

**NORTH DAKOTA
STATE REPORT**
June 2023

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Midwinter Waterfowl Survey

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual midwinter waterfowl survey in early January indicated about 29,000 Canada geese in the state.

A low count was expected this year for wintering waterfowl given the substantial snowfall and cold temperatures in November and December leading up to the Survey.

During the survey, an estimated 24,400 Canada geese were observed on the Missouri River, and another 4,400 on Nelson Lake in Oliver County. Dinges said after summarizing the numbers, an additional 5,900 mallards were tallied statewide, most of which were recorded on Nelson Lake.

The 10-year average (2013-22) for the midwinter survey in North Dakota is 122,200 Canada geese and 16,500 mallards.

Mobile App

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department developed a [new mobile app](#) that allows outdoor enthusiasts instant access in the field to their licenses, hunting and fishing regulations and other important information.

To download the app, go to Google Play Store or Apple App Store and search NDGF or North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

If users have multiple hunters and anglers in their household, they can add those profiles to the phone or other mobile device as well.

There are other valuable features on the mobile app that will certainly benefit outdoor users, including sunrise, sunset times and some weather forecast information; view or download guides, regulations, proclamations and maps; a buy and apply section, offering quick access to apply in Game and Fish lotteries, purchase licenses and register watercraft; the list goes on.

And like many mobile apps, it uses your location services to bring information back to the user, such as hunting units based on your location or contact information for the game warden in the area.

CWD Test Results

With most chronic wasting disease testing completed, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department reported 24 deer from the 2022 hunting season tested positive.

Eight deer were from hunting unit 3F2; eight from unit 3A1; two from unit 4B; and one from units 3B1 and 3E2. Single positive deer were also found in four new units – 3A3, 3E1, 3F1 and 4F – where the disease had not been previously detected.

Wildlife division chief Casey Anderson said the department is encouraged the number of cases was on par with results from the 2021 hunting season when 26 cases were found.

“While we certainly wish the number was zero, this stable trend is a good thing and supports our current management approach,” he said.

The 2022 results come while the state legislature considers a bill that would strip the Game and Fish Department’s ability to restrict baiting as a means to combat CWD.

CWD forces Game and Fish to make tough decisions that leave some folks unhappy, Anderson said.

“That said, the department is charged with protecting the health of the deer herd for current and future use,” he said. “It’d be irresponsible of us to ignore the serious threat CWD poses, and we hope to have every tool available to do our job. Unfortunately, with CWD, we don’t get a redo.”

Confirmed cases included 22 hunter harvested mule deer; one harvested white-tailed deer; and one mule deer hit by a vehicle. The estimated infection rates among mule deer were 4.9% in unit 3F2 and 9.8% in unit 3A1. Only 4.4% of hunters submitted heads for testing in units where the department focused its surveillance efforts.

Record Count of Bighorn Sheep

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department’s 2022 bighorn sheep survey, completed by recounting lambs in March, revealed a record 347 bighorn sheep in the grasslands of western North Dakota, up 4% from 2021 and 15% above the five-year average. The count surpassed the previous record of 335 bighorns in 2021.

Altogether, biologists counted 96 rams, 206 ewes and 45 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.

There are currently about 470 bighorn sheep in the populations managed by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 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.

2022 Deer Season Statistics

A total of 47,590 North Dakota deer hunters took approximately 25,093 deer during the 2022 deer gun hunting season, according to a post-season survey conducted by the state Game and Fish Department.

Game and Fish made available 64,200 deer gun licenses last year. Overall hunter success was 53%, with each hunter spending an average of 4.4 days in the field.

“The lower success was due, in part, to deteriorating weather conditions during the beginning of the season,” said Casey Anderson, wildlife chief for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. “We were met with high winds immediately followed by blizzard conditions, producing measurable snow amounts and below normal temperatures for most of the season.”

Tough Winter

A winter that started in early November and hung around until April like an unwanted guest tested the endurance of wildlife and landowners, both fixtures on the landscape familiar with unpredictable North Dakota weather.

“North Dakota has one of the toughest climates in the lower 48 and this winter was certainly one of the most difficult we’ve seen,” said Bill Haase, state Game and Fish Department assistant wildlife division chief. “Winter was difficult on wildlife and people, and we appreciate all those landowners out there, especially livestock producers who had the tolerance and compassion to deal with the impacts from deer and other animals.”

By early April, the Game and Fish Department had fielded nearly 250 depredation reports statewide for just white-tailed deer. More than 100 of those calls landed in the Jamestown office for deer alone.

Deer depredation was more notable in areas where wildlife habitat was lacking on the landscape. This was especially true in the eastern third of the state where food and cover is generally lacking, thus forcing deer herds to concentrate in isolated livestock operations.

“There are some landowners, livestock producers in particular with livestock feed supplies, who tend to have the most issues with deer and other wildlife being attracted to their locations,” Haase said. “We certainly heard from some and we have a lot of tools that we can help minimize these issues.”

There are short-term solutions that the department can provide producers with depredation issues, such as wrapping bales and motion sirens. And long-term solutions, like permanent hay yards, portable panels designed specifically to keep deer out of livestock feed supplies and food plots. The department provides hay yard materials at no cost and provides cost-share for construction. Currently, there are about 750 of these structures dotting North Dakota’s rural landscape.

While there is a need to help producers safeguard livestock feed supplies, there is also a demand for more wildlife habitat on the landscape.

“Going into winter, we probably had the poorest habitat conditions we’ve had in a long time in the state,” said Kevin Kading, department private land section leader. “There just isn’t much habitat in a lot of places, but we need to rebound somehow. We need habitat on the landscape.”

