

PHEASANT HUNTING FORECAST 2023: SOUTH DAKOTA SHOULD BE ANOTHER GOOD SOUTH DAKOTA PHEASANT SEASON

By Andrew Johnson

Thanks to timely rains and strong production, hopes run high that this year's season could be similar — or perhaps even better — than the 2022 season

By many accounts, South Dakota's 2022-2023 pheasant season was one of the most successful in recent memory. In fact, harvest surveys conducted by the state's Game, Fish and Parks Department estimate that hunters bagged north of 1.15 million pheasants last year — the highest total in the last five years.

The real story from last year, however, was that winter came early and stayed late. Starting the week before Christmas, round after round of snow — often in the form of days-long blizzards — coupled with long stretches of sub-zero weather were the norm rather than the exception, reminding pheasants (all wildlife, actually) and pheasant hunters how unrelenting a prairie winter can be.

And while there's no doubt there was likely above-average pheasant mortality due to the harsh winter weather, recent field reports from around the state all point to the 2023 season being better than anticipated. Taking it a step further, many wildlife officials believe it will rival last year's season thanks to strong production this spring.

NESTING AND BROODING CONDITIONS

When spring finally did arrive in South Dakota, the added moisture from all the snowmelt gave residual habitat, which is critical for nesting success, a much-needed shot in the arm. To make things even better, timely rains arrived throughout most of the state just in time for peak nesting season.

That surge in spring nesting cover, combined with a stronger-than-expected carryover of adult birds that survived the winter, made for ideal nesting conditions across the pheasant belt, says Matt Gottlob, Pheasants Forever's state coordinator in South Dakota.

"We had pretty good nesting conditions this spring, with just enough rain this summer to keep things green," Gottlob says. "Up to this point, we're seeing a good amount of broods, and the size of the broods has been average to above average."

FALL HABITAT OUTLOOK

According to the most recent U.S. Drought Monitor, most of the state is currently out of drought. However, while the state has had more precipitation and the habitat looks better than it did a year ago, dry conditions will still have an impact on how this fall's hunt plays out.

"Emergency haying and grazing is going to have an impact on habitat, especially in counties in the southeast and also along the eastern half of the state," Gottlob reports. "But I don't see any

conditions across South Dakota where we couldn't expect a fall similar to last year, if not a little better in places."

Even though emergency haying and grazing might mean less acres to hunt this fall, Gottlob says the important thing to remember is that grass was there during nesting and brood-rearing seasons. With that in mind, Gottlob has high hopes for this fall's hunt.

"Based on conditions up to this point, I would anticipate we would have habitat conditions and bird numbers similar to last fall," states Gottlob. "As long as we don't have severe drought over the next month, month and a half, we're going to be sitting pretty good."

REGIONAL FIELD REPORTS

ABERDEEN AREA

Spring nesting habitat and summer brood-rearing conditions were ideal in and around Brown County, according to Casey Weismantel, executive director at the Aberdeen Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. Weismantel also oversees HuntFishSd.com, the digital outdoor arm of the Aberdeen CVB.

"We had perfect summertime temps and enough rain to produce the habitat needed for nesting and brood rearing," Weismantel says. "This is also the second year in a row where strong bug numbers were available to produce the food source needed for the chicks. From what I see and the reports we are getting from the guides, lodges and outfitters in the area, our brood numbers are strong. We are getting reports of six to 14 in a brood."

Like most other places in the state, Weismantel expects haying and grazing to have an impact. He also believes hunters can benefit from the work the Aberdeen Pheasant Coalition has done to open up more public access to hunters.

"The Aberdeen Pheasant Coalition put more than 4,000 acres of habitat on the ground around the Aberdeen area, and it's all open to the public," Weismantel explains. "This is CRP acreage that's designed for nesting habitat. After all, it is about the number of birds raised, not the number of birds harvested. Most of the state public hunting and APC acres circle around Aberdeen like a horseshoe, which means Aberdeen is literally sitting on the hot spot for public hunting access.

"Last fall was the best pheasant hunting we have seen for at least 10 years, and I feel like this year is shaping up to be a close second," he concludes. "The best advice I can give is for hunters to do their homework, call ahead, visit HuntFishSD.com and then bring your dogs, because we'll wear them out."

NORTH CENTRAL – CAMPBELL, WALWORTH AND EDMUNDS COUNTIES

In the north-central part of the state, Senior Farm Bill Biologist Tom Zinter says spring nesting conditions were favorable and that timely rains at the end of June provided a flush of vegetation and insects to sustain pheasant chicks through the above-average temperatures that followed later in summer.

