

2018 fall bird hunting forecast

Ring-necked pheasant

Pheasant Stocking: Each year, the department stocks approximately 75,000 pheasants on 90 DNR managed properties. The pheasant stocking program is in place to supplement hunting opportunities in areas of the state where wild pheasants are not abundant. The state game farm also provides additional hunting opportunities through the Day-Old Chick (DOC) program. In the DOC program, conservation clubs raise pheasant chicks to be released on approved DNR-managed properties or private property open to public hunting. The DOC program currently involves conservation clubs that normally receive about 35,000 rooster chicks annually. To find properties stocked with pheasants, visit dnr.wi.gov and search FFLIGHT.

Harvest: During the 2017-18 season, an estimated 42,450 hunters pursued pheasants, spending 418,890 days afield and harvesting 301,490 pheasants. Fond du Lac, Kenosha, Jefferson counties harvested the most pheasants. Participation and harvest estimates reflect the pursuit of both wild and stocked pheasants.

Pheasant hunting has long been a Wisconsin tradition. The ring-necked pheasant was introduced as a game bird to Wisconsin as early as the late 1800s. Ideal habitat conditions allowed the population to flourish and expand rapidly. In the 1940s the pheasant population began to decline due to limited habitat availability, modern agricultural practices and urbanization. Today's pheasant population is most common in the west-central and southeastern regions of the state.

In response to the population decline, the Pheasant Stamp was created in 1991 to provide funds for pheasant restoration and management. The management of ring-necked pheasants in Wisconsin is in large part due to revenues generated from the sale of the Pheasant Stamp. Habitat projects funded by Pheasant Stamp dollars along with countless partner dollars and efforts have managed, preserved and restored thousands of acres of nesting and winter habitat.

Ruffed grouse

Each year, the DNR conducts ruffed grouse drumming surveys in the spring and brood count surveys in the summer. Roadside surveys to monitor the number of breeding grouse have been conducted by staff from the department, U.S. Forest Service, tribal employees, and numerous grouse enthusiasts and volunteers since 1964. Brood data is collected summer and the data is available in early September. Collectively, these surveys help indicate grouse production levels and population trends in Wisconsin.

Results from the 2018 drumming survey showed a 34% decrease in drumming activity between 2017 and 2018, based on the roadside survey to monitor breeding grouse activity. The down turn was seen in both the central (-29 percent) and northern (-38 percent) forest regions of the state. These two areas comprise the primary grouse range in Wisconsin. While the decreases in the southwest (-14 percent) part of the state were smaller by percentage, and an increase in the southeast was observed, these areas are not within the primary range for grouse. The drumming activity in southwestern and southeastern Wisconsin are at or near historic lows, and likely would not significantly add to grouse abundance in the

state.

Spring was late to arrive in 2018, with much of the state having below normal temperatures and early spring snow storms until late into April. Much of the early survey period in the southern half of the state had conditions outside of the survey's parameters. Surveyors in the south were given an extension of 10 days to get their survey routes completed. Most of the early part of May had normal temperatures and rainfall and surveyors were able to complete their transects on time. Overall survey conditions were "excellent" on 64% of transects run, while 53% rated the overall conditions as "excellent" in 2017. Conditions were rated as "Fair", the lowest available weather condition rating, 2% of the time in 2018 and 8% in 2017. Survey conditions do influence drumming activity and may cause grouse numbers to be over or under estimated.

While grouse populations ebb and rise on a nine to eleven-year cycle, an overriding downward trend can be noted for the Wisconsin Grouse population since the inception of this survey. Grouse highs are not as high as they have been in the past and the population seems to be slower to recover from cyclic lows. The long-term aging of Wisconsin's forests are likely playing a role in these changes. Not all regions of the state see these changes in forest aging occurring at the same rate, with the more commercial forests of the Northern and Central regions aging at a slower rate than the more privately-owned forests of the Southwest and Southeast regions. It is likely that this trend in grouse numbers will continue to occur until our forests reach a stasis in their aging process.

Beyond managing state-owned lands, Wisconsin DNR is working to provide young forest cover through an extensive collaborative effort known as the Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership. This partnership provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners interested in managing for young forest. The program is helping to create habitat for ruffed grouse and other wildlife species, and helping maintain healthy and diverse forest communities.

Grouse hunters are very much in tune with grouse numbers relative to the population cycle – the number of hunting days spent in the field and overall harvests vary significantly from year to year.

Preliminary ruffed grouse harvest data for the 2017-18 season show that 64,533 hunters reported spending 583,917 days in the field hunting grouse, with approximately 185,336 grouse harvested. Highest harvests were reported by hunters in Price, Douglas, Marinette counties.

Hunters may need to scout different sites in order to find pockets of birds. Ruffed grouse use a variety of habitat types, but young, early succession forests are most important when trying to find grouse. Finding the densest woody cover available is often the best way to locate grouse in a new hunting area. Checking harvested birds' crops will show hunters what grouse are currently eating and may also suggest likely hunting locations.

