

Thief Lake Wildlife Management Area Newsletter
August 2023 Volume 22 Issue 1

Where has the last year gone? It seems like just last week we were scrambling to get the 2022 Newsletter sent out! While the time has flown by there have been a lot of changes in the Thief Lake area. Last year's flooding has been replaced by one of the worst droughts in the last 70 years. Two summer interns assisted with many projects, including battling invasive plant species, maintaining trails, and banding geese. Read on to find out more of what we've been up to since last September. We hope to see you at Thief Lake this year!



Sunset from the Thief Lake Observation Mound near Maanum's Landing on the southwest side on the lake on July 3, 2023.

Staff Update – SUMMER INTERNS



Tyler Zimmerman was an intern with us this summer and is going into his senior year at the University of Minnesota Crookston for Natural Resources Management. He is from Pengilly, MN and enjoyed assisting with elk food plot establishment and trail camera monitoring this summer. Tyler enjoys hunting deer in the fall, especially with his bow. He wishes you good luck in the woods this upcoming season!



A soybean food plot for elk and other wildlife.



Lauren Hedman was our other summer intern this year and she has one year left at Dordt University in northwest Iowa. Lauren is double majoring in Environmental Studies: Natural Resource Management and General Biology. This is Lauren's second internship with the MN DNR; last summer she worked for fisheries in Waterville, MN. Lauren grew up in the Twin Cities and has enjoyed lots of camping and hiking with family in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Lauren likes kayaking, hiking, camping, and has enjoyed exploring the Thief Lake area while berry-picking this summer.

Hunter Walking Trails – Not Just for Hunters!

BY TYLER ZIMMERMAN

Thief Lake has many great outdoor recreational opportunities, including a vast 75.5 miles of Hunter Walking Trails which provide a fantastic resource for not just hunters but for anyone to enjoy. The trails provide a scenic path through the many habitat types that Thief Lake has to offer - the perfect place to hike, observe wildlife, and much more for the non-hunting recreationists.

For hunters, the Hunter Walking Trails can be a very useful tool! The trails can provide a great place for grouse hunting, making it easy to cover ground through the diverse habitats. Another great option is using the trails for quick and easy access to get closer to your favorite deer hunting spots.

The Thief Lake Hunter Walking Trails are open year-round for anyone to enjoy. The trails are generally cleared from brush and fallen trees and limbs in mid to late summer and are mowed right before fall so they are ready for all the recreationists we receive during that time. We suggest wearing some blaze orange or blaze pink if you use the trails in the fall and early winter when hunters may be present. The trails are looking great this year, so we hope to see you out there and wish you luck! For additional information on our hunting trails as well as others go to [Minnesota DNR Hunter Walking Trails](#).



A brush mower pulled behind a four-wheeler is used to mow Hunter Walking Trails late each summer.

Prescribed Fire is an Important Habitat Management Tool

BY LAUREN HEDMAN

While purposely setting the landscape on fire may seem like a strange thing to do, prescribed fire has many uses in Minnesota. Thief Lake staff plan to burn multiple units within Thief Lake WMA between August 18 and the end of September. Historically, fires set by lightning or Native Americans helped keep prairies free of brush. Prairies and Oak Savannas are considered fire-dependent ecosystems, which means that without fire, brush encroachment will turn the prairie or savanna into a brushland or forest.

In addition to preserving these unique areas, fires help encourage new growth. Fires remove old vegetation that is shading out new plants. They also eliminate extra fuels on the landscape, which helps prevent hotter, more intense wildfires. Fires help prairies by shifting soil nutrients to those that prairie species prefer. Fire can also be used to control invasive species, like buckthorn, honeysuckle, and others.

Actually, performing a prescribed burn takes a lot of planning. DNR staff write a burn plan, which includes unit boundaries, the vegetation types throughout the unit, personnel and tools needed, and contingency plans. Prep work, like mowing firebreaks, may need to take place before the burn. On the day of the burn, the weather must be within the guidelines listed in the burn plan: wind speed and direction, temperature, and humidity are all checked before and during the burn. Throughout the burn, staff patrol the edges to extinguish any escapes and monitor the fire. Once the unit is burned, any smoking materials near the edges of the unit are extinguished. Prescribed fire is an important tool for managing habitat in Minnesota.