“From what I have seen throughout August, it appears our area had good success from first nesters,” he contends. “A large majority of the broods that I have seen are reaching maturity, and they’re large broods, too, of 10-14 birds. Those signs have me hopeful that we will continue our upward trend in bird numbers that we experienced last year.”

As far as habitat goes, Zinter says it looks good going into the fall season, and he expects hunters to find success in the area again this year.

“Bird numbers are looking to be at a level that should provide ample opportunity,” he says. “I won’t categorize it as easy hunting, but with some effort you can find a lot of birds across the landscape. As always, finding areas with quality habitat is going to be key. There are definitely areas or pockets that have more birds than others. Proper hunt preparation and scouting for undisturbed habitat will help hunters find those areas that hold more birds.”

SOUTH CENTRAL – LYMAN, TRIPP AND GREGORY COUNTIES

Farm Bill Biologist Trent Walrod says spring nesting conditions were fair and brood-rearing conditions in the area have been favorable so far this year.

“We have also been quite lucky as of late since we have been able to catch some rains at the end of July and the beginning of August, so the habitat that is still standing is looking great going into fall,” he reports. “I think we can expect a bump in numbers from the long-term average, but I do believe that the numbers will be down from our bumper year we had last year. With the emergency haying declaration, I think we will see birds more grouped up than we have in the past, and with the hatch we’ve had I think those birds have been pushed into whatever standing cover they have around.”

CENTRAL – BEADLE, FAULK, HAND, HYDE, JERAULD, MINER AND SANBORN COUNTIES

“This year was a good year for production,” says Justin Enfield, a PF farm bill biologist who covers Jerauld, Kingsbury, Miner and Sanborn counties. “It wasn’t perfect, by any means, but if you go out and walk you’re pushing birds up and running into broods in the field.”

Michael Hagan, a farm bill biologist who covers Hand, Hyde and Faulk counties, echoes those thoughts, saying spring nesting conditions were favorable for production.

“A lot of our fields of native grasses and forbs sprouted up quickly and provided early cover and nesting habitat,” Hagan says. “I have seen a good number of pheasant nests when walking through fields conducting site evaluations this summer. Personally, I feel really optimistic about gamebirds being abundant this fall due to a successful spring.”

SOUTHEAST – HUTCHINSON, LAKE, LINCOLN, MCCOOK, MINNEHAHA AND TURNER COUNTIES

And here are a few notes direct from your South Dakota pheasant hunting forecast author. Where I live in the southeastern part of the state, it has been abnormally dry. In fact, the most recent U.S. Drought Monitor map 31 shows that southeastern South Dakota is the driest part of the state, alternating between moderate and severe drought.

In this region, habitat conditions vary from poor to average, and a majority of CRP in the region has been cut. That said, the habitat absolutely looks healthier than it did last year, and I have been amazed at how many birds I saw during the spring and throughout the summer.

I did not get out and run my personal brood routes as I have in years past, but in talking with landowners, producers, rural mail carriers and agronomists with local seed companies, all the reports I've heard so far are that bird numbers in this area are on par with last year.

INSIDER TIPS

Don't give up on an area if the habitat has been hayed or mowed. In years like this, where plenty of emergency haying has taken place due to lingering drought conditions, I look at it as a glass half-full scenario.

Because I often hunt on my own or in small groups of two or three hunters and a couple dogs, big patches of public ground can sometimes be intimidating. If half of it is cut, that reduces the amount of cover where birds can hide and loaf throughout the day and significantly increases my chances of finding them. On top of that, pheasants are known edge-dwellers, so any type of cut or break that creates edge habitat gives me another option to hunt.

Also, gone are the days where sweeping rain showers blanket large portions of the state. Rather, "popcorn" showers have become much more common, dropping heavy amounts of rain in isolated areas. This means habitat conditions can vary widely from one end of a county to another. So, if you're not finding areas of quality habitat, take a 20-minute drive and chances are you'll be in luck and find areas with better habitat and more birds.

IF YOU GO

South Dakota has a youth-only season that runs Sept. 30 to Oct. 8, and it's followed by a resident-only season that opens Oct. 14 and closes Oct. 16. During youth season, hunters can hunt on public and private lands, while public lands are the only areas open during the resident-only season. Those two seasons are followed by South Dakota's traditional pheasant season, which is open October 21 all the way to January 31, 2024.

Regardless of season, shooting hours are from 10 a.m. to sunset, and Central Time is used for opening shooting hours statewide. The daily limit is three rooster pheasants, with a possession limit of 15.