

NORTH DAKOTA STATE REPORT

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Spring Turkey

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is offering 7,647 wild turkey licenses for the 2022 spring hunting season, 635 more than last year.

Ten of the 22 hunting units have more spring licenses than last year, one has fewer licenses and 10 remain the same.

One noteworthy change from last year is handguns are no longer a legal firearm. Only shotguns, including muzzleloading shotguns, no larger than 10 gauge are legal.

Earth Day Contest

The Earth Day Patch Contest is step one in bringing awareness and develop consciousness about the environmental conditions of our planet and North Dakota. Students who participate will develop a patch design using five colors to incorporate some aspect of Earth Day including environmental awareness, respect for Earth, water quality, wildlife or habitat conservation in North Dakota.

The contest is open to students in grades K-12. Winners are chosen from three grade categories (K-4, 5-8 and 9-12). Each winner will receive an outdoor kit, which includes a pair of binoculars and field guides. The grand prize patch design winner is chosen from one of the three winning age categories. In addition, the grand prize winner will have their design displayed on the year's recognition patch, be featured in *North Dakota OUTDOORS* and on the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website.

Midwinter Waterfowl Survey

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual midwinter waterfowl survey in early January indicated about 81,000 Canada geese in the state.

Andy Dinges, Department migratory game bird biologist, said that number likely would have been higher, but snow and bitterly cold weather in late December undoubtedly pushed some birds south just prior to the survey.

During the survey, an estimated 55,000 Canada geese were observed on the Missouri River, and another 21,100 on Nelson Lake in Oliver County. Dinges said after summarizing the numbers, an additional 7,000 mallards were tallied statewide, most of which were recorded on Nelson Lake. Lake Sakakawea officially froze over just a few days before the survey this year.

The 10-year average (2012-21) for the midwinter survey in North Dakota is 123,100 Canada geese and 24,700 mallards.

Game and Fish Violations

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's enforcement division tallied the number of hunting, angling and boating citations for 2021, and failure to carry a license was the number one violation.

Game wardens issued more than 2,600 citations last year. Counties with the most violations were Ramsey (399), Williams (132) and Benson (125).

The most common violations and number issued were:

- Boating (846): inadequate number of personal flotation devices (247); failure to display boat registration (92); and use of unlicensed/unnumbered boat (63).
- Licensing (493): failure to carry license (256) and hunting/fishing/trapping without proper license (213).
- Fishing (406): aquatic nuisance species violations (137) and exceeding limit (81).
- Small game (243): using shotgun capable of holding more than three shells (70) and failure to leave identification of game (62).
- General (209): hunting on posted land without permission (58); use of motor vehicle off established trail (55); and loaded firearm in vehicle (48).
- Miscellaneous (182): criminal trespass (71); minor in possession (30); and possession of a controlled substance (30).
- Big game (170): CWD violations (20); tagging violations (18); and failure to wear fluorescent orange (17).
- Wildlife management areas/refuge (82): Failure to obey posted regulations (50).
- Furbearer (18): Shining (using artificial light) (7).

While wardens issued more than 2,600 citations in 2021, that number hardly compares to the number of people contacted by wardens and no citations were issued. These license checks, boating safety inspections, public safety calls, wildlife issues, the list goes on, are as important as the number of citations issued.

In total, game wardens made 51,100 field contacts in 2021. This number does not include public contacts at sport shows, state fair, local wildlife club meetings, school programs, hunter safety classes, and other community events.

CWD Test Results

With most chronic wasting disease testing completed, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department reports 26 deer tested positive during the 2021 hunting season.

Fourteen were from hunting unit 3F2, eight from unit 3A1, and one was found in unit 3B1. Single positive deer were also found in three units (3C, 3D1 and 3E2) where the disease had not been previously detected.

The estimated infection rates in unit 3F2 were 4.9% in mule deer and 3% in whitetail deer. In unit 3A1, the estimated infection rate in mule deer was 6.9%. Approximately 4.9% of hunters turned in heads for testing in units where the Department was focusing surveillance efforts.

