

OUTDOORSUPDATE

OF THE OUTDOORS:

Grouse Season Just Around The Corner

BY GARY HOWEY
Hartington, Neb.

You can feel it, before you ever start to see it? It's in the air, the cool brisk temperatures and the breeze that will soon bring the cold weather into the Midwest.

Mojo my hunting dog knows it's here; he now has a lot more energy and more bounce in his step when I let him out for his run at night!

Once I told him to come to me, he came out of the kennel on a dead run. He had his nose to the ground, his tail high in the air and after a couple of laps around the yard, he ran to the back of the pickup and sat there, waiting to go hunting.

You didn't need to look at a calendar to know that fall was in the air. You can feel it.

With the arrival of September outdoorsmen and women know that hunting season is here.

The first game bird season to open was the Dove season, which opened Sept. 1, which gave hunters an opportunity to get a little shooting in early.

It won't be long before the sharp tailed grouse/prairie chicken season will open.

The closely related sharp-tailed grouse and prairie chicken are native birds and can be found throughout the prairies of Nebraska and South Dakota.

The Sharp-tailed have a fairly short tail feathers that appear pointed because the two center feathers are longer and darker than the rest of the tail feathers, thus their name. The Prairie Chickens has a short, dark and rounded tail.

Another means of distinguishing the difference between the grouse and chicken would be their feet and legs. Grouse has a feathered leg down to the feet while the chicken's leg is featherless and yellow in color.

In South Dakota the season, which is opens statewide, begins on Sept. 18, 2010 and runs through Jan. 2, 2011 with a daily limit of 3 and a possession limit of 15.

Hunters in South Dakota who hope to bag a prairie chicken would do best to hunt the south-central part of the state as they can find mixed Sharp Tails east of the Missouri River and west of the Missouri south to the Missouri River.

There will be scattered coveys of



PHOTOS: GARY HOWEY
ABOVE: Prairie Chickens tail feathers are more rounded than that of a Sharp-tailed Grouse. These birds are going through their courtship ritual on their Lek near Hartington, Neb.
RIGHT: Sharp-tailed Grouse as their name indicates, has tail feathers that come to a sharp point. These grouse were filmed on a Lek near Mullen, Neb.



grouse on public lands east of the Missouri, but the best hunting will be farther west farther west. In western South Dakota, sharp Tails are present but not as abundant as in the west central part of the state.

In Nebraska the season is divided into two zones the East Zone that is open from Sept. 18 - Jan. 31, 2011. This zone is east of U.S. Highway 81 and requires a special permit. Four hundred of these permits were made available beginning August 1.

Requests for these permits had to be made by mail, or by phoning (402) 471-5597 or they could be obtained at the Commission headquarters in Lincoln.

The daily bag limit for the east zone is three with a possession limit of three.

The West Zone, which is West of U.S. Highway 81 opens and closes the same as the east zone with a daily bag limit of 3 and a possession limit of 12.

Like most other wildlife that lives on the prairie, they depend on their eyesight and hearing for safety.

Grouse will be found in areas where they're able to see danger approaching. At times it will be an area with the thinnest cover as this gives them the ability to spot danger at a distance.

Since they inhabit the prairie, where it's always windy, look for grouse out of the wind on the downwind side of a ridge or hill.

Grouse will move into thick cover to get out of the sun and I've located them resting under cedar trees or in shelterbelts on very warm sunny days.

If you're hunting on a day that's very warm, especially during the early season, look for the birds near stock tanks, ponds or any location with easy access to water.

The edges of irrigated alfalfa fields are also good bets for grouse as alfalfa is a good food source for the birds and the irrigation systems wheel tracks generally hold enough water to quench their thirst.

If you plan on hunting grouse and prairie chicken be prepared to walk as these birds are found in larger coveys in native grassland areas and are jumpy.

It's nothing unusual for serious hunters to walk miles in pursuit of these birds.

This is another hunt where a good hunting dog is a huge plus.

For those of you that don't have a whole lot of experience hunting grouse, you'll need to know that these birds are much different from other gamebirds.

Unlike their cousins, the pheasant and

quail, which inhabit heavy cover, the grouse is a creature of the prairie.

I've found an excellent way to locate grouse is by carefully checking the field over using my field glasses, as grouse will usually have a sentry or two with their heads protruding above the grass keeping an eye out for danger.

