows for northern pike and nongame fish while darkhouse spearfishing.
- Establishes a channel catfish limit west of N.D. Highway 1.
- For bow and spearfishing – allows the taking of channel catfish in the Missouri River System up to the first tributary bridge.

The 2024-25 fishing licenses can be purchased online by visiting the Game and Fish website.



## Fourth Consecutive Record Count of Bighorn Sheep

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department’s 2023 bighorn sheep survey, completed by recounting lambs in March, revealed a record 364 bighorn sheep in the



grasslands of western North Dakota, up 5% from 2022 and 16% above the five-year average. The count surpassed the previous record of 347 bighorns in 2022.

Altogether, biologists counted 106 rams, 202 ewes and 56 lambs. Not included are approximately 40 bighorn sheep in the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park and bighorns introduced to the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in 2020.

Brett Wiedmann, Department big game biologist, was pleased to see an increase in the survey for the sixth consecutive year.

The northern badlands population increased 5% from 2022 and was the highest count on record. The southern badlands population dropped to its lowest level since bighorns were reintroduced there in 1966.

"We were encouraged to see a record count of adult rams, and adult ewes and lambs were near record numbers," Wiedmann said. "Unlike the population declines observed in most other big game species following the severe winter of 2022-23, the increase in the bighorn population was attributable to two factors: higher than expected survival of adults and lambs during the extreme winter conditions of 2022, and better than anticipated lamb production and survival during 2023. Basically, bighorn sheep are incredibly hardy animals that can thrive during North Dakota's most frigid winters."

Department biologists count and classify all bighorn sheep in late summer, and then recount lambs the following March as they approach one year of age to determine recruitment.

Currently, about 490 bighorns make up the populations managed by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, National Park Service and the Three Affiliated Tribes Fish and Wildlife Division, just shy of the benchmark of 500 bighorns in the state.

A bighorn sheep hunting season is tentatively scheduled to open in 2024. The status of the season will be determined Sept. 1, following the summer population survey.

## Game and Fish Pays \$762,000 in Property Taxes

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department recently paid more than \$762,000 in taxes to counties in which the Department owns or leases land. The 2023 in-lieu-of-tax payments are the same as property taxes paid by private landowners.

The Game and Fish Department manages more than 200,000 acres for wildlife habitat and public hunting in 51 counties. The Department does not own or manage any land in Traill or Renville counties.

Following is a list of counties and tax payments received.

COUNTY	TAX DUE	COUNTY	TAX DUE
Adams	207.28	McKenzie	34,790.67
Barnes	12,878.16	McLean	131,526.92
Benson	5,841.17	Mercer	20,014.83
Billings	228.02	Morton	25,448.92
Bottineau	8,176.40	Mountrail	6,188.96
Bowman	2,420.75	Nelson	9,395.85
Burke	1,049.17	Oliver	2,668.61
Burleigh	30,670.96	Pembina	12,593.86
Cass	8,537.08	Pierce	3,500.01
Cavalier	16,734.72	Ramsey	18,628.77
Dickey	13,982.92	Ransom	3,029.54
Divide	2,721.89	Richland	20,278.14
Dunn	5,251.05	Rolette	52,621.67
Eddy	7,195.69	Sargent	20,792.37
Emmons	8,040.34	Sheridan	96,399.22
Foster	1,040.78	Sioux	225.00
Golden Valley	160.43	Slope	1,950.75
Grand Forks	21,588.07	Stark	5,629.43
Grant	1,193.55	Steele	10,930.49
Griggs	104.53	Stutsman	5,956.84
Hettinger	4,763.66	Towner	2,667.57
Kidder	13,596.39	Walsh	10,879.95
LaMoure	12,744.62	Ward	56.51
Logan	430.41	Wells	64,986.95
McHenry	1,953.29	Williams	8,871.68
McIntosh	11,131.18		



From left: Jeb Williams, Department director, Richard Bahm, and Scott Peterson, Department deputy director.

## Agency Volunteers Recognized

Volunteer instructors for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department were recently recognized at the annual banquet in Bismarck.

Richard Bahm, Mandan, was recognized as Hunter Education Instructor of the Year.

Longtime volunteers were also recognized for their service:

**30 YEARS** – Mark Biel, Bismarck; Jeff Bjugstad, Wahpeton; Patsy Croke, Mandan; Darrell Ekberg, Manvel; Gary Ertmann, Devils Lake; Theodore Hoberg, Grand Forks; Vernon Laning, Stanton; Robert Martin, Jamestown; Francis Miller, Mandan; and Kenneth Retzlaff, Ellendale.

**25 YEARS** – William Bahm, Almont; Mark Engen, Anamoose; Mark Entzi, Watford City; Daryl Heid, Center; Matthew Herman, Ashley; Leon Hiltner, Wales; Michael



Hinrichs, Bismarck; Del Houghton, Steele; Lynn Kieper, Bismarck; Curtis Miller, Tioga; Marvin Neumiller, Washburn; Craig Roe, Kindred; Douglas Sommerfeld, Lisbon; Tim Stiles, Fairmount; Cindie Van Tassel, Breckenridge, Minn.; and Paul Vasquez, Grand Forks.

