

Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Project №: W-15-R-80**Title of Job:** 2024 April Rural Mail Carrier Survey

Christopher Crowder, Data & Biometrics Program Manager

Bryan O'Connor, Upland Game Program Manager

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The 2024 April Rural Mail Carrier Survey was conducted 1-4 April 2024. We received 370 cards by 20 May 2024, of which 339 cards contained complete information necessary for processing. The results below (Tables 1–2) are based on the complete cards. Rural Carriers made observations while traveling 141,670 miles of rural roads in 85 of Nebraska's 93 counties.

Caveats. The April survey provides a snapshot of wildlife populations entering the breeding season and might not reflect conditions experienced by hunters the subsequent fall. Interpretations of percent change from previous year's indices and longer-term means are only meaningful in relation to the indices themselves. That is, when an index value is low, insignificant changes in the index from one year to the next translates into large percent changes but result in no observable difference in abundance within a region. For example, an increase in a species index from 0.01 to 0.02 animals observed per 100 miles is a 100% increase but would not likely be noticeable to hunters afield. Further, survey methodology does not allow for the estimation of population size or density, but rather only for trends in relative abundance through time. At a statewide scale, these indices are correlated with harvest and are, therefore, useful for forecasting.

Interpretations. Statewide indices for all species were similar to or slightly higher compared to the 2022 and 2023 survey. Regionally, indices were widely similar for most regions. In the Central region, indices were higher for pheasants and cottontails. In the Southeast region, indices were higher for turkey and cottontails but were lower compared to 2023 for pheasant. In the Panhandle region, indices were higher for pheasant but were lower to 2023 for cottontails and turkey. In the Sandhills region, indices were similar for cottontails but were higher for turkey and pheasant. In the Southwest region, indices were similar to 2023 for pheasants and higher for cottontails and turkey. Bobwhite indices were higher in the North-Central, Northeast, Republican, and Southeast regions in comparison to 2023.

Take Home Message. The results of this survey seem to indicate that game abundance should be in a good position going into the breeding season, but much will depend on the weather conditions during the breeding season and summer. Results from summer surveys, such as the bobwhite whistle counts and July RMCS will provide some insight into how the breeding season is going.

TABLE 1. Raw counts of pheasants, prairie grouse, wild turkey, cottontails, and jackrabbits from the 2024 April Rural Mail Carrier Survey by pheasant management region (Fig. 1).

Region	Carriers	Miles	Pheasants	Grouse	Turkey	Cottontail	Jackrabbit
Central	46	19,953	116	103	849	101	1
Northeast	74	32,010	145	9	378	121	13
Panhandle	41	15,266	181	11	265	57	10
Sandhills	26	10,460	31	56	429	23	1
Southeast	102	43,391	75	11	748	179	6
Southwest	50	20,590	182	60	1,256	120	4
Statewide	339	141,670	730	250	3,925	601	35

