



2022-23

Nebraska's Upland Game Bird Hunting Outlook

The following forecast is based on spring and summer upland game population surveys, including the April and July Rural Mail Carrier Surveys and the Northern Bobwhite Whistle Count Survey. In addition, biologists from across the state provided input on regional weather events and habitat trends that may have affected populations. The summaries and field reports below reflect the best available information regarding bird numbers, weather conditions and habitat/access trends in Nebraska's six regions but should not be used to predict hunting conditions or local population densities at any single location within a region. Preseason scouting is highly encouraged to increase hunter success. For more information about upland gamebird hunting in Nebraska or to view more detailed survey reports, please visit OutdoorNebraska.org/Upland.

STATEWIDE OVERVIEW

Ring-Necked Pheasants



Similar to last fall, increasingly dry conditions and their effects on habitat availability likely will limit pheasant hunting opportunities in Nebraska this fall. Still, survey results look more promising this year in many areas of the state (Table 1), and hunters willing to adapt to the changing conditions

should find success this fall.

Following a relatively mild winter, dry conditions intensified throughout the state, and by early April, over half of Nebraska reached severe to extreme drought status. Following a delayed green-up, precipitation during late spring jump-started vegetative growth in most areas, improving habitat conditions right as hens began

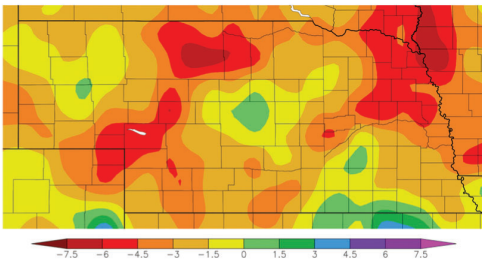


Figure 1. Departure from normal precipitation (inches) during the primary nesting season (May 1 – July 31, 2022) in Nebraska. *Source: High Plains Regional Climate Center (hprcc.unl.edu)

to nest.

Precipitation throughout the nesting season was below average overall, yet highly variable (Figure 1).

Timely rains in July helped improve habitat conditions across much of central and southeastern Nebraska, along with portions of the northern panhandle. Cover is more variable elsewhere in the state as we enter the fall.

Statewide, pheasant counts during this year's July mail carrier survey were up 26% compared

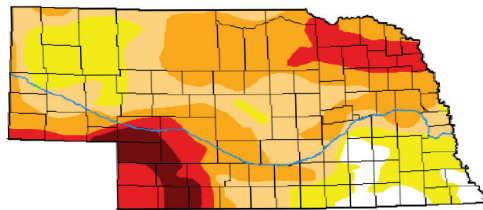


Figure 2. Nebraska drought conditions as of August 16, 2022. *Source: U.S. Drought Monitor (droughtmonitor.unl.edu)

to 2021 (Table 1).

According to surveys, the panhandle should support some of the higher pheasant densities this fall, but numbers also improved in several other regions. Most notably were increases observed in the northeast (+39%) and southeast (+44%) regions, where pheasant counts also exceeded five-year averages (Table 1). Habitat is more isolated within these regions, but where quality cover exists, hunters should find better pheasant hunting opportunities.

Brood reports have been highly variable this summer. According to field reports, production was very limited within the southwest and extreme southern panhandle regions that have experienced prolonged drought conditions. As of mid-August, roughly 75% of the state is experiencing moderate to extreme drought (Figure 2), so preseason scouting is highly encouraged. Habitat conditions and bird numbers

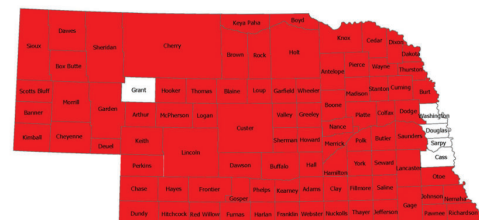


Figure 3. Nebraska counties approved for emergency haying and grazing on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands as of August 13, 2022. *Source: Farm Service Agency (fsa.usda.gov/state-offices/Nebraska)

likely will be highly variable this fall, even within localized areas.

Emergency haying and grazing of Conservation Reserve Program lands will be prevalent throughout the state again this fall (Figure 3) and will affect some CRP tracts open to walk-in hunting through the Nebraska Game and Parks' Open Fields and Waters Program.

Northern Bobwhites



Mild winter weather appears to have benefited bobwhite populations throughout much of the state this year. Results from summer surveys were somewhat mixed but, along with field reports, suggest that high overwinter survival carried over more birds into this year's breeding population.

Statewide, bobwhite counts during this year's whistle count surveys increased by 30% compared to 2021, and increases were observed in all management regions except West Platte (Table 2). This year's fall population will depend largely on production during the nesting season, which is still underway.

Much of the core bobwhite range in southeastern and south-central Nebraska received timely rains that helped maintain favorable habitat conditions throughout the nesting season.

Brood reports have been variable, as usual, but recent observations of adult pairs indicate renesting efforts have continued throughout the late summer, which is often a good sign.

According to surveys, the East Central, Southeast and Republican management regions

Continued on next page



should support the state's highest quail densities. Overall, quail numbers remain below those observed during recent peak years (2015-2018) but rebounding populations should provide better hunting opportunities this fall.



Prairie Grouse *(Sharp-Tailed Grouse and Greater Prairie-Chickens)*

A below-average breeding population coupled with dry conditions across much of the state over the

past two years likely will limit prairie grouse hunting opportunities in Nebraska this fall. Early indications suggest production was "spotty" across much of the Sandhills region again.

Late summer precipitation was very sporadic, which has had major implications on habitat conditions and brood survival.

According to field reports, production was very limited across northern portions of the Sandhills that missed out on most of those scattered rainfall events — including popular grouse hunting areas near Valentine, Nebraska. Brood reports have been more common in southeastern and extreme western portions of the Sandhills, with most

brood sizes on the smaller end (averaging 3-4 birds).

Hunters should expect to see sparser cover this fall, but it will also be highly variable, as will bird numbers, even at very localized scales.

In a recent U.S. Department of Agriculture report (Aug. 15, 2022), 73% of Nebraska's rangelands were rated in poor to very poor condition.

Without some relief, cover likely will continue to deteriorate with continued grazing pressure as the fall progresses.

Locating suitable cover may be challenging but will be the key to finding birds this season.

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD



Southwest District:

Pheasant counts in the Southwest were down only slightly (-6%) during this year's July mail carrier survey, but numbers remain well below long-term averages (Table 1). Prolonged drought in western portions of the district (Figure 2) has limited pheasant population recovery within this popular region.

Habitat conditions west of U.S. Highway 83 have worsened as the summer has progressed, and many of the remaining CRP fields were affected by haying or grazing. Rangelands are in poor shape, which will also reduce local hunting opportunities for greater prairie-chickens.

Overall, the outlook is not great for this portion of the district: Landowners are seeing some adult pheasants, and very few quail, but brood reports have been very limited this summer. Fortunately, habitat conditions improve further east within the district — a trend similar to last year. Portions of south-central Nebraska received timely rains in June and July that helped maintain quality nesting and brood-rearing cover.

Anecdotally, this year's hatch may have been slightly delayed as few pheasant or quail broods were observed prior to July 1. Pheasant brood sizes have been variable in size but indicate some production occurred in areas where suitable habitat exists. Large blocks of cover preferred by pheasants are more limited here compared to further west, but hunters should find success on many of the larger CRP tracts and Rainwater Basin wetlands scattered throughout the region.

With a stronger breeding population of quail and favorable habitat conditions throughout the summer months, biologists remain optimistic that quail populations will rebound this fall.



Northwest District:

According to the July mail carrier survey, pheasant numbers in the panhandle region improved 48% compared to 2021 (Table 1). Despite this positive trend, populations have been down in recent years and current numbers are up only slightly from the five-year average.

After catching nice rains in May throughout the region, habitat conditions looked relatively good as birds entered the nesting season. But like most areas of the state, dry conditions prevailed as the summer progressed, especially right along the Colorado border (Figure 2).

Biologists have seen evidence of production in the southern panhandle, but both brood observations and sizes have been below average.

Habitat conditions generally improve further north in the panhandle, but quality cover is becoming more and more limited across the region due to emergency haying and grazing. Ag-dominated areas within Sheridan, Box Butte and Morrill counties caught timely rains in July, but this may have been too little too late. Pheasant brood observations have been relatively limited in this area, although the lack of dew often inhibits roadside observation this time of year. Nonetheless, the outlook does not look overly promising.

On a more positive note, recent field reports indicate some late pheasant production occurred near wetlands throughout the region. Observations of grouse broods also have been variable this summer throughout the northwest district. Better grouse production was expected in the western Sandhills this year due to improved habitat conditions, but populations remain below-average due to drought in recent years.



Northeast District:

Positive trends in pheasant abundance look promising in the northeast region this year, but emerging weather trends and limited cover may pose challenges to hunters again this fall according to field reports. Pheasant counts during the July mail carrier survey increased by 39% compared to last year and also were 43% above the five-year average (Table 1).

Still, pheasant hunting opportunities remain fairly localized within this region due to declining trends in habitat availability. CRP fields generally are more abundant in several counties along the South Dakota border, which continue to provide some of the region's better pheasant hunting opportunities. Last fall, widespread haying and grazing of CRP greatly reduced the amount of cover available for pheasants and pheasant hunters.

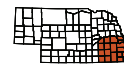
A similar situation is unfolding as drought conditions worsen in the northern half of the district this year. Forage demand is growing and portions of many CRP fields likely will be affected this year — including some of those open to public hunting through Open Fields and Waters.

On a positive note, many counties are only allowing 50% of the field to be hayed or grazed this year which will leave more cover standing.

Similar to last year, pheasant hunting on publicly accessible lands likely will be more productive earlier in the season. Better quail numbers have been reported throughout the district this summer and should provide some additional hunting opportunities where quality habitat exists.

In the eastern Sandhills, prairie-chicken brood observations were fairly common early on with variable brood sizes reported. Timely precipitation in July helped maintain quality brood-rearing cover across much of the region, but conditions are becoming increasingly dry.

Bird numbers have been down in recent years and will likely be variable again this fall.



Southeast District:

Timely rainfall throughout the spring and summer have helped maintain favorable nesting and brood-rearing conditions across much of the southeast region, which should improve upland bird hunting opportunities this fall.

According to this year's July mail carrier survey, pheasant counts increased 44% compared to last year and were also 14% above the five-year average (Table 1).

Like the northeast, quality pheasant habitat and hunting opportunities have become very localized within this region. CRP expirations, woody encroachment and other land-use changes have contributed to declining habitat trends. Playa wetlands in the Rainwater Basin region continue to provide some of the region's better pheasant hunting opportunities. Most wetlands throughout this region were relatively dry again this summer, though this varies locally, which creates additional nesting cover for pheasants and other ground-nesting birds.

Bobwhite numbers also have improved in the southeast according to summer surveys. Whistle counts in the East Central and Southeast management regions increased by 52-66% compared to last year (Table 2). Field reports generally have been positive for quail across the region: Broods have varied in size and age, and signs of breeding activity (calling and paired adults) have been evident from May through early August.



Upland Game Bird Survey Results

RING-NECKED PHEASANT SURVEYS:

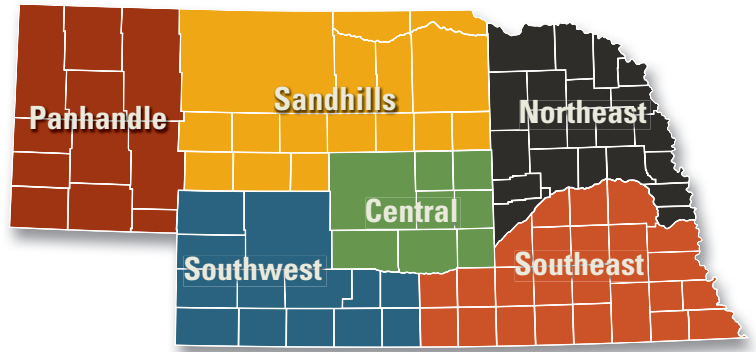


TABLE 1 *Percent Change from:

Region	2021 July RMCS	5-yr Ave. (2017-2021) July RMCS	Overall Abundance Rank (1=Best)	Top Counties (no particular order)
Panhandle	+48	+5	1	Cheyenne, Box Butte, Morrill
Southwest	-6	-34	2	Furnas, Gosper, Lincoln, Harlan
Northeast	+39	+43	3	Antelope, Cedar, Dixon, Knox
Sandhills	-19	-24	4	Blaine, Cherry, Grant
Southeast	+44	+14	5	Clay, Fillmore, Webster, York
Central	+32	-18	6	Greeley, Howard, Sherman
Statewide	+26	+7		

NORTHERN BOBWHITE SURVEYS:

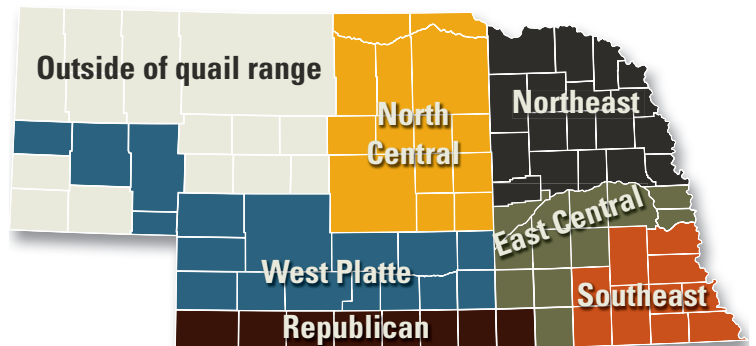


TABLE 2 *Percent Change from:

Region	2021 RMCS	2021 Whistle Count Survey	5-yr Ave. Whistle Count Survey	Overall Abundance Rank (1=Best)	Top Counties (no particular order)
East Central	+142	+66	+43	1	Butler, Seward, Thayer
Southeast	-28	+52	+9	2	Gage, Jefferson, Johnson, Pawnee
Republican	-34	+21	-2	3	Franklin, Furnas, Harlan, Red Willow
Northeast	+58	+84	+28	4	Antelope, Pierce, Stanton
West Platte	+136	-28	-40	5	Gosper, Frontier, Lincoln
North Central	0	+142	+7	6	Greeley, Howard, Sherman
Statewide	+32	+30	-4		

* For low-ranked regions, large percent changes might not translate into noticeable changes in hunting conditions.



WHERE TO HUNT

Pheasants:

Public hunting opportunities for pheasants are generally more abundant in southwest Nebraska and portions of the panhandle. This occurs primarily on private lands enrolled in the Open Fields and Waters Program, and there are no shortage of acres. N-CORPE lands and several wildlife management areas surrounding irrigation reservoirs also support relatively good numbers of pheasants.

In the southwest, biologists typically enroll an additional 25,000+ acres of tall wheat and milo stubble and associated unfarmed pockets into the Open Fields and Waters Program each fall, and those tracts will be displayed in the 2022-23 Stubble Access Guide and updated online.

Further west in the panhandle, clusters of CRP and tall wheat stubble enrolled in Open Fields and Waters throughout portions of Cheyenne, Deuel, Box Butte and Sheridan counties typically provide some of the best opportunities for pheasants.

Valentine and Crescent Lake national wildlife refuges also can support good numbers around wetland margins during certain years. Waterfowl Production Areas, WMAs and Ducks Unlimited Revolving Properties in the Rainwater Basin region of south-central Nebraska can offer good pheasant hunting opportunities depending upon water levels and grazing management; cover on these sites can be highly variable so pre-season scouting is recommended in planning your hunt.

In the northeast, clusters of CRP enrolled in Open Field and Waters within Antelope, Knox, Cedar, Dixon and Dakota counties typically provide some of the better pheasant hunting opportunities. Some nearby WMAs and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers properties along the Missouri River can support high pheasant densities during drier years when cover is abundant.

Preseason scouting is highly recommended this fall as some areas have been affected by prolonged drought. Emergency haying and grazing will affect cover on some CRP tracts located throughout the state, including some enrolled in the Open Fields and Waters Program (see Figure 3).

Northern Bobwhite:

Public lands scattered throughout the bobwhite's core range in southeastern and south-central Nebraska provide excellent quail hunting opportunities.

In the southeast, some of the best quail numbers can be found on some of the region's many WMAs — especially those in the southern two tiers of counties. Many of these WMAs are managed specifically with quail in mind, and in this highly fragmented landscape, these areas offer some of the largest blocks of contiguous quail habitat around. Open Fields and Waters sites scattered throughout that same general area should not be overlooked.

A drier, yet more diverse landscape prevails as you move west along the Kansas border; some of the best quail hunting opportunities typically are found east of U.S. Highway 83, where woody cover is more abundant.

Those targeting quail should focus on the edges of the many CRP fields, unfarmed draws and crop stubble fields enrolled in Open Fields and Waters throughout the region. The WMAs and Corps lands surrounding the region's irrigation reservoirs also support good numbers of quail and provide some of the largest blocks of habitat to explore. During certain years, good numbers of bobwhites can be found on public lands outside of their core range, but populations and associated hunting opportunities are highly variable from year to year.

Prairie Grouse:

(Sharp-Tailed Grouse and Greater Prairie-Chickens)

For prairie grouse, it's hard to overlook the expansive blocks of native prairie found on federal lands across the Nebraska Sandhills, which include the Nebraska National Forest (Bessey Ranger District), Samuel R. McKelvie National Forest, and the Crescent Lake and Valentine national wildlife refuges. These four areas alone total more than 322,000 acres, are conservatively-grazed, and support good numbers of prairie grouse.

Both species can be found on most of these federal lands, but sharp-tails typically dominate

the bag. For greater prairie-chickens, hunters need to look further east or south. The eastern Sandhills' rolling topography is picturesque prairie-chicken habitat, and hunters will find an increasing number of Open Fields and Waters sites scattered across portions of Rock, Holt, Loup, Garfield and Wheeler counties.

In southwest Nebraska, prairie-chickens can be found on several large blocks of Open Fields and Waters in Chase County, but hunters should not overlook opportunities found on nearby N-CORPE lands and Open Fields and Waters tracts found in portions of Hayes, Keith and Lincoln counties.

Some Open Fields and Waters lands in eastern Nebraska amidst some of the larger remaining complexes of grassland habitat provide some more limited opportunities for greater prairie-chickens; hunters are reminded that an East Zone grouse permit (free) must be obtained to pursue prairie grouse east of U.S. Highway 81.

FIND A PLACE TO HUNT

Nebraska offers more than 1.2 million acres of public and privately owned lands that are accessible for public hunting. Find these acres to hunt in the annually updated Nebraska Public Access Atlas, available at OutdoorNebraska.org/PublicAccessAtlas or in the new Nebraska Stubble Access Guide, an atlas supplement, available in October 2022 at OutdoorNebraska.org/Guides.

