



OUTDOOR CONNECTION

STORIES, ADVICE, AND INFORMATION FOR OUTDOOR LOVERS

LOOKING AT THE RINGNECK PHEASANT'S JOURNEY

A common fall scene in northwest Iowa during pheasant season can be traced back to the original season dating back to 1925.

Photo by Steve Weisman

Editor's Note: With a mild winter and as spring arrives, it becomes time to see pheasants that have survived the winter. This is the 100th year commemorating the first pheasant season in Iowa, and the Iowa DNR is commemorating that season with several features on the history of the ringneck pheasant. Here is the first one.

DES MOINES — It was still an hour before the 2024 pheasant season would open but the birds were there and they were ready. Cackles and crowing were coming from all across the Kossuth County prairie as hunters whispered with anticipation – today would be one for the memories was the consensus.

Judging by the parking lots at the public hunting areas across north Iowa, that opinion was a popular one.

Going back to 1901

Pheasants are not native to the United States but seem to have found a home in the Plains and upper Midwest. Iowa's birds can be traced back to a wind storm in 1901 that damaged William Benton's private game farm in Cedar Falls, liberating around 2,000 pheasants. Rumor had it, Benton obtained his stock from Tacoma, Washington.

That unintentional release was followed by intentional stockings in 1908-09 by private landowners in Kossuth and O'Brien counties that helped the exotic birds get a foothold in northern Iowa. By 1910, the state Conservation Commission got involved, purchasing 6,200 eggs and distributed them to farmers in 82 counties. Farmers would often have hen houses where the pheasant eggs would be placed alongside chicken eggs importer.

At the time, Iowa's countryside consisted of too-wet-to-farm sloughs and small farms,

with a patchwork of corn, oats, hay, pasture and beet fields, which was a perfect match for the ring-necked pheasant. Soon, it became clear that wild birds were better equipped to survive than captive birds and in 1915, farmers were encouraged to trap and move wild birds to new areas.

The expanding pheasant population began to cause localized crop damage to the point that 130 farmers in Hancock County petitioned the state to open a hunting season.

1925: the first hunt

In 1925, Iowa allowed pheasant hunting in 13 north central counties for three days in the fall, opening at noon each day. In these early seasons, hens were occasionally legal to shoot along with roosters. In 1943, the birds were so numerous that Iowa held a spring season in addition to the regular fall season.

"These early seasons were extremely conservative, lasting only three to five days," said Todd Bogenschutz, upland wildlife biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

In 1936, the Conservation Commission conducted its first roadside population survey in September and October. The survey evolved in these early years before moving to early August and becoming standardized in 1962.

Pheasants continued to expand across the state and additional counties were opened

to hunting. The state was divided into zones based on estimated bird population – the Long Zone in northern Iowa had a 2- to-3-week season; the Short Zone in southern Iowa had a 5-12-day season.

In 1955, hunters bagged an estimated 1.5 million birds. Around 1959, shooting hours were standardized and pheasant hunting moved into the modern era with one season statewide and was open in more than 80 counties, with only far southeast Iowa still closed.

While pheasants were expanding their reach, Iowa's agriculture community began to change, going from more than 6.8 million acres planted to small grains in 1950, to 1.29 million acres in 1972. Soybeans that had been planted on 1.9 million acres in 1950, increased to 6 million acres in 1972.

The 1985 Farm Bill

Changes to Iowa's countryside accelerated during the farm crisis in the 1980s. The 1985 Farm Bill created the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to reduce crop production to allow grain prices to recover, and Iowa producers enrolled 76,000 acres in the program by the end of the year. The second round of enrollments increased to 1.2 million acres. By 1993, 2.2 million acres of crop fields were enrolled and converted to grasslands.

When added to existing hay and small grains, Iowa had an estimated 4.5 million

acres of pheasant friendly habitat, up from 2.9 million acres in 1983.

"CRP wasn't a new idea. Its premise was similar to the soil bank in the 1950s and 60s," Bogenschutz said. "Grain prices recovered quickly and pheasants responded to the expanded habitat."

With the goal of improving grain prices achieved, the focus of CRP shifted to prioritize native seed plantings, seed mix diversity and specific landscapes. The federal Farm Bill had become the most important habitat program for the state.

Rise and Fall of bird numbers

Iowa's pheasant population is heavily influenced by winter and spring weather – mild winters with little snow followed by warm dry spring is good for survival and reproduction; conversely, cold, snowy winters with cool, wet springs isn't good for pheasants.

The consecutive bad winters and wet springs from 2008-12 saw Iowa's bird numbers plummet to an all-time low harvest of 109,000 roosters in 2011, and hunter participation bottomed out at 41,000, two years later.

However, droughts benefit ground nesting birds – including pheasants – and the recent string of droughts followed by mild winters has returned bird populations to pre-crash levels.

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Steve and Roxy Sauflay on the top deck of the Norwegian Sun before we embarked on our 10-day Alaskan cruise.

Photo by Steve Weisman

Is it still winter! Is it spring? Depends on the day!

