



THIEF LAKE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 5 ISSUE 1

SEPTEMBER 2006

Editors 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:

Minnesota DNR/Thief Lake WMA
42280 240th Avenue NE
Middle River, MN 56737
Phone: (218) 222-3747
Fax: (218) 222-3746
e-mail: joel.huener@dnr.state.mn.us

ACCESS TO THIEF LAKE IN 2006 - WHAT'S NEW?

Several changes have occurred since last fall that have modified access to Thief Lake. Those who were here last fall found that access to the east end of the lake at the Moose River access was mostly unavailable due to highway construction on Marshall County 127. That construction is now nearly complete. Access to the Moose River landing has been restored. In addition, we have constructed a new launch on the north side of the River, complete with concrete "planks", that will provide a footing for trailers as they are backed into the water.

As most of you are aware, we are in the midst of the worst drought since 1988. The dry conditions have really helped to speed up the recovery of the marsh from the damage that occurred during the flood of 2002. Emergent vegetation has grown very well this summer, and submersed vegetation has also come on strong. The result is much better habitat conditions on the marsh.

Unless we get significant rains between now and waterfowl season, however, we will see reduced access to the lake – particularly on the south side. The lake is currently about 12 inches below normal lake level, and the boat launches at both Hennings and Maanums are dry. Most of the level ditches on the south side of the lake still hold water, as does the Moose River and Northeast boat access. There is a significant delta where the Moose River empties into the lake, and unless things change, boats coming down the river will have to push for a ways to reach navigable water again. The improved submersed vegetation in the basin will make it difficult to run motors in places. Bring your push pole and waders, and call ahead if you have questions!

NEW STAFF AT THIEF LAKE!

There have been a number of changes in the staff at Thief Lake since our last newsletter. Paul Telander left to become the Regional Wildlife Manager in Bemidji. Randy Prachar is the new manager, coming to Thief Lake from the Assistant Manager position at Roseau River WMA.

There's also been a large turnover in our maintenance and equipment crew. Harry Scramstad, Jerome Henning, and Garner Erickson retired. They've been replaced by Todd Erickson, Neil Mattison, and Rick Beito. They've all been involved in some of the bag checks in recent years, so you may have already met them on previous visits.

Marshall Deters and Joel Huener are the veterans in the crew, and most of you will continue to see them on the marsh.



DUCK SEASON AT THIEF LAKE; LAST YEAR IN REVIEW AND PROSPECTS FOR THIS FALL

Those of you who hunted Thief Lake last fall know that it was one of our better duck hunting seasons, but one where access was difficult at times. The construction on Marshall County 127 limited access to the east side of the lake, and the Moose River access was not usable for much of the season. In addition, a late summer drawdown to improve habitat conditions resulted in water levels that were 7-8 inches low for much of the season. The season-long average bag check was 1.81 ducks per hunter per day, however, and divers (mostly scaup and ringnecks) comprised 69% of the bag.

While Minnesota's breeding duck numbers declined again this year, habitat conditions here were much improved, so that local production was the best we've seen in years. Continental populations (particularly those in prairie Canada) are improved from last year, and this combined with improved habitat conditions may result in

increased migrant use at Thief Lake. Duck limits will be similar to last year; with the exception that canvasback will be open season-long (one bird per day). During the regular season, Thief Lake will now be part of the remainder of state zone for Canada geese, and the season will be 70 days with a two bird bag.

DEER IN NORTHWEST MINNESOTA - INTENSIVE HARVEST PERMITS AVAILABLE

Those of you that deer hunt in this part of the State know that we've been in an Intensive Harvest (IH) status in recent years. These regulations are having the desired effect of reducing populations in our herd units (PA 202 and PA 206). Deer registration at Thief Lake's registration declined 11% last year from the previous year, and this is the second consecutive decline in registered harvest. This same pattern was exhibited for both Permit Areas (PAs) contained in this work area – PA 202 and PA 206. The trend toward increasing antlerless harvest has continued, and last year our registration stations showed that only 40% of the registered harvest was antlered bucks.

Populations are still high enough to offer the IH option in this area. Recent changes in licensing have allowed hunters to tag deer with both archery and firearms equipment statewide, but only one buck per person may be tagged.

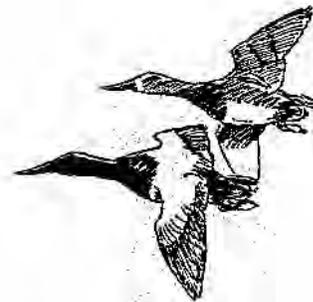


TB TESTING IN DEER IN NORTHWEST MINNESOTA

Following the discovery of Bovine Tuberculosis (BTB) in several cattle herds in Northwest Minnesota last year, the DNR undertook an extensive sampling effort to determine whether BTB was present in deer populations in the vicinity of these herds. One positive animal was found during the sampling on opening weekend of firearms deer season, and one other case has since been noted. As a result, the DNR will once again be sampling deer in the vicinity of Skime, Fourtown and Salol this

year during the firearms deer season. Hunters in those areas are encouraged to have their deer tested (it's free at the check stations!). More information is available in the hunting synopsis.