**20 YEARS** – Mark Fisher, Devils Lake; Glen Hauf, Makoti; Jonathan Hughes, Minot; Morris Hummel, Coleharbor; Terry Kassian, Wilton; Keith Kinneberg, Wahpeton; Jacqueline Martin, Anamoose; Dale Patrick, Jamestown; Andrew Robinson, Minot; Thomas Rost, Devils Lake; Scott Thorson, Towner; and Matthew Veith, Bismarck.

**15 YEARS** – Mark Berg, Nortonville; Troy Enga, Berthold; Cassie Felber, Towner; Christopher Krenzel, Harvey; Andrew Majeres, Garrison; Phil Mastrangelo, Mandan; Dale Miller, Grandin; Michael Ness, Carrington; Mike Redmond, Ray; and Dustin Roeder, Menoken.

**10 YEARS** – Troy Anderson, Dickinson; Michael Bahm, Mandan; Craig Blomster, Leeds; Jamey Boutilier, Zap; Jennifer Ekberg, Grand Forks; Jason Forster, Lidgerwood; William Harkness, Leeds; Connie Jorgenson, Devils Lake; Dennis Lakoduk, Minot; Krista Lundgren, Kulm; Bruce Nielsen, Valley City; Dean Rustad, Ray; Kori Schantz, Underwood; and Daniel Sem, Minot.

**5 YEARS** – John Arman, Bismarck; Austin Barnhart, Dickinson; Joel Bohm, Mohall; Kody Helland, Kathryn; Kolten Helland, Kathryn; Troy Jespersen, Grenora; Jayar Kindsvogel, Center; Kellen Latendresse, Minot; Jason Lura, Carrington; Jeff Myers, Ryder; David Randall, Minot; Brad Sage, Mandaree; Kevin Streitz, Minot; Arnold Tow, Tioga; Ryan Walker, Fargo; Adam Westphal, Starkweather; Jordan Yellowbird, Garrison; and Anna Walker, Williston.

## Cayla's Kitchen

Add some kick to your standard fish sandwich with the perfect mix of heat and crunch. Check out this installment of Cayla's Kitchen for a mouth-watering spicy pike sandwich recipe. Straight from the darkhouse spearfishing hole to the kitchen table, it's a dish you'll be sure to add to your repertoire next hardwater season. Find this easy wild game recipe and more at [gf.nd.gov/caylas-kitchen](http://gf.nd.gov/caylas-kitchen).



## Earth Day Patch Contest Winners

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department announced the winners of the 2024 Earth Day Patch Contest. Over 2,000 students from 100 schools entered this year's contest.



Winners in three age categories are Ella Haagenson, Leeds (K-4); Isla Anderson, St. Johns Academy, Jamestown (5-8); and Deegan Kierschemann, Barnes County North, Wimbledon (9-12). Haagenson's design was chosen as the overall winner and will be made into the 2024 Earth Day patch.

Youth and adults who participate in cleaning up public lands receive the 2024 patch to celebrate Earth Day and their service. Projects that qualify for the Earth Day patch include refuse pick-up on local, state or federal properties and landscaping on public property including planting trees, bushes and pollinator plants.

Groups participating in the service projects are encouraged to take the following precautions to ensure their safety: keep young people away from highways, lakes and rivers and only allow older participants to pick up broken glass or sharp objects.

Participants are asked to contact Sherry Niesar at 701-527-3714 or [sniesar@nd.gov](mailto:sniesar@nd.gov) to receive a patch.

## STAFF NOTES



Russ Kinzler, left, and Brian Blackwell, president of the Dakota Chapter of the American Fisheries Society.

## Kinzler Garners Fisheries Society Honor

Russ Kinzler, Game and Fish Department fisheries supervisor in Riverdale, was awarded the Distinguished Professional Service Award for the Dakota Chapter of the American Fisheries Society.

Kinzler was promoted to Missouri River System supervisor in 2023. The Missouri River System is vitally important to the overall fishing resources of the state and his position requires a tremendous variety of knowledge and skills to ensure the resources are properly managed and the angling public is well informed.

"Russ has been a tremendous asset to the fisheries division and fisheries resources of North Dakota over the last 30-plus years," according to the nomination letter. "His skills and personal qualities make him an exceptional supervisor, biologist and top-notch employee ... to better the North Dakota Game and Fish Department and fisheries of North Dakota for the benefit of anglers and the resource."





Brett Wiedmann, left, receives his award.

## Wiedmann Honored for Bighorn Sheep Work

Brett Wiedmann, North Dakota Game and Fish Department big game biologist, received the inaugural Roosevelt American Spirt Conservation Award at the Midwest Chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation banquet in March.

“The Midwest Chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation recognizes and commends your courage, dedication, optimism, honor, and compassion for significant scientific contributions to the preservation of North America’s wild sheep and individual commitment to ensure the health and welfare of wild sheep and wildlife conservation,” according to chapter leaders.

