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 and habitat/access trends among the state’s region. Preseason scouting is encouraged to increase hunter success.

For more detailed survey results or additional information on upland bird hunting in Nebraska, visit OutdoorNebraska.org/Upland.

### STATEWIDE OVERVIEW

#### Ring-Necked Pheasant

Pheasant hunting opportunities may be more limited this fall due to emerging weather patterns, but hunters willing to adapt to the changing conditions should find success in many areas. Compared to 2020, spring pheasant counts were 29% and 35% higher in the Northeast and Southeast regions, respectively. Notable declines, however, were observed elsewhere, especially in the Southwest and Panhandle, which experienced extreme drought last fall/winter.

Abundant precipitation during late spring helped much of the state recover. Overall, nesting conditions were favorable early on and brood observations throughout the state, although variable, indicate some production occurred despite the hot, dry conditions that commenced in mid-June.

This year’s statewide pheasant index during the July RMCS was down 14% statewide, but hunters are cautioned that dry conditions often inhibit roadside observations. Densities again should be highest this fall in portions of the Southwest and Panhandle regions. Preseason scouting is recommended due to changing weather and habitat conditions. Emergency haying and grazing of Conservation Reserve Program lands was authorized throughout much of the state and likely will affect some CRP tracts open to walk-in hunting through the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission’s Open Fields and Waters Program.

#### Northern Bobwhite

Severe winter weather during recent years have negatively affected Nebraska’s bobwhite populations, which remain below long-term averages. Still, biologists and land managers remain optimistic that the favorable nesting and brood-rearing conditions this summer throughout much of the species’ core range in south-central and southeast Nebraska will help quail populations rebound.

Statewide, bobwhite counts during the July RMCS and Whistle Count Survey were down 10-22% compared to 2020. Some adult mortality was expected following the extended periods of snow cover and extreme freezing temperatures in February 2021. Fortunately, no mass mortalities were reported, and regional declines appear to have been less severe across southern Nebraska, including the Republican, Southeast, and West Platte regions. This year’s fall population largely will depend on production during the nesting season, which is underway. Biologists and private landowners have observed good numbers of broods throughout the summer where quality habitat exists within the core range. Timely rains have maintained relatively good habitat conditions across much of southern Nebraska and appears to have encouraged additional re-nesting during late summer.

Overall, hunters should expect to find numbers similar to last year across south-central and southeastern Nebraska but likely will find fewer coveys elsewhere in the state.

#### Prairie Grouse

Prairie grouse numbers have been variable in recent years but even “average years” can provide some excellent hunting opportunities.

Spring lek counts were variable but did not indicate any major losses during winter.

The Sandhills were in better shape this spring, in terms of residual cover, than areas further west and south that experienced prolonged drought in 2020. Despite abnormally high temps this summer, July rains helped maintain suitable brood-rearing cover across the Sandhills. Brood observations have been relatively limited but indicated that some production had occurred in most areas of the state. Brood sizes have been on the smaller side, which may indicate that heat stress affected brood survival. Although a few young broods were observed late this summer, re-nesting appears to be more limited this year.

The Sandhills continue to offer some of the best hunting opportunities for chickens and sharptails. Conditions are becoming increasingly dry throughout Nebraska’s prairie grouse range and, if it continues, the cover may become sparse in some areas.
**Upland Game Bird Survey Results**

**RING-NECKED PHEASANT SURVEYS:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2020 July RMCS</th>
<th>5-yr Ave. (2016-2020) July RMCS</th>
<th>Overall Abundance Rank (1=Best)</th>
<th>Top Counties (no particular order)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Panhandle</td>
<td>-7</td>
<td>-27</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cheyenne, Deuel, Box Butte, Morrill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest</td>
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<td>-36</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chase, Hayes, Hitchcock, Perkins</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Antelope, Cedar, Dixon, Knox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandhills</td>
<td>+48</td>
<td>-22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Blaine, Cherry, Grant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
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<td>-29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Clay, Fillmore, Webster, York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
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<td>-51</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Greeley, Howard, Sherman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide</td>
<td>-14</td>
<td>-21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NORTHERN BOBWHITE SURVEYS:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2020 RMCS</th>
<th>2020 Whistle Count Survey</th>
<th>5-yr Ave. Whistle Count Survey</th>
<th>Overall Abundance Rank (1=Best)</th>
<th>Top Counties (no particular order)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>-38</td>
<td>-8</td>
<td>-28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Franklin, Furnas, Harlan, Red Willow</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
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<tr>
<td>East Central</td>
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<td>-20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Butler, Seward, Thayer</td>
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<tr>
<td>West Platte</td>
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<td>-21</td>
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<td>Gosper, Frontier, Lincoln</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>-27</td>
<td>-31</td>
<td>-29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Antelope, Pierce, Stanton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Central</td>
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<td>-17</td>
<td>-65</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Greeley, Howard, Sherman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide</td>
<td>-22</td>
<td>-10</td>
<td>-35</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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

**Southwest District:**

Pheasant counts were down during this year’s April and July RMCS, but this region continues to support some of the state’s highest densities. In western parts of the district, many CRP fields impacted by emergency haying and grazing last fall had limited regrowth this spring as drought conditions persisted through April. Habitat conditions improved dramatically following abundant spring rains.

Overall, early nesting conditions were favorable but similar to last year, dry conditions prevailed during late summer — especially out west. Brood reports have been variable even within portions of counties so hunters will need to be more mobile this fall to find quality cover and better bird concentrations. East of U.S. Highway 83, periodic rains have maintained relatively good habitat conditions throughout the summer. Larger blocks of CRP cover are more limited as you move east but generally support better pheasant numbers.

