



To be successful, you need to have a game plan for your hunt.

conditions that push damp birds, both young and old, into the open to dry off. As a result, they're simply easier to observe during roadside counts. Last summer, however, ideal mornings where more birds would be searching for sunshine to dry off were few and far between. In other words, the conditions were very poor for counting pheasants, which likely contributed to the downturn in the survey's findings.

A good example of the disparity between pheasant counts and the actual population can be found when you compare the SDGFP's 2016 brood survey info from different survey routes in northeastern South Dakota near Aberdeen, a traditional pheasant hunting hotspot about a half-hour north from my home. Each year, SDGFP runs its annual brood survey in the Aberdeen area along 14 routes in Brown, Marshall, Day, Edmunds, Faulk and Spink counties. Across the routes, an average of 1.84 pheasants per mile were observed in 2016, which was down 43 percent from 2015's average of 3.22 pheasants observed.

"We have three survey routes that go through Brown County alone," said Travis Runia, senior upland biologist for SDGFP. "Two of those routes were actually higher than 2015 numbers."

He said a route located in the southern

part of Brown County showed a significant decrease from 2015, which led him to believe the area's actual pheasant population in 2016 was actually much more stable than the numbers indicated, given the fact two of the routes in the same county showed an increase.

Evidence of a stronger pheasant population in Brown County was also apparent this spring, according to Aberdeen-based Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologist Emmett Lenihan. Prior to the peak pheasant-nesting season, which is mid-May to mid-June in northeastern South Dakota, Lenihan said he was surprised at the number of birds he was seeing in Brown and Day counties.

"Going into the nesting season we were looking pretty good — everybody was seeing birds everywhere if there was habitat available," he said. "Seeing the number of birds around was quite a positive change from where we were three or four years ago. Back then, it was hard to even find a dead pheasant on the road this time of year. So, things are turning around, and maybe we can keep them going in the right direction."

There is no doubt the overall population is not as high as it was a decade ago. But I am of the opinion that too many people don't keep the larger

picture in mind. Simply stated, we have birds, and plenty of them.

However, this doesn't mean a limit of pheasants will be stuck in your grille soon after you cross state lines into the Dakotas. After all, pheasant hunting is a participation sport, and the more you and your dogs are willing to work, the better your results will be.

WHERE TO GO

Portions of the Dakotas had a higher-than average snowfall this past winter. The severe conditions put a dent in some localized pheasant populations, so keep that in mind if you're planning a pheasant hunt.

In North Dakota, record snowfall amounts had wildlife officials fearing the worst in certain locations.

"Everywhere in the state had snow and was cold, but I would say the central part of the state and the southwest corner had it really bad," said Rodney Gross Jr., upland game biologist for NDGF. "In the Bismarck area we set a record for snowfall in December, and down in the Bowman County area in the southwestern corner of the state they said it was really bad, too."

Despite the harsh conditions, Gross said the pheasant population seemed to rebound heading into spring.

"I think pheasants made it through better than we all thought," he noted. "Toward the end of January and in February we had a reprieve and an early warmup that helped them out. We did lose some birds, but I don't think it's as bad as we all were thinking."

He said the traditional pheasant belt in southeastern North Dakota, primarily from Jamestown south toward the towns of Oakes, Ellendale and Ashley, didn't have as harsh of a winter.

In addition to a number of federal Waterfowl Production Areas and other public hunting opportunities, southeastern North Dakota also traditionally sees high enrollment in its Private Lands Open to Sportsmen (PLOTS) program. Statewide, the program provides about 730,000 acres of walk-in hunting opportunity to hunters on an annual basis. PLOTS acres change yearly, so take care to grab the latest PLOTS guide from a NDGF office or download map sheets

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