

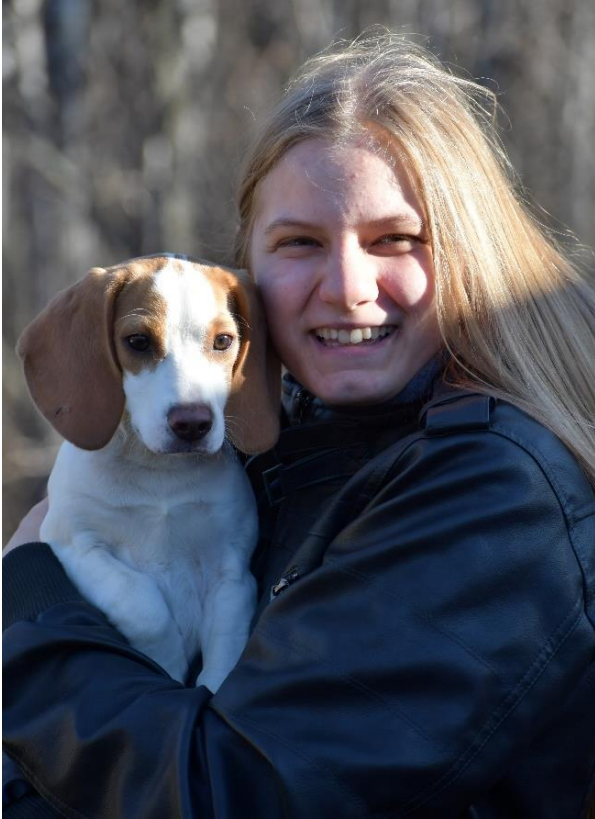
Thief Lake Wildlife Management Area Newsletter
August 2024 Volume 23 Issue 1

Another year has flown by in northwest Minnesota! After a ridiculously mild winter our drought broke this spring, and the lake came up a foot and a half in June alone. The heavy rains were tough on nesting birds and hindered our food plot planting. We hosted two interns this past summer. Read on to find out what we've been up to since last September. We hope to see you at Thief Lake this year!



The view from the Thief Lake Observation Mound near Maanum's Landing on the southwest side of the lake on April 10, 2024 – the day the ice went out. Ice out was almost a month earlier than in 2023.

Staff Updates – SUMMER INTERNS



Tammie Collins was an intern with us this summer and is going into her junior year at South Dakota State University for Natural Resources Law Enforcement. Tammie grew up in Aitkin, MN and enjoys hunting and fishing with her family. She kept busy battling invasive species, mowing the grass around the headquarters (that grew like crazy this year), and helping with wildlife surveys. During her summer here at Thief Lake, Tammie enjoyed getting to know the area and all the people in it.



Natalia Kepczynski was our other summer intern this year and is going into her junior year at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She is majoring in Natural Resource Conservation with a specialty in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation. Natalia grew up around New England and this was her first experience in the Midwest! This summer she has been working on invasive species removal, waterfowl banding, trail cameras, and various wildlife surveys. Natalia enjoys hiking, kayaking, berry picking, plant pressing, and viewing the diverse wildlife of Thief Lake!

NEW CONSERVATION OFFICERS



CO Sarah Jahn - I cover the Thief River Falls East station. I graduated with my bachelor's degree in Natural Resource Law Enforcement from the University of Minnesota Crookston. Before becoming a Conservation Officer, I worked as a Park Ranger in North Dakota and Minnesota, and as a Seasonal Biological Science Technician for the US Fish and Wildlife Service. When I am not working, I enjoy spending time with my family and dogs, as well as hunting, fishing, and hiking. I've enjoyed working this area and am looking forward to my favorite season of the year - DUCK SEASON!



CO Nick Bruesewitz - I cover the Karlstad station. Before becoming a Conservation Officer, I attended the University of Minnesota Crookston and received a bachelor's degree in Natural Resource Law Enforcement. While attending school, I served in the Minnesota Army National Guard. During my free time, I enjoy spending time outdoors fishing, hunting, and hiking. I've enjoyed the Northwest and look forward to continuing my work in the Karlstad Station.

STAFF DEPARTURES AND UPDATES FROM NW MINNESOTA

- **Thief Lake** has one fewer staff member than last year. **Cari Dostal** had been the Office and Administrative Specialist (OAS) at the Thief Lake, Roseau River, and Karlstad Wildlife offices for the past 11 years. She left the DNR in June for a promotion with the Department of Corrections. We miss Cari and wish her the best! The shared OAS position in northwest MN remains vacant and has not been posted.
- **Roseau River WMA**, located north of Thief Lake along the Canadian border, has experienced significant turnover in recent months. **Randy Pracher** retired in July after over 35 years in the Wildlife Division of the DNR. **Tom Enright** was hired as the new Supervisor at Roseau. Tom had been the Assistant Area Wildlife Manager there for the past 5 years. The DNR is in the process of hiring a new Assistant at Roseau.
- **Thief Lake's** own Assistant Area Wildlife Manager, **Kyle Point**, was recently chosen to take Randy Pracher's former spot on the **State Waterfowl Committee** as one of two representatives from the Northwest Region. If you have any waterfowl related concerns, please call (218) 633-7675 or email kyle.point@state.mn.us

DNR and Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa are Teaming Up to Relocate Elk from Northwest to Northeast Minnesota BY TAMMIE COLLINS

Elk were reintroduced to Minnesota in the early 1900s. Today's elk population is comprised of three herds. The Grygla herd is the smallest, with less than 30 elk. The Kittson Central herd has about 75 elk. The Caribou-Vita herd crosses the Canadian border regularly and has around 225 elk. Even though the elk population is small, the DNR allows limited elk hunting opportunities due to requirements by state statute, which reduces crop damage by maintaining low populations. The Minnesota DNR is working with the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa to restore elk to the Fond du Lac Reservation and the surrounding area in northeast Minnesota. In 2023, the Minnesota Legislature provided \$2.3 million in funding to the Fond du Lac Band and DNR to expand Minnesota's wild elk population and range. This restoration plan to move a total of 100 to 150 elk from the current herds, could lead to reduced elk hunting opportunities for a few years so that the northwest herds can provide additional elk to relocate. The plan is to move between 12 and 30 elk each year, so getting 100 to 150 moved over to the northeast could take 7 years or more. The main goals from the Fond du Lac proposal are to restore a native species, recover a state-listed species, restore a species that can handle climate change, provide an economic boost from elk tourism and recreational opportunities, and provide distant future hunting opportunities. For more information on elk in Minnesota check out [Elk management | Minnesota DNR \(state.mn.us\)](#). Overall, relocating some elk from the northwest to the northeast will be beneficial to Minnesota's elk population, as well as the people of Minnesota.



A young bull elk from the Grygla herd. Photo taken by Thief Lake Wildlife Intern Tammie Collins in July 2024.

Using Trail Cameras to Assess Wildlife Use of Brush-Mowed Areas

BY NATALIA KEPCZYNSKI

Thief Lake WMA is composed primarily of Tallgrass Aspen Parklands, a habitat type that is accustomed to wildfires as a natural disturbance regime. Since wildfires are now much less frequent, brush encroachment and invasive species have largely replaced the prairie-like components of the ecosystem. Some units of Thief Lake WMA have unfortunately been undisturbed for decades, meaning that manual brush removal is needed first to knock down large bushes and trees before regular prescribed burning can take place. Brush mowing is conducted annually in targeted, overgrown areas. To determine how impactful the mowing is for wildlife, trail cameras were deployed at five sites before mowing, and left out after mowing to observe changes in wildlife use. Trail cameras are a non-invasive sampling method to observe wildlife and the nearby habitat, set to take pictures whenever motion is detected within frame. These trail cameras can provide a vast array of information on our management area that is difficult to obtain in person in the field. For brush management purposes, the cameras show which wildlife species are browsing on these newly opened-up habitats, and if the mowing has increased wildlife presence and food availability. Since they have been deployed for over a year now, we can also observe how vegetation is changing, and, overall, how effective mowing appears to have been. After sorting through thousands of photos, we have found several species to be grazing or wandering through the areas, including deer, moose, turkeys, coyotes, wolves, bears and more! The trail cameras show positive results after last year's brush mowing, further emphasizing the important information this sampling technique can provide about wildlife behavior and vegetation response to disturbance, and why preserving open habitat is critical for our native species to thrive.



A cow moose walking through a brush mowed area on June 1, 2024 at 11:22 PM.



Two deer browsing as they walk through a brush mowed area as winter came to an early end in March.

From Record Flooding, to Drought, to Flooding

THIS IS GETTING RIDICULOUS!

The roller coaster of precipitation has continued in northwest Minnesota. April of 2022 brought a monthly record 5.5" of rain to Thief Lake and was followed by another 5.5" in May. That led to the lake cresting 4.1' above our *then* summer target level of 1158.5' (elevation) in May of 2022. As 2022 rolled into 2023, we went from extreme flooding to extreme drought. **2023 was our driest calendar year on record, with only 14.9" of precipitation recorded** at the rain gauge near the Headquarters. Our precipitation data goes back to 1954. The winter of 2023 – 24 was very mild with little snow. We topped out at 7" of snow in the woods in late January. Our average peak is 14" in late February and early March. By mid-March this year, we only had patches of snow left in the woods. We average 12" at that time of year! With the above average temperatures, we did not have frost in the ground until late "winter." **We have had above average precipitation every month except March this year.** By the end of July, we had received 18.5" of precipitation, which is more than we got in all of 2023 and 4.2" above average for that point in the year.

Waterfowl Production at Thief Lake in 2024

IT WAS A BUST BECAUSE OF THE RAIN!

After a very mild winter with very little snow, spring arrived early to Thief Lake. We set records for our earliest returning trumpeter swan (February 1st) and Canada goose (February 7th). Ice out occurred on April 10th, almost a month earlier than last year. The lake was 3" below our *old* summer target level of 1158.5' elevation at ice out. This was largely due to 2023 being the driest calendar year ever at Thief Lake. May rainfall was 1" above average, June was 2.4" above average, and July was almost 1" above average at our rain gauge. Some surrounding areas were hit much harder by certain storms. **The lake rose 2.5' and crested on July 9th.** The timing and amount of rain was bad for breeding waterfowl and grouse. Nests in low-lying areas were flooded out, and young ducklings and grouse chicks don't do well in the rain. Over-water nesting ducks like ringnecks can only build their nests up so high because they only use materials within reach of the nest. **There can actually be too much water for ducks!** If there is any good news from this situation, it's that there should be more water on the landscape (including much of the prairie "duck factory") next spring for a better hatch next year. Reports from some lakes around Bemidji and parts of Roseau River WMA indicate better duck production and some very late hatched broods that will not be able to fly by the regular duck opener - if they make it that long. Even when a nest hatches, there are many ways for a duckling to perish. Even too much rain can cause an untimely end to a young duck's life!

New Thief Lake Water Management Plan