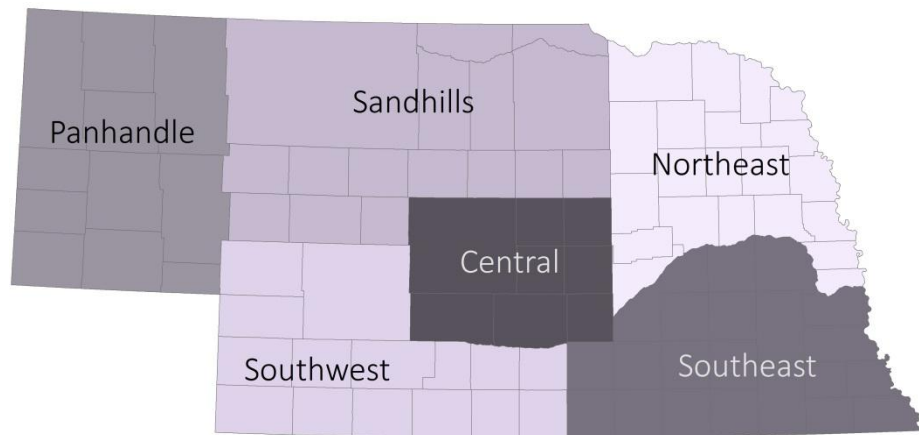
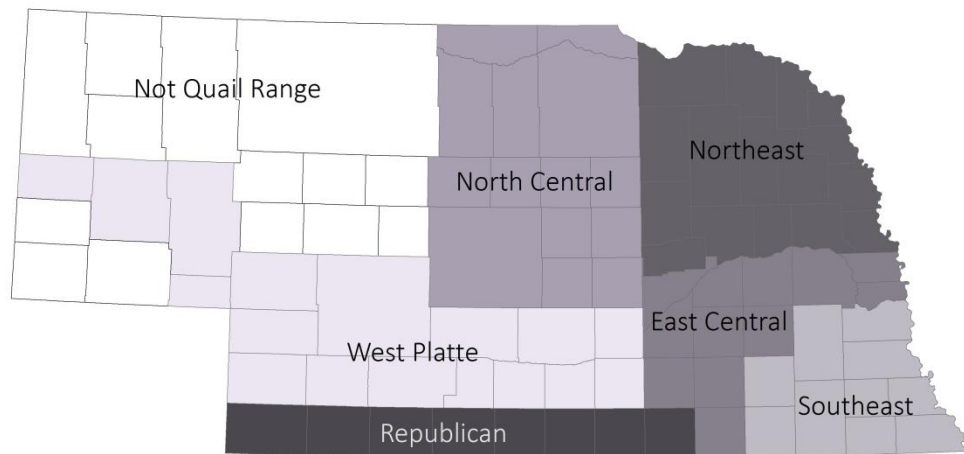
FIGURE 1. Pheasant Management Regions.

TABLE 2. Raw bobwhite counts from the 2024 April Rural Mail Carrier Survey by bobwhite management zones (Fig. 2).

Zone	Carriers	Miles	Bobwhites
East Central	61	24,530	10
North Central	45	20,129	85
Northeast	68	30,683	60
Republican	26	11,424	13
Southeast	36	15,530	11
West Platte	75	29,575	12
Not Quail Range	28	9,799	2
Statewide	339	141,670	193

FIGURE 2. Bobwhite Management Zones.

Results. Statewide indices were similar or higher for all species (Tables 3-6, Figs. 3-6). Regional indices were generally mixed for all species compared to 2023. A total of 70 rural carrier cards were returned with no observations on them (20.6%) which is lower than in 2023. Table 7 shows how many cards contained zero observations by species.

TABLE 3. Pheasant indices from the 2024 April Rural Mail Carrier Survey by pheasant management region (Fig. 1). Carrier means are weighted by miles traveled per carrier.

Region	Mean Pheasants per 100 miles & 90% Confidence Limits	Percent Difference from:			
		2023	Mean 2019-2023	Mean 2014-2023	Mean 2004-2023
Central	0.58 (0.39-0.77)	37	84	34	-20
Northeast	0.45 (0.02-0.87)	-7	-2	-8	-48
Panhandle	1.18 (0.71-1.65)	23	-24	-41	-44
Sandhills	0.29 (0.00-0.80)	56	-67	-69	-78
Southeast	0.17 (0.00-0.58)	-11	-21	-43	-72
Southwest	0.88 (0.43-1.33)	6	-40	-47	-61
Statewide	0.52 (0.44-0.58)	16	-22	-34	-54

