



Overall, quail numbers remain below those observed during recent peak years (2015-2018), but numbers in the Southeast, East Central and Northeast regions are nearing. Statewide, rebounding populations should provide better hunting opportunities this fall.

## Prairie Grouse

(Sharp-Tailed Grouse and Greater Prairie-Chickens)

A below-average breeding population coming into nesting season likely will impact prairie grouse hunting opportunities this fall. Rangeland conditions across the grouse range have improved

greatly compared to the past two years, but the effects of the drought were observed, with low numbers of adults present during lek surveys.

According to field reports, production has been good across most of the grouse range. Brood reports appear to be up from previous years, with most brood sizes being average to above average. Increased rainfall has produced great brood cover and plentiful insects.

Good production should help in adding to a low breeding populations and aid in the rebounding of grouse numbers.

Hunters should expect to see improved habitat conditions and bird numbers this fall as range

conditions have improved to 56% good or excellent in comparison to 23% in 2022.



# REPORTS FROM THE FIELD



## Southwest District:

Intense drought has limited the past two seasons of productions and caused a severe impact on this year's breeding population. Pheasant counts in the Southwest were down 16% during this year's July mail carrier survey, and numbers remain well below the long-term average (Table 1).

The Southwest has seen a break in the drought with good moisture this past winter and late spring through summer. Habitat conditions have improved immensely across the region. The amount of CRP fields affected by emergency haying and grazing this year will be much less than the past couple of years, providing good cover for this fall. Range conditions also have improved and should provide good cover for greater prairie-chickens, as well.

Local impacts from the severe spring storms possibly could be seen. Areas affected by the storms were flooding in the Republican River valley and hailstorms in southern Red Willow, Furnas and Harlan counties.

The southeastern part of the district, east of Highway 283, appears to have kept a better quail breeding population coming into the spring based off whistle count surveys. With this year's quality of habitat, biologists are optimistic for good brood numbers and the start of a population rebound this fall.

Overall, the outlook for the Southwest looks poor based off spring and summer surveys. However, as wheat harvest finishes and reports of birds are coming in, local biologists believe production has been good in 2023. With good production from the few birds that did carry over, we hopefully will be able to bump numbers up this fall for a fair to average year of hunting.



## Northwest District:

The Northwest remains as the area with our highest pheasant densities, according to the July RMCS, regardless of a 48% reduction from 2022 (Table 1). The area also remains below both the five-year and long-term averages. The reduction of quality habitat for two years during the drought followed by a severe winter this year are likely contributors to the large reduction in pheasant numbers.

After receiving nice rains this spring and summer, habitat conditions have improved and most of the region has come out of drought status (Figure 2). Hunters can expect to find an

increased amount of habitat available this fall to hunt, as most of the counties in the district have come out of CRP emergency haying and grazing (Figure 3).

Even with great looking habitat conditions, bird numbers for the Panhandle are looking poor. Reports from the field on broods are few in the northern part of the district and variable in the south. Reports are indicating poor nesting in the early parts of the season. Most brood observations are looking to be from renestings as broods are young and small in size. Lingering snow followed by early spring rains likely are contributors to early failed nesting. Observations of broods in the southern part of the district appear to be better than the northern, but both are still below average.

Grouse brood reports for the district have been good. The breeding population appeared down during early spring lek surveys, but increased observations of broods appear to be pointing to good production. Brood reports have been more consistent and showing chicks of good age and brood size. Hunters should see increased grouse numbers over last year, but likely below average to average overall as populations are still rebounding from a fall during the drought.



## Northeast District:

Pheasant numbers were up 2% from 2022 and 33% from the 10-year average in the Northeast, based on the July RMCS. Pheasant numbers remain below the long-term average (Table 1).

Pheasant hunting opportunities remain fairly localized within the region due to the declining trends in habitat availability. CRP fields generally are more abundant and larger in size in several counties along the South Dakota border, which continue to provide some of the region's better hunting opportunities. Last fall, widespread haying and grazing of CRP greatly reduced the amount of cover available for pheasants and pheasant hunters.

Much of the district qualifies for emergency haying and grazing again this year, and portions of many CRP fields likely will be affected again this year, including lands open to public hunting through Open Fields and Waters.

Severe winter weather conditions impacted the northern portion of the state as deep snow accompanied by ice covered the landscape for much of the season. Impacts appear to have been more severe on quail populations in the part

of the district as low numbers were reported during spring whistle count surveys. Quail numbers appear to improve as you move into the southern part of the district. Pheasants tend to be more capable of handling these severe winter conditions and don't seem to have been impacted as much.