According to surveys, bobwhite numbers in south-central Nebraska were down slightly but field reports have been pretty positive this summer. Many quail broods are fully-grown, but some younger broods observed in recent weeks indicate many hens attempted to re-nest later in the summer. Haying and grazing will affect some CRP fields this fall, including some enrolled in OFW. This year’s strong winter wheat crop produced some tall, robust stubble that likely will concentrate birds this fall. Rangeland cover is becoming increasingly sparse further west, which may limit prairie-chicken hunting opportunities.

**Northeast District:**

Portions of this district that continue to support high densities of suitable habitat should provide good pheasant hunting opportunities again this fall. After relatively good production this past nesting season, spring counts were up 29% compared to 2020. They also were 11% above the five-year average.

Spring moisture improved conditions for early nesting attempts throughout most of the region. Precipitation during the primary nesting season was below average throughout much of the district but the tier of counties along the South Dakota border received significantly less rainfall from April through June. Habitat conditions improved slightly following a July rain, but it has remained dry there since then. Nesting conditions have been more favorable south of U.S. Highway 20 this summer, but broods have been a common sight next to CRP fields throughout the district. Pheasant counts during the July RMCS were similar to last year in the Northeast, but brood sizes have averaged four to six.

The key for upland hunters this fall will be finding suitable standing cover. Pheasant densities and hunting opportunities in the Northeast are heavily dependent on the availability of CRP and in recent years, losses have outpaced new enrollments. Field reports indicate many CRP fields have been hayed or grazed and local USDA offices are processing additional requests in several counties.

Hunters should find good numbers of pheasants concentrated in the remaining cover. Quail populations typically are sporadic in the Northeast but likely will be even more limited this fall following winter losses. Prairie grouse numbers likely will be variable in the central and eastern Sandhills given the variable weather and habitat conditions.

**Southeast District:**

Pheasant numbers were mixed during this year’s April (+35%) and July RMCS (-17%) but both remain well below long-term averages. With continued habitat loss and woody encroachment within many remaining grasslands, pheasant populations have become isolated in the Southeast. Playa wetlands within the Rainwater Basin provide some of the district’s best pheasant hunting opportunities. Drier conditions this spring and summer in the Rainwater Basins may have increased the availability of nesting and brood-rearing cover but this likely varied throughout the region.

To provide additional hunting opportunities near urban areas, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission will be releasing pen-reared pheasants on select wildlife management areas before the youth season and Thanksgiving weekends. For more information, visit OutdoorNebraska.org/Upland.

According to surveys, bobwhite numbers were down in the Southeast compared to recent years but may bounce back sooner than expected according to recent field reports. Land managers have been pleasantly surprised with the number of old and young quail broods they observed during summer fieldwork and brood-rearing conditions look favorable going into the fall. These reports may not be representative of areas dominated by private land that typically provide more marginal or isolated quail habitat but still provide a positive sign following winter losses. Hunters should expect to find quail numbers similar to, or slightly lower than, last year.

This map highlights in red the Nebraska counties approved for emergency haying and grazing on Conservation Reserve Program lands as of Aug. 13, 2020. For more information, visit the Farm Service Agency at fsa.usda.gov/state-offices/Nebraska.

Two other available resources are the U.S. Drought Monitor map at droughtmonitor.unl.edu and the the High Plains Regional Climate Center’s ACIS Climate maps at hprcc.unl.edu.
WHERE TO HUNT

Pheasants:
The Southwest continues to provide some of Nebraska’s best public hunting opportunities for pheasants. This occurs primarily on private lands enrolled in OFW, where there is no shortage of acres. One-third of all available CRP acres within this region are publicly accessible through OFW and during most years, hunters tend to find better pheasant numbers as they move west in the region.

N-CORPE lands and several wildlife management areas surrounding irrigation reservoirs also support good numbers of pheasants. In the Southwest, biologists typically enroll an additional 25,000-plus acres of tall wheat and milo stubble and associated unfarmed pockets into OFW each fall; those tracts will be displayed in the 2021-22 Stubble Access Guide and updated online. In the Panhandle, clusters of CRP and tall wheat stubble enrolled in OFW throughout portions of Cheyenne, Deuel, Box Butte and Sheridan counties provide some of the best opportunities for pheasants. Valentine and Crescent Lake NWRs also can support good numbers around wetland margins during certain years. Waterfowl Production Areas, WMAs, and Ducks Unlimited Revolving Properties in the Rainwater Basin of south-central Nebraska can offer good pheasant hunting opportunities depending on water levels. Cover on these sites can be highly variable, so pre-season scouting can be useful.

In the Northeast, clusters of CRP enrolled in OFW within Antelope, Knox, Cedar, Dixon and Dakota counties typically provide some of the better pheasant hunting opportunities. Some nearby WMAs and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers properties along the Missouri River can support high pheasant densities during drier years when cover is abundant.

Preseason scouting is recommended this fall as emergency haying and grazing will affect cover on some CRP tracts throughout the state, including some enrolled in OFW.

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:
For prairie grouse, it’s hard to overlook the expansive blocks of native prairie on federal lands across the Sandhills, including the Bessey Ranger District of the Nebraska National Forest, 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. Both species can be found on most of these federal lands but sharp-tails typically dominate the bag.

For 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 southwestern Nebraska, prairie-chickens can be found on several large blocks of OFW in Chase County, but hunters should not overlook opportunities found on nearby N-CORPE lands and OFW tracts in portions of 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.