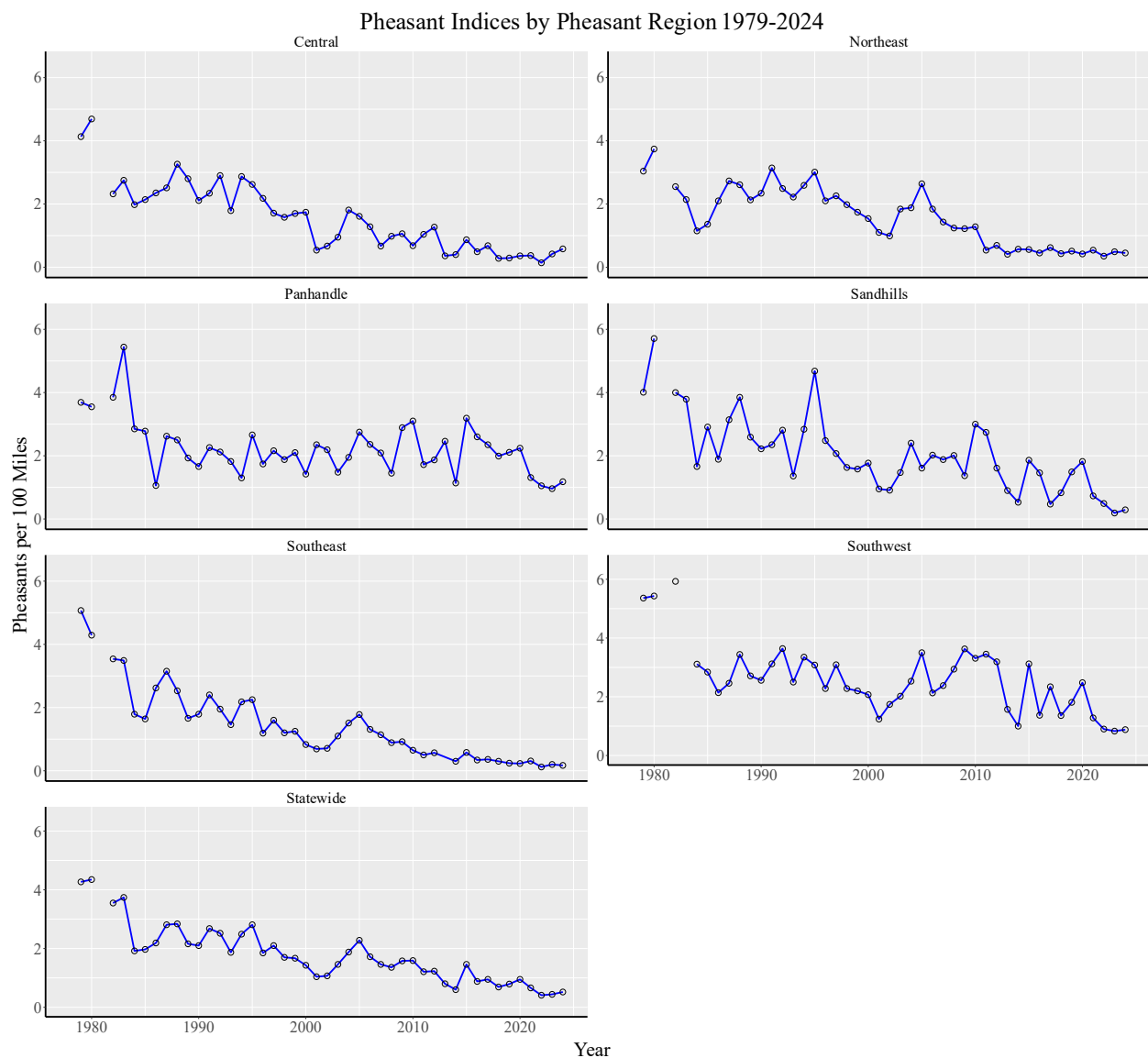
FIGURE 3. Regional and statewide time series (1979–2024) of pheasant population indices from the April Rural Mail Carrier Survey by pheasant management region (Fig. 1).

TABLE 4. Northern bobwhite indices from the 2024 April Rural Mail Carrier Survey by bobwhite management zone (Fig. 2). Carrier means are weighted by miles traveled per carrier.

