

2006

South Dakota



Fall 2006
South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks

Ringneck Outlook

Despite Drought, Pheasant Numbers Remain High

South Dakota's lingering drought had a minimal effect on the state's ringneck pheasant population. The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department's annual pheasant brood survey showed only a 6 percent drop in pheasant numbers one year after the population of birds in the state hit a 40-year high.

The effect weather might have on the pheasant population was a cause for concern all year. The first challenge was an early winter ice storm that coated most of East River South Dakota. After being teased with some spring rains, the state was plunged into a drought that shriveled cover and burned crops. Still, South Dakota's pheasants survived and proliferated at a rate that outpaced the 10-year average by 44 percent.

The state's pheasant population is measured on brood routes that sample specific areas where the birds exist in numbers large enough to be surveyed. These annual counts have traditionally been a reliable indicator of the overall pheasant population. GFP conducts the surveys on 110 30-mile routes throughout the state. The 2006 survey found that pheasant numbers were down slightly due to smaller brood sizes in some parts of the state. However, surveyors found 35 percent more roosters than were counted in the banner year of 2005.

* Statewide, 48 of the 110 brood routes showed an increase over 2005. When compared to the 10-year average, 82 of the routes had higher numbers in 2006.

* Among the local areas surveyed that showed greater pheasant numbers than 2006 were Winner, Huron, Mitchell and Yankton with Sioux Falls showing virtually no change in population.

* Six local areas in the state showed pheasant numbers that were significantly higher than their 10-year average. They included Aberdeen, Huron, Sioux Falls, Brookings, Watertown and Sisseton. The Winner, Mobridge, Mitchell and Yankton areas also measured statistically higher than their 10-year average.

Habitat is a significant factor in pheasant population. During the 1960s, the pheasant population soared to one of the highest levels ever, due in a large part to the Soil Bank program that allowed farmers to set aside acres. In 1963 the statewide brood survey recorded 11.1 pheasants per mile. The next year the Soil Bank program dissolved, farmers cultivated more land, and the pheasant estimate dwindled to four per mile.

RESULTS OF PHEASANT BROOD SURVEYS BY CITY AREAS

CITY AREA & ROUTES		Pheasants Per Mile			2006 Estimates Compared With	
		10 yr. mean	2005 survey	2006 survey	2005 survey	10 yr. mean
Chamberlain	9	13.15	13.55	12.88	-05%	-02%
Winner	8	5.75	5.64	5.87	+04%	+02%
Pierre	12	4.26	5.73	4.26	-25%	00%
Mobridge	8	3.68	5.55	3.89	-30%	+06%
Aberdeen	14	4.00	8.73	7.99	-09%	+100%
Huron	17	6.47	9.84	10.27	+04%	+59%
Mitchell	16	6.74	7.19	7.58	+05%	+12%
Yankton	10	1.52	1.45	1.65	+14%	+09%
Sioux Falls	13	1.84	2.97	2.97	+00%	+61%
Brookings	11	2.98	7.43	6.90	-07%	+132%
Watertown	12	2.41	8.16	7.93	-03%	+229%
Sisseton	5	1.01	3.01	2.74	-09%	+171%
Western SD	5	2.68	2.75	2.46	-11%	-08%
STATEWIDE	109	4.33	6.62	6.22	-06%	+44%

Surveyors were finding only two birds per mile by 1969 and estimates reached a low of one pheasant per mile by 1976.

The Conservation Reserve Program, along with other efforts to increase private and public hunting opportunities, has helped bring the pheasant population back to the level enjoyed during the '60s. In 2005, an estimated 1.9 million roosters were harvested in South Dakota, up from an estimated 1.6 million harvested in 2004. The CRP is a federal program and as Congress begins its work on the next Farm Bill, leaders in the Game, Fish and Parks Department have gone on record asking hunters to lobby their representatives for the continuation of CRP or the creation of another similar program that provides residual cover for wildlife.

While a healthy pheasant population is important, the number of birds alone doesn't ensure hunter success. Hunters must work to secure a place to hunt. Most of South Dakota is private land and permission is required from landowners before hunting can take place. Those wishing to hunt on private land should contact landowners personally prior to the hunting season.

South Dakota offers more than 1 million acres of private lands opened to public hunting through GFP's Walk-In Area Program. Other public land opportunities for hunting include about 325,000 acres of State Game Production Area land and Federal Waterfowl Production Area land.

