

2020-21

Upland Game Bird Nebraska Hunting Outlook



The following forecast is based on spring and summer upland game population surveys, including the Rural Mail Carrier and the Northern Bobwhite Whistle Count surveys. Nebraska biologists also provided input on regional weather events and habitat trends that could have affected populations. The summaries and field reports below reflect the best available information on bird numbers, weather conditions and habitat trends among that state's regions, but should not be used to predict hunting conditions or local population densities at any single location within a region. Preseason scouting is encouraged to increase hunter success.

For more information about upland game bird hunting in Nebraska, visit OutdoorNebraska.org/upland.

STATEWIDE OVERVIEW

Ring-Necked Pheasant



Winter survival was relatively high as pheasant counts during April's RMCS were up 20% statewide compared to 2019. Habitat conditions were good going into nesting season, but most of the state experienced a

heat wave in early- to mid-June, resulting in extremely hot and dry conditions during peak hatch. Fortunately, conditions immediately before and after were favorable, and timely rain in July and early August created good habitat conditions across most of the state.

Survey results and anecdotal reports suggest overall production was better than last year, at least within the core pheasant range. Statewide, pheasant counts from the July RMCS showed a slight increase (+5%) compared to 2019. Regional increases were observed in 3 of 6 regions, with the most notable increases in the Southwest (+47%) and Panhandle (+36%). These regions support the highest pheasant densities and will again provide some of the best pheasant hunting opportunities in 2020. Portions of western and northeastern Nebraska are becoming increasingly dry this fall, but early moisture created sufficient cover in most areas.

Pheasant hunters should be aware that emergency haying and grazing of CRP lands has been authorized in 33 counties (as of Aug. 31, 2020), and this may be expanded to other counties depending on subsequent weather patterns.

Northern Bobwhite



Statewide, bobwhite counts during the July RMCS and Whistle Count Survey were 14-16% lower compared to 2019 and remain below the 5-year averages. Regionally, whistle counts declined in all regions, except the East-Central, Northeast, and Republican regions, where counts remained the same or increased slightly.

Nebraska's quail populations were negatively affected by severe winter weather events during spring 2019 and have yet to fully recover. Despite survey results, this year's fall population largely will depend on production during the nesting season, which is still underway.

Overall, conditions this summer were relatively favorable throughout much of the core bobwhite range, which includes portions of southeastern and south-central Nebraska. Precipitation was above normal in portions of the southeast and rain was well-timed throughout the summer, helping to maintain high-quality cover for nesting and brood-rearing. Where suitable habitat exists, biologists have reported good numbers of quail across southern Nebraska, where brood sizes have been relatively large. Reports elsewhere in the state's quail range have been more limited, but localized areas should still support hunt-able numbers. The best quail hunting opportunities will be found in their core range of southern Nebraska this year.

Biologists are optimistic that favorable nesting conditions will set the stage for improved quail hunting opportunities this fall and will help Nebraska's bobwhite populations rebound.

Prairie Grouse

(Sharp-Tailed Grouse and Greater Prairie-Chicken)



Production was below average during two of the last three years, and breeding populations of prairie grouse are not where they once were in

Nebraska. However, conditions have been favorable throughout much of their core range in the Sandhills this summer, and better production is expected compared to 2019.

Precipitation during the primary nesting season (May-July) was slightly above normal for much of the central and eastern Sandhills, and habitat conditions were relatively good throughout the nesting and brood-rearing seasons. Broods observed this summer have been variable in both number and age, with some of the earliest reports coming during mid- to late-June (successful early nesting attempts). The Sandhills should offer some of the best hunting opportunities for prairie grouse this fall (both species). Hunters should also find good opportunities in the Panhandle and Southwest regions but where drier conditions have prevailed, grouse hunting may be more challenging due to the sparse cover.



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Upland Game Bird Survey Results

RING-NECKED PHEASANT SURVEYS:



% Change from*:

Region	2019 July RMCS	5-yr ave. (2015-19) July RMCS	Overall abundance rank (1=Best)	Top counties (no particular order)
Southwest	+47	+18	1	Chase, Hayes, Hitchcock, Perkins
Panhandle	+36	-26	2	Cheyenne, Deuel, Box Butte, Morrill
Northeast	+11	-5	3	Antelope, Cedar, Dixon, Knox
Sandhills	-36	-52	4	Blaine, Cherry, Grant
Southeast	-3	-31	5	Clay, Fillmore, Webster, York
Central	-60	-60	6	Greeley, Howard, Sherman
Statewide	+5	-16		

NORTHERN BOBWHITE SURVEYS:



% Change from*:

Region	2019 July RMCS	2019 Whistle Count Survey	5-yr ave. Whistle Count Survey	Overall abundance rank (1=Best)	Top counties (no particular order)
Republican	+8	+1	-23	1	Franklin, Furnas, Harlan, Red Willow
East Central	-39	+7	-5	2	Butler, Seward, Thayer
Southeast	-26	-12	-41	3	Gage, Jefferson, Johnson, Pawnee
West Platte	-33	-32	-20	4	Gosper, Frontier, Lincoln
Northeast	+100	+8	+4	5	Antelope, Pierce, Stanton
North Central	-29	-21	-75	6	Greeley, Howard, Sherman
Statewide	-16	-14	-34		

* For low-ranked regions, large percent changes might not translate into noticeable changes in hunting conditions.