Zone	Mean Bobwhites per 100 miles & 90% Confidence Limits	Percent Difference from:			
		2023	Mean 2019-2023	Mean 2014-2023	Mean 2004-2023
East Central	0.04 (0.00-0.15)	-45	-72	-71	-62
North Central	0.42 (0.14-0.70)	82	89	51	81
Northeast	0.19 (0.00-0.70)	38	240	295	198
Republican	0.11 (0.00-0.42)	265	-28	-37	-35
Southeast	0.07 (0.05-0.36)	89	-26	-55	-40
West Platte	0.04 (0.00-0.30)	-38	-2	-44	-45
Not in Range	0.02 (0.00-0.34)	NA	-53	-64	-61
Statewide	0.13 (0.08-0.18)	36	34	15	24

FIGURE 4. Regional and statewide time series (1979–2024) of bobwhite population indices from the April Rural Mail Carrier Survey by bobwhite management zone (Fig. 2).

TABLE 5. Cottontail indices from the 2024 April Rural Mail Carrier Survey by pheasant management region (Fig. 1). Carrier means are weighted by miles traveled per carrier.

Region	Mean Cottontails per 100 miles & 90% Confidence Limits	Percent Difference from:			
		2023	Mean 2019-2023	Mean 2014-2023	Mean 2004-2023
Central	0.50 (0.37-0.64)	17	25	10	-6
Northeast	0.37 (0.07-0.68)	-15	2	-5	-30
Panhandle	0.37 (0.04-0.71)	-11	10	3	-4
Sandhills	0.22 (0.00-0.58)	7	58	-11	-12
Southeast	0.41 (0.12-0.71)	12	4	-2	-18
Southwest	0.58 (0.26-0.90)	88	16	-2	1
Statewide	0.42 (0.37-0.47)	14	13	1	-13