Going forward, Kading said, if a landowner is interested in developing habitat, there is a host of programs set up to do just that.

“There are more programs, money and funding available right now for habitat than ever before, really,” Kading said. “And it’s not just through the Game and Fish Department. It’s through USDA, partners and other conservation groups. The Game and Fish Department can be a good source to start with. We can certainly walk landowners through all of these different options and point them in the right direction.”

While wildlife habitat is one of the aspects that can help alleviate depredation issues, so is hunting access. Kading said the Department’s Private Land Open To Sportsmen program is a remedy for both of those by providing habitat for wildlife to rebound and providing access opportunities for hunters. To further encourage hunter access, Kading also suggests landowners enrolling in the hunter-landowner contact program and posting Ask Before You Enter signs on their property.

“Our private land staff is well versed in different programs and partner programs that are out there. The simplest and quickest thing we can do is put grass on the ground. It’s quick to establish, and it creates quality fawning and nesting cover,” Kading said. “There are a lot of [different opportunities for landowners](#) that our staff can help with to put grass on the ground.”

ANS Awareness Week

May 14-20 is Aquatic Nuisance Species Awareness Week in North Dakota in an effort to raise the public’s understanding of the preventative steps recreationists need to follow to stop the introduction and spread of ANS in the state’s waterways.

ANS are nonnative plants, animals or pathogens that can affect the ecology of our lakes and rivers and the economic and recreational value of those waterways.

State Game and Fish Department ANS coordinator Ben Holen said ANS awareness week is comprised of state and federal agencies highlighting the ongoing efforts taking place in North Dakota.

“Many partners are taking a collaborative approach by reaching water recreationists, cabin owners, pet owners and water users about stopping the spread of aquatic nuisance species into our state’s lakes and rivers,” Holen said. “We’ve definitely seen an increase in awareness over the past decade.”

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.

Deer Season Set

North Dakota's 2023 deer season is set, with 53,400 licenses available to hunters, down 10,800 from last year. In addition, muzzleloader licenses decreased by 146 and restricted youth antlered mule deer licenses by 145.

North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief Casey Anderson said population, harvest and survey data indicate the state's deer population is decreasing, with the eastern most hunting units suffering the biggest loss.

"The severity of winter conditions this year was record setting, particularly in the eastern half of the state," Anderson said. "Consequently, there will be fewer deer licenses allocated in 2023; the lowest number of licenses available since 2016. Conservative license allocations are intended to maintain hunting opportunities while continuing to encourage population growth."

High quality deer habitat is not as abundant as in the past, Anderson said, which has limited the potential for population recovery following the severe winter conditions the state just experienced. For example, deer-gun harvest densities in the Red River Valley are down about 90% from what was harvested in 2005. This, he said, is due in part to those hunting units having lost more than approximately 70% of CRP grass cover and other key habitat features.

"If CRP contracts continue to expire, by 2026, 85% of the once 3.4 million acres that were present in 2007 will be lost," Anderson added. "Habitat does not have to be CRP but needs to fulfill winter and fawning habitat needs in particular for numbers to bounce back effectively."

The recently completed mule deer survey showed western North Dakota's mule deer population is 29% lower than last year.

New Legislation

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department tracked 20 outdoors-related bills during the 2023 legislative session, 12 passed both chambers and signed into law.

HB 1014 – Provides an appropriation for defraying the expenses of the industrial commission and agencies under its control. This includes Outdoor Heritage Fund at \$15 million.

HB 1134 – Nonresident current North Dakota national guard members are eligible to receive resident licenses, except lottery permits.

HB 1224 – Allows a dog handler to carry a handgun in the recovery of a big game animal while in the presence of a dog. The dog handler cannot use the handgun to assist in the recovery of the animal.

HB 1233 – Allows a 11-, 12- and 13-year-old antlerless white-tailed deer youth hunter to also hunt during the regular deer gun season.

HB 1260 – Develops agreements to compensate private landowners for the development of habitat on private property for addressing fish and wildlife populations. In addition, allows the Game and Fish director to issue special antlerless elk depredation management licenses to landowners upon payment of the fee required for a resident big game license. To be eligible for this license, a landowner cannot charge a fee for elk hunting and must allow reasonable public access as determined by the director.

HB 1366 – Allows an individual engaged in barefoot skiing or surfing to wear a wet suit. A life preserver must be on board the towing vessel for an individual barefoot skiing or surfing.

HB 1409 – A nonresident youth who is less than 16 years of age may purchase a resident general game hunting license and may hunt small game and waterfowl, except swans and wild turkeys, during the entire regular small game and waterfowl seasons. The accompanying adult family member or legal guardian does not have to be licensed.

HB 1538 – Relates to fishing. Establishes an application fee of \$75 for all tournaments, a conservation fee of an amount to be determined between the tournament sponsor and a representative of the fishing tournament (except for nonprofits), post contest reporting requirements, Game and Fish establishes a fishery conservation fund, and a surcharge of \$5 on each nonresident fishing license. Effective April 1, 2024.

SB 2017 – Establishes an appropriation of \$107,611,466 to the Game and Fish Department for the biennium beginning July 1, 2023, and ending June 30, 2025.

SB 2097 – Requires a political subdivision to notify the Game and Fish director, among others, before engaging in meetings with federal agencies to have any water body in the state designated a wild, scenic or recreational river under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

SB 2297 – Certified game and fish volunteer instructors who have maintained active status in the state for 30 years are eligible to receive complimentary fishing and certain hunting licenses. Emergency clause carried; effective immediately.

SB 2382 – Provides clarity to the motorboat numbering exemptions section of the North Dakota Century Code.