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD



Southwest District:

In the Southwest, the pheasant numbers are up according to the July RMCS index, which increased by 47% compared to 2019 and was higher than the 5- and 10-year averages. July brood reports from producers during wheat harvest were mixed, but production appears to be better across much of the region. Brood ages and sizes have been variable indicating nesting success early and late in the season.

Following a typical spring and early summer, conditions remained very dry west of Highway 83. Fortunately, the onset of these drier conditions occurred after peak hatch. Habitat conditions still look favorable going into the fall, but pre-season scouting is recommended given emergency haying and grazing will impact CRP cover in certain counties. Rangeland cover appears to be sufficient, and hunters should find decent prairie-chicken numbers on larger blocks of grass in western portions of the region.

As in most years, isolated hail storms affected a few areas, with the most notable storms near Wallace and east of Palisade. Farther east, biologists saw good numbers of quail, as well as some pheasant broods where quality cover exists. Timely rains in south-central Nebraska led to excellent habitat conditions throughout the summer and into fall, and high brood survival is expected. Recent observations of calling males and paired adults suggest this may have encouraged additional nesting effort by bobwhites, which can produce multiple clutches in a year when conditions are right.



Northwest District:

In the Northwest, pheasant counts also improved in the April (+6%) and July (+36%) rural mail carrier surveys and were in line with their respective 20-year averages.

After a typical May and June, much of the Northwest remained extremely dry. Portions of the Panhandle currently are in moderate to severe drought, yet suitable cover was produced early in the growing season and field reports have noted food resources remain abundant. This should aid in brood survival, but rain would help the cause.

Lack of recent moisture or dew likely contributed to fewer brood observations during late summer. Pheasant broods observed have been relatively large in number, and brood reports have been mixed for sharp-tails. Deteriorating range conditions in portions of the Panhandle may pose challenges for grouse hunters due to the sparser cover. Conditions were more favorable further east in the Sandhills, and prairie grouse production appears to be better this year compared to 2019.

Field reports have noted a lot of variability in brood size and age for both species, but habitat conditions look good and high brood survival is expected.

Hail events were isolated in the Northwest region with only a few notable storms occurring north of Dalton and a few localized areas in Cherry County (federal properties were not affected). Overall, survey results and field reports from the Northwest are encouraging, but late-season precipitation is needed to help maintain quality cover and food resources for birds going into this fall and winter.

Groundwater levels remained high in portions of the central Sandhills, and some access roads on Samuel R. McKelvie National Forest (USFS) and Valentine National Wildlife Refuge (USFWS) remain inaccessible. These areas should offer good grouse hunting opportunities this fall, but hunters are encouraged to check with the respective federal agency for up-to-date information.



Northeast District:

This year's survey results were mixed for pheasants in the Northeast, but field reports suggest hunters should find good pheasant hunting opportunities in localized areas offering quality habitat. Compared to 2019, this year's April RMCS index was down 18% in the Northeast, yet the July RMCS index was up 11%.

Total precipitation during the primary nesting season (May-July) was below normal east and above normal west of a line following the western border of Pierce, Madison and Platte counties. As a rule of thumb, nest success in the eastern third of Nebraska, where it is wetter, often is higher during years when less rain falls during the nesting season. Still, dry conditions have persisted since April in portions of the Northeast, and several counties are experiencing severe drought, as of the end of August.

Where suitable habitat exists (primarily CRP), biologists have observed good numbers of pheasant broods — some with relatively large numbers. Knox, Antelope, Cedar and Dixon counties should provide the best pheasant hunting opportunities this fall.

Farther west, habitat conditions have been relatively good in the eastern Sandhills where moisture has been abundant. Prairie grouse production is expected to be average here, but an "average" year still offers a good number of birds and hunting opportunities. Similar to the western Sandhills, brood observations indicate production occurred early and late in

the nesting season.

Noxious weed invasions have required widespread mowing and chemical applications on a large number of CRP fields in the Northeast region. Hunters are encouraged to contact the Game and Parks district office in Norfolk at 402-370-3374 for more information on Open Fields and Waters Program (OFW) sites potentially affected. Hunters also should note high water levels in the eastern Sandhills continue to inundate low-lying areas, affecting some county roads.



Southeast District:

Pheasant numbers were down slightly in the Southeast during the April and July RMCS and remain below long-term averages. With continued habitat loss and woody encroachment within remaining grasslands, pheasant populations have become very isolated in this region. Better pheasant hunting opportunities exist where there is adequate grass cover within relatively open landscapes, such as the Rainwater Basin region.

To provide additional hunting opportunities near urban population centers, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission will release pen-reared pheasants on select wildlife management areas prior to the youth season and Thanksgiving weekends. For more information on pheasant releases, visit OutdoorNebraska.org/upland.