By STEVE WEISMAN
OUTDOOR EDITOR

Has mid to late March been a yo-yo or what! It's spring, it's winter...that's the way things are in March in northwest Iowa! First, the Rotary car went through the ice the evening of March 13.

Then on Friday, my wife and I met another couple in Sioux Falls, and the day was a balmy 70+ degrees. It was a perfect day for my friend, Steve Sauflay and I to attend the 58th annual Sioux Empire Sportsmen's Boat, Camping and Vacation Show. Meanwhile, Steve's wife, Roxy and my wife, Darial hit as many of the shopping areas in Sioux Falls that they could in the four-hour window we had given them.

Before the Show, about new friends

Even though we are in our 70s, you never know when you are going to make new friends! We met Steve and Roxy last August on our 10-day cruise to Alaska. We met them as we boarded the Norwegian Sun, sat together on the top deck for a couple of hours as the rest of the passengers boarded and just plain hit it off. Get this: Steve and I both attended Dakota State (Madison, SD). I graduated in 1970, while Steve graduated in 1971. However, we ran with different people back then. After graduation, Steve and Roxy spent most of their working careers in Denison, Steve with Farmland Foods and Roxy a career educator as a special education specialist.

True sports fans, they became die-hard Hawkeye fans and spent many a Saturday at Kinnick Stadium!

Meanwhile, Darial graduated as a registered nurse in 1972, while I taught English and coached at two stops in South Dakota: Wessington and Hot Springs. Great experience, and my goal was to stay in a system four years and then move to experience another community.

As a result, we moved to Estherville in 1978, but the moving every four years stopped there! We raised our kids (Steph and Curt) and stayed until I retired in 2003. Kinda crazy, but Darial and I became die-hard Hawkeye fans as did both Steph and Curt.

All this time, Steve/Roxy and Steve/Darial knew nothing about the other couple...that is until a late August cruise, when we became good friends over the 10 days and have since kept in touch with each other via phone calls and texting.

Back to the Show

Held at the Sioux Falls Arena & Convention Center, it's my annual kickoff to the open water season. As in other years, the show's big weekend found the Convention Center bursting with "outdoor dreams." Divided into sections, there was the Boat and RV Camper area with the newest and biggest in boats and pontoons, alongside the best in campers and motor homes.

Another section included rows of booths featuring many of the top resorts, lodges and camps from the Midwest and Canada. These booths were interspersed with tackle and electronics vendors and oh, so much more!

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Getting ready for spring

With warmer weather just around the corner, dreams of outings, adventures and day trips may linger in the mind of any cabin fever-ridden individual. Mother Nature has not made it easy for us this year, with her back-and-forth warm, sunny days and windy snowstorms.

Finding solace in the heat of our homes during the cold months may be enough to satisfy the hearts of some, but for others like me, I find myself yearning for the soft green grass, the return of bugs and herps, and the commotion of the world that warmer weather brings.

Spring brings opportunities in many ways, and I encourage you to join me in some of my endeavors.



Sidney Krueger

Emmet County Naturalist

forward to seeing increased participation in the future.

A variety of opportunities

For families looking to get out and enjoy the weather, Emmet County boasts a variety of things to do. Fort Defiance State Park is a hidden gem with miles of hiking trails on a rugged woodland landscape. A handful of geocaches reside in the county, three of which have been placed by Emmet County Conservation. The numerous lakes

are great for fishing and putzing around on your boat. For those unable to stay at home any longer and are willing to brave the cold bite of the winter-spring transition, migratory waterfowl have returned with vigor and numbers. Bring a pair of binoculars and bird-spot on any of the area's lakes. Programs will be continually offered at the Nature Center, and surprise visits are always welcome.

For those looking to find a community of fellow nature and book-loving people, the Brambles & Bindings book club is available at your disposal. Starting a book club was a naive dream of mine, and it hasn't come as easy as it may have seemed on paper. Regardless of any bumps in the road I may have stumbled on as I worked towards making something of my own, the book club remains a place for people to gather, share ideas and discuss topics bigger than they are. I welcome you to join me as we connect with the world through words on paper and thoughts spoken by those that surround us.

As I look back on March and reflect on the year so far, I can't help but want to continuously thank the community that has welcomed me in with open arms. The community that supported the conservation and education efforts of the Foundation at this year's banquet, and the community that is proactive in offering nature education in the classroom. I am honored and thankful to be a part of a community that cares as much about me as I do it.

OUTDOOR CONNECTION

HAWKINS SHARES ROLE CHANGE

By Mike Hawkins
Iowa DNR Fisheries Biologist

I moved to the Okoboji Region in 1999 to begin my career with the Iowa DNR's Fisheries Bureau, taking an entry-level position with the Natural Lakes Investigations Team. One of my primary responsibilities was leading the long-running harvest surveys on the Iowa Great Lakes, a dataset that dates back to the 1950s and provides invaluable insight into both long-term and short-term fishery trends. This role allowed me to spend countless hours on Iowa's natural lakes, studying fish populations, habitat conditions, and the incredible ecosystems that make this region so special. From the very beginning, I felt like I had the best job in the world.