Mountain Lion Zone 1

[Mountain lion hunting](#) during the late season in Zone 1 is closed immediately. The zone's late-season harvest limit of either seven total cats or three females was reached after the third female was taken.

A conditional season in Zone 1 will open March 6 for hunters to pursue the additional seven mountain lions that were not taken during the early season. The Zone 1 early season harvest limit was eight cats, and only one was taken.

Paddlefish Snagging Season to Close

Effective Sunday, May 8, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department has closed the state's 2022 paddlefish snagging season to any additional harvest to provide long-term protection of the paddlefish population. The season opened May 1.

An additional seven-day snag-and-release season will begin Monday, May 9 and run through Sunday, May 15. Paddlefish snaggers with an unused paddlefish tag can continue snagging during the additional snag-and-release season but must release all fish immediately. If a snagger has already used their tag on a harvested paddlefish, they are not allowed to participate in the additional snag-and-release period.

Agencies Address Lake Levels

Based on all the necessary ingredients needed to provide essential water levels for lakes Sakakawea and Oahe in 2022, the forecast to do just that doesn't look promising at this time.

“Given current water levels and projected runoff based on mountain snowpack, its likely both lakes Sakakawea and Oahe will be 5-10 feet lower than the lake elevations experienced in 2021,” said Greg Power, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries chief. “At these forecasted elevations, boating access at many, if not most of the boat ramps, will become problematic. The good news is that work was done during previous droughts resulting in a network of low water ramps that may become functional this year if some issues, such as erosion and sedimentation, are first addressed.”

Understanding this, Game and Fish Department personnel teamed a few months ago in a planning effort for the upcoming open water recreational season on the Missouri River System with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, North Dakota Parks and Recreation and the North Dakota Department of Water Resources.

“Current interagency planning is intended to proactively deal with these boat ramp issues through addressing coordination, permitting and funding matters yet this winter so that ramp work, where needed, can begin shortly after ice-out,” Power said. “The corps and Game and Fish have identified and prioritized potential boat ramp sites that will be impacted by the lower lake

levels and are seeking additional funding and partnership with stakeholders who manage the respective recreational sites. By mid-March, various agency staff will reconvene and firm up plans based on funding needs and availability, using the most recent corps runoff forecast data.”

Power said current mountain snowpack for the upper Missouri River basin is only around 80% of normal, but one storm can change things.

“Of course, this is Mother Nature driven and subject to change,” Power said.

Nonresident Any-Deer Bow Licenses

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department will have 810 any-deer bow licenses available to nonresidents in 2022.

Up to five hunters can apply together as a party. A lottery will be held if more applications are received than licenses available. A total of 1,767 people applied in 2021.

The number of nonresident any-deer bow licenses available is 15% of the previous year’s mule deer gun license allocation.

Avian Influenza

Animal health officials with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department and North Dakota Department of Agriculture are monitoring a national outbreak of a foreign strain of highly pathogenic avian influenza detected in a number of central and eastern states since December.

The virus can cause high levels of sickness and death in domestic poultry but has also been attributed to a number of cases in free ranging waterfowl, shorebirds and raptors. Cases of HPAI may be detected in North Dakota as waterfowl migrate into the state and may persist into spring.

Avian influenza viruses rarely infect people, but hunters should consider precautions to limit exposure. These include avoiding handling sick animals, wearing gloves when dressing game, washing hands and equipment thoroughly, and cooking meat to an internal temperature of 165 degrees.

The Game and Fish Department asks the public’s help in monitoring the [outbreak in wild birds](#). Report any sick or dead birds through the online form gf.nd.gov/mortality-report.

The Department of Agriculture encourages poultry owners to use biosecurity measures such as: keeping visitors to a minimum, washing hands before and after contact with live poultry, changing clothes before and after exiting their property, and looking for signs of illness. Report sick domestic birds to U.S. Department of Agriculture (1-866-536-7593).

Record Count of Bighorn Sheep

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department’s 2021 bighorn sheep survey, completed by recounting lambs in March, revealed a record 335 bighorn sheep in western North Dakota, up

4% from 2020 and 15% above the five-year average. The count surpassed the previous record of 322 bighorns in 2020.