Sharp-tailed grouse

Sharp-tailed grouse season dates: October 20 – November 11, 2018

The sharp-tailed grouse is native to Wisconsin and historically occupied a large portion of the state, using primarily young, open pine and oak barrens or sa-

vanna ecosystems. Long-term population declines across North America, including Wisconsin, have occurred since the early 1900s due to habitat loss. Sharp-tailed grouse management began in northern Wisconsin during the late 1940s and early 1950s and a tightly regulated harvest season has been in place in 1997.

Each spring sharp-tailed grouse dancing ground surveys are conducted. These survey results help to provide an index to population abundance and allow wildlife managers to make informed management decisions for sharp-tailed grouse.

The 2018 survey results show an increase in sharptailed grouse activity in Game Management Units 2, 8, and 9. Douglas County Wildlife Area saw a 64% increase in sharptailed grouse activity during the survey, while Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area saw a 6% decline. Both wildlife areas are located in Game Management Unit 8.

Though the population has not yet recovered to historic levels, it is believed a limited harvest is sustainable. Wildlife managers are quite hopeful that the sharp-tail population will respond positively to ongoing focused habitat management efforts. Recent disturbance events such as the 2013 Germann Road Fire and the 2011 blow-down may also prove beneficial to sharp-tails, over time.

In northwestern Wisconsin, sharp-tailed grouse are found primarily in association with large blocks of barrens habitat on public lands. Barrens habitat in northwestern Wisconsin is recognized internationally as a key conservation opportunity area. The birds attract many visitors to the northwestern part of the state each year.

Wisconsin's Sharptailed Grouse Management Plan provides framework to combine habitat development for barrens dependent wildlife species with working forests, with a goal to expand the suitable habitat for sharptails and reconnect isolated populations wherever possible.

There were no permits available for the 2017 sharptailed grouse season, therefore no birds were harvested. For the 2016 sharp-tailed grouse season, 148 hunters applied for 25 sharp-tailed grouse permits. The reported harvest was 7 birds, with a success rate of 28%. Success rates are not corrected for nonparticipation.

Wild turkey

Each year, the DNR conducts summer brood surveys looking at the number of broods and brood size of various upland game birds, including wild turkey. Turkey brood production can affect the number of birds available to harvest in fall. Summer brood surveys are conducted June through August and results are available in September each year. The 2017 turkey brood production varied across the state with more areas that saw increases than declines.

Wild Turkey broods seen per observer hour increased 8% from the previous year. Broods per observer decreased from 3.8 in 2016 to 3.5 this year, but is still above the longterm (1987- 2016) mean of 2.15 broods per observer. The average brood size (4.1) for 2017 is down from the 4.5 observed in 2016. While turkey numbers vary among regions, turkeys are doing well statewide with strong numbers going into the fall hunting season.

The 2017 fall turkey season was open from September 16 through December 31, 107 consecutive days, with no closure during the gun deer season in Turkey Management Zones (TMZ) 1-5. Turkey Management Zones 6 and 7 had a 63-day season running from September 16 through November 17. Statewide, the number of permits available (102,550) was up from the 101,800 available in 2016. Total permits issued through a random drawing process and over-the-counter sales were 66,816. Permitted hunters harvested 3,971 turkeys for a success rate uncorrected for non-participation of 5.9%. This success rate was less than the 7.3% recorded for the 2016 fall season. Based on the 2017 fall turkey hunting questionnaire, 52% of all fall turkey hunters receiving a harvest permit hunted turkeys during the 2017 fall turkey season, this is a decrease from the 2016 fall season (66%). Statewide, the average number of days spent hunting for fall turkeys was 6.5 days; hunting pressure was highest on weekends. Most fall turkey hunters (35.5%) are hunting fall turkeys incidental to archery hunting.

The restoration of turkeys in Wisconsin ranks as one of the greatest wildlife management success stories in our state's history. Absent from Wisconsin's landscape as recently as the 1970s, our spring turkey harvests now rank among the largest in the nation. Wild turkeys have proven surprisingly tolerant of harsh winter weather as they have become established throughout northern Wisconsin. After over two decades of rapidly increasing population and harvest, turkey numbers in the state appear to be stabilizing at levels suitable to the available habitat. Turkey population numbers and harvests will likely ebb and flow near current levels in response to natural factors like weather and food availability. Hunters can expect some annual variation in both their personal success and overall turkey harvest.

Fall turkey hunters can maximize their chances for success by learning about turkey behavior and the wild turkey annual cycle. In the fall, there is a shift in habitat use, with turkeys moving from more open field habitats into forested areas. Turkey flocks typically make use of areas dominated by oak and hickory – this habitat shift coincides with food availability when succulent vegetation and insects become less available and mast becomes

more available. In poor mast production years, turkey flocks are drawn to areas where food can be found. This often leads to turkeys frequenting farmland and open fields, where they become more visible and vulnerable to hunters. Turkey hunters should monitor mast crops where they hunt and determine where turkeys may be feeding. Spending a few evenings prior to turkey season locating roosting areas will help hunters find birds when the season begins.

Most turkey hunting occurs on private land, so it is important for hunters to make sure landowner relationships remain a high priority. Landowners in Wisconsin are often willing to allow hunters to use their land, and Wisconsin hunters have continued to set the standard high in forming valuable relationships with these landowners. For more information, visit dnr.wi.gov and search "turkey."