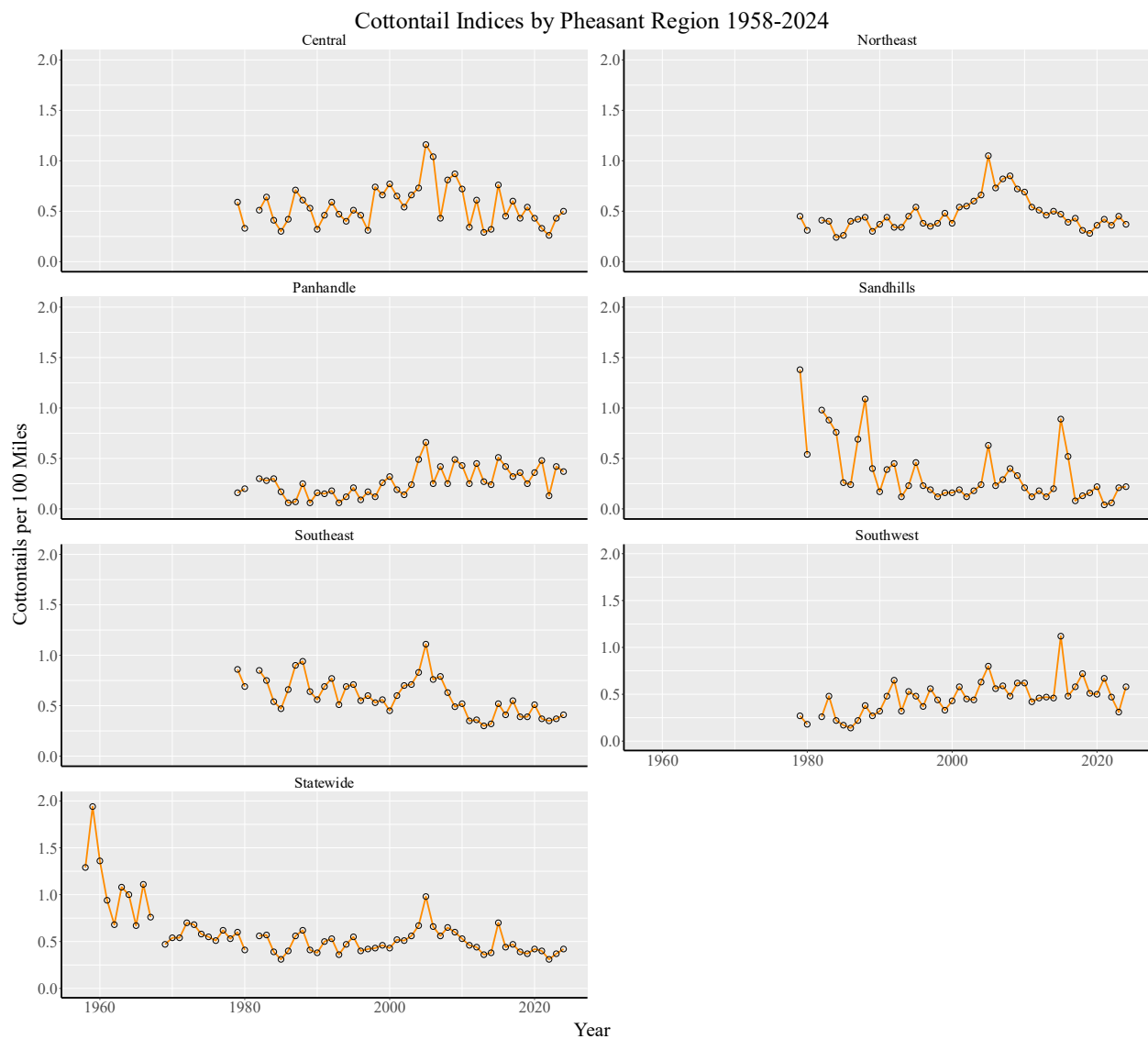
FIGURE 5. Regional and statewide time series (1958–2024) of cottontail population indices from the April Rural Mail Carrier Survey by pheasant management region (Fig.1).

TABLE 6. Wild turkey indices from the 2024 April Rural Mail Carrier Survey by pheasant management region (Fig. 1). Carrier means are weighted by miles traveled per carrier.

Region	Mean Wild Turkeys per 100 miles & 90% Confidence Limits	Percent Difference from:			
		2023	Mean 2019-2023	Mean 2014-2023	Mean 2004-2023
Central	4.25 (3.34-5.16)	1	14	1	-31
Northeast	1.18 (0.00-3.24)	-46	-47	-54	-53
Panhandle	1.73 (0.00-4.02)	-49	-27	-16	-7
Sandhills	4.10 (1.64-6.55)	17	-23	-31	-50
Southeast	1.73 (0.00-3.73)	14	-18	-25	-41
Southwest	6.09 (3.91-8.28)	54	-15	-31	-38
Statewide	2.77 (2.42-3.12)	1	-18	-27	-38

