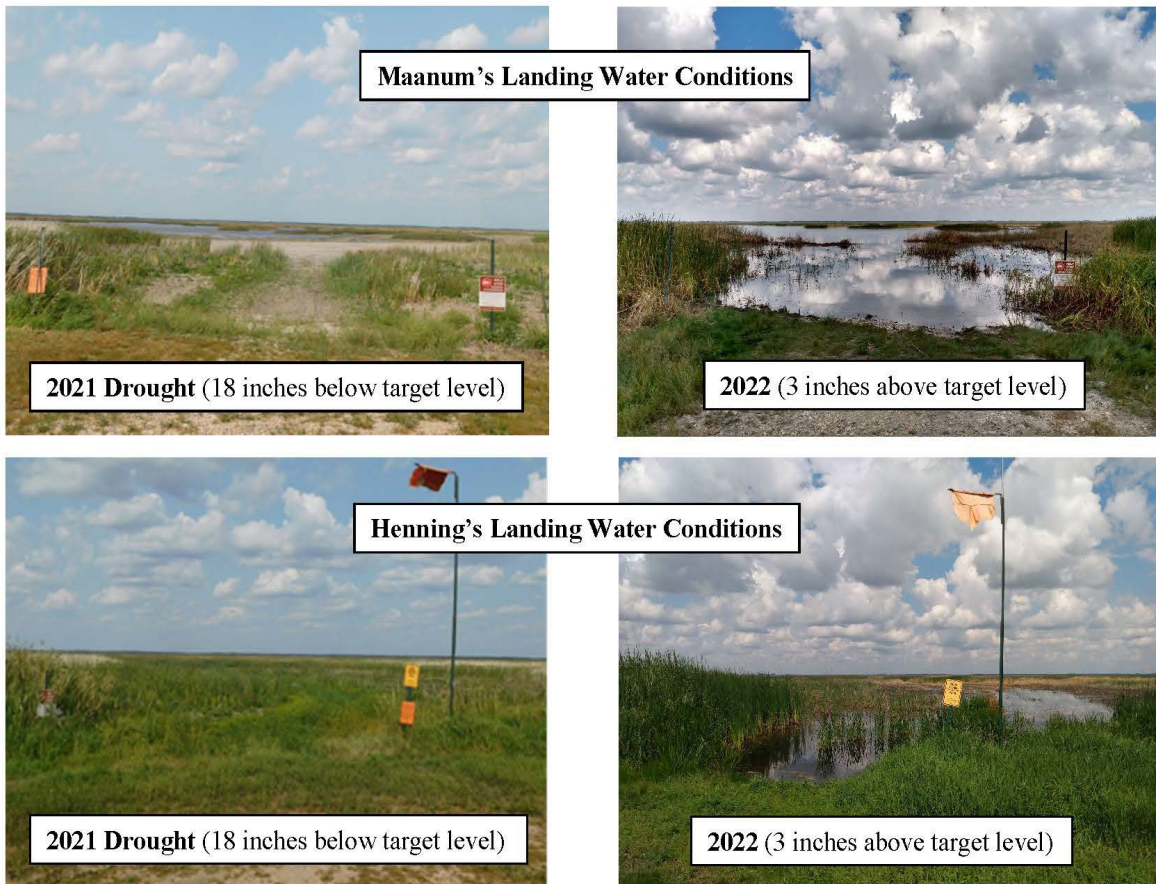


Thief Lake Wildlife Management Area Newsletter
September 22 Volume 21 Issue 1



It is hard to believe that another fall season is rapidly approaching 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 have been some changes in staffing and a few new habitat projects in the area. Enjoy the newsletter and we will see you out in the field!



Staff Update

Thief Lake staff have nearly doubled since this spring. We are now back to 5 employees stationed at Thief Lake. The newest hire is Gregg Gallagher. He started this summer as the equipment operator. This position was previously held by Rick Beito, who retired in March of 2021. Gregg spent most of his life in central Minnesota farming and training horses. In 2017 he moved to the Thief Lake WMA area where he takes part in the many outdoor activities this region has to offer. Gregg is very excited about his new position helping improve wildlife habitat and maintaining access to the area!



A familiar face returned to Thief Lake this year. Kyle Point was hired as the Assistant Wildlife Area Manager and began in May. He helped with hunter bag checks on Thief Lake in 2019 and 2020, so you may recognize him. KP is originally from Michigan and grew up duck hunting and fishing. He earned his bachelor's degree in Fisheries and Wildlife Management (Wildlife Concentration) from Lake Superior State University in Sault Ste. Marie, MI in 2013. After that he worked a lot of seasonal waterfowl research jobs in several states (Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, New Jersey, North Dakota, Louisiana, Kansas, and spent 2 seasons banding ducks for the Minnesota DNR in the northwest part of the state). He wishes you good luck in the woods and on the water this fall!



Maanum's Landing at the peak of flooding - May 15, 2022.

Access to Thief Lake in 2022: A Return to Normalcy

The low water levels brought on by last year's drought are a thing of the past. After excessive spring rains **Thief Lake crested at 4.1' above summer target level in mid-May**. This was almost a record high level for the lake. As I write this in early September, the **lake is still 3 inches above target level**. So, access to the lake is "back to normal". The deeper water will allow for easier outboard use, but the submerged aquatic vegetation or "weeds" are thick on much of the lake. This means you may need to stop and clean the prop on occasion. The bullrush cover is in good shape this year. Invasive cattails were sprayed around the entire perimeter of the lake this summer, so some of the cover is already brown. Entries into most of the camping areas along the south shore of the lake remain soft, so scout ahead of your camper on foot to ensure you do not get stuck! Feel free to call the office to ask about current conditions prior to arrival.

Waterfowl Production at Thief Lake in 2022

Water is good for ducks, right? Well, it turns out you can have too much of a good thing. This spring's flooding in the Thief Lake area put a damper on local duck and goose production. The late spring also had a negative impact. Most puddle ducks like mallards, pintails, and teal nest on dry land in grassy cover. With an extra 4 feet of water in the lake this spring most of the nesting cover around the lake was inundated. Birds that had already started to nest had their eggs overtaken by rising water. Divers like ringnecks, redheads, and canvasbacks do not walk well on land and typically nest over water in cattails, bullrush, or on floating bogs. Unlike songbirds, ducks only use materials in the immediate vicinity of the nest to build their nests. Although ducks can build their nests up a bit if water levels rise, they don't build nests several feet deep like eagles can. So, it was a very tough spring for nesting waterfowl in the Thief Lake basin and our brood surveys reflected that with very few ducklings observed and almost no goslings seen on the lake.



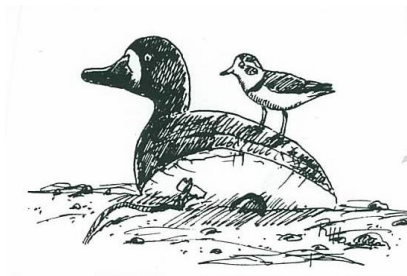
Canvasback nest in cattails at the edge of a pothole in North Dakota during a dry spring. (2017)



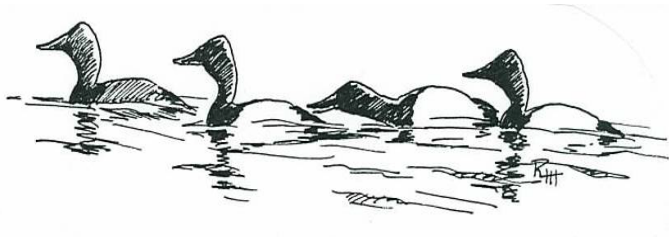
Pintail nest in grassy cover. The hen was probably going to lay more eggs before starting incubation.

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

Total duck harvest on Thief Lake was estimated at **5,116 in 2021**, which was **more than double** the harvest of 2,483 in 2020. The 2021 total includes 226 teal taken during the first early teal season in Minnesota since 1965. The 2020 season was cut short due to thick ice that formed at the launches around October 20th. Hunter success, measured in ducks per hunter per day, was up from last year (2.27 vs 2.06). Hunter participation was low in 2021 because extremely low water conditions made access difficult, but those that did get out had great success. Freeze up was relatively late in 2021 (November 14), which gave hunters a longer season to target less pressured birds. Harvest was biased towards puddlers (79%), which is typical when the lake is low. Blue-winged teal, green-winged teal, and ringnecks were the top three species harvested in 2021.



The daily duck limit remains 6, with no more than 4 mallards (no more than 2 hens), 3 wood ducks, 2 redheads, 2 canvasbacks, 2 black ducks, and 1 pintail. **The scaup (bluebill) limit changes during the season.** One scaup may be taken per day through October 13; 2 scaup may be taken through the remainder of the season in each zone. The bag limit for Canada geese remains 5. Shooting hours are half hour before sunrise to sunset for the entire season. Motorized spinning-wing decoys may be used statewide, including on WMAs. Please refer to: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/hunting/waterfowl/index.html> for all 2022 regulations.

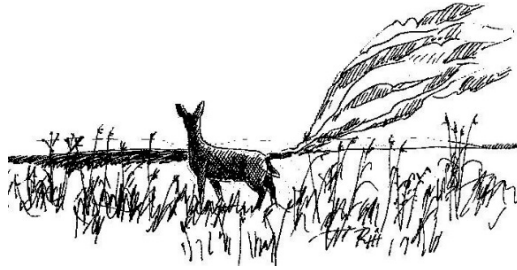


Teal Season 2022 Recap

Minnesota's second experimental early teal season concluded on September 7th and the Thief Lake numbers are in! Sixty-five hunters were bag checked during the 5-day season. They harvested 190 teal, averaging 2.92 teal per hunter per day! Most (86%) of the teal taken were blue-wings. Only 5 geese were checked, and numbers are still low on the lake.

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 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 decoy lines and anchors that could transport eggs and seeds. For more info (including pictures) see: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/invasives/ais/index.html>

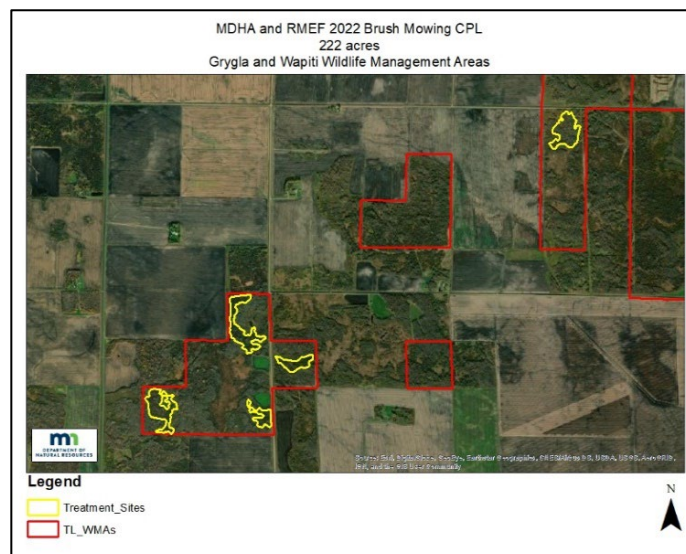


Deer in Northwest Minnesota

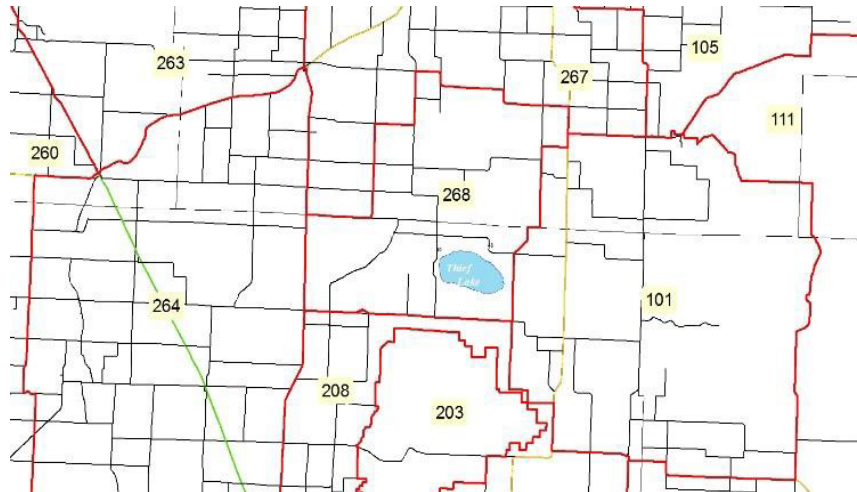
The winter of 2021/22 was a bit more severe than we have experienced in recent years. The DNR uses the winter severity index (WSI) to measure how significant each winter is on deer survival. The WSI is calculated from November 1 through May 31 and one point is accumulated for each day with air temperatures below 0 degrees Fahrenheit and one point for each day when the snow depth is 15 inches or greater. This past winter we recorded a total of 111 points. To put that in perspective, a winter with less than 50 points is considered mild and a winter with greater than 120 points is considered severe. Although we were approaching a severe winter, the deer pulled through fairly well. Part of this can be contributed to having high quality wintering areas where the deer have access to cover and food (primarily woody browse).

We partner with the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation to secure funding which helps us accomplish important habitat work within these wintering areas. This past winter we were able to mow over 200 acres of brush that will regenerate and provide high-quality browse for deer and elk for years to come.

See the map below for an example of the brush treatment areas.



Deer Permit Areas (DPAs) in the Thief Lake Area



With the populations doing well in the area, DPA 101 will now have a 2 deer limit and DPAs 267 and 268 will continue to have 3 deer limits.

Grouse, Bear, and Elk

We conduct two drumming counts for ruffed grouse in the work area. The routes around Thief Lake and the Randen Ridge were both up from 2021. We had a wet spring, with a record amount of precipitation in May, but we began to dry out and warm up after that. Staff have been observing broods while working in the field so that is a good sign for this fall.

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 are considered good to very good this year. As of writing this newsletter, current harvest in the area is down nearly 40% from this time last year. The abundance of natural foods this fall will continue to make it more challenging for hunters to harvest a bear.

The mid-winter aerial survey of elk in the Grygla herd was conducted in January and a total of 29 elk were counted. That puts us just below the population goal of 30-38 animals for this herd. For more info on elk hunting opportunities please see:

<https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/hunting/elk/index.html>



Editor's Request to our readers

Many of you have been coming to Thief Lake for several years with your families. Some even across generations. We would love to share with other readers your story. If interested, send us an email along with a picture. You could include a memory, or even a recipe to share.

If you know of others who might be interested in receiving this newsletter, 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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As always, special thanks to Ross Hier for the use of his artwork!

