

**NORTH DAKOTA  
STATE REPORT**  
*June 2024*

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**Midwinter Waterfowl Survey**

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual midwinter waterfowl survey in early January was a record breaker.

During the aerial midwinter survey, one of the longest running coordinated migratory bird surveys in North America, biologists counted more than 300,000 Canada geese, breaking the record of 222,000.

Compared to last year when winter came early and stayed late, there was a lot more open water along the Missouri River System to hold birds.

Interestingly, biologists counted more than 9,000 snow geese during the survey, while most years there are zero. Also biologists typically see 5,000 to 10,000 mallards, and this year the tally jumped to 43,000 birds.

**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, 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.

Wildlife division chief Casey Anderson said that despite lower harvest success, the department 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.

## **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.

"We were encouraged to see a record count of adult rams, and adult ewes and lambs were near record numbers," said big game biologist Brett 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."

There are currently about 490 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.

## **2023 Deer Season Statistics**

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.

The department 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%.

## **ANS Awareness Week**

May 5-11 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.

“The pathways of ANS introductions are vast, so it is important to relay ANS awareness across diverse platforms to reach many unique water users,” he said. “Raising awareness is a collaborative approach among partners and conscientious citizens.”

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.

### **Elk, Moose, Bighorn Sheep Seasons Set**

Elk, moose and bighorn sheep applications are available online at the North Dakota Game and Fish Department’s website, [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).

A total of 833 elk licenses are available to hunters this fall, an increase of 230 from last year.

Licenses in units E1E, E1W and E3 increased due to a stable to increasing elk population. Licenses in elk units E2, E4 and E6 remain the same as in 2023.

A total of 242 moose licenses are available, a decrease of 15 from last year.

Licenses in units M5, M6, M8 and M10 remain the same as the moose population appears to be stable with good hunter success in these units. Licenses in M9 and M11 are reduced slightly to align with the observed population in these units. Moose units M4 and M1C will remain closed due to a low moose population in these units.

A bighorn sheep hunting season is tentatively scheduled for 2024, depending on the sheep population. The status of the bighorn sheep season will be determined Sept. 1, after summer population surveys are completed.

## **Deer Season Set**

North Dakota's 2024 deer season is set, with 50,100 licenses available to hunters, down 3,300 from last year.

In addition, muzzleloader licenses decreased by 66 and restricted youth antlered mule deer licenses remained the same.

Casey Anderson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief, said population, harvest and survey data indicate the state's deer population is stable to decreasing in the southeastern part of the state.

"The 2023-24 winter was one of the mildest on record. However, fawn production was reduced following extreme winter conditions during 2022-23, which limited population growth despite reduced gun licenses during the 2023 hunting season," Anderson said. "Modest license allocations are intended to maintain hunting opportunities while encouraging population growth in the state."

High-quality deer habitat is not abundant, which has limited the potential for population recovery. If CRP contracts continue to expire, by 2026, Anderson said 85% of the once 3.4 million acres present in 2007 will be lost.

"Habitat does not have to be CRP but needs to fulfill winter and fawning habitat needs in particular for numbers to bounce back effectively," he said.

The spring mule deer survey showed western North Dakota's population is 1% higher than last year, following record low fawn production in 2023.

## **Spring Turkey Season Set**

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is offering 8,137 wild turkey licenses for the 2024 spring hunting season, 725 more than last year.

Thirteen of the 22 hunting units have more spring licenses than last year and eight remain the same. Unit 21 (Hettinger and Adams counties) is again closed due to lack of turkeys.

First-time spring turkey hunters 15 or younger are eligible to receive one spring license valid for any open unit. To be eligible, the youth hunter must be 15 or younger on opening day of spring turkey season and has never received a spring turkey license in North Dakota.

## **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 percent, 89 percent for moose and 71 percent 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.

The department issued 649 elk licenses last year. Of that total, 589 hunters harvested 418 elk – 190 bulls and 228 cows/calves.

### **Nonresident Any-Deer Bow Licenses**

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department will have 337 any-deer bow licenses available to nonresidents in 2024.

A lottery will be held if more applications are received than licenses available. A total of 2,124 people applied in 2023.

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

### **Walleye Tagging Studies**

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department will be conducting numerous tagging studies on walleye populations across the state over the next several years to gain a better understanding of how anglers are utilizing these fisheries.

This year, walleye tagging efforts will occur at Coal, Twin, Coe and West Napoleon lakes. These studies will provide information that will enable the Department fisheries managers to provide the best fisheries possible for the state's anglers to enjoy.

Anglers will play a vital role in these studies and are encouraged to report any tagged fish they encounter by logging in to their North Dakota Game and Fish Department account or using the "tagged fish reporting" feature on the Department's website [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).

### **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.

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 <https://gf.nd.gov/ans>.

### **Game and Fish Pays 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.