

Thief Lake Wildlife Management Area Newsletter

September 2020 Volume 19 Issue 1



Figure 1. We had 13 youth parties participate in the Youth Waterfowl Hunt this year. 11 duck species were harvested and the top 3 birds in the bag were ringers, redheads, and mallards.

Another fall season is about to kickoff and the staff at Thief Lake have been busy getting everything ready. This includes seeding goose food plots, clearing and mowing hunter walking trails, mowing parking areas and the controlled hunting zone, and many other activities. It is an exciting time of year and most of us can agree on one thing- it goes by way too fast! There is a lot going on throughout the rest of the year that we do for wildlife and their habitats, and we wanted to start this newsletter by highlighting a few of the partnerships that we have that help us accomplish this important work. Enjoy the newsletter and we will see you out in the field!

Partnerships and Habitat Work

We are fortunate to have passionate partners that help us get habitat work done on the ground. Healthy wildlife populations require quality habitat and each species has certain requirements. From hiring seasonal employees to working with contractors to install

firebreaks, these organizations have gone above and beyond to enhance the habitats that sustains healthy populations.

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF)

We have worked closely with RMEF over the years and they have contributed significantly to help us accomplish numerous projects. RMEF has provided more than \$140,000 in funding since 2002 in order to enhance brushland habitats in the Thief Lake and Karlstad work areas. This work aims to stimulate new growth in early successional habitats that historically were maintained by windstorms, grazing and fire. The work is accomplished by shearing brush with bulldozers and following up with prescribed fire when possible. Elk are primarily grazers, and they are quick to hone in on the fresh growth of grasses and forbs following treatments. Deer and elk also browse new brush growth in the winter.



Figure 2. Dozers used in brush treatment (left) and elk browse on new willow growth (right).

Minnesota Deer Hunters Association (MDHA)

MDHA has been successful in securing a number of Conservation Partner Legacy (CPL) grants that have been used to hire seasonal employees, enhance oak savannas, conduct prescribed burns, and treat invasive species. The CPL grants are part of a program that was made possible by the voters of Minnesota back in 2008 when they voted on the Legacy Amendment. This raised sales tax by 3/8 of 1% and some of these dollars are allocated for habitat, which has helped us accomplish a lot of great work. Most recently, we worked with the DNR Roving Crew, MDHA, and a contractor to enhance 34 acres of oak savanna habitat.



Figure 3. Recent work with MDHA to enhance oak savanna habitat before (left) and after (right). Photo credits: Darrin Ekstein of Nebraska Tool

American Bird Conservancy (ABC)

The ABC has been active in identifying areas within the Thief Lake work area that are suitable for Golden-winged warbler habitat. These birds nest on the ground in early successional habitats in forests and brushlands. To create the early successional habitats, ABC works with contractors to mow the brush during the winter months. This work is especially important due to the fact that approximately 50% of the entire population of the species breed in Minnesota!



Figure 4. Example of a site treated for Golden-winged warbler habitat. The warblers utilize the adjacent aspen for singing perches and feeding once the chicks fledge. Photo credits: Golden-winged warbler (left) by Michael Furtman.

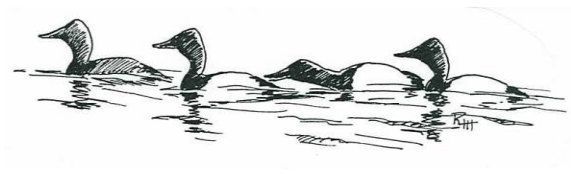


Access to Thief Lake in 2020

What can we expect?

We received a series of 1-2" rain events in the spring and early summer which resulted in the lake being 1-1.5' above target level through the end of July. We have since been drier and are currently 2" above summer/fall target level. That means that access is forecasted to be good at all boat launches around the lake. The bulrush and phragmites cover is in decent shape throughout the basin considering the high water levels throughout much of the growing season.

Feel free to call the office to ask about current lake levels prior to arrival.



Duck Season at Thief Lake; Last Year in Review and Prospects for this Fall

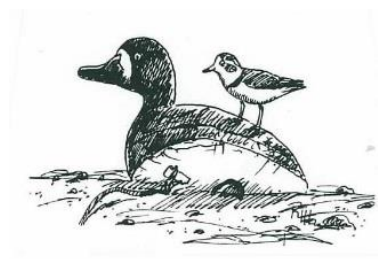
Total duck harvest on Thief Lake was estimated at 2,425 in 2019, down from 4,465 in 2018. Hunter success, measured in ducks per hunter per day, was down from last year (1.34 vs 2.38). There was a significant rain event (6-8") the night before the regular opener and that ultimately brought the lake up to 2 ½' over target level. The cover, in terms of bulrush and phragmites, was in very poor shape after the rain, making it difficult to conceal boats and canoes. Harvest was biased towards divers (65%), but a good variety of species were taken throughout the season. Ringnecks and redheads made up 42% of the total harvest on the lake. Redhead harvest was down and made up 8% of the total harvest.

Most bag limits in 2020 will be the same as last year. The daily limit for sandhill cranes will **increase from 1 to 2**. Another change is that 1 scaup may be taken per day through **October 22nd** and 2 per day for the remainder of the season. The September early goose season will begin on September 5th and end on the 20th.

