

2024-25

# Nebraska's Upland Game Bird Hunting Outlook

The following forecast is based on spring and summer upland game population surveys, including the April and July Rural Mail Carrier Surveys and the Northern Bobwhite Whistle Count Survey. In addition, biologists from across the state provided input on regional weather events and habitat trends that may have affected populations. The summaries and field reports below reflect the best available information regarding bird numbers, weather conditions and habitat/access trends in Nebraska's six regions but should not be used to predict hunting conditions or local population densities at any single location within a region. Preseason scouting is highly encouraged to increase hunter success. For more information about upland game bird hunting in Nebraska or to view more detailed survey reports, please visit [OutdoorNebraska.gov](http://OutdoorNebraska.gov).

## STATEWIDE OVERVIEW

### Ring-Necked Pheasants



Drought and poor habitat conditions over the course of multiple years put heavy stress on pheasant populations in Nebraska. Relief from drought came in the late spring of 2023 to improve habitat conditions for the fall, but were too late to have much of an impact on nesting and brood production unfortunately. However, improved

habitat conditions come winter provided refuge to the heavy snows and frigid temps we saw in January. Aside from this spell in January, winter conditions were fairly mild and from improved results of spring surveys it appears that we had good winter survival and a stronger population going into the breeding season than the previous.

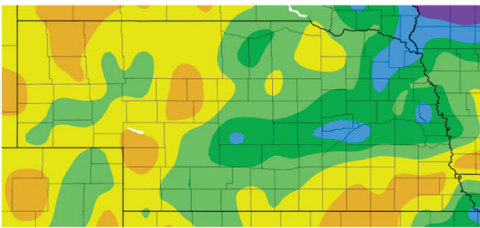


Figure 1. Departure from normal precipitation (inches) during the primary nesting season (May 1 - July 31, 2024) in Nebraska. \*Source: High Plains Regional Climate Center (hprcc.unl.edu)

Precipitation during 2024 has been average to above average for the majority of the state (Figure 1). With adequate amounts of rainfall and recent disturbance on most habitat acres we are seeing great forb responses and some terrific looking habitat for both nesting and brooding this year.

Observations from across the state this year have been of larger broods and more observations than the past few years where quality habitat is present. Grasshoppers and other insects appear to be very abundant this year, which provide a

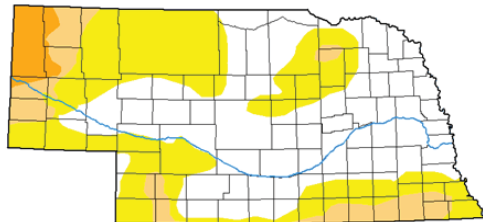


Figure 2. Nebraska drought conditions as of August 15, 2024. \*Source: U.S. Drought Monitor (droughtmonitor.unl.edu)

key food source for young chicks. With these observations and improved habitat conditions, it is looking like we will have successful year for production and should see increased numbers this fall.

Statewide pheasant counts during this year's July rural mail carrier survey increased 19% compared to 2023 (Table 1). According to surveys, the Panhandle and Southwest pheasant management regions should support some of the higher pheasant densities this fall, with increases of 22% and 41% respectively compared to 2023. All other management regions also saw increase this year compared to 2023, except for the Northeast, which decreased 19% but was comparable to both the five- and 10-year averages (Table 1). The Central and Southeast management regions also exceeded the five- and 10-year averages (Table 1). Pheasant habitat within these regions are more isolated, but where quality cover exists, hunters should find good pheasant hunting opportunities.

### Northern Bobwhites



Mild winter weather was seen for most of the quail range in Nebraska, except for a short spell where frigid temps and deep snow swept across most of the state. Results from spring and summer surveys show similar or increased numbers across the quail range except for the east central area.

Based on surveys and field reports it seems

winter survival was good this year and were able to carry over more birds into this year's breeding population.

Statewide, whistle count surveys were similar to counts in 2023 and above the five-year average. Increases were recorded for all management units except the east central area (Table 2). Fall populations will depend largely on production during the nesting and brooding seasons, and with the quality of moisture received this year the habitat conditions look good for nesting and brooding (Figure 1).

Brood reports are limited, as usual, but coming in of increased brood size. Observations of adult pairs and continued male calling throughout the summer are being reported. These are indications of additional and renesting attempts, which are often good signs.

According to surveys, the Southeast, East Central, and Republican management regions should support the state's highest quail densities.

### Prairie Grouse

(Sharp-Tailed Grouse and Greater Prairie-Chickens)

Breeding populations appear to have overwintered well as lek observations this spring and RMCS results indicate increases compared to 2023. Rangeland conditions across the grouse range have improved greatly compared to the past few years, and created quality nesting and brooding habitat for this year.