As I advanced to the role of Natural Lakes Research Biologist, I earned my graduate degree and helped spearhead several landmark projects. In 2003, our team launched a comprehensive watershed assessment of the Iowa Great Lakes, culminating in the acquisition of the region's first high-resolution airborne LiDAR survey. This groundbreaking data set allowed us to precisely model erosion and sediment delivery,



Mike Hawkins

prioritize wetlands for restoration, and identify the best conservation practices. The resulting Iowa Great Lakes Watershed Management Plan has been the foundation for conservation efforts ever since.

While conducting this research, we also developed new strategies

for managing the region's shallow natural lakes—particularly tackling the challenges posed by common carp and excessive nutrient levels. Our work extended to critical studies on walleye and muskellunge, further informing fisheries management strategies.

In 2007, I transitioned to the

Fisheries Management Section and became the Spirit Lake District Fisheries Biologist, overseeing aquatic resources across nine counties. My focus shifted to turning research into action. With the help of dedicated teams and community partners, we completed restoration projects on many of northwest Iowa's shallow lakes, including Marble Lake, West Hottes, Diamond Lake, Little Swan Lake and Lost Island Lake to name a few.

This region is home to some of the most effective conservation groups in the state. The Okoboji Protective Association (OPA) has been instrumental in our success, and through partnerships like these, we have achieved remarkable milestones together: constructing an electric fish barrier to keep Asian carp out of the lakes, battling invasive Eurasian watermilfoil, implementing thousands of acres of conservation practices and making real progress in improving water quality in Iowa's largest lakes.

Now, it's time to pass the game ball to a new quarterback. I'm stepping into a new role as the Northwest Regional Fisheries Supervisor, a position that is being reinstated after its elimi-

nation in 2008. The absence of this role placed extra strain on existing staff, and our teams in Clear Lake, Black Hawk, and Spirit Lake are eager to have this leadership position restored.

While my responsibilities are shifting to a regional level, I remain committed to supporting the OPA and the many outstanding conservation organizations in the Iowa Great Lakes. Most importantly, I'm looking forward to mentoring the next generation of technical leaders in northwest Iowa and ensuring that our teams have the resources they need to succeed.

The search is underway for the next Spirit Lake District Biologist, and we hope to have someone in place by early April. Serving this community and working to protect Iowa's natural resources has been the greatest honor of my career. In my new role, I will continue to do everything I can to support the dedicated teams who make our natural resource management efforts possible.

P.S. My office will still be located at the Spirit Lake Fish Hatchery, and I intend to stay engaged locally. I'll see you around!

Woodland Wildflower Report

This year, I am excited to take part in Iowa DNR's Woodland Wildflower Report. This report will track the blooming of our native woodland wildflowers, and it is a great excuse to get out and practice your plant ID. Any citizen scientist or wildflower enthusiast can take part in contributing to this report with results posted to the DNR's website weekly.

Some especially enthusiastic individuals will have the opportunity to take part in the Frog and Toad Call Survey offered across the state by the DNR. Participants will identify frogs and toads based on their calls and report the species and their relative abundance at designated survey sites. Although the training for this year's survey may have already concluded, interest in participating in future surveys is always welcome.

Emmet County needs volunteers

The Iowa DNR website designates Emmet County as a "county with need" due to our current lack of participation, which prevents an accurate reflection of frog and toad survey numbers in the area. As someone who has always been captivated by the sounds of our amphibian companions, this survey has quickly become something close to my heart. I look

PHEASANT, Continued from Page 1C

Iowa is a national pheasant hunting destination, second only to South Dakota in bird harvest, with hunters harvesting nearly 600,000 roosters in 2023.

Much of the harvest estimate is dependent upon hunters in the field. The last time Iowa's pheasant harvest topped one million birds was in 2003, when there were an estimated 142,000 resident and nonresident hunters. In 2023, that esti-

mate was 83,000.

"Our pheasant population is similar to 2007 when the harvest was around 700,000 birds," he said. "The only difference from today is we don't have the number of pheasant hunters as we did in 2007. Harvest is driven by bird numbers, but also how many people are pulling the trigger."

A century of pheasant hunting

The Iowa DNR and Pheasants Forever are celebrating 100 years of pheasant hunting in the Hawkeye State. The first season was held Oct. 20-22, 1925, when 13 counties in north central Iowa were opened to pheasant hunting. Hunters were allowed a three-rooster limit, for a half-day of hunting. An estimated 75,000 hunters participated.

Hunters can commemorate the 100th anniversary by purchasing a hard card featuring Iowa Pheasants Forever Print of the Year when they purchase their 2025 hunting and fishing licenses.

Information on places to hunt, the August roadside survey results and more is available online by clicking the 100 Years of Pheasant Hunting graphic at www.iowadnr.gov/pheasantsurvey.