As a friend of mine once said, "what you want to look for are the sentries. They always have one or two keeping an eye on things, so look for something out there that resembles a bowling pin, which is probably the sentries long neck protruding above the cover."

When hunting grouse and chickens, you won't need a heavy game load to hunt as 7? shot works well during the early season. Early season birds have a tendency to hold longer before flushing, as many of the birds are the young of the year.

Later on in the season, once the birds have been pressured, a 6 shot gives you a little more knock down power at longer range as the birds are more apt to flush wild.

Hunting grouse can be demanding sport, as long walks are common unless you spot the birds before you go after them.

Once grouse and chicken flush, it's not uncommon for them to pump and glide into the next section or even several sections before landing. This is especially true during the late season.

When hunting grouse or any gamebird during warm weather with dogs, you need to be sure that you bring along plenty of water for both yourself and the dog.

When it's warm, I carry a sports squeeze bottle in my vest and water the dog often.

If you like dark meat, then grouse will be right up your alley. It tends to be a bit dry if over cooked, so it's best when cooked to what I call medium rare.

Grouse hunting is a great way to get out into the states prairies and grasslands to hunt prior to the pheasant opener.

It's also an excellent way to get yourself and your dog in shape for your next hunt.

Gary Howey, Hartington, Neb., is the producer/host of the award winning *Outdoorsmen Adventures* television series available in the upper Midwest on Fox and other TV networks as well as on www.MyOutdoorTV.com. For more information on the outdoors check out www.outdoorsmenadventures.com.

OUTDOOR REPORT

Sight-In Days Set For Sharpshooters Range

The Yankton Sharpshooters will be holding our annual public sight-in days on Sept. 19 and Oct. 10 at the range 5 miles west of Wal-Mart on Highway 50 and 2 1/2 miles north on the Utica oil road.

If you have a firearm that needs to be sighted in for the upcoming hunting seasons, you are encouraged to attend. Benches, rests and targets are provided. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. both days. See a range officer before removing your guns from your vehicle.

SD GF&P Offers Decoys For Checkout

SIJUX FALLS — The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks office (GFP) in Sioux Falls has launched a new decoy checkout program just in time for hunting season.

Beginning immediately, four duck and goose decoy kits are available for hunters. The kits include combinations of goose shells, and duck and goose floaters. A deposit fee is required at checkout, and the kit must be returned within five business days.

Visit the GFP Regional Office at 4500 South Oxbow Ave. in Sertoma Park to check out a kit. For more information, call 605-362-2700 or log on to gfp.sd.gov.

Watchable Wildlife Conference Set For Oct. 5-7

LINCOLN, Neb. — Wildlife and nature tourism will be the focus of the Watchable Wildlife Conference on Oct. 5-7 at the Kearney Holiday Inn. The public is invited to attend.

This year's program features sessions concentrating on wildlife tourism development and management programs, wildlife viewing site development and natural resource conservation management. Hear the leading professional wildlife managers, business owners, and authors in the field of wildlife and nature tourism.

Visit <http://www.watchablewildlife.org/conference/register.htm> to register for the conference. Call the Kearney Holiday Inn for lodging at (308) 237-5971.

Corps To Build Three New Sandbars Complexes For Habitat

OMAHA, Neb. — The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Missouri River Recovery Program plans to construct three emergent sandbar habitat complexes totaling up to 75 acres in the Missouri River. The complexes will be located at:

- River mile 757,
- River mile 759, roughly four miles upstream of Ponca State Park, and
- River mile 789.6 near Wynot, Neb.

These sandbars are being constructed for use as nesting and foraging habitat by two species of birds on the Federal Endangered Species List. The birds, the interior least tern and the piping plover, use sparsely vegetated, inter-channel sandbars from April until the end of August to nest, lay eggs, and rear their young before flying south in late summer.

Construction will begin in mid to late September with all work scheduled to be complete by April 15, 2011; the date typically associated with the birds' arrival back on the Missouri River in the spring.

The Corps is required to provide habitat for the interior least tern and the piping plover under the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's amended 2003 Biological Opinion on the Operations of the Missouri River main stem system.

Prior to the construction of the dams on the Missouri River, sandbars were more abundant in the river than they are today, owing to the meandering river and the significantly wider, uncontrolled floodplain.