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 throughout the grouse range has produced great brood cover and a plentiful of insects.

Good production should help aid in the rebounding of grouse numbers. Hunters should expect to see improved habitat conditions and bird numbers this fall as range conditions continue to improve with 74% in fair to excellent condition.



# REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

## **Southwest District:**

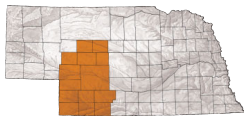
Intense drought has limited bird production and caused a severe impact on carryover populations for multiple years. Changes in weather last year and this are looking to have some impact though as pheasant counts in the Southwest were up 41% during this year's July RMCS, but still below the long-term average (Table 1).

Habitat conditions have improved immensely across the region as good moisture has been present the past year for most of the region. The amount of CRP fields affected by emergency haying and grazing this year should be minimal, leaving good cover for this fall. Range conditions also have improved this year and should provide good cover for greater prairie chickens as well.

This spring, severe weather did hit parts of the Southwest with severe thunderstorms and hail. Localized impacts from the storms could possibly be seen.

The far eastern part of the district appears to have maintained a better quail breeding population coming into the spring based off whistle count surveys. With this year's quality of habitat and brood observations biologist are optimistic that we will see better numbers this fall.

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



## **South Central District**

Pheasant numbers appear to be on the rebound in the district as increases were seen this year during the RMCS for both the central and southwestern management units within the district, 54% and 41%, respectively. Bird numbers remain below the long-term averages for both units, but near to above the five- and 10-year averages (Table 1).

Winter weather was mostly mild throughout the district aside from a cold snap in January with accumulating snowfall. This event doesn't seem to have been overly impactful as the results from spring whistle count surveys show increases across all management units in the district from 2023, and like increased results compared to the five-year average (Table 2).

With improving numbers for both pheasant and quail in the district things are looking to be lining up for improved hunting this fall. True impacts on what will come this fall relies on nest success and brood production.



Reports from the field have been of more brood sightings and of good sized broods.

Habitat is looking good with moisture received between last year and this year to provide good conditions for both nesting and brood rearing. Going into the fall habitat conditions should remain as previous year drought conditions have resided and minimal to no emergency haying and grazing should be seen across the district.

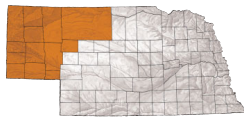
## **Northwest District:**

The Northwest remains as the area with our highest pheasant densities, according to the July RMCS. An increase of 22% this year over last shows signs of improvement for the areas, but it remains below both the five-year and long-term averages. The reduction of quality habitat for multiple years during the drought and a severe winter a year ago had some harmful impacts to the population, but this year's more mild winter and early moisture have bird numbers and habitat both looking better.

After receiving nice rains during early spring habitat conditions for nesting and brooding look good, but summer heat has parts of the region starting to face drought conditions (Figure 2). Hunters should plan for preseason scouting as some of the counties are deemed eligible for emergency haying and grazing of CRP lands due to drought status.

Bird numbers for the Panhandle are likely to still be below average this fall, but improved from last year. Reports from the field on broods are limited but better than the previous year.

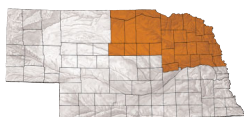
Grouse brood reports for the district have been good. The breeding population appeared up during early spring lek surveys, and increased observations of broods appears to be pointing towards good production. Brood reports have been more consistent and showing chicks of good age and brood size. Hunters should expect to see an increase 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:**

A drop was seen this year in the Northeast based on the July RMCS. Pheasant numbers were down 19% from 2023 and 33% from the long-term average, but like the five- and 10-year averages (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 pheasant hunting. Last fall, widespread haying and grazing of CRP



greatly reduced the amount of cover available for pheasants. Moisture in much of the district has curbed the drought status and the majority of the district shouldn't see affects this year from emergency haying and grazing. Preseason scouting is recommended as some fields may be affected though, including lands open to public hunting through the Open Fields and Waters program.

Winter weather conditions were fairly mild except for one short stint where we experienced frigid temps and deep snow. Impacts from this event seem to have been less detrimental to the quail than originally expected, and overall the population coming into the breeding season seems to be close to average (Table 2).

In the eastern Sandhills, prairie-chicken breeding populations were elevated this year based off early spring lek observations. With good 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 biologist as ranchers are out in the fields putting up hay and moving cattle. It is expected to see an average or close to average year this fall.

## **Southeast District:**

A mild winter was seen by most of the Southeast district and likely played favor in overwinter survival of birds. Pheasant numbers are up 45% from 2023 and above five- and 10-year averages (Table 1).

Quality pheasant habitat and hunting have become 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 continue to provide some the of the region's better pheasant hunting opportunities.