Midwest Walleye Challenge: a Citizen Science Fishing Event

The Midwest Walleye Challenge kicked off April 1, 2025 in the five Midwest States of Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska and South Dakota, with Michigan joining in once their Walleye fishery opens on May 15. These citizen science fishing events are a fun way for anglers and biologists to join forces in support of their State's Walleye fishery. The event is open to anglers of all skill levels with \$10,000 in prizes to be awarded in each state, including "Tough Luck" prizes for those anglers who don't catch anything but still report their fishing trip (see rules for details).

"What makes these events unique is how we combine the fun of fishing for prizes with the ability to collect high quality data on the Walleye fishery across each State," says Sean Simmons, founder and president of MyCatch. "By having the anglers actively engaged and leading the data collection, it demonstrates how the angling community can play a meaningful role in the management and conservation of the resource."

This event uses the mobile app MyCatch where anglers report their catches and trips to qualify for prizes. There is a \$25 entry fee, and thanks to our generous sponsor Discount Tackle, every angler that reports a valid trip automatically wins a \$20 gift certificate. New this year are "Referral Prizes" where anglers who refer their friends to the event also qualify for cash prizes or gift certificates, as well as "Early Bird" prizes for folks who sign up early.

See the rules for complete details.

"It is important that anglers report all fish they catch in order for biologists to properly understand the population structure," says Simmons. "That's why we offer a range of prize categories that reward reporting all fish, such as "Random Draw Prizes" and a 'Most Fish Caught' category."

Another example of this unique prizing strategy is the "Most Waterbodies Fished" category that incentivizes anglers to collect data on as many different water bodies as possible. The reason we include "Tough Luck" prizes is to help the biologists know how often there are "zeroes" (i.e. the times when no fish are caught), which is important information when assessing a Walleye fishery.

"During our follow up discussions with anglers, we learned many of them value catch and release fishing, so this year we are also offering a prize category for folks who provide a "Release Video" when reporting their catches, as a way to reward those anglers," says Simmons. Of course everyone wants to know who catches the "Longest Walleye" and so there are prizes for that category too. Check out last year's events at AnglersAtlas.com/events to see who placed first in each of these categories.

"Secret spots stay secret," adds Simmons, "We never share exact location to the public and the biologists only receive waterbody level data, which is anonymized."

For further details, please contact Sean Simmons at sean@anglersatlas.com, or visit the web page.

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Ice-out channel catfish are biting

DES MOINES — Channel catfish move close to shore and are eager to bite in many lakes and large reservoirs across Iowa just after the ice is gone. The bite starts sooner in southern Iowa impoundments since they lose ice a week or two before northwest Iowa natural lakes.

After eating light during the winter, channel catfish are prone to feed heavily during early spring, cleaning up small fish that died over the winter. Search for actively feeding fish on windblown shorelines, points where dead fish are piled up, and shallow areas where the water warms quickly. Keep the wind in your face and move often until you find actively feeding fish.

Use cut bait or shad sides fished on the bottom. To keep the bait on the hook, try using a 1/0 to 3/0 bait holder hook and enough weight (3/8th to ½ ounce) to cast into the wind. Bring along disposable latex gloves to handle the bait and help keep the smell off your hands.

Ice-out catfishing can be good in any lake that has an abundant catfish population. Iowa's flood control reservoirs: Rathbun, Red Rock, Coralville and Saylorville usually offer the best action. Try catfishing in natural lakes, such as: Storm Lake, North Twin, Tuttle, East Okoboji, Little Wall Lake, or Black Hawk Lake in northwest Iowa soon after the ice is gone. Small impoundments, like Don Williams, Big Creek, Volga Lake, Diamond Lake, Mormon Trail Lake, Greenfield City Reservoir, or Lake Icaria, also offer good early spring catfishing.

Catfish can be found in almost every body of water across Iowa. Check the to find out where catfish are biting.

Looking at the data from the hunting town hall meetings: Part 1

By STEVE WEISMAN
OUTDOOR EDITOR

During the week of February 17-20, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) held 20 town hall style meetings where local staff provided updates on the recently concluded hunting and trapping seasons. The goal was for the general public to attend and listen to the season reviews, hear directly from the DNR staff and to ask questions and give feedback on their thoughts about the seasons and potential rule changes. Comments collected from these public meetings were then compiled and considered along with other related comments received prior to proposing changes to hunting and trapping rules and regulations.

During those town hall meetings, all sites received the same statewide video providing summaries of wildlife, population status and trends as well as some harvest estimates from the recently completed seasons. Over the next two weeks we will look at the summaries taken from the video. This week we will cover three of the five summaries.

Squirrels, turkeys and ruffed grouse

First to speak was Jim Coffey, Iowa DNR Forest Wildlife Biologist, who discussed squirrel, ruffed grouse and turkey. According to Coffey, “Squirrels are a very underutilized resource in the state of Iowa with our traditional numbers showing that we used to harvest over a million squirrels.” That has fallen today to an estimated 22,000 hunters targeted squirrels with an average of 1.1 squirrels bagged per outing and 4.3 squirrels taken per year.

