

Briefs: Neb.
Man Harvests
Bighorn Sheep

LINCOLN, Neb. — Tyson Ritz of Waverly harvested a 1212-year-old bighorn sheep ram Saturday, Dec. 10, in Nebraska's Pine Ridge, according to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

It was the state's 17th bighorn hunt since 1998, and each has resulted in a harvested ram.

"It is a once-in-a-lifetime hunt that few people get the opportunity to do," said Todd Nordeen, Game and Parks northwest district wildlife manager. "It was an exciting opportunity for this individual to draw that permit and be successful."

Ritz, with Game and Parks staff guiding him, began the hunt in the Fort Robinson area at about 8 a.m. He spotted and bagged his trophy about 212 hours later. Ritz took his shot with a .30-06 rifle at 245 yards.

The bighorn weighed approximately 225 pounds. Nordeen said it likely lost weight during the rut, when amorous rams are constantly on the move in search of ewes.

Nordeen said about 10-20 percent of bighorn rams survive to the age of 1212 years.

Bighorn sheep were extirpated from Nebraska in the early 1900s because of habitat loss, disease and unregulated hunting. Game and Parks began reintroducing them in 1981, and the state today has a bighorn population of approximately 315.

Ritz was one of 1,762 applicants who paid \$25 to enter a lottery for the sheep permit, which was valid for one bighorn during the Nov. 29-Dec. 22 season. Revenue goes toward the state's bighorn management program.

The bighorn was the second and final one harvested during the season. The auction permit holder harvested a bighorn on Dec. 3.

Bald Eagle Success Story
Continues in Nebraska

LINCOLN, Neb. — A record 90 active bald eagle nests were observed in Nebraska during the 2011 breeding season, according to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. The previous record was 54 in 2007.

The state's first successful modern bald eagle nest was observed in 1991 in Douglas County. "The increase in the number of nesting bald eagles in the state over the past two decades is nothing short of remarkable," said Joel Jorgensen, Game and Parks nongame bird program manager.

While bald eagles have been increasing as a breeding species since 1991, this year's boost also is the result of additional surveying effort. "After a couple of years of less focus, we spent a few days surveying some areas that had not been checked for a few years," Jorgensen said.

Bald eagle nest monitoring is conducted and coordinated by Game and Parks but also relies on cooperating agencies and trained volunteers. Partners include National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Platte River Recovery Implementation Program and Nebraska Public Power District.

The bald eagle recovery is considered a modern conservation success story. It was listed as a federally and state endangered species in 1978. Populations declined greatly throughout the 20th century primarily because of the use of DDT and similar chemical pesticides. In 1963, there were fewer than 500 breeding pairs in the lower 48 states; today there are more than 10,000 breeding pairs.

Platte River SP Superintendent Sykes Passes Away

LINCOLN, Neb. — Roger Sykes, the first and only superintendent at Platte River State Park (SP), passed away suddenly Tuesday morning in an Omaha hospital following a brief illness. He was 66.

Sykes, a 43-year employee of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, became superintendent at the then-new Platte River State Park, located near Louisville, in January 1982. He was instrumental in development of the park and has been its steadfast steward.

"Roger was a wonderful ambassador of Nebraska parks," said Game and Parks Director Rex Amack. "His commitment to excellence and hospitality resonated throughout the agency. Our heart-felt sympathies go out to Roger's family."

Sykes was born May 19, 1945, in Beatrice. He was raised in Clatonia, where he graduated from high school in 1963. He received a bachelor's degree at Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln in 1968.

Sykes began his Game and Parks career in June 1968 as assistant superintendent at Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (SHP) at North Platte. He became superintendent at Fort Kearny SHP near Kearney in October 1970 before moving to Platte River SP in 1982.

OF THE OUTDOORS | GARY HOWEY

Pheasant Hunting: From The Start

BY GARY HOWEY
Hartington, Neb.

As a kid growing up in Watertown, I remember how folks were always talking about the great pheasant hunting in the Redfield area, as this was the place where pheasant hunting began, in South Dakota.

That's the reason, on opening day, Dad, with my brother and I tagging close behind, headed that way for the pheasant opener. On the way, we'd make a stop at Tinker Town, a small bar and grill to grab a burger and a soda, which was a real treat for us as going out to eat then meant going to my Grandparent's house, not to a place that actually sold food.

Neither my brother A.J. or I were old enough to hunt, but we were the closest things to a hunting dog Dad had, so our job was to chase up, find and to retrieve downed and running birds.

