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PHEASANT...Continued

from the department website. The maps are also available on mobile devices or via Garmin GPS download.

Above-average snowfall hit north-central and northwestern South Dakota, as well, but Runia said the arrival of above-average temps in January and February eased the pressure pheasants were feeling. He said that most of South Dakota saw above-average snowfall, but that it was not severe enough to have a major effect on the pheasant population.

There is a shift occurring as to where pheasants are flocking in South Dakota. For years, the pheasant triangle of Lyman, Tripp and Gregory counties in the south-central portion of the state held the highest populations and the highest hunter success rates. In fact, harvest totals from those three counties alone are higher than Iowa's total harvest.

While this three-county region, which includes famous pheasant destinations such as Winner, Burke and Gregory, still merits consideration, two river valleys are becoming more and more popular, largely because of the amount of public land they contain.

The James River valley, for example, has added walk-in opportunities in the form of the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. In South Dakota, CREP lands are open to public hunting and are unique to the James River's watershed in the eastern half of the state. There are currently more than 110,000 acres are enrolled in the program that can be found stretching from near the North Dakota border north of Aberdeen all the way south to where the "Jim" River meets up with the Missouri River.

The Missouri River valley has long been a destination for Canada goose hunters, but with the expansion of row crops pushing farther west, pheasants have moved into the big river valley for good. In addition to public lands owned or managed by the state, Army Corps of Engineers ground that abuts the reservoir system along the river is often untouched by many hunters. If you want an adventure, consider taking a boat up Lake Sharpe, Lake Francis Case or Lake Oahe to hunt the nooks and crannies along the shore. Quite often you'll have these big tracts of public land all to

yourself, as most folks are content to use boats only for fishing.

Last, don't forget the ample opportunity that can be found on the Fort Pierre National Grassland, where there are thousands of acres available to the public-land hunter. Huge flushes of hundreds of pheasants won't greet you on the grasslands, but with some good dog work and a willingness to walk for miles at a time, hunters will be able to score a limit in a solid day's work.

HAVE A GAME PLAN

A successful hunt dictates that you can't take the birds or their senses for granted. Remember, if you choose to forgo the pen-raised cannon fodder and actually "hunt" roosters of the wild variety, this is a game squarely rigged in their favor. You're stepping into a world in which a wild bird lives year-round, and you're playing by their rules.

Unfortunately, I see a similar scene play out time and time again each year as truck doors or tailgates slam and dog whistles blow. At the first foreign noise, roosters start trickling out the ends and sides of the field — by foot and feather — with the hunt largely over before it started.

To avoid these common mistakes, have a firm game plan that is completely understood by each of your players before even entering the field. Once you arrive, everyone needs to get out of the vehicles as quickly as possible and take their respective places in one smooth and relatively quiet motion.

Everything you need, which isn't much, should be ready to roll before arrival. Coats, vests, gloves and hats need to be on before you step out of the vehicle.

Not being ready not only shows a disrespect for the pheasants, but also for hunting partners who often have to wait for slowpokes to go through an entire pre-game routine between each field. Don't be that guy. Have the courtesy to be sure that you're always ready to roll.

Time is of the essence when hunting wild pheasants, so hatching a solid game plan prior to your party heading afield is paramount. Have no doubt whatsoever that being unorganized, loud and untimely will reduce your prospects for success. ■