Surveys suggest bobwhite populations are down in the Southeast compared to recent years. This year's whistle counts were mixed between the East-Central (+7%) and Southeast (-12%) management units with a lot of variability among individual routes as well. Precipitation during the primary nesting season was slightly above normal in much of the Southeast, with higher rainfall totals along the Kansas border. The good news is that rain was well-distributed across the summer months.

Public land managers have observed good numbers of quail broods where high-quality habitat exists; they've noted relatively large brood sizes early on (in both number and age), likely from initial nesting attempts. Similar to the Southwest, some late summer production is expected as favorable nesting conditions persisted throughout the summer and into early fall. Quail hunters should expect to find good bird numbers in localized areas in the Southeast this fall, but likely won't encounter the same number of coveys they did between 2015-2018 when populations were high.



WHERE TO HUNT

Pheasants:

The Southwest continues to provide some of Nebraska's best public hunting opportunities for pheasants, primarily on private lands enrolled in the OFW Program. During most years, hunters tend to find better pheasant numbers as they move west.

One-third of all available CRP acres within the Southwest region are publicly accessible through OFW, and biologists expect to enroll over 20,000 acres of tall wheat/milo stubble and unfarmed pockets into the program this fall. (These tracts will be displayed in the 2020-21 Stubble Access Guide in October.)

N-CORPE lands and several WMAs surrounding irrigation reservoirs in the Southwest support good numbers of pheasants, as do clusters of CRP and tall wheat stubble in OFW in portions of Cheyenne, Deuel, Box Butte, and Sheridan counties. Valentine and Crescent Lake NWRs also have supported a good number of birds around wetland margins in certain years. Waterfowl Production Areas, WMAs, and Ducks Unlimited Revolving Properties in the Rainwater Basin region of south-central Nebraska can offer good pheasant hunting opportunities depending upon water levels. Cover on these sites can be highly variable, so pre-season scouting is recommended.

Hunters in northeast Nebraska should focus on clusters of CRP enrolled in OFW within Antelope, Knox, Cedar, Dixon, and Dakota counties. Some nearby WMAs and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers properties along the Missouri River can support high

pheasant densities during dry years when cover is abundant. Pre-season scouting is recommended as emergency haying and grazing will affect cover on some CRP lands in portions of western and northeastern Nebraska.

Northern Bobwhite:

Public lands scattered throughout the bobwhite's core range in southeastern and south-central Nebraska provide excellent quail hunting opportunities. In the Southeast, some of the best quail numbers are on WMAs in the southern two tiers of counties. Many of these WMAs are managed specifically with quail in mind, and in this highly fragmented landscape, these areas offer some of the largest blocks of contiguous quail habitat around. OFW sites scattered throughout that same general area should not be overlooked.

A drier, yet more diverse landscape prevails as you move west along the Kansas border and some of the best quail hunting opportunities typically are found east of U.S. Highway 83, where woody cover is more abundant. Those targeting quail should focus on the edges of the many CRP fields, unfarmed draws, and crop stubble fields enrolled in OFW throughout the region.

The WMAs and USACE lands surrounding the region's irrigation reservoirs also support good numbers of quail and provide some of the largest blocks of habitat to explore. During certain years, good numbers of bobwhites can be found on public lands outside of their core range, but populations

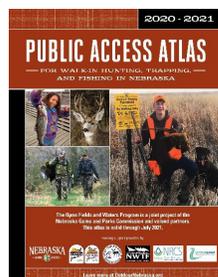
and associated hunting opportunities are highly variable from year to year.

Prairie Grouse:

(Greater Prairie-Chicken and Sharp-Tailed Grouse)

For prairie grouse, it's hard to overlook the expansive blocks of native prairie found on federal lands in the Nebraska Sandhills, including the Nebraska National Forest Bessey Ranger District, Samuel R. McKelvie National Forest, and the Crescent Lake and Valentine National Wildlife refuges. These four areas total more than 322,000 acres, are conservatively-grazed, and support great numbers of prairie grouse. Though both species can be found here, sharptails typically dominate the bag.

To find greater prairie-chickens, hunters need to look further east or south. The eastern Sandhills' rolling topography is picturesque prairie-chicken habitat, and hunters will find an increasing number of OFW sites scattered across portions of Rock, Holt, Loup, Garfield and Wheeler counties. In Southwest Nebraska, prairie-chickens can be found on several large blocks of OFW in Chase County, but hunters should not overlook opportunities on nearby N-CORPE lands and OFW tracts in Hayes, Keith, and Lincoln counties. Some OFW lands in eastern Nebraska, among the remaining larger complexes of grassland habitat, provide limited opportunities for greater prairie-chickens; hunters are reminded to get a free East Zone grouse permit to pursue prairie grouse east of U.S. Highway 81.



FIND LAND TO HUNT

Nebraska offers more than 1.2 million acres of public and privately owned lands that are accessible for public hunting. Find these acres to hunt in the 2020-21 Nebraska Public Access Atlas, available at OutdoorNebraska.org/PublicAccessAtlas or in the 2020-21 Nebraska Stubble Access Guide, an atlas supplement, available in October 2020 at OutdoorNebraska.org/Guides.

