

Thief Lake Wildlife Management Area Newsletter

August 2026 Volume 25 Issue 1



*Sunset over
Thief Lake on
September
30th, 2025.
Note the coot
swimming in
the lower
left.*

The days are getting shorter and cooler nights are approaching. The ducklings are getting bigger and Thief Lake has gotten bigger, too. We've had the wettest June through July in over 50 years! That caused the lake to rise 18" above our fall target level. The cover on the lake this year is variable. Areas of cattail on the east end that were sprayed last year are now breaking down and decomposing. While providing ideal loafing habitat, it will be difficult to conceal boats. The bullrush between Maanum's and Henning's is mostly thin and will be tough to hide within as well. Submerged plants on the east end are thick, even with the high water.

Head West, Young Man

Kyle Point, Thief Lake WMAs Assistant Manager for the past 4 and a half years, is leaving for a new job in the Pacific Flyway in mid-October. He will be helping a friend from New Jersey manage a 5,000-acre private island duck hunting club in northern California. He will also be a hunting guide. This will be the 12th state Kyle has worked in! He enjoyed the mixed bags on Thief Lake over the past several years. He will be selling several boats, his old truck, truck bed camper, and other things before leaving. He hopes to see many of you this fall and appreciates your cooperation with bag checks and hospitality over the years. His departure will leave Thief Lake with only 2 staff for the foreseeable future. Our General Repair Worker position is also vacant, and funding has been limited to fill positions. So, goodbye from Kyle 2Point0. Happy hunting!



One of 6 ruffed grouse eating willow buds at sunset on February 5th just north of the Thief Lake office.

Wettest June – July in 50 Years!

Snow depth was below average for the third year in a row, peaking at 12 inches in early February. Snow remained in the woods through mid-April, which is normal. Ice out was on April 24th, similar to 2025. We received below average precipitation from last November through May. By the end of May we had just over half our normal precipitation for the calendar year. By the end of July, we were above average for the year! We received 5.40" of rain in June (1.54" above average) and 6.73" of rain in July (3.06" above average). On July 30th we received 2.02" of rain in less than 30 minutes! We had our wettest June through July in just over 50 years and the 4th wettest since our records started in 1949. We received another inch and a half of rain in early August that pushed the lake level up to 1160.20'. That's 9 inches above our summer target level. Our water level peaked at a time when we typically begin releasing water to drop down towards our fall target level of 1158.5'.

Waterfowl Production at Thief Lake in 2026

DOWN FROM LAST YEAR'S BUMPER CROP*

We conducted the Thief Lake Boat Brood Survey on August 6th and counted 99 ducklings. That's down from 177 last year, but up from the abysmal 39 ducklings two years ago. Last year was one of the better counts from the past several years. Most ducklings encountered were ringnecks, mallards, blue-wings, and wigeon, but nine different species were seen. Some of the flighted mallards and teals observed could be this year's young that were flying already. *If we had conducted the survey a week or two earlier, we would have counted more mallard and teal broods. That said, we did find a freshly hatched ringneck brood that was likely still in their eggs a week prior. Keep in mind that this brood survey is a one-time snapshot of waterfowl production only on Thief Lake. It is not designed to count all the ducklings, and most of the ducks harvested on Thief Lake hatch elsewhere.



There were around 350 adult trumpeter swans on the lake observed during the brood survey, but we only saw five swan broods.

Teal Season 2025 Recap and 2026 Opening Weekend Results

Minnesota's fifth early teal season in 2025 ran from Saturday, September 6th through Wednesday the 10th. The relatively late start to this "early" season proved very detrimental. A record cold snap brought lows in the mid-30s to the area in early September. The cold and north winds not only pushed our teal south before the season opened, but it also pushed larger ducks (including mallards) out before any hunting occurred on Thief Lake! The lack of new teal arriving with the front set us up for a slow teal season. Forty-eight hunters were bag checked between Saturday and Sunday. They averaged 1.27 teal per hunter per day, a decline from the record low of 1.61 the previous year. Most (82%) of the teal taken were blue-wings and only 2 geese were checked. Over the first three teal seasons, hunters averaged 3.08 teal each per day. The continental harvest rate on blue-winged teal is extremely low at about 2%. When blue-wings encounter good breeding conditions they are the best adapted duck species to take advantage and produce a lot of ducklings. The slower teal seasons in recent years do not mean that teal are in trouble. Hunter success during teal season is driven by several factors which have just not aligned favorably the past 2 years.

This year's teal season began on Saturday, September 5th and ran through the 9th. The limit

remained 6 teal per day. A total of 51 hunters were checked between Saturday and Sunday. They averaged 1.73 teal per hunter per day. Of the 88 teal harvested, just 3 were green-winged teal.

