



2025-26

Nebraska's Upland Game Bird Hunting Outlook

NEBRASKA
- GAME PARKS -

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.

STATEWIDE OVERVIEW

Ring-Necked Pheasants



season survey results.

Precipitation across the state during 2024 was average to slightly above, especially during the summer growing season (Figure 1). Last year's moisture created good habitat conditions for the winter and this year's nesting. A dry and mild winter should have provided for good winter survival, which seems to be the case from early

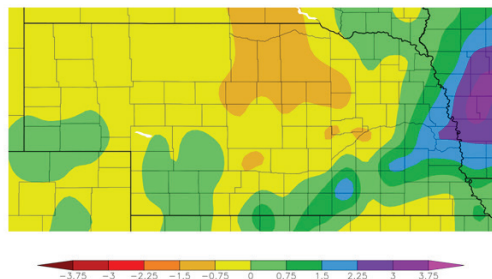


Figure 1. Departure from normal precipitation (inches) in Nebraska for January 1 - December 31, 2024. *Source: High Plains Regional Climate Center (hprcc.unl.edu)

This year started off dry during the spring, but followed up with above-average rainfall during the late spring and early summer months (Figure 2). Good moisture has created great-looking habitat across most of the state. Some severe weather, with hail or heavy rainfall, occurred during this time, which could have some localized impacts on production, but overall conditions were favorable for good production of birds.

Observations of broods from across the state this year have been frequent but seeing a good amount of variability in chick and brood sizes. Variability of size shows signs of some later nesting attempts likely due to the early weather events. Grasshoppers and other insects appear to be very abundant this year, which provide a key food source for young chicks. With these observations and improved habitat conditions it

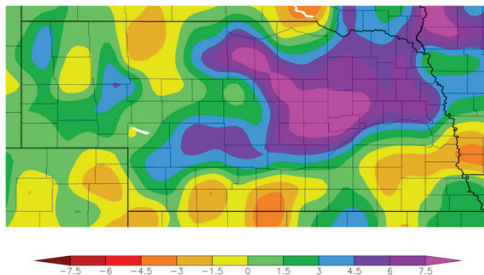


Figure 2. Departure from normal precipitation (inches) during the primary nesting season (May 1 - July 31, 2025) in

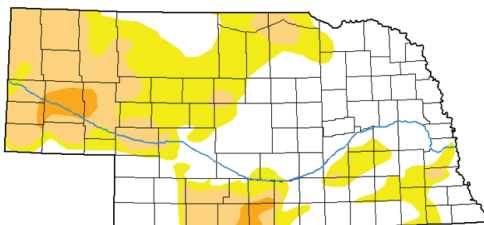


Figure 2. Nebraska drought conditions as of August 12, 2025. *Source: U.S. Drought Monitor (droughtmonitor.unl.edu)

is looking like we will have a successful year for production and should see increased numbers this fall.

Statewide pheasant counts during this year's April rural mail carrier survey increased 83% compared to 2024, and saw increases in all six pheasant management regions. However, statewide during our July rural mail carrier survey we saw a 12% drop compared to 2024, and mixed results at the management region scale (Table 1). According to surveys, the Panhandle and Southwest pheasant management regions should support some of the higher pheasant densities this fall. The Central, Northeast, and Sandhills management regions all saw increases this year compared to 2024. The Central management region also exceeded the five-year and 10-year averages, while the Northeast exceeded the 10-year average (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 this past year. Results from spring and summer surveys show similar or increased numbers across the quail range. Based on surveys and field reports it seems that 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 up compared to counts in 2024 and above the five-year average. Increases were recorded for all management units except the Northeast management 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 2).

Brood reports have been fairly frequent this year and of increased brood size. Observations of adult pairs and continued male calling throughout the summer are being reported. These both 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 2025 in the core grouse range. 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.



Continued on next page

According to field reports, production has been good across the majority 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 look good with 75% in fair to excellent condition.