At the same time, turkey hunting is a very popular sport in the state of Iowa with a spring and fall season. Coffey noted, “We’ve just come off a record-breaking harvest of 16,088 birds harvested in the spring for 2024. Our increase in harvest was up over 34% across the state.” This included about a 4.8% increase in the number of hunters. Of the two seasons, the fall season is seen as underutilized with only 516 birds bagged. To look at state harvest numbers, the state is broken into nine agricultural areas. Data shows that eight of the nine regions

were down in 2024 based on the five-year average, but this is after three years of excellent production, which pushed the five-year average higher than normal. Two surveys are used to analyze trends including the Summer Turkey Survey and the Bow Hunter Survey.

Ruffed grouse hunting takes place in a small area of northeast Iowa and is limited to a small number of hunters who target the ruffed grouse. It appears that grouse numbers are declining in range and numbers possibly because of maturing habitats in northeast Iowa. According to Coffey, to learn more about the ruffed grouse numbers, “We’re looking at conducting more surveys with our spring turkey hunters.

Furbearer program

Vince Eveltizer, Iowa DNR Furbearer and Wetland Biologist, discussed furbearers. Except for otter and bobcat prices, the fur market remains depressed. This is one of the reasons that trapping pressure is relatively low. Most furbearer popula-

tions are stable except for muskrats and gray fox. Not one gray fox was harvested and sold last year. A 13-state Muskrat Pilot Project along with a Gray Fox Pilot Project are underway to analyze reasons for population declines. In addition, a huge shift has occurred in the harvest of coyotes with a high of 18,676 coyotes taken and sold in 2018-19 when the fur markets were high to only 1,585 this past year.

However, there are hunters/trappers who harvest coyotes recreationally. Eveltizer notes, “The biggest highlight for the past year is the revival of furharvest education program. It continues to grow and become stronger, especially with the help of the Iowa Trappers Association.”

Upland game highlights

Todd Bogenschutz, Upland Game Biologist for the Wildlife Bureau, shared how the weather throughout the year had a big impact on numbers. The winter was normal, but a January blizzard likely affected some areas. It was the elevated spring rainfall that hit during the peak of nesting had a huge

impact on production. According to Bogenschutz, “The August Roadside Count for 2024, we did see a decline in pheasant, quail and partridge numbers from what we saw in 2023, but it was not unexpected. That being said, we still had pretty good pheasant numbers across much of the northern half of the state.”

As for harvest numbers, 2024 numbers are not released until later in March. As for 2023 numbers, “It was a heck of a year.” A total of 590,685 pheasants were harvested in 2023, far above the 10-year average of 318,154. Habitat trends continue to be a concern.

“Over the last 30 years, we’ve seen a pretty significant decline of the habitat we have for pheasants and upland game.” Over that time, Iowa has lost 2,956 square miles of habitat. The Farm Bill is crucial and so important to our upland populations. The hope is for a good Farm Bill in 2025. This marks the 100th year of pheasant hunting in the state of Iowa.

Looking at the data from the hunting town hall meetings: Part 2

By STEVE WEISMAN
OUTDOOR EDITOR

In last week’s column, we began looking at the results of the Iowa DNR’s 20 public town hall meetings where interested Iowans listened to presentations by DNR personnel on season reviews and had the opportunity to ask questions and give feedback on their thoughts about the seasons and potential rule changes. Comments collected from these public meetings were then compiled and considered along with other related comments received prior to proposing changes to hunting and trapping rules and regulations. This column will discuss both waterfowl and deer highlights.

Waterfowl highlights

Orrin Jones, Waterfowl Biologist for the Wildlife Bureau, discussed the surveys of duck populations by the U. S. Wildlife and Canadian Wildlife services, which in the spring of 2024 showed once again a lower continental breeding duck population. According to Jones, “This is below the long-term average and significantly lower than recent all-time record highs. This is the third year in a row of these lower populations. What is driving these lower populations are environmental conditions.”

Drought conditions and unfavorable nesting conditions are at the base of the problems. Precipitation in May and June may have helped brood survival but was too late to help with the nesting. During the fall, weekly migration counts are conducted at refuges across the state of Iowa. Migration in 2024 was in the normal range in 12 of the last 17 years. However, during mid-October through mid-October, counts were well below normal, most likely due to mild and stable weather temperatures to the north of Iowa. December of 2024 saw an outbreak of the Avian Influenza.

“This began with the influx of migrant ducks in mid-November and affected a small proportion Canada geese and trumpeter swans especially during December. This was an unprecedented new development so many questions remain.” Exposure to humans remain low, but there are steps to take to avoid coming in contact with sick birds. The seasons for 2025 will be very similar to 2024 except for the special September teal season, which will now be only 9 days versus the previous 15 days. Framework/structure and zones for Iowa’s 2026-2030 regular water-

fowl seasons have now been set.

Deer highlights

Jace Elliot, State Deer Biologist, provided an update on the deer harvest, population trends and disease status over the past year, along with proposed changes for the 2025 deer season. According to Elliot, “Across the state, hunters reported just under 103,000 over the past season. This is down 3% over the previous year and the five-year statewide average. Despite being slightly lower, we continue to see a fairly stable harvest trend over the past decade.”