2025 Regular Duck Season at Thief Lake

IT WAS THE BEST OF OPENERS. IT WAS THE WORST OF OPENERS.

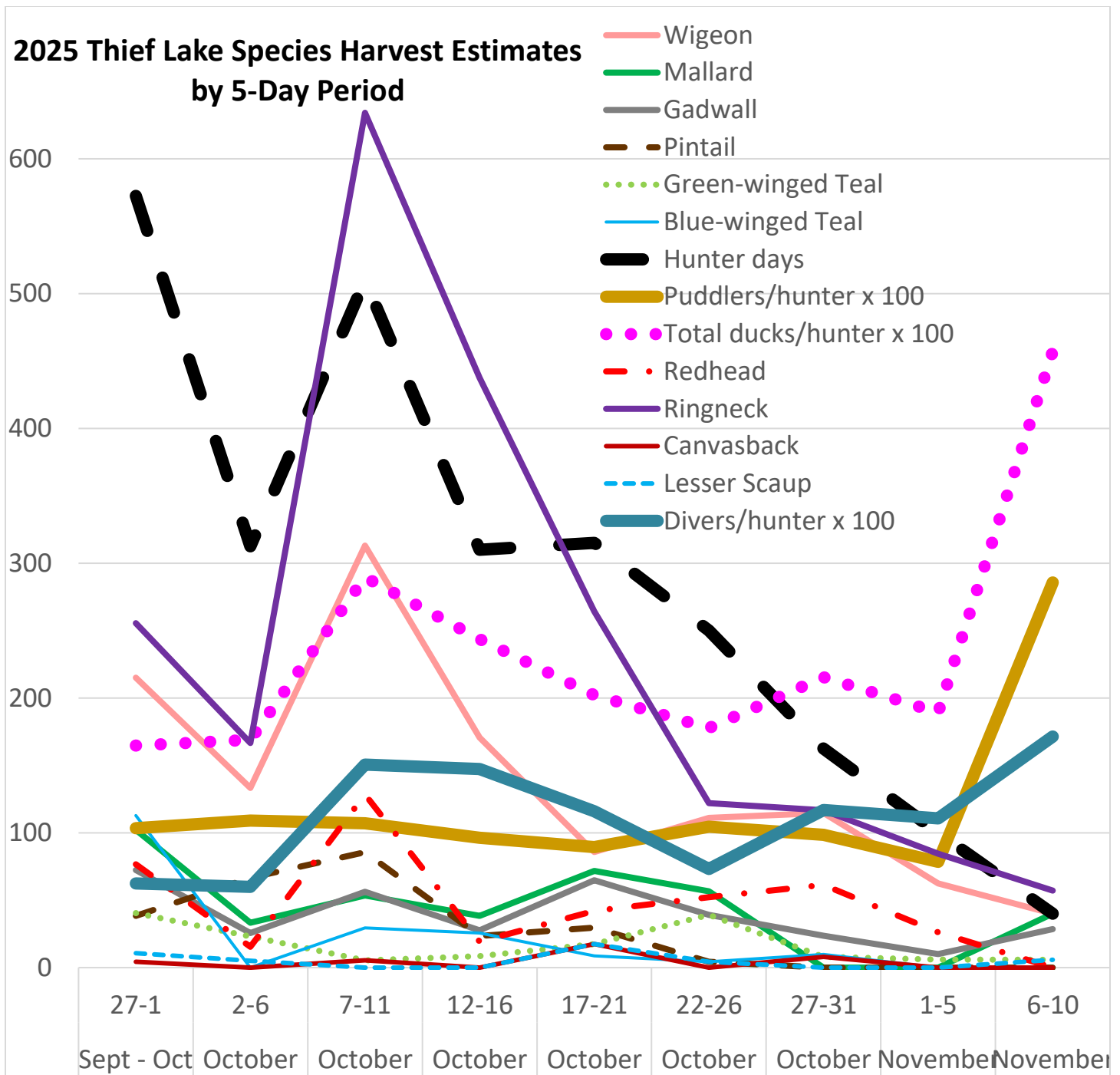
Opening Day had the 5th highest ducks per hunter average in lake history at 3.24! However, hunters at the NE Landing and the Moose River Landing were much more successful (over 4 ducks each) than hunters on the south side of the lake (less than 2 ducks each). Kyle Point hunted the south side, and it was his slowest opening day in 24 seasons! All the opening days with more than 3 ducks per hunter have been since 2011 when shooting time changed from 9 AM to 30 minutes before sunrise. We had a decent push of ducks in early October, but that was the only other decent migration noticed. For the third year in a row, we didn't get the major cold fronts to push more new birds down than we lost with each minor front. Despite seeming like a slow fall, bag check data for the regular season came to a surprisingly high 2.14 ducks per hunter per day. Better than last year's 1.98 and 2023's 2.07, and well above the long-term average of 1.61. Ringneck numbers seemed low all season, but they were still #1 in the bag and 40% of the harvest. Luckily the wigeon made up for that, comprising a species-record 23% of the ducks bagged! Mallards were #3 at 8%, followed by redheads (8%), gadwall (7%), pintails (5%), blue-wings (5%), and green-wings (4%). Overall, 52% of the regular season harvest was puddle ducks. We had open water at the end of duck season for the second year in a row (very abnormal). The lake had mostly frozen over in mid-November and the only ducks that remained were virtually all mallards in the sanctuary.