DNR Waterfowl Web Page

For more information on some of the things that the DNR is doing for waterfowl and waterfowl hunting, go to the Web page at: [DNR information on waterfowl and waterfowl hunting](#)

During waterfowl season, there is a link from this site to the most current aerial census information for various key waterfowl staging areas around the state.

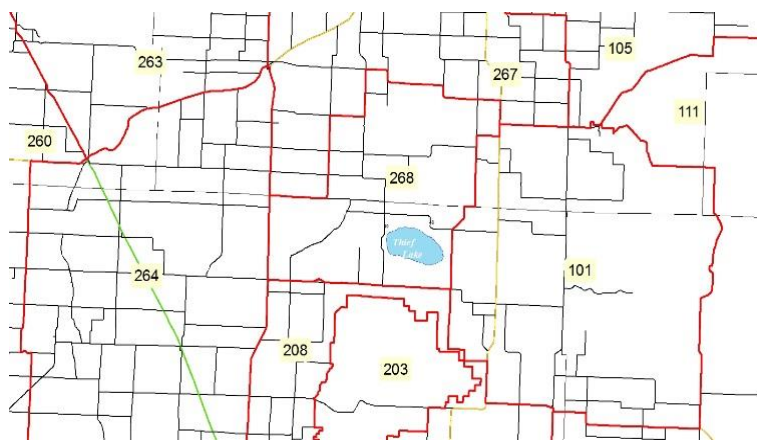


Invasive Rules Apply to Duck Boats (and gear), too!

Boats used strictly for duck hunting are exempt from some of the regulations that apply to other boats in the state of Minnesota, such as the need for registration or running lights. They are still subject to the rules regarding invasive species. For decades we have been battling a small infestation of purple loosestrife at the Maanum's boat launch, which undoubtedly came in with someone's trailer or boat from an infested area. If we want to maintain the character of Thief Lake, we need to protect it from introductions of aquatic plants like Eurasian milfoil or curly leaf pondweed, or invertebrates like the faucet snail (an alternate host for a parasite that has killed off thousands of scaup on Winnie and the Upper Mississippi). We need to clean off trailers and drain boats. In duck hunting, though, we have lots of additional gear that you might not think about – boat blinds with non-native vegetation or decoys strings and anchors that could transport eggs and seeds. For more info (including pictures) see:

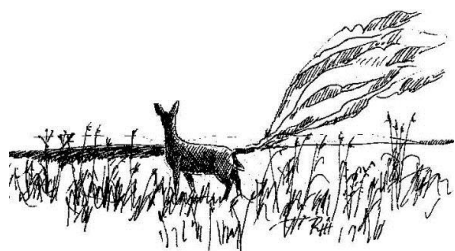
[Invasive information](#)

Deer Permit Areas (DPAs) in the Thief Lake Area



Deer in Northwest Minnesota

The four-day youth deer hunt will again be statewide for the 2020 season. The hunt will run over MEA weekend (Thursday October 15 to Sunday October 18) and youth ages 10-17 are allowed to take one either-sex deer by firearm except they may not take antlerless deer in permit areas designated as bucks only. Hunters afield during this time (except waterfowl hunters hunting over water) are reminded that they have to wear full (deer season) orange or pink. Hunters in the CHZ can remove their orange or pink once they are in a blind during this season.



Deer Populations in Northwest Minnesota

The DPAs in the Thief Lake work area went through an updated population goal setting process this past winter where there was opportunity for public input. People were able to provide their comments in-person at workshops, online, or talk to local wildlife managers. After going through the process, the public wanted to see a 25% increase in the population in DPA 101 and to stabilize the populations in DPAs 267 and 268.

To stabilize the populations in DPAs 267 and 268, they will once again be **Intensive**. These populations continue to thrive with the mild winters and below average snow depths. To move towards the 25% increase in DPA 101, it will go from Managed to **Hunters Choice**. This designation allows for 1 deer of either sex.

Grouse, Bear and Elk

We do two drumming counts for ruffed grouse in the work area. The routes around Thief Lake and the Randen Ridge were both down slightly from 2019. Unfortunately, we had above average rains throughout the late spring and early summer and few broods have been observed this summer.

Bear populations continue to do well in the Thief Lake area and there have been numerous sightings by staff this summer. Natural foods for bears in the area have not been as abundant

this year as they had been the last 2 years, with the exception of highbush cranberry and hawthorn. We see increases in bear complaints during years when natural food sources are not as plentiful. A great resource to refer to is our living with bears page on our DNR website: [Living with Bears](#)

The mid-winter aerial survey of elk in the Grygla herd remains below the target level again this year, and as a result, no season was offered for this herd this year. Elk hunting continues in the Kittson County areas, however. For more info on elk hunting opportunities, see: [Information on elk hunting opportunities](#)

Special thanks to Ross Hier for the use of his artwork!

Editor's Note: If you know of others who might be interested in this information, please send us their address. If you received this newsletter as a hard copy and have an email address, please send it to us so we can add you to our electronic distribution list. We are, of course, also happy to provide hard copies to those of you without email addresses.

We welcome your comments and questions too! You can reach us at:

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