

**NORTH DAKOTA  
STATE REPORT**  
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**2015 Deer Season Set**

North Dakota's 2015 deer season is set, with 43,275 licenses available to hunters this fall, 4,725 fewer than last year, and the lowest number since 1978.

Jeb Williams, wildlife chief for the State Game and Fish Department, said deer populations remain well below management objectives in most units, and continuing a conservative management approach is needed to help with recovery efforts.

Any-antlerless (down 2,650 from last year) and any-antlered (down 1,150) licenses make up the majority of the reduction, while antlerless whitetail (down 800) and antlered whitetail (down 650) account for the remainder.

On a positive note, Williams said the mule deer population in the badlands increased for the third consecutive year, with numbers showing the spring mule deer index is up 24 percent from last year.

However, as was the case the past four years, there are no antlerless mule deer licenses available in units 3B1, 3B2, 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, 4E and 4F. This applies to regular gun, resident and nonresident any-deer bow, gratis and youth licenses.

The number of licenses available for 2015 includes 1,875 for antlered mule deer, an increase of 525 from last year; 828 for muzzleloader, down 104 from last year; and 187 restricted youth antlered mule deer, an increase of 53 from last year.

North Dakota's 2015 deer gun season opens Nov. 6 at noon and continues through Nov. 22. State law requires residents age 18 or older to prove residency on the application by submitting a valid North Dakota driver's license number or a North Dakota nondriver photo identification number. Applications cannot be processed without this information.

Gratis applications received on or before the regular deer gun lottery application deadline ) will be issued an any-legal-deer license. As per state law, applications received after the deadline will be issued based on licenses remaining after the lottery – generally only antlerless licenses remain.

Total deer licenses are determined by harvest rates, aerial surveys, depredation reports, hunter observations, input at advisory board meetings, and comments from the public,

landowners and department field staff.

### **Two Deer Positive for CWD**

Two mule deer taken during the 2014 deer gun season from unit 3F2 in southwestern North Dakota have tested positive for chronic wasting disease, according to Dr. Dan Grove, wildlife veterinarian for the State Game and Fish Department.

The total now stands at seven deer to test positive for CWD since 2009, and all were from the same general area within unit 3F2.

“This isn’t surprising, and the number of positives coming out of the area remains low,” Grove said, while mentioning both hunters were notified of the positive results.

In addition to unit 3F2, samples for CWD testing were taken last fall from deer harvested by hunters in the central third of the state, and from any moose or elk taken during the hunting season. In all, more than 1,200 samples were tested.

Since the Game and Fish Department’s sampling efforts began in 2002, more than 25,000 deer, elk and moose have tested negative for CWD.

The hunter-harvested surveillance program annually collects samples taken from hunter-harvested deer in specific regions of the state. In 2015, deer will be tested from the western third of the state.

The Game and Fish Department also has a targeted surveillance program that is an ongoing, year-round effort to test animals found dead or sick.

CWD affects the nervous system of members of the deer family and is always fatal. Scientists have found no evidence that CWD can be transmitted naturally to humans or livestock.

### **2014 Deer Gun Season Stats**

A total of 43,500 North Dakota deer hunters took approximately 26,300 deer during the 2014 deer gun hunting season.

The State Game and Fish Department made available 48,000 deer gun licenses in 2014, and all licenses were issued. Overall hunter success was 60 percent, with each hunter spending an average of 4.4 days in the field.

Hunter success for antlered white-tailed deer was 60 percent, and antlerless whitetail was 56 percent.

Mule deer buck success was 82 percent. No mule deer doe licenses were issued in 2014.

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 65 percent, while doe hunters had a success rate of 63 percent.

A total of 932 muzzleloader licenses were issued in 2014, and 814 hunters harvested 356 white-tailed deer (171 antlered, 185 antlerless). Hunter success was 44 percent, with each hunter spending an average of 5.4 days in the field.

In addition, a record 23,450 archery licenses (21,500 resident, 1,950 nonresident) were issued in 2014. All total, 19,918 bow hunters harvested 6,046 deer (5,593 whitetails, 453 mule deer), for a success rate of 30 percent. Bucks accounted for 78 percent of the harvest. Archers spent an average of 10.7 days afield.

The department is in the process of determining recommendations for licenses in the 2015 deer proclamation. These recommendations will be discussed at the upcoming spring Game and Fish public advisory board meetings, scheduled for March 30-31 and April 6-7. The proclamation will be sent to the governor's office for approval in late April.

In addition to harvest rates and winter aerial surveys, the department monitors a number of other population indices to determine license numbers, depredation reports, hunter observations, input at advisory board meetings, and comments from the public, landowners and department field staff.

### **Sage Grouse**

Results from North Dakota's spring sage grouse survey indicate the number of strutting males observed remains well below management objectives. Therefore, the sage grouse hunting season will remain closed in 2015.

Aaron Robinson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department upland game bird biologist, said biologists counted a record low 30 males on six active strutting grounds. Last year, 31 males were counted on the same leks in the southwest.

Sage grouse are a long-lived species with low reproductive output, which makes population recovery slow. Currently, Robinson said, natural reproduction cannot keep up with natural mortality, and the densities of active leks may be limiting hens from finding males to breed.

"It might be that our last chance to increase the genetic diversity of our population is if another state is willing to provide some birds for a translocation, but the success of such a project is not guaranteed either," Robinson said.

However, Robinson said the potential for a successful nesting season is good this year due to abundant residual grass cover brought about by last summer's rainfall. "The outlook for a favorable hatch this year looks optimistic for the limited number of birds we have in the state," he added.

Sage grouse management in North Dakota follows a specific plan developed by a diverse group of participants. With the threats facing the species and the decline in population, Game and Fish Department biologists do not foresee a hunting season in the near future.