Back then, we always did well around Redfield and when we had the opportunity to film our Outdoorsmen Adventures television show there this year, I jumped at the opportunity.

Prior to this year's season, the South Dakota Game & Parks warned that bird numbers would be down this season, which didn't bother me a bit as I knew even if the numbers were down, there'd be more birds in the Redfield area than most of South Dakota as well as in other states.

Team member Larry Myhre, Sioux City, IA, and I rolled into the Redfield Super 8 around noon where we met Cathy Fink, Coordinator for the Redfield area Chamber of Commerce, Pat and Marti Thelen and over lunch, talked about the hunt as well as the game plan for our first afternoon hunt. It sounded as if we'd be hunting with a group of local hunters who had some great areas lined up.

Since we were both South Dakota natives, we were familiar with the Redfield area and as we headed out of town, we talked about the upcoming hunt and all the area had to offer.

Redfield, the Pheasant Capital of the World didn't get that honor by accident as it's one of the premier hunting locations in the state and located just outside of town is the where, in 1908 the first successful Chinese Ringneck Pheasants were released in South Dakota, which led to the first South Dakota pheasant-hunting sea-



Where it all began: Redfield — the home of the first successful pheasant stocking in South Dakota offers excellent pheasant hunting as these hunters from the Redfield, that hunted with the author during the filming of an Outdoor Adventures television segment can attest to.

PHOTO: LARRY MYHRE

Gary
HOWEY

son on October 30, 1919.

It was the fifth week of the pheasant season so we'd be hunting well-educated birds and would need a good size group to get close to the birds. As we pulled into the farm we'd start our hunt at to meet with the other hunters, several birds burst out of the shelterbelt leading into the place, it had to be a good omen, didn't it?

Our first push would be through a slough with hunters on either side working or winging approximately 15 yards out ahead of the walkers. I, my dog MoJo, Larry and several other hunters posted on the end, blocking, keeping the birds from running out ahead of the walkers and escaping into another field.

It didn't take us long to realize that this wasn't these folks first rodeo, they knew how to hunt as very few birds were able to get by them. As we tallied the birds at the end of the field, we were well on our way to a great day of South Dakota pheasant hunting.

Redfield unlike some of the other areas of the state where habitat has been converted to cropland, has excellent habitat including wetlands/sloughs giving wildlife

excellent cover, especially in the winter months, these along with public hunting areas and food plots planted by the landowners are a huge part of the reason wildlife population in the area have done so well.

Throughout the day, we worked our way through sloughs, grass and trees all of which held birds and at the end of the first afternoon's hunt we'd reached our 30-bird limit. After some quick photos, some good natured joking, story telling and refreshments, we headed back to town to get ready for the following days hunt.

Upon rising the following morning, it was obvious today's hunt would test even the best shooters skill as the wind, which the upper Midwest is so well known for, had arrived, blowing hard from the north which would give the pheasants a tremendous jump start once they were in the air.

Our first hunt on day two was just a stones throw away from historical marker commemorating the original release sight of the first pairs of pheasants.

Because of the high winds, once airborne, the birds were at Mach One in a heartbeat, with the shooters having to get a bead on them quickly, leading these

high flying birds way out in front, hoping if the shot wasn't right on that the birds would cross paths with the shot before winging off into the next township.

Even with the high winds our group of hunters fared well, finding good numbers of pheasants in each field, giving us the opportunity to bag the birds we needed.

The heavy wind we had to contend with made it a little tougher hunting than the day before, but we finished up with a limit of birds, had the opportunity to hunt one of South Dakota's best pheasant hunt areas, to make some new friends while revisiting a part of the state I hadn't seen since I was a kid, in an area that's a big part of South Dakota's pheasant hunting history, as this is where it all began!

For more information on the excellent hunting and other outdoor opportunities in the Redfield area, go to www.redfield-sd.com.

Gary Howey, Hartington, Neb. is a full-time outdoor communicator, President of Outdoorsmen Productions LLC and the Producer/Host of the Outdoorsmen Adventures television series, which can be seen on Fox, affiliates throughout the upper Midwest.

Mont. Aims To Cut Abuse Of Disabled Hunter Permits

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — Montana wildlife regulators suspect more and more people are faking disabilities to take advantage of privileges granted to disabled hunters, so they want to remove one of those perks in hopes of curbing abuse.