However, there are differing county-wide trends, which is the way the DNR manages deer populations. Buck harvest data averages for the past five years show most counties in the western half of the state with a severe decline in antlered deer harvest. “This is reflective of both population declines and severe EHD (Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease). We have been working to reverse this trend that eliminate doe harvest over the past several years. Now much of southern Iowa also experienced declines in harvest though not as severe as western Iowa.” The opposite has happened in much of eastern Iowa where counties experienced the highest harvest rates in almost two decades.

Chronic Wasting Disease continues to increase in Iowa with eight new counties added to the list (Cedar, Des Moines, Muscatine, Pottawattamie, Shelby, Story, Tama, Wapello) in just the last year. CWD was first found in Iowa in 2013. More than 3,000 mortalities occurred from EHD and occurred in 95 of Iowa’s 99 counties.

Elliot also shared a deer habitat suitability map that shows much of southern and eastern Iowa containing significantly more deer habitat than central, northern and western Iowa with. Those sections only having river corridors and the rare timber stands. This shows that Iowa’s deer population is actually made up of many deer populations that are trending independently with one another. “These are all reasons why the Iowa deer program focuses on population management at the county level.”

County population trends come from a range of data: spring spotlight survey, antlered buck harvest, bow hunter observation survey and deer/vehicle crashes, plus the feedback of local DNR staff, hunters and landowners. These all help make the decision of deer management decisions at the county level.

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The event actually kicked off on Thursday evening and ran through Sunday. Each day included great hunting and fishing seminars. Of course, there were workshops for kids and the ever-popular live trout fishing in a tank. To me, nothing beats watching a youngster dangling a jig in front of a trout and then the strike, the bend of the rod and the splashing of the trout at it is pulled out of the water!

Steve and I didn’t purchase anything, but we talked our dreams, and Steve took home an entire bag stuffed with dealer contact cards and brochures. Of course, we shared the usual fishing stories, some of which I do believe had a bit of truth to them. We talked the Hawkeyes and the South Dakota State Jackrabbits, visited with vendors and just plain enjoyed talking about putting in docks, pleasant weather and open water fishing, especially since Steve has a home on Enemy Swim near Waubay, SD and my pontoon is on East Lake with access to the entire Okoboji Chain of Lakes. Now, fishing is certainly the best excuse to visit!

Steve and I then met the gals at Look’s Marketplace on the southeast side of Sioux Falls for a mid-afternoon lunch. Darial and I had the best walleye with dip, seasoned fries and a tossed salad. Also, a Marketplace, Look’s offers lots of unique grocery items, specialty chee-

es, high end butcher shop with premium meats and seafood. After lunch, Darial and Roxy picked out their own “specialty” purchases.

Then we rushed home to beat the early spring storm before it turned to snow later Friday night. After all, it was the weekend of the boys’ state tournament! We did get some much-needed rain and less than an inch of snow by Saturday morning! Yes, the March winter/spring yo-yo was on.

Open water fishing

Most certainly, the open water season is on. As a matter of fact, the walleye bite at Chamberlain, SD on the Missouri River has been pretty darned good since the end of February! Check out the Allen’s Missouri River Guide Service Facebook page and see all the pics of limits of walleyes over the course of the past month.

Amazing how the area from Ft. Thompson down to Chamberlain puts out daily limit after daily limit of nice walleyes year after year each spring. This year is no exception with anglers from all over the Midwest heading to Chamberlain with some trailering and fishing from their own boats, while others contact an area guide and just sit back and catch fish!

Facebook posts from around here show the beginning of open water fishing. Walleyes

have been taken pretty consistently on the Little Sioux River, smallmouth bass on Big Spirit Lake and I know panfish will be going from shore at Lost Island, East Okoboji and the canals. What a great time of year it is.

Yes, this is in the April Outdoor Connection tab, BUT don’t bet that we’re out of the snow and even blizzard cycle yet! When I coached girls track, it seemed like we were never safe. One early April track meet at Spencer was held on a Friday, and the temperatures were pushing 70 when we started the meet. We even spent nearly an hour in the Spencer gym under a tornado warning.

The next day was Saturday and brought several inches of snow and, you guessed it, strong northwest winds and a blizzard!

Don’t forget the boat registrations

Yes, this is the year! All boat registrations expire on April 30, 2025 of the current registration cycle. Boat registration fees are collected by the county recorder. Upon payment, boat owners will receive a boat registration and stickers to be placed on the vessel. Each boat registration is for a three-year period with the new cycle effective May 1, 2025 – April 30, 2028.

If you renew your registration late, you will pay a \$5 penalty.

EXPERIENCING THE OPENER

By BOB JENSEN

The opening day of fishing season means different things to different anglers. In some places, opening day means nothing to anglers because where they live, there is no opening day of fishing season. Fishing season is open year ‘round. But in some states there are very distinct fishing seasons.