Quail also appear to have done well through the winter based off the spring whistle count surveys, especially in the central and southern portions of the district. In comparison to 2023, only a slight reduction was seen in the southeast management area, but a 31% decrease was seen in the east central management area. The southeast management area showed a 53% increase over the five-year average (Table 2).

Field reports have been good for the district. With improved weather conditions the habitat for both nesting and brooding are in good shape. 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:

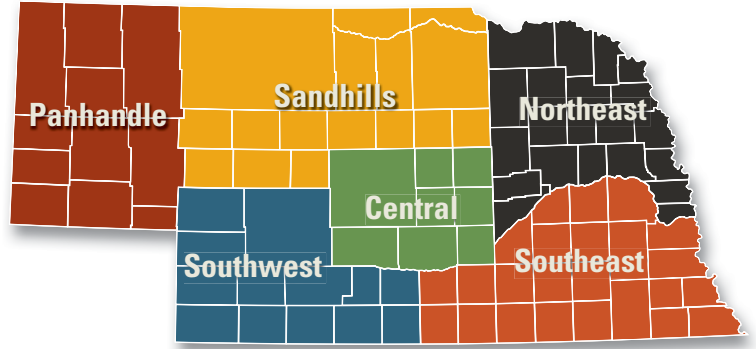


TABLE 1 \*Percent Change from:

Region	2023 July RMCS	5-yr Ave. July RMCS	20-yr Ave. July RMCS	Overall Abundance Rank (1=Best)	Top Counties (no particular order)
Panhandle	+22	-9	-11	1	Cheyenne, Box Butte, Morrill
Southwest	+41	-4	-36	2	Hitchcock, Gosper, Harlan
Northeast	-19	+1	-33	3	Antelope, Cedar, Dixon, Knox
Central	+54	+90	-11	4	Greeley, Howard, Sherman
Southeast	+45	+55	-31	5	Clay, Fillmore, Webster, York
Sandhills	+57	-65	-84	6	Blaine, Cherry, Grant
<b>Statewide</b>	<b>+19</b>	<b>+9</b>	<b>-30</b>		

## NORTHERN BOBWHITE SURVEYS:

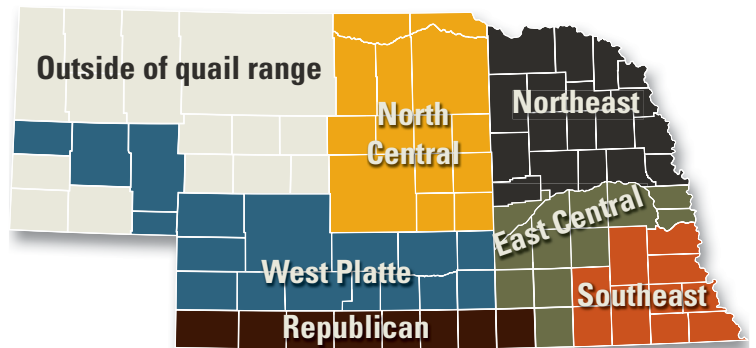


TABLE 2 \*Percent Change from:

Region	2023 RMCS	2023 Whistle Count Survey	5-yr Ave. Whistle Count Survey	Overall Abundance Rank (1=Best)	Top Counties (no particular order)
Southeast	+24	-9	+53	1	Gage, Jefferson, Johnson, Pawnee
Republican	+24	+5	-4	2	Franklin, Furnas, Harlan
East Central	-20	-31	-10	3	Butler, Seward, Thayer
North Central	+30	+32	+43	4	Greeley, Howard, Sherman
Northeast	+4	-6	+4	5	Antelope, Pierce, Stanton
West Platte	+8	+62	+2	6	Gosper, Frontier, Lincoln
<b>Statewide</b>	<b>+7</b>	<b>+1</b>	<b>+16</b>		

\* 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 are generally more abundant in southwest Nebraska and portions of the Panhandle. This occurs primarily on private lands in the OFW program. 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 30,000-plus acres of tall wheat and milo stubble and associated unfarmed pockets in OFW each fall, and those tracts will be displayed in the 2024-25 Stubble Access Guide and updated online.

Further west in the Panhandle, clusters of CRP and tall wheat stubble enrolled in OFW 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 preseason scouting is recommended.

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.

## **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. 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; 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, including the Nebraska National Forest (Bessey Ranger District), Samuel R. McKelvie National Forest, and the Crescent Lake and Valentine national wildlife refuges. These 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 sharptails 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 southwest 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 amidst some of the larger remaining complexes of grassland habitat provide some more limited opportunities for 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](http://OutdoorNebraska.gov) or in the new Nebraska Stubble Access Guide, an atlas supplement, available in October 2024 at [OutdoorNebraska.gov](http://OutdoorNebraska.gov).