Permits to hunt from a vehicle, called PTHV permits, are given to Montana hunters with certain disabilities certified by a doctor, chiropractor, nurse or physician's assistant. The permit allows a disabled person who can't get around without assistance to hunt from a self-propelled or drawn vehicle.

In some prime hunting areas, those permit holders are allowed to drive along roadways normally gated and closed to all other vehicles. They are also allowed to shoot cow elk without buying an additional antlerless elk license, even in some areas where licenses aren't available to the general public.

That kind of access has led to abuse of the permits by apparently healthy hunters, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks officials said.

"Most of what we see is people utilizing the permit as an opportunity or a resource to be able to take an antlerless elk," said James Kropp, the FWP's chief of law enforcement. "They're a long way from their vehicle dragging elk off the mountain unassisted, really in a

situation the permit was not designed for."

As of Monday, 9,188 lifetime PTHV permits have been issued, according to FWP. The result has been a reduction in the number of cow elk in some areas, such as the Bitterroot Mountains in southwestern Montana, said FWP commission chairman Bob Ream.

"The population is being knocked back because of the substantial cow harvest in certain districts," Ream said.

But even when they encounter instances of apparent abuse, it's usually difficult for wildlife officials to penalize a person who holds a valid permit without putting them in the awkward position of deciding whether a person is disabled.

"Given the fact that these are signed off by a medical physician, it's not really our judgment to determine whether they are or they aren't," Kropp said.

Ream and his fellow commissioners gave initial approval Friday to a plan that would ban holders of the special permit from shooting shoot cow elk with just a general big-game permit.

The ban, which was originally proposed by a disabled hunter's group out called Blackfoot Access Group, aims to curb the problem by taking away one of the biggest incentives for abusing the program.

"You've got so many people who scam their way into getting

a PTHV because of these incentives," said George Hirschenberger, a retired Bureau of Land Management program manager who works with the Blackfoot Access Group. "We're not asking for that privilege to go away, we're asking the commission to suspend the privilege until the PTHV is back under control."

Hirschenberger said he saw evidence of the abuse in the sheer number of people without apparent disabilities who would arrive at his BLM office and at other BLM and U.S. Forest Service offices seeking keys to open the gates of the roadways closed to all but the PTHV permit holders.

"If this guy can walk from his car to the front desk without a problem, what is the reason for him to have a PTHV?" Hirschenberger asked.

Ream said he hopes the ban will be a temporary measure that lasts just until the Legislature tightens the criteria to qualify for the permits, a cause the Blackfoot Access Group plans to lobby for during the 2013 legislative session.

The permit qualifications are set in state law. A person must be dependent on an oxygen device, wheelchair, crutch or cane, or else be an amputee above the

wrist or ankle. The last qualifying clause is that a person must be unable to walk unassisted for 600 yards over rough terrain while carrying 15 pounds within an hour and be unable to handle or maneuver up to 25 pounds.

"That last clause — that's ridiculous," Ream said. "It needs to be more medically based than that. And secondly, it shouldn't be a lifetime permit."

That last category is where the biggest spike in PTHV applications comes from, and those applications have been rising since 2008, when the commission allowed permit holders to hunt cow elk without a license, FWP spokesman Ron Aasheim said.

In 2005, before the change, 564 new permits were issued to disabled hunters who cited that qualifying condition. In 2009, the year after the change, 943 new permits citing that condition were issued, Aasheim said.

The proposed ban, which is now out for public comment before a final decision will be made in February, has been endorsed by hunters' groups in Helena and Missoula.

"This proposal will return respect for the disabled hunters program," said Rod Bullis of Helena Hunters and Anglers.

Custer SP
Names New
Superintendent.

CUSTER STATE PARK — Matt Snyder has been selected as the new superintendent of Custer State Park. Snyder begins his duties Dec. 19, succeeding Richard Miller, who is retiring after 11 years with the park, the last seven years as superintendent.

"Matt's extensive experience in park management and as the operations manager for the state park system will serve him well at Custer," said State Parks Director Doug Hofer. "His knowledge of business practices, experience in concession management and ability to work with partners made him an ideal choice to lead the park."

For the past four years, Snyder has been the manager at Itasca State Park, Minnesota's oldest and one of its largest state parks with over 32,000 acres and more than 100 lakes. Snyder served as the South Dakota State Parks' Assistant Director of Operations for eight years before taking the role at Itasca near Lake Preston.

Snyder was born in Carroll, Iowa. He received his Park Management Degree from South Dakota State University and a Masters Degree from Michigan State in Natural Resources Administration and Policy.

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