The partnership between the Game and Fish Department and Midwest Chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation has been a conservation success story. North Dakota’s bighorn sheep population has nearly tripled since partnership began in 1999. Chapter leaders contended that this is in large part due to Wiedmann’s management-focused research and strategic out-of-state translocations.



## Wellman Hired in Williston

Stephanie Wellman was hired earlier this spring as the Game and Fish Department’s administrative assistant in Williston.

Wellman worked for the city of Williston for eight years before the transition.



## Bluem Earns CRBP Certification

Jerad Bluem, Game and Fish Department district game warden, passed the Certified Recreational Boating Professional exam earlier this spring.

The CRBP certification, developed by the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators, is a voluntary credential for recreational boating professionals. It encompasses knowledge, performance, and career achievements in specific program domains.

Bluem also holds a NASBLA certification in the Level I Comprehensive Boating Incident Investigation Course and is a graduate of NASBLA’s 2023 Recreational Boating Safety Leadership Academy, showcasing his commitment to professional development and leadership in the field. As a member of the NASBLA Enforcement and Training Committee, Bluem’s leadership extends to the oversight of the engine cut-off switch charge.

## Big Game Biologist Named



Ben Matykiewicz was named big game management biologist for the Game and Fish Department in Bismarck earlier this spring.

Matykiewicz completed his bachelor’s degree at Bemidji State University and master’s degree at Kansas State University. He

was working for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources prior to his move.

## Parvey Joins Agency in Devils Lake



Matthew Parvey was selected to fill a private land biologist position for the Game and Fish Department’s in Devils Lake.

Parvey attended Dakota College at Bottineau and Valley City State University, earning degrees in wildlife management and wildlife and fisheries science. He worked for Ducks Unlimited in Devils Lake before joining the Game and Fish Department.







# BACKCAST

By Ron Wilson

I park off the side of the gravel road with the vehicle's front tires in Montana and the back tires in North Dakota. My location, where the two states shoulder up against one another somewhere in southwestern Bowman County, is marked by a metal sign ventilated by bullet holes and bleeding rust.

Sage grouse in this part of the world have ignored boundaries forever and I'm doing the same this early April morning. With four coworkers hidden in three photo blinds on the North Dakota side of things, the straw I draw sends me here, mentally flipping a coin to decide which direction to head.

My hope, like my coworkers, is to witness something that's been playing out for eons, before established borders, gravel roads and barbed wire fences. We want to witness one of the grandest mating displays in nature, or at least in this neck of the woods, where the big male sage grouse, some weighing in at 7 pounds, puff up their chests, raise tail feathers into spiky fans, ruffle wings and bob to impress the opposite sex.

Our aim, to photograph, record video or simply view through binoculars these birds during their spring routine, has taken on a bit of urgency as the sage grouse population in North Dakota has for years been heading in the wrong direction. With just two active leks remaining in the state, and little evidence suggesting a comeback, that you-should-have-been-here-yesterday vibe has sort of set in.

It's 30 degrees, sunrise isn't for a half hour, but I can already make out the dozen or so pronghorn standing in the sagebrush flat on the Montana side eyeing me,

wondering what's slowly walking in their direction.

From what I've read, on those spring mornings when the wind is down, you can hear male sage grouse up to nearly a mile before you see them. The sound they make is sort of a liquid "plopping" — an odd noise in this arid country that looks to be a long time between drinks — emitted by their air sacs.

Unfortunately, a south wind blowing at my back makes it difficult to hear much of anything at a distance. So, I walk, glass the sagebrush flat that seemingly stretches to the horizon and walk some more.

Not long after sunrise, between me and two pronghorn bucks I've been watching, I see something white moving through the vegetation.

"Got one," I text my coworkers sitting in blinds a 20-minute hike from here. There's little doubt what I'm looking at through binoculars as the white feathers on the bird's neck and puffed-up chest pop in the day's new sun, rendering my find unarguable.

Every time the grouse turns and points his spiky, fanned tail feathers in my direction, I hike and cut the distance between us. Finally, at maybe 50 yards, I can make out the "plopping" sound that I've long wanted to hear. Through binoculars at this range, it appears as if the bird is dancing at my feet, strutting just for me.

And, in a sense, it is because the big male, driven by photoperiod and the instinctive need to mate, to help perpetuate this centuries-driven ritual, sadly has the entire dance floor to himself.

---

*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*



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Bismarck, ND 58501

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*This mink eating a duck outside its den was photographed in Kidder County earlier this spring. Mink are generally solitary and unsociable except during the breeding season. In North Dakota, this member of the weasel family will breed from January to March. Generally, four to six blind and nearly naked young are born in April or May in a den. The mink family, tended by the female only, stays together until late summer or fall when the young disperse to find areas of their own. Some young have moved up to 20 miles from the areas where they were born.*

PHOTO BY ASHELY PETERSON.

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