Altogether, biologists counted 99 rams, 175 ewes and 61 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.

Big game biologist Brett Wiedmann was pleased to see an increase in the survey for the fourth consecutive year.

The northern badlands population increased 6% from 2020 and was the highest count on record. The southern badlands population declined again to the lowest level since bighorns were reintroduced there in 1966.

“We were encouraged to see the count of adult rams increase to near record levels, and adult ewes were at record numbers,” Wiedmann said. “Most encouraging was a record lamb count corresponding with a record recruitment rate.”

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.

Department staff, in conjunction with biologists from the Three Affiliated Tribes Fish and Wildlife Division, also reported the bighorn sheep translocated in January 2020 from Rocky Boy’s Reservation in Montana to the Fort Berthold Reservation performed exceptionally well their second year in the state. The population has nearly doubled in just two years, which is exceptional population performance for bighorn sheep.

There are currently almost 450 bighorn sheep among populations managed by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, the National Park Service and the Three Affiliated Tribes Fish and Wildlife Division. Wiedmann said the next benchmark is 500 bighorns in the state, which seemed improbable just a few years ago.

Dr. Charlie Bahnson, Game and Fish veterinarian, added that although the Department was pleased to see a low prevalence rate of *Mycoplasma* during last winter’s disease monitoring of bighorn sheep, biologists did observe several bighorns coughing during the 2021 survey, which indicates the population has not completely cleared the deadly pathogen first documented in 2014.

2021 Deer Season Statistics

A total of 57,086 North Dakota deer hunters took approximately 32,793 deer during the 2021 deer gun hunting season, according to a post-season survey conducted by the state Game and Fish Department.

Game and Fish made available 72,200 deer gun licenses last year. Overall hunter success was 57%, with each hunter spending an average of 4.5 days in the field.

Hunter success for antlered white-tailed deer was 40%, and antlerless whitetail was 48%.

Mule deer buck success was 72%, and antlerless mule deer was 80%.

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 63%, while doe hunters had a success rate of 57%.

Game and Fish issued 12,113 gratis licenses in 2021, and 9,311 hunters harvested 4,713 deer, for a success rate of 51%.

A total of 1,336 muzzleloader licenses were issued, and 1,049 hunters harvested 492 white-tailed deer (258 antlered, 234 antlerless). Hunter success was 47%.

A total of 29,762 archery licenses (26,251 resident, 3,511 nonresident) were issued in 2021. In total, 23,466 bowhunters harvested 7,251 deer (6,144 whitetails, 1,107 mule deer), for a success rate of 31%.

ANS Awareness Week

Governor Doug Burgum declared [May 15-21 Aquatic Nuisance Species Awareness week](#) in North Dakota to raise the public's understanding of the preventative steps recreationists need to follow to stop the introduction and spread of aquatic nuisance species in the state's waterways.

Knowing the fallout of aquatic nuisance species, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department has long steered communication efforts that focus on the dangers of unwanted exotics once established.

“Aquatic nuisance species are nonnative plants, animals or pathogens that can affect the ecology of our lakes and rivers and can affect the economic and recreational value of those waterways,” said Ben Holen, ANS coordinator in Jamestown. “Aquatic nuisance species can really change the ecology of a lake and upset the food web and can be very hard on recreation.”

North Dakota currently has low numbers of aquatic nuisance species. Other than zebra mussels, just a few invasive plants and animals – curly leaf pondweed, Eurasian watermilfoil, flowering rush, and grass, bighead, silver and common carp – are found in some state waters.

To fight the introduction and spread of unwanted invasives, Holen said some of the shared burden falls on water users. The Game and Fish Department encourages anglers, pleasure boaters and others to clean, drain and dry all equipment after every use. Clean and remove all plants or animals from watercraft or equipment prior to leaving any recreational area. Drain and remove water from all equipment prior to exiting designated access points. Not draining water can be extremely hazardous and may cause negligent transportation of ANS to various locations. Afterwards, verify that all equipment is completely dry before using again.