Construction of the federally authorized Bank Stabilization and Navigation Project along with

reservoir operations have altered the flows on the system so that little new sandbar habitat is formed naturally and the existing habitat on the system is prone to erosion and vegetation encroachment.

The Corps works in conjunction with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and the States of Nebraska and South Dakota when choosing sites for sandbar construction.

Two of the main selection criteria used when choosing sandbar construction sites are historical usage of the area by the birds and natural sand accumulation within the area. There are already large, submerged sand deposits in each of the three proposed construction locations that the Corps intends to build into habitat available for the birds during

their nesting season.

This year, construction of the sandbars will be accomplished using a new method that will take advantage of the expected high releases out of Gavins Point Dam this fall.

Instead of using the traditional construction methods of excavating sand with hydraulic dredges or excavators and piling the sand to form sandbars, the Corps intends to use large sand-filled tubes called geotubes to slow down the water and cause sand to deposit and form sandbars immediately downstream of the structures. The tubes will be filled with sand from the bed of the river adjacent to the site.

To find out more information about the Missouri River Recovery Program, visit morriver-recovery.org.

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Going Fishing And Catching A Hurricane On Vacation

BY CANDUS THOMSON
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CHAPPAQUIDDICK ISLAND, Mass. — Vacation began in a washing machine and stayed there for three days.

At least that's how it felt when a nor'easter pulled up at our little island seven miles off the Massachusetts coastline and parallel-parked over the neighborhood. When it wasn't dropping reservoirs of water on our heads and roofs, it was driving stinging droplets into any opening in our raincoat.

Instead of being on the water nearly every waking hour, as planned, fishing buddy Bev Aaron and I tied and retied everything in our tackle boxes. During one lull — I think it was a spin cycle — he dashed out to Wasque Point and hauled an 8-pound bluefish out of the surf for supper. A clamming expedition produced enough bivalve material for a pot of chowder simmered to perfection by his wife, Esther.

And then we waited to be air-dried and fluffed back to normal. Two weeks of downtime ended Friday as it began — in the water, not on the water — with Earl huffing and puffing and nearly blowing our little rental into the ocean.

The storm chased us off the island a day early, but that's the pact you make with nature when you have your heart set on being outdoors. New England weather punishes and rewards, sometimes on the same day but often before the week is out, just as sure as Indian summer follows the first frost.

Unfortunately, between storms,

the fish did not get the word that the coast was clear, even though the air turned crisp, the breeze took on the feel of fall, and the sky and ocean water turned a dazzling blue not found in any paint store.

We caught a Wiffle ball and a small plastic shovel, minus plastic pail and child. Bev landed a pair of filleting gloves, price tag still attached. I hooked my foot. Those were the highlights.

It didn't matter what we threw into the water: pontoon-shaped Roberts Lures created by an avid on-island angler; Deadly Dicks, icicle-like metal swimmers imported from Canada that almost always attract stripers and blues; bright yellow bucktails from Maryland.

Topwater bugs and plastic eels failed, too. We rejected underwater explosives, figuring the president's bodyguards wouldn't be too keen on loud noises so close to the summer White House.

All we had to show for days of casting and cranking were schoolies and dinks.

With the Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby just weeks away, everyone is hoping the waters cool and bite turns red-hot.

The five-week derby, founded in 1946, is a huge deal. It survived the striped bass fishing moratorium in the 1980s by featuring other species and now attracts about 2,000 competitors each year. The prize money is nice, but the real reward is being known as the top angler on an island with a rich fishing history.

The competition was the subject last year of a terrific book by David Kinney, "The Big One: An

island, an Obsession, and the Furious Pursuit of a Great Fish," that was snapped up by the DreamWorks studio.

For once, it would be nice to see a fishing movie that doesn't involve a crazy captain, a big storm and violent deaths (Gregory Peck, meet George Clooney).

So where have the Martha's Vineyard stripers gone? Tackle shop theories abound, some of them involving "greedy" anglers to the south who slam migrating stripers in spring and again in winter (Note to self: Put mud on the front license plate before pulling into the parking lot).

Another theory, being spun by an earnest employee behind the counter, involves stripers taking a shortcut through the Cape Cod Canal just to the north and bypassing Martha's Vineyard.

Interesting. Creative, even. Except that the canal was built in 1916 and if all the big fish were going to change course, they probably would have done so by the dawn of the Harding administration.

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