Sage grouse are North Dakota's largest native upland game bird. They are found in extreme southwestern North Dakota, primarily in Bowman and Slope counties.

### **Missouri River Tagging Study**

Year two of a four-year walleye tagging study on the Missouri River and Lake Oahe is complete, and returns are providing biologists with valuable information.

Paul Bailey, North Dakota Game and Fish Department south central district fisheries supervisor, said nearly 17,000 fish were tagged in 2013 and 2014, the first two years of the study, and more than 3,000 tag numbers were turned in by anglers.

"The study is designed to assess walleye movements, mortality and what proportion of the walleye population is harvested annually by anglers," Bailey said.

The study area extends from the Garrison Dam in central North Dakota downstream to Oahe Dam in South Dakota, and involves a major collaboration of biologists and researchers from North Dakota Game and Fish, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, and South Dakota State University.

The study targets adult walleye, each fitted with a metal jaw tag stamped with a unique number to identify the fish, and a phone number to report the tag. Anglers can either keep or release the fish. Anglers practicing catch-and-release can write the tag number down and report it, leaving the tag on the fish when released.

Bailey said the first two years of the study revealed some interesting movement patterns. "For example, over half of the tagged walleye that were reported by anglers were caught within 10 miles of where they were tagged and released," he added. "However, fish tagged in North Dakota moved greater distances than those tagged farther downstream, and North Dakota fish moved both upstream and downstream after tagging."

Most of the returns in both 2013 and 2014 were from May, June and July, and Bailey said when the bite slowed in August, so did the returns.

Anglers can report tags by calling the phone number found on tags, which, anglers should note, is a South Dakota phone number. Tag information can also be reported on the Game and Fish Department's website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov), or by calling 701-328-6300.

Anglers should record the date and location of the catch, whether the fish was kept or released, tag number and length and weight (if the fish was measured). Anglers who report tagged fish can keep the tag, and will receive a letter providing some history on the fish.

A small portion of the tags offer a reward to anglers to encourage returns, Bailey said, with these tags clearly marked “Reward.”

Reward tags must be physically turned in to Game and Fish offices in Riverdale or Bismarck, or to a Game, Fish and Parks office in South Dakota.

### **New Legislation**

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department tracked 23 outdoors-related bills during the 2015 legislative session, 12 of which were passed by both chambers and signed into law. The following bills take effect this year, unless otherwise noted.

House Bill 1081 – Makes available to the Outdoor Adventure Foundation up to two spring turkey, one any-elk, one any-moose, seven deer and two pronghorn licenses for youth who have been diagnosed with cancer or a life-threatening illness. In addition, provides for a study, during the 2015-16 interim, of North Dakota Game and Fish Department licenses provided to entities for the purpose of fundraising.

HB 1156 – Beginning in 2016, allows an unsuccessful applicant in the deer gun lottery to donate the refund to the Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open to Sportsmen program.

HB 1158 – Effective April 1, 2016, county auditors will no longer be responsible for allocating and tracking hunting and fishing license sales within their respective counties. That responsibility will become the Game and Fish Department's. A county auditor upon request, may continue to sell hunting and fishing licenses.

HB 1197 – Prohibits a government agency from providing funds to a nonprofit organization for the purpose of holding any interest in real property or an easement for wildlife or conservation purposes. However, does not apply to a state government agency in partnership with a nonprofit organization if the state agency also benefits.

HB 1241 – Makes a short-barreled rifle legal for hunting.

HB 1356 – This bill clarifies Century Code language pertaining to wildlife depredation. Allows the Game and Fish Director to authorize individual landowners to carry out certain hazing practices to help alleviate or prevent wildlife depredation to livestock forage supplies.

HB 1381 – Prohibits a drone from being used to intentionally harass hunters and anglers.

HB 1409 – Provides direction on finances provided through the Outdoor Heritage Fund, with \$20 million available in a fiscal year and \$40 million for the biennium.

HB 1456 – Encourages Congress to pass federal legislation to return uplands of the Oahe Reservoir in Emmons and Morton counties above 1,620 feet mean sea level to the state of North Dakota.

Senate Bill 2017 – Appropriates \$77,231,739 to the Game and Fish Department for the 2015-17 biennium. In addition, provides for one elk license available for raffle to Annie’s House at Bottineau Winter Park.

SB 2077 – Regulates criminal history record checks for Game and Fish volunteers and final applicants for employment.

SB 2093 – Guide and outfitter licenses expire March 31 if issued after March 31 of the previous year.

### **Pronghorn Hunters in 2014**

Hunter success during last fall’s limited pronghorn hunting season was 89 percent, according to statistics provided by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

The first open season since 2009 was held only in unit 4-A, the far southwestern corner of the state. Game and Fish issued 249 licenses, and 235 hunters took 210 pronghorn, consisting of 199 bucks, five does and six fawns.

Hunters who received a lottery or gratis pronghorn license could participate in an early bow-only portion of the season, and in a later part of the season when legal firearms were allowed. Ten percent of the harvest occurred during the early bow-only part of the season, and 90 percent occurred during the 16.5 days when hunters could use firearms.

### **Moose, Elk, Sheep Stats**

Harvest statistics released by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department show overall hunter success during the 2014 season for bighorn sheep was 100 percent, 88 percent for moose and 67 percent for elk.

The department issued four bighorn sheep licenses and auctioned one. All five hunters harvested a bighorn ram.

The department issued 110 moose licenses last year. Of that total, 106 hunters harvested 93 animals – 82 bulls and 11 cows/calves. One additional license was raffled by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the hunter was successful in harvesting a moose.

The department issued 274 elk licenses last year. Of that total, 249 hunters harvested 166 elk – 97 bulls and 69 cows/calves. One additional license was raffled by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the hunter was successful in harvesting an elk.