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Traditional Pheasant
Season Opens

A Place to Hunt

If you are coming to South Dakota this fall, you need to think about where you will hunt. Of course, a spot where there are birds is important, but experienced hunters say bird numbers are only part of the equation. In most of the pheasant range, it may be difficult to obtain permission to hunt private land on opening weekend. Landowners often save their land for relatives and friends.

Areas with high pheasant numbers may mean more competition from other hunters, so you might have

better luck seeking out one of the less popular areas or waiting to come to South Dakota until after cold weather sets in.

The first significant snowfall of the season often arrives in early November, right after the daily opening hour switches from noon to 10 a.m. Snow and wintry weather will concentrate roosters in heavy cover where hunters with dogs can flush them in gun range.

If going to an area with lower pheasant density sounds like bad planning, remember that pheasant hunting can still be good in moderate

density areas. It is the lack of competition that experienced hunters seek. On private land, permission is easier to obtain in the less well-known parts of the state. And in the best areas, many landowners charge hunters an access fee.

Public land, too, will have much less pressure after the weather turns a little tough. If a day of hunting in cattails and snow sounds like fun, November can be the highlight of the pheasant season.

South Dakota Pheasant Hunting Tips

Try smaller groups.

Except in rare cases, the big pheasant drives of years past are not the most effective way to hunt roosters. Two or three hunters will have more luck getting permission from a landowner and they can hunt most kinds of cover just as well as a big group.

Find the real cover.

With pheasants under pressure in most of South Dakota, the birds quickly learn what cover types are safe. If it is too steep, too thick, or too remote for most hunters, that's where they will be. And they'll know the best escape routes, too. Successful hunters are quiet, and they get between the birds and their escape cover.

Make use of the weekdays.

Most hunters can only be out on Saturday and Sunday. By Sunday evening, the birds are wild. If you will be in South Dakota for several days, try arriving on Wednesday or Thursday. By then the pressure will be lower and roosters will have calmed down from the weekend.

Don't let the weather stop you.

If the weather is rough, you can take advantage of the reduced competition. Put on your long underwear, and head for cover that offers the birds protection. If it's snowing and blowing, the roosters will pile into dense cover, and hold tight for you to boot them out. The discomfort is a small price to some of the best shooting of the year.

Wild roosters are tough.

Experienced hunters say that a 1 1/4-ounce load of 4 shot is as reliable as anything available. Those who have switched to steel shot recommend 1 1/8 ounces of 2 shot. Either load fired through an improved cylinder barrel makes a perfect combination for South Dakota roosters.

Follow your dog's lead.

Dog owners are well-advised to adapt their hunting to their dog's best traits. If you own a flushing dog like a retriever or springer spaniel, dense cattail marshes give your dog a chance to track down a tight-sitting bird. Pointing dogs will frustrate their owner in dense cover. If they do point a bird, locating the dog can be impossible unless you own a beeper collar. Pointers are more effective in grassy draws and uplands that pheasants often use as loafing cover.

Looking for the out-of-way refuge.

When the hunting pressure is on, smart roosters are often found in small patches of cover away from the hunting pressure. The tail of a slough, upper end of a draw, or a plum thicket on a hillside are good spots to find one or two birds.

Shoot the front half.

Pheasants aren't particularly fast, but many hunters shoot behind them. Concentrate on the front half, that's where his vitals are. Many good shooters say they zero in on the white strip that gives ringnecks their name.

Use the morning.

With shooting hours starting at noon or 10 a.m., some hunters wonder what to do in the morning. Try a scouting trip for pheasants along the roadsides. Once you have found some, track down the owner of the land, and get ready for the afternoon hunt.

Watch out for fires.

Drought conditions from this summer are sure to have an effect on this fall's landscape. The fire danger will be high and hunters should go into the fields prepared to put out small fires before they become big fires. Extinguish cigarettes with water or dirt or use your vehicle's ashtray. Limit vehicle traffic to designated areas and never park over dry grass.

Stay comfortable.

Be prepared for South Dakota's unpredictable fall weather. On an opening day not too many years ago, there was 4 inches of snow on the ground at dawn, which melted into a muddy mess by early afternoon. From the 25-degree morning temperature the mercury climbed to a sweaty 75 degrees. Appropriate clothing included a down vest, rubber boots, leather boots, a wool shirt, rain pants, T-shirt, and a sun hat. The secrets to outfitting a pheasant hunter are layering and a big duffel bag.

Happy Hunting!!!