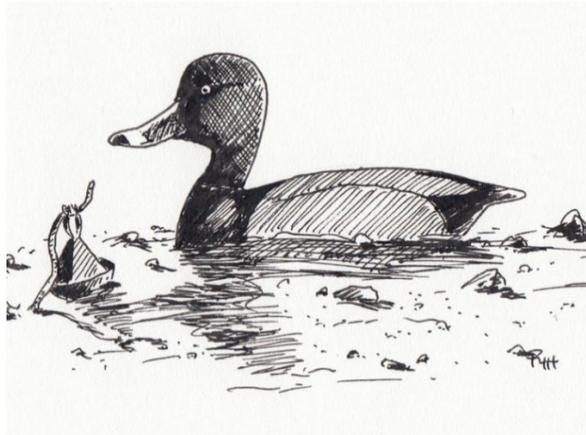
An Active Prescribed Burn



Example of growth after a prescribed burn with a blooming prairie plant photo inset.

From Record Flooding to Record Drought **A TALE OF TWO YEARS**

The roller coaster of precipitation that brought flooding to northwest Minnesota last spring took a nosedive this year. Actually, Thief Lake received below average precipitation from June to November of 2022. After a relatively mild fall season, winter roared in on November 10th and most of the lake froze up overnight. Rain transitioned to several inches of snow. That snow fell on a ground that had not yet developed frost, and each successive snowstorm added more insulation. We never did get frost in the ground in most areas. We peaked at 20.5” of snow in the woods in early April. By late April the snow finally melted, and any flooding was brief, as the lack of frost allowed much of the meltwater to soak into the ground. That must be what’s keeping the plants as green as they are, because **as of the end of July the Thief Lake rain gauge has received less than 6 inches of rain for the entire year!** Average rainfall is typically over 14 inches by the end of July. We were 3 inches below average in July alone! Almost every storm to hit northwest Minnesota has gone around us, or at least around the rain gauge which is located next to the dam on the west end of the lake. We have precipitation data from almost every month dating back to 1954, and **this is the driest we have ever been over the first seven months of any year!**



Low Water Will be Bad for Lake Access and Divers, **GOOD FOR PUDDLE DUCKS IN 2023**

There’s usually a silver lining. The bad news – as you might expect, the drought has dropped Thief Lake below target level. As of August 31, 2023, the lake is 6” below target level. This will make boat access very difficult, especially at Maanum’s Landing, Henning’s Landing, and the campgrounds on the south side of the lake. The good news is that if you can make it out on the lake the hunting

should be fantastic and the bullrushes are thick this year. The submerged aquatic plants (“weeds”) that produce seeds and tubers that ducks like to eat also appear very healthy. There is even some wild rice around the mouth of the Moose River! That duck buffet combined with low water will make getting around the lake with an outboard motor challenging this year. If you didn’t know – there are some big rocks out there! The dredge spoils on either side of the old channel running east-west across the lake are also shallow this year, making a perfect loafing spot for coots and ducks alike. If you prefer shooting and eating dabbling ducks like mallards, pintails, and teal then the low water should be good news for you. Generally, low water results in more dabblers and less divers being shot. Also, some of the best hunter success has been during years when the lake was at its lowest. So, if you have a canoe or kayak consider using it for hunting this fall. And if you’ve been thinking about buying a mud motor now might be a good time. Just remember our 10-horsepower restriction!



Kayaks can be very useful for duck hunting! Just be careful about over-loading them. And always wear a life vest.

Entries into the camping areas along the south shore of the lake could become soft if we get some rain, 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 2023

Spring was late to arrive at Thief Lake, but it was a much better year for nesting waterfowl than 2022. Spring runoff mostly soaked into the ground, so the lake did not flood like last year. Being fully staffed allowed us to get some much-needed maintenance done on our goose nesting tubs, mallard hen houses (tubes), and wood duck boxes this winter. We also installed 21 new hen houses, including one within view of the picnic shelter by Maanum's Landing (which got a new tin roof last fall). We won't know how many of our hen houses and wood duck boxes had nests until we refresh them this winter, but most of the goose tubs had nests in them during our goose pair survey. Duck brood numbers on the lake indicated good local production this year.



The new mallard nesting tube or "hen house" in front of the picnic shelter (note the new roof) next to Maanum's Landing on the southwest shore of Thief Lake.

Duck Season at Thief Lake 2022 in Review

Total duck harvest on Thief Lake was estimated at 6,640 in 2022, which is the highest estimate since 1996 and up 30% from the harvest of 5,116 in 2021! The 2022 total includes an estimated 405 teal taken during the early teal season. Hunter success, measured in ducks per hunter per day, was the second highest on record, but down slightly from the record high in 2021 (2.39 in 2022 vs 2.52 in 2021). The 2022 season got off to the slowest start since 2004 but made up for it over the course of the fall. Opening day was plagued by warm, foggy, misty, windless conditions and a lack of locally produced ducks due to the spring

flooding. Hunter success was best during mid-October and again in early November. Hunting pressure was low during those timeframes. Harvest was split equally – half dabblers and half divers. Top birds in the bag during the regular season were ringnecks (#1), wigeon, blue-winged teal, mallards, redheads, and pintails. Freeze up came with the storm that hit on November 10th.



Good numbers of plumed out wigeon were present on November 9th, just before freeze-up! Late season hunting can be very productive and offers your best chance at a taxidermy worthy duck this far north. Cold conditions do increase risk, though. Take extra safety precautions!

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 12; 2 scaup may be taken through the remainder of the season in 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 the [2023 MN DNR Waterfowl Hunting Regulations](#).



Are they real teal or decoys? (Decoys. They're decoys.)

Teal Season 2022 Recap, 2023 Preview

Minnesota's second experimental early teal season ran from September 3rd through 7th last fall. Sixty-five hunters were bag checked at Thief Lake during the 5-day season. They averaged 2.92 teal per hunter per day! Most (86%) of the teal taken were blue-wings. Only 5 geese were checked.

The third and final year of the experimental early teal season will be September 2nd through 6th, 2023. After this year a decision will be made as to whether teal season will continue as is, continue with changes, or be discontinued. The limit remains 6 teal per day. Other duck species are not allowed to be shot. Decent numbers of mallards and pintails and good numbers of wigeon have already been seen on the lake, so please identify your birds before pulling the trigger! **Shooting hours for teal season start at sunrise**, unlike regular duck season which starts a half-hour before sunrise.

Teal season is a great time to make sure you're ready when the regular duck

opener rolls around. *It's not as unpleasant to find out your waders leak when it's 75 degrees out and the water is still warm!* Hunting pressure on Thief Lake is much lighter on teal opener than the regular duck opener, and very few people hunt the weekdays of teal season. My best hunt last year was the last afternoon of the season, and I didn't hear another shot on the lake! Good numbers of blue-wings were observed on Thief in mid-August. I encourage you to take a kid and get after the teal before they migrate south!

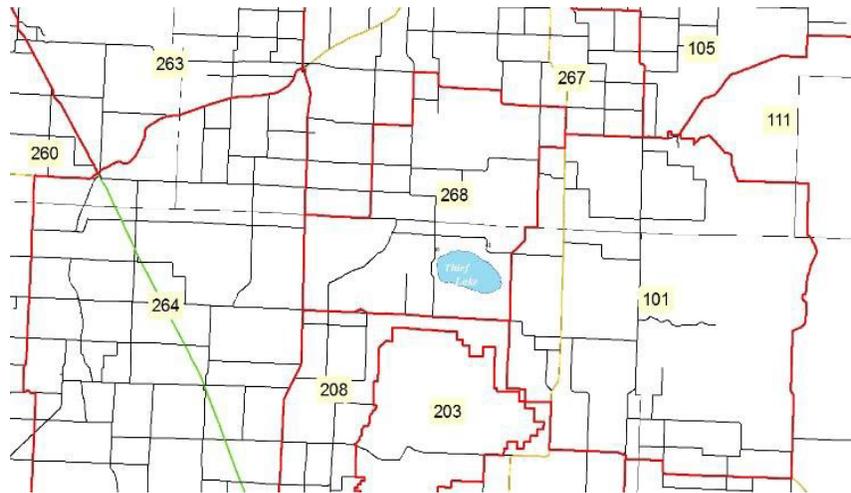
Deer in Northwest Minnesota



A young deer walking through the 13" of snow we had in early January 2023. We peaked at 20.5" of snow in the woods in early April. Average peak snow level is 14.5" in late February.

The winter of 2022/23 was characterized by relatively deep snow throughout the entire season. 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 105 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 in DPA 268. Part of this can be contributed to having high quality wintering areas where the deer have access to cover and food (primarily woody browse).

Deer Permit Areas (DPAs) in the Thief Lake Area



Deer hunters will see a couple of changes for the DPAs in the Thief Lake area. DPAs 101 and 267 saw a decrease in their bag limit designations. DPA 267 will go from a 3-deer limit to a 2-deer limit. DPA 101 drops from a 2-deer limit to a 1-deer limit (either sex). DPA 268 will once again be a 3-deer limit.

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 down from 2022. We had a dry spring and that should positively influence nesting success and chick survival. 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 this year and the acorns began dropping in mid-August. The abundance of natural foods this fall will 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: [Hunting Elk in Minnesota](#)



The sun sets on another day of duck hunting on Thief Lake.

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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Email us at: [Kyle Arola](#), Area Wildlife Manager
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As always, special thanks to Ross Hier for the use of his artwork!