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

Southwest District:

Good weather last year and this are looking to have some impact as pheasant counts in the Southwest were up 72% during this year's April mail carrier survey, and over 150% increase during spring crow count surveys.

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 have also improved this year and should provide good cover for greater prairie chickens as well.

The 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 good numbers this fall.

Overall, the outlook for the Southwest looks good based off of spring and summer surveys, but still below long-term averages. However, as wheat harvest finishes up and reports of birds are coming in, local biologist believe that production has been good this year and optimistic for a good year of hunting.

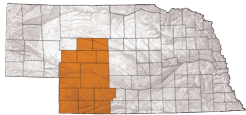
South Central District

Pheasant numbers appear to be improving in the district as increases were seen this year during the spring crow counts and April RMCS for both the central and southwestern management units within the district, 65 & 72% respectively. During the July RMCS a slight decrease was seen in the Southwest region but the Central region increased in comparison to 2024. Bird numbers still remain below the long-term averages for both units, but above the 5 and 10 year averages in the Central region (Table 1).

Winter weather was mostly mild throughout the district, which is showing to have helped carryover a good population into the spring. The spring whistle count surveys show increases across all management units in the district from 2024, and 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 due to moisture



received late spring and into the summer to provide good conditions for both nesting and brood rearing. Going into the fall habitat conditions should remain, but some counties may see some emergency haying and grazing due to drought conditions experienced earlier this year, especially further south in the district.

Northwest District:

The Northwest saw an increase of 23% for pheasants this spring during our April RMCS, indicating a good breeding population for this year. However, results from the July RMCS show a drop from last year and the area still remains under the long term averages. The district still holds some of our higher pheasant densities within the state.

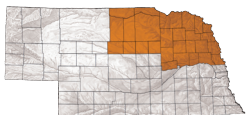
After receiving good rains this summer habitat conditions for brooding and this fall look good, but early drought conditions this year may affect cover this fall. Hunters should plan for preseason scouting as some of the counties are deemed eligible for emergency haying and grazing of CRP lands.

Bird numbers for the Panhandle are good and expecting to see improvement from last year. Reports from the field on broods are becoming more frequent and showing signs of a good hatch.

Grouse brood reports for the district have been good. The breeding population appeared up during early spring lek observations, 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 in grouse numbers over last year, and a good opportunity for hunting this fall.

Northeast District:

Pheasant numbers during the July RMCS were similar this year compared to 2024, along with both 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 opportunities. Moisture in much of the district has curbed the drought status from early this year and the majority of the district shouldn't see affects this year from emergency haying and grazing. Preseason scouting is recommend as some fields may be affected though, including lands open to public hunting through Open Fields and Waters.



Winter weather conditions were fairly mild this past year and quail breeding population numbers look to be similar to improved compared to 2024 according to surveys. Both the spring whistle count surveys and April RMCS show improvements in population over long-term averages (Table 2). The northeast district is the more northern extent of the quail range and above average numbers there are likely to be below core range averages.

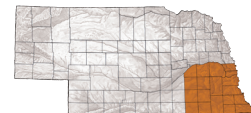
In the eastern Sandhills, prairie-chicken breeding populations were elevated this year based off early spring lek observations. With good range conditions and the high number of grasshoppers this spring and summer, optimism is shared by all that it will be a good production year. Reports of good sized broods are coming in from biologist as ranchers are out in the fields putting up hay and moving cattle. It is expected to see a good year this fall.

Southeast District:

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. Both April and July RMCS show a decline in pheasant population numbers compared to last year and the long-term averages (Table 1).

Quail appear to have done well through the winter based off the spring whistle count surveys, especially in the southern portions of the district. Compared to 2024, only a slight increase was seen in the southeast management area, but a 137% increase was seen in the east central management area. The Southeast management area showed a 41% increase over the five-year average as the East Central increased 102% (Table 2).

Field reports have been good for the district. With good moisture in the late spring/summer, 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:

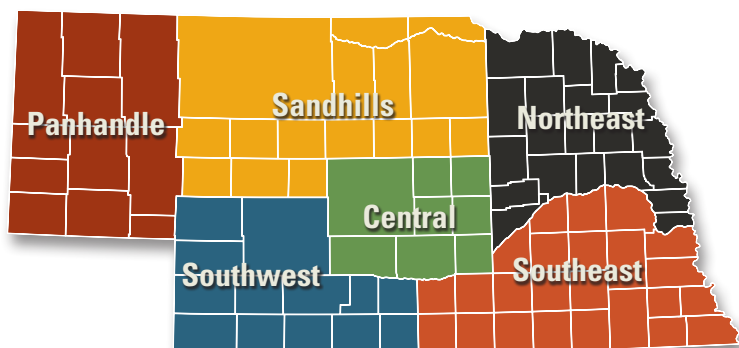


TABLE 1

*Percent Change from:

Region	2024 July RMCS	5-yr Ave. July RMCS	20-yr Ave. July RMCS	Overall Abundance Rank (1=Best)	Top Counties (no particular order)
Southwest	-8	-13	-47	1	Hitchcock, Red Willow, Furnas
Panhandle	-23	-33	-36	2	Cheyenne, Box Butte, Morrill
Northeast	+3	-4	-35	3	Antelope, Cedar, Dixon, Knox
Central	+9	+80	-10	4	Greeley, Howard, Sherman
Sandhills	+198	-47	-58	5	Blaine, Cherry, Grant
Southeast	-38	-19	-61	6	Clay, Fillmore, Webster, York
Statewide	-12	-9	-44		

NORTHERN BOBWHITE SURVEYS:

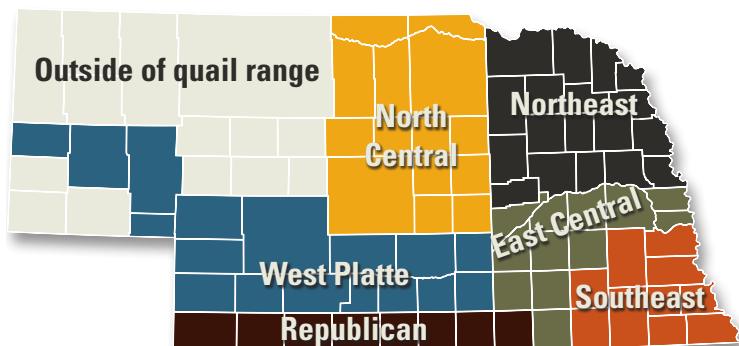


TABLE 2

Region	2024 RMCS	2024 Whistle Count Survey	5-yr Ave. Whistle Count Survey	Overall Abundance Rank (1=Best)	Top Counties (no particular order)
East Central	+21	+137	+102	1	Seward, Thayer
Republican	+27	+75	+82	2	Red Willow, Furnas, Harlan
Southeast	-54	+7	+41	3	Gage, Jefferson, Johnson, Pawnee
West Platte	+34	+60	+114	4	Gosper, Frontier, Lincoln
North Central	+37	+84	+144	5	Greeley, Howard, Sherman
Northeast	-56	-2	+11	6	Antelope, Pierce, Stanton
Statewide	-2	+38	+68		

* 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 are 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 30,000-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 2025-26 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 preseason scouting is recommended.

In the northeast, clusters of CRP enrolled in Open Field and Waters 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. 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 Open Fields and Waters 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 found 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 areas alone 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 Open Fields and Waters in Chase County, but hunters should not overlook opportunities found on nearby N-CORPE lands and Open Fields and Waters tracts found in portions of Hayes, Keith and Lincoln counties.

Some Open Fields and Waters 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 accessible for public hunting. Find these acres to hunt

in the annually updated Nebraska Public Access Atlas, available at OutdoorNebraska.gov or in the new Nebraska Stubble Access Guide, an atlas supplement, available in October 2025 at OutdoorNebraska.gov.