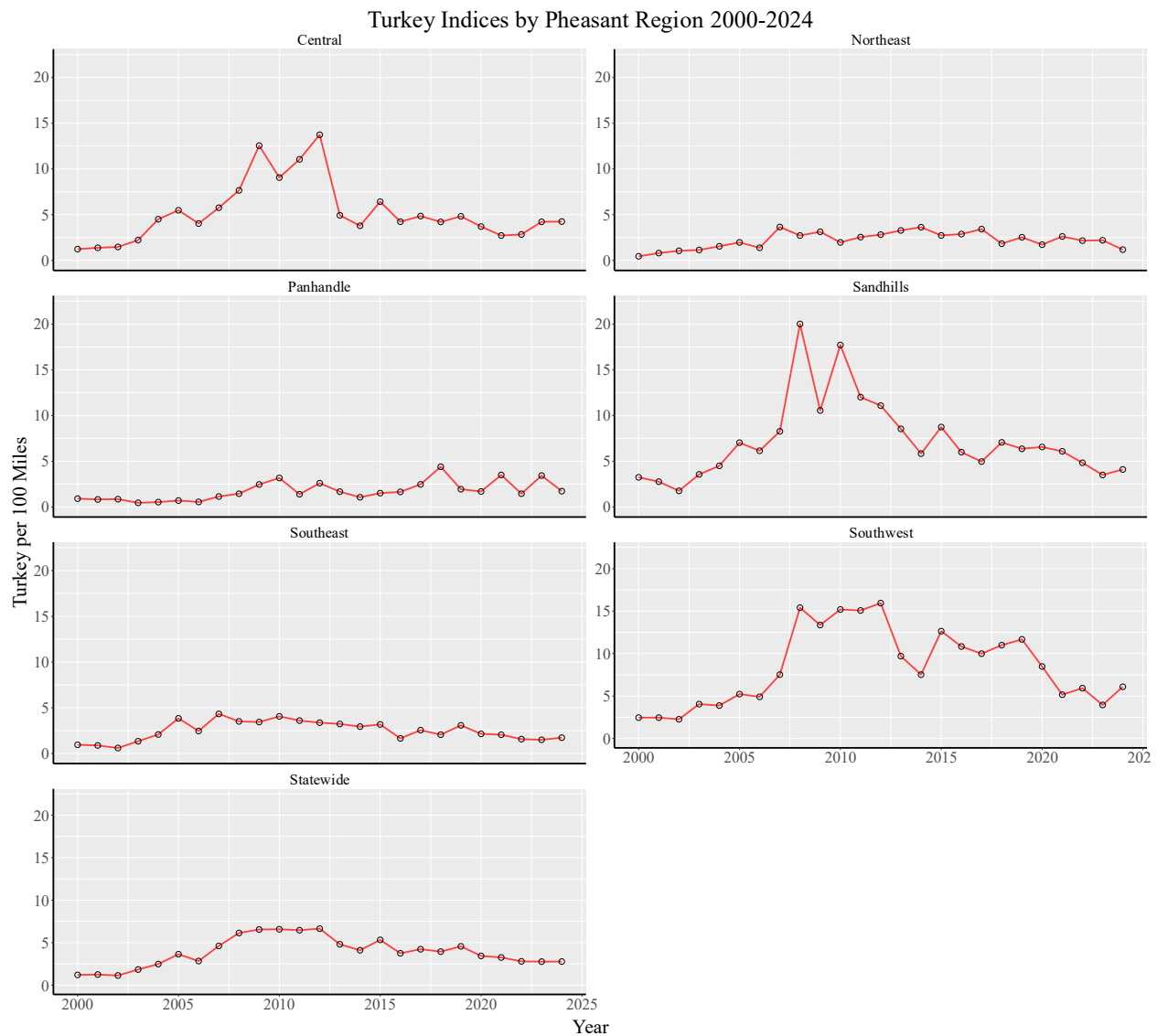
FIGURE 6. Regional and statewide time series (2000–2024) of wild turkey population indices from the April Rural Mail Carrier Survey by pheasant management region (Fig. 1).

TABLE 7. Number of cards and percent of total cards ($n = 339$) that contained zero observations by species. For the April 2024 survey, 21% ($n=70$) of cards contained zero counts for all species compared to the April 2023 survey in which 23.6% ($n=81$) of cards contained zero counts for all species. Percentages by species from the 2023 survey are reported for comparison.

	Pheasant	Quail	Grouse	Wild Turkey	Cottontail	Jackrabbit
Nº of Cards	189	312	298	155	179	323
Percent (2024)	56	92	88	46	53	95
Percent (2023)	57	94	87	45	62	95

We appreciate the time, support, and valuable information from all the mail carriers that participated in this survey.

Without the help from these carriers, this survey would not have been possible.

Thank you.