As part of the State's efforts to control this disease, the Legislature has imposed a ban on feeding deer within a 15-mile radius of the affected cattle operations. Details on the boundaries of these areas, and the timing of the ban will be out soon.



CHZ AND GOOSE HUNT CHANGES

The proportion of Eastern Prairie Population (EPP) geese in the harvest during the regular season in Northwest Minnesota has declined over time as resident giant Canada goose populations have grown. Giants make up a large enough proportion of the harvest (this is why we've been taking measurements on your geese all these years!) that this area is now considered part of the remainder of state zone during the regular goose season. This is good news, because it gives us a longer season (70 days), and a two bird bag.

With this change will come some changes in our Controlled Hunt Zone (CHZ) rules. Hunters in the blinds will now be limited to 12 shells in possession. The other CHZ rules in effect in recent years will still apply. We'll still be checking geese to look at which sub-species are making up the harvest here at Thief Lake.

The Northwest Goose Zone remains in effect for the early September goose season. The September season in this zone ends Sept. 15, and hunting within 100 yards of open water is prohibited. The limit on geese in this zone during the early season was expanded to five last year, and this remains in effect this year.

MINNESOTA ELK SEASON IN 2006

The elk herd that is managed out of this office continues to do well, and we have scheduled a hunt again this year. This year we will hold a bull hunt, with two permits issued for September, and two cow hunts, each with three permits. One of these hunts is scheduled for late November and the other for early December. Last October Marshall Deters saw three bulls next to Maanum's boat launch on the day after MEA weekend. You never know where they'll show up next!

The application period for this hunt ended in mid-July, and the drawing was held shortly thereafter. Hunting elk is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in Minnesota, and hunters may hunt singly or in parties of two (with one tag between them). Watch for news releases or the DNR website next summer if you're interested in applying for this unique opportunity.



GROUSE PRODUCTION IMPROVED

This summer's dry conditions have finally brought about good nesting conditions for the area's upland birds – primarily ruffed and sharp-tailed grouse. Recent years saw cold, wet conditions during the time that broods were hatching, which resulted in poor chick survival. While counts of sharptails on leks (dancing grounds) this spring were down somewhat from previous years, the ruffed grouse drumming counts for Northwest Minnesota were up, and this may indicate an anticipated upswing in the grouse cycle. Conditions were much improved this year, and we hope to see more birds in the woods and in the fields this fall.

AVIAN INFLUENZA TESTING

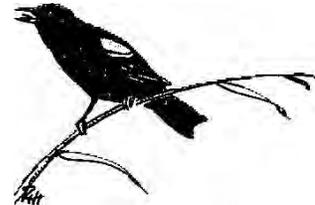
The subject of avian influenza (AI - commonly called bird flu) has received a lot of attention in recent years. AI occurs naturally in birds, including waterfowl, and there are a variety of strains. The highly pathogenic form has not been found in North America. Thief Lake staff assisted researchers in sampling ducks during banding operations this summer, and the DNR has hired personnel to sample hunter-killed birds this fall. These researchers may be present during waterfowl season, and if so will be contacting hunters at boat launches or at their camps. Sampling is quick, and no cutting is involved. For more information, see the hunting synopsis, check the DNR waterfowl link below, or go to www.birdflu.state.mn.us

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:

www.dnr.state.mn.us/hunting/waterfowl/index.html

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.



REMINDER - SPECIAL YOUTH ONLY ANTLERLESS DEER HUNT

For the third year now, there will be a special youth antlerless deer season the Saturday and Sunday of MEA weekend (Oct. 21-22 this year). Young people between 12 and 15 years of age may hunt with a rifle for deer in this area during that time period. Youth must be accompanied by a non-hunting adult during the hunt.

Waterfowl hunters hunting over water are not affected by this hunt, but small game and archery deer hunters, along with trappers, are subject to the deer season blaze orange requirements on these two days. Goose hunters using the CHZ must wear orange on the way to and from their blinds, but are

allowed to remove the orange apparel while hunting from the blind.

LOW WATER ACCESS TO THIEF LAKE

During low water periods like the one we are experiencing now, boat access to the lake (whether Thief Lake or other areas) can be difficult. It's important to note that it is illegal to drive a truck or ATV out into the bed of a lake or wetland to launch a boat (or for any other reason). It also tends to tear up the boat launches for others. Please do not drive past the boat launch signs. If conditions are dry enough, hunters may detach their trailers and walk a boat and trailer out to the water's edge. The same is true for the level ditch banks and other areas around the lake.

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

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Minnesota DNR
Thief Lake Wildlife Management Area
42280 240th Ave NE
Middle River, MN 56737