In the eastern Sandhills, prairie-chicken breeding populations were low this year based off early spring lek surveys. However, with the improving range conditions and the high number of grasshoppers this spring and summer, optimism is shared by all that it will be a good production year to help in building the population back up. Reports of good-sized broods are coming in from biologists as ranchers are out in the fields putting up hay and moving cattle.



## Southeast District:

A mild winter was seen by most of the Southeast district and likely played favor in over winter survival of birds. Pheasant numbers appear to be similar to last year with only a slight reduction (-8%), but are still 6% above the five-year average (Table 1).

Quality pheasant habitat and hunting opportunities have become very localized within the Southeast. CRP expirations, woody encroachment, and other land-use changes have contributed to declining habitat trends. Playa wetlands in the Rainwater Basin region continue to provide some of the region's better pheasant hunting opportunities. Most wetlands throughout the region have been dry for multiple years, which has created additional nesting cover for pheasants and other ground nesting birds.

Quail also appear to have done well through the winter based off the spring whistle count surveys. In comparison to 2022, only a slight reduction was seen in the East Central management area, but a 25% increase was seen in the Southeast management area. Both the East Central and Southeast management areas showed increases over the five-year average, 31-48% (Table 2).

Field reports have been good for the district. Early drought this year was suppressed with late spring and summer moisture to create good nesting and brood cover. Reports on broods have been of good quantity and size indicating success in the early season. Breeding activity has continued on well into summer as reports of whistling males and paired adults were reported into early August.





# Upland Game Bird Survey Results

## RING-NECKED PHEASANT SURVEYS:

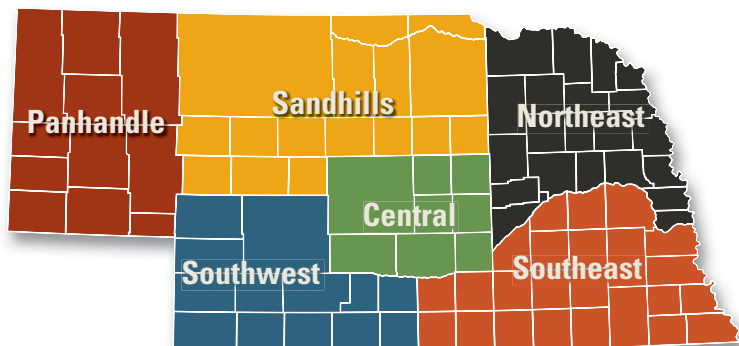
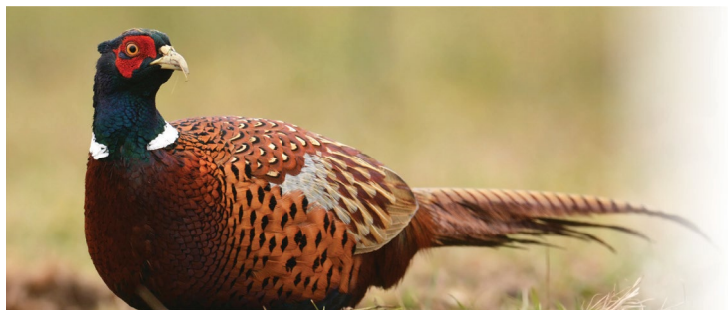


TABLE 1

\*Percent Change from:

Region	2021 July RMCS	5-yr Ave. July RMCS	20-yr Ave. July RMCS	Overall Abundance Rank (1=Best)	Top Counties (no particular order)
Panhandle	-48	-35	-26	1	Cheyenne, Box Butte, Morrill
Northeast	+2	+37	-20	2	Antelope, Cedar, Dixon, Knox
Southwest	-16	-39	-56	3	Hitchcock, Gosper, Harlan
Central	+41	+33	-43	4	Greeley, Howard, Sherman
Southeast	-8	+6	-56	5	Clay, Fillmore, Webster, York
Sandhills	-80	-84	-91	6	Blaine, Cherry, Grant
Statewide	-19	-12	-44		

## NORTHERN BOBWHITE SURVEYS:

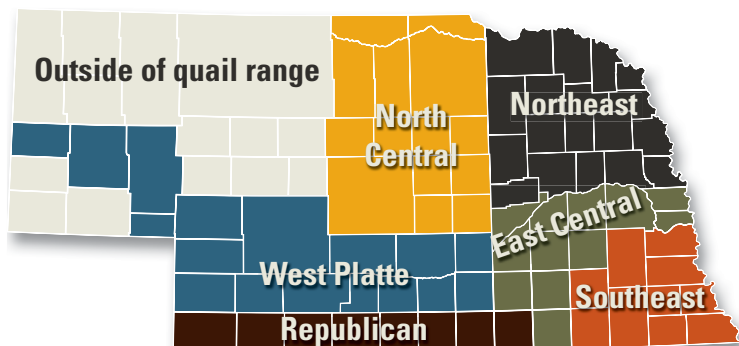
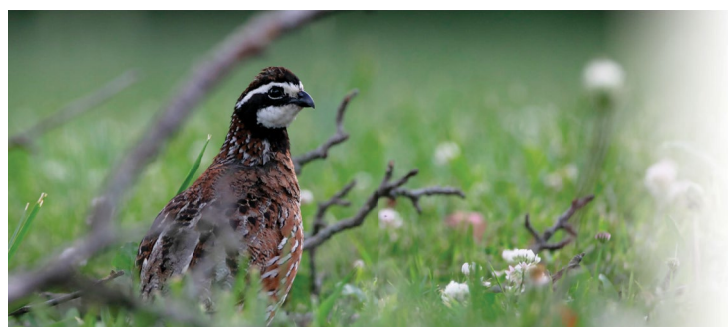


TABLE 2

\*Percent Change from:

Region	2022 RMCS	2022 Whistle Count Survey	5-yr Ave. Whistle Count Survey	Overall Abundance Rank (1=Best)	Top Counties (no particular order)
Southeast	+12	+25	+48	1	Gage, Jefferson, Johnson, Pawnee
East Central	-13	-4	+31	2	Butler, Seward, Thayer
Republican	+6	-17	-18	3	Franklin, Furnas, Harlan
Northeast	-17	-9	+19	4	Antelope, Pierce, Stanton
West Platte	-50	-15	-30	5	Gosper, Frontier, Lincoln
North Central	+57	-46	-31	6	Greeley, Howard, Sherman
Statewide	-9	0	+6		

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



# WHERE TO HUNT

## **Pheasants:**

Public hunting opportunities for pheasants generally are more abundant in southwest Nebraska and portions of the Panhandle. This occurs primarily on private lands enrolled in the Open Fields and Waters Program, and there is no shortage of acres. N-CORPE lands and several wildlife management areas surrounding irrigation reservoirs also support relatively 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 the Open Fields and Waters Program each fall, and those tracts will be displayed in the 2023-24 Stubble Access Guide and updated online.

Further west in the panhandle, clusters of CRP and tall wheat stubble enrolled in Open Fields and Waters throughout portions of Cheyenne, Deuel, Box Butte and Sheridan counties typically provide some of the best opportunities for pheasants.

Valentine and Crescent Lake national wildlife refuges also can support good numbers around wetland margins during 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 and grazing management; cover on these sites can be highly variable so pre-season scouting is recommended in planning your hunt.

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 highly recommended this fall as some areas were affected by prolonged drought. Emergency haying and grazing will affect cover on some CRP tracts located throughout the state, including some enrolled in OFW (Figure 3).

## **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 can be found on some of the region's many WMAs — especially those 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. Open Fields and Waters 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; 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 Corps 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:**

*(Sharp-Tailed Grouse and Greater Prairie-Chickens)*

For prairie grouse, it's hard to overlook the expansive blocks of native prairie on federal lands across the Sandhills, which include 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 good 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 Open Fields and Waters 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 portions of Hayes, Keith and Lincoln counties.

Some OFW lands in eastern Nebraska amidst some of the larger remaining complexes of grassland habitat provide some more limited opportunities for greater prairie-chickens; hunters are reminded that an East Zone grouse permit (free) must be obtained to pursue prairie grouse east of U.S. Highway 81.

## FIND A PLACE TO HUNT

Nebraska offers more than 1 million acres of public and privately owned lands that are accessible for public hunting.

Find these acres to hunt in the annually updated Nebraska Public Access Atlas, available at [OutdoorNebraska.gov](https://OutdoorNebraska.gov) or in the new Nebraska Stubble Access Guide, an atlas supplement, available in October 2023 at [OutdoorNebraska.gov](https://OutdoorNebraska.gov).