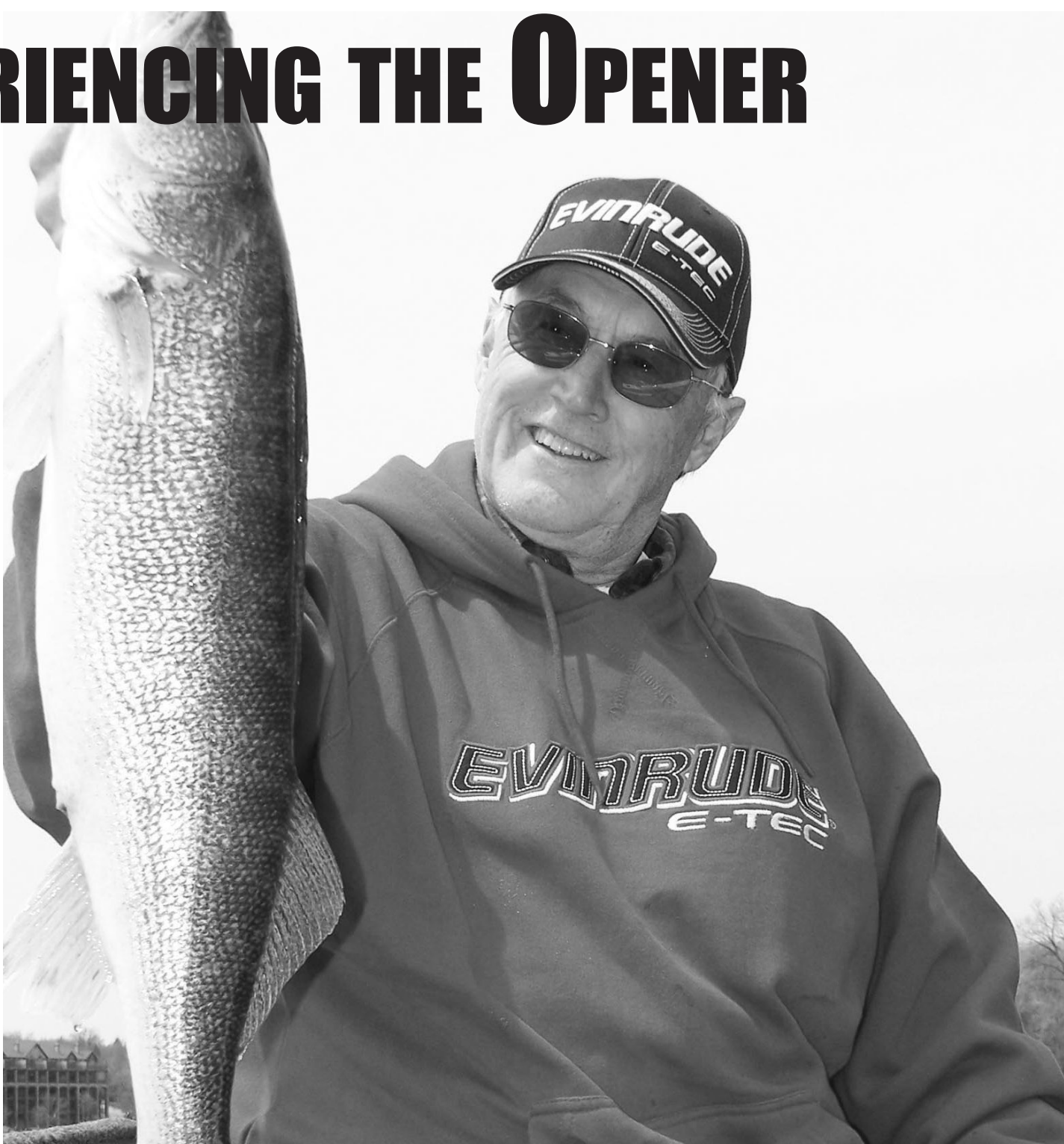
Some states even have multiple openers. Maybe a walleye opener and a bass opener a couple of weeks later. Here are some of my thoughts and memories from fishing season openers past.

I was about ten years old when my Dad invited me to go with him and a friend on the opening day of walleye season. This was a long time ago when Iowa had a statewide opening day of fishing for gamefish.

We prepared for the opener for days. New line on reels, organizing the tacklebox, making sure the plug was in the boat (we didn’t want to repeat the “forgetting to put the plug in” adventure.) The excitement was indescribable. We were up early the day of the opener. Waited in a long line at the boat ramp, froze all day, caught just a couple of fish. At the end of opening day, I was anxious for the next year’s opener. Some things are certainly hard to understand!

I recall a Walleye Opener in the Iowa Great Lakes region. We were on the water shortly after midnight. So were hundreds of other anglers. The competition for good fishing spots was intense and action was slow.

We trolled crankbaits until dawn, then switched to jigs and live bait rigs. Catching remained slow. At day’s end, our group gathered at the cabin where we were staying and reminisced about our most recent Walleye Opener. One of the members of our group asked, “Why do we do this every year? We know that the lakes will be crowded and the



A good memory from way back. The Fishing Professor Jim McDonnell with an Opening Day walleye.

Photo by Bob Jensen

bite is usually slow. Why do we do this?”

Another group member explained, “It’s tradition.” The eldest and wisest group member then declared, “Some traditions should die.” Exactly a year later, the same group of anglers gathered at the same location to celebrate the tradition of the fishing opener. Some traditions die hard.

Then there was an Opener in Minnesota in the mid 80s. The walleyes on the central Minnesota lake that we were fishing weren’t interested in

getting caught.

We decided to move to another lake. As we waited for our turn to load the boat, we noticed a crappie in the shallow reeds next to the boat landing. Then we saw another and another.

We cancelled the move to the other lake and started fishing for crappies. We caught ‘em really good. A forgettable walleye morning turned into a memorable afternoon of catching crappies.

I fondly remember an Opener in northern Minnesota

years ago. We got on the water about the time that the sun should have appeared. It was cold and overcast. That was the best weather of the day.

Mid-morning it started snowing. As the day progressed, the snow got heavier. And the fish weren’t cooperating. We retreated to the lodge where we were staying and gathered around the fireplace.

Stories of previous fishing trips were shared in actual and enhanced versions. This day of not catching fish holds a wonderful place in my fishing

memories. It’s not always the fish that make for a memorable day of fishing. It’s the people that you fish with.

The Opening Day of fishing season usually isn’t the best for catching. Catching is almost always better a couple of weeks later when the water has warmed and the weather has stabilized. However, for many of us, when it comes to anticipation and excitement, the Opening Day of fishing season is pretty tough to beat. Here’s good news. Opening Day is not far off.

Getting ready for boating season

By JOE YARKOSKY
CONSERVATION OFFICER, IOWA DNR LAW ENFORCEMENT BUREAU

With boating season right around the corner, for this article let’s dive (no pun intended) into some more detailed boating regulations and safety topics.

One of those topics and a common question that we get asked each year is “How many people can my boat carry?” and/or “How large of a motor can I put on my boat?” This is a common scenario where we invite friends and family for a boat ride, but don’t know how many people we can take.

Another common scenario is an upgrade of a motor to your fishing boat, and you don’t know which one to pick out that will be acceptable for your boat. Let’s investigate this information at a little more detail to answer these questions.

Under the US Coast Guard Federal Boat Safety Act of 1971, all boats less than 20’ in length must have a capacity label. This label is a responsibility of the boat manufacturer. Kayaks, sailboats, inflatables and canoes are exempt from this requirement, or boats over 20’ and up to 26’ in length, they will still have a capacity label; however, the label will be provided by the manufacturer and typically also displays accreditation from the National Marine Manufacturers Association or similar association.

Now we know most all boats will have a capacity plate, but how do we find a capacity plate? Capacity plates are located near the steering wheel or the transom of the vessel. The capacity plate will tell you this

information:

Maximum number of persons or pounds allowed on the boat

Maximum number of persons, gear and motor (if motor is an outboard)

Maximum horsepower rating for engine

Now that we have found the capacity plate, what are the laws regarding the capacity plate? Iowa boating laws state the following regarding capacities:

No person owning or operating a vessel shall permit said vessel to be occupied by more passengers and crew than the registration capacity permits. Iowa recognizes the capacity rating issued by the Coast Guard, manufacturer or boating association as the official rating for vessels and that rating is documented on boating registration.

Vessels not containing capacity rating information (over 26’ vessel in length), the passenger capacity will be O.R. (Operator’s Responsibility). The responsibility for determining passenger capacity of the vessel so designated shall rests with the operator of the vessel.

A person shall not operate on the waters of this state under the jurisdiction of the commission a vessel equipped with an engine of greater horsepower rating than designated for the vessel by the federally required capacity plate or by the manufacturer’s plate on those vessels not covered by federal regulations.

A person shall not with fraudulent intent, deface, destroy, place, stamp or alter the capacity plate on a vessel required by state or federal law.

The passenger capacity of boats shall be painted or attached to the starboard side of the boats within 9 inches of the transom in 3” or larger block numbers in a color contrasting to the boat color so that the numbers ride above the water line when the boat is fully loaded.

The reason for these guidelines

And lastly, why do we have laws (state, federal) and manufacturing guidelines regarding boat capacity and engine horsepower restrictions? The answer is safety. Boats come in all shapes and sizes, and they also have different limitations. The more people and weight you put in your boat, the lower it will set in the water (freeboard height), the more unstable it becomes and the risk of capsizing the vessel increases. This is a common scenario we see each year on the water. Same with principle with using a motor with a higher horsepower rating than what the capacity plate states. Not only are you adding extra weight to the stern of the vessel, but you are also jeopardizing the structural integrity of the transom.

Quick reminder, ALL boating registrations expire this year on April 30th, 2025. Boating registrations in Iowa go on a 3-year cycle, so make sure you get your registrations renewed and sticker affixed to the vessel prior to headed out on the water.

Happy boating season and be safe! For any additional questions, please contact your local State Conservation Officer.



MALLARD DUCKS AT
SANDBAR SLOUGH



TRUMPETER SWAN AT
SANDBAR SLOUGH



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SLOUGH WITH WHITE-FRONTED GEESE



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Inspiration for Our Day- "The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul. The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore." ~Psalm 121:7-8

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