The daily duck limit remains 6 for 2026, with no more than 4 mallards (no more than 2 hens), 3 wood ducks, 2 redheads, 2 canvasbacks, 2 black ducks, and **3 pintails**. **The scaup (bluebill) limit changes during the season in each zone.** In the North Zone, 1 scaup may be taken per day through October 10; 2 scaup may be taken per day throughout the remainder of the season.

The bag limit for Canada geese remains 5.

Shooting hours are a half-hour before sunrise to sunset for the entire season. Motorized spinning-wing decoys may be used statewide, including WMAs. Please refer to [Hunting and Trapping Regulations Booklet 2026-2027](#)

*Note that the **Waterfowl Regulations** are now **included** in the **Hunting and Trapping Regulations** booklet



This graph shows duck harvest estimates by five-day period on Thief Lake during the 2025 season. The best hunting, as far as ducks per hunter, was November 6-10, when an estimated 40 hunters averaged over 4.5 ducks each per day. 62% of that late harvest was puddle ducks – mostly mallards, wigeon, and gadwall. While wigeon were present all season, the peak of wigeon harvest coincided with a migration and a bump in hunting pressure from October 7-11. Wigeon were the second most harvested duck on Thief Lake last year. One in every five ducks' shot was a wigeon! Ringnecks remained the top bird in the bag last year. Despite ringneck numbers seeming low all season, almost 2 of every 5 ducks shot on Thief was a ringer. Ringneck and redhead harvest also peaked October 7-11 with the only notable increase in duck numbers we had on the lake during the season.

Adopt a WMA

Have you heard about the Adopt a WMA Program that Minnesota has? This program gives members of the public an opportunity to “adopt” a WMA to assist with the management and upkeep of WMAs throughout the state. Opportunities can range from picking up garbage along the road to mowing hunter walking trails and campsites. Please reach out to us to discuss opportunities to adopt a WMA in the Thief Lake area!

Burn, Baby! Burn!

PRESCRIBED FIRE AS A HABITAT MANAGEMENT TOOL

If you drive near the Northeast or Moose River Landings early this fall you may think you missed hunting season. Many of the trees and bushes have already lost their leaves. This isn't a trick of the calendar. It's the result of prescribed fires that resulted in brush and tree mortality. Many game species like white-tailed deer, ruffed grouse, and woodcock prefer early successional and edge woodland habitats. Prescribed fire is one tool the DNR can use to set back succession and improve wildlife habitat. Wildfire occurred regularly on this landscape before settlement and prescribed fires aim to mimic the historic disturbance regime. Burning consumes leaf litter and understory brush, releasing nutrients for grasses, forbs, and trees to utilize. Fire rarely consumes a forest evenly. The areas that don't burn add diversity, making the area attractive to a wider variety of wildlife species.



Photos from a prescribed burn along the north side of Thief Lake in late May 2026.

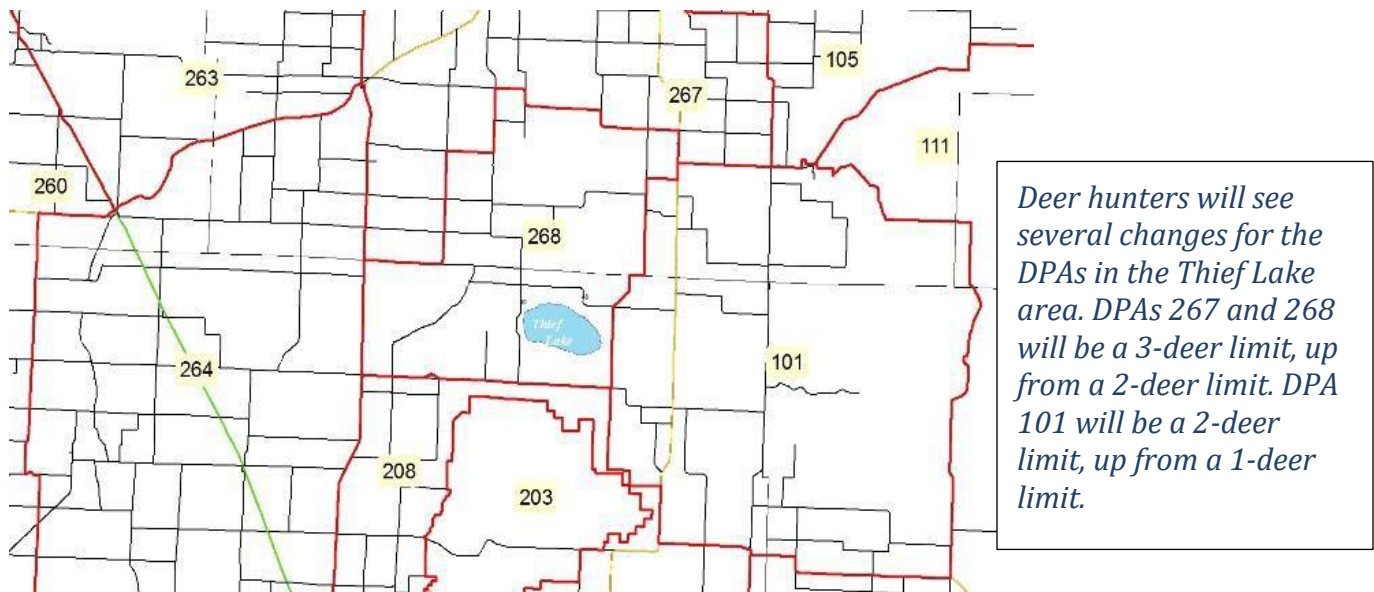
Deer in Northwest Minnesota

The deer in the Thief Lake area experienced yet another mild winter in 2025/26. This marks the third year in a row where the winter severity index (WSI) was below 50. The DNR uses the WSI to measure how significant each winter is on deer survival and is calculated from November 1 through May 31. One point is accumulated 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 44 points, down from 47 points in 2024/25. 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.



A bachelor group of white-tailed deer enjoying a late-August morning on Thief Lake WMA

Deer Permit Areas (DPAs) in the Thief Lake Area



Grouse, Bear, and Elk

- We conduct two drumming counts for ruffed grouse in the work area. The route around Thief Lake was the same as last year and about average. The Randen Ridge route was down 27%, but close to the average. While high drumming counts don't always translate into grouse numbers come fall, we did have good conditions for nesting. It is yet to be determined how the significant rain events we received in June and July impacted brood survival for both ruffed and sharp-tailed grouse. For the 2026 summary of ruffed grouse data statewide, check out [Grouse surveys in Minnesota](#)
- Sharp-tailed grouse continue to do well in the Thief Lake work area. We counted sharpies on 23 leks this spring, down from 27 last year but up from 18 in 2024. We also counted slightly fewer birds. Total sharpies dropped from 370 to 358. The average number of grouse per lek was still 13, but that's down from 20 per lek in 2024. We do not count all the leks or birds in the work area and the lek survey is used to track long-term trends. For the 2026 summary of sharp-tailed grouse survey data in the state, check out [Grouse surveys in Minnesota](#)
- Bears are abundant in the Thief Lake area and there have been numerous sightings by staff this summer. Natural foods for bears are mostly above average this year. Everything from chokecherries and highbush cranberry to acorns and hazel are in great shape going into the fall. This will likely lead to a slower start to the bear hunting season for hunters, which opened September 1st.
- There were a total of 46 elk (32 antlerless, 2 spike bulls, and 12 branched bulls) documented this past winter. This is a large increase from the 24 the previous winter. Due to the current number of elk, there will be hunting this fall for the Grygla herd. There were two tags offered this year - one for an antlerless and one for an either-sex elk. The season will run from September 12-20.
For more info on elk in Minnesota please see: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/elk/index.html>



A sunrise photo of elk tracks crossing a road near Thief Lake WMA

Editor's Request to Our Readers

NEW ROSEAU RIVER WMA E-NEWSLETTER SIGNUP!

Interested in what's going on at **Roseau River and Roseau Lake WMAs** north or Thief Lake? Want to get their pre-season hunting outlooks? Looking for a way to connect to the outdoors? Sign up for their **BRAND-NEW e-newsletter!** Reach out to by email to: roseauriver.wildlife@state.mn.us Be sure to follow updates on their WMA webpage for other updates throughout the year at [Roseau River WMA | Minnesota DNR](#)

If you know of others who might be interested in receiving **our** newsletter, please send us their address. If you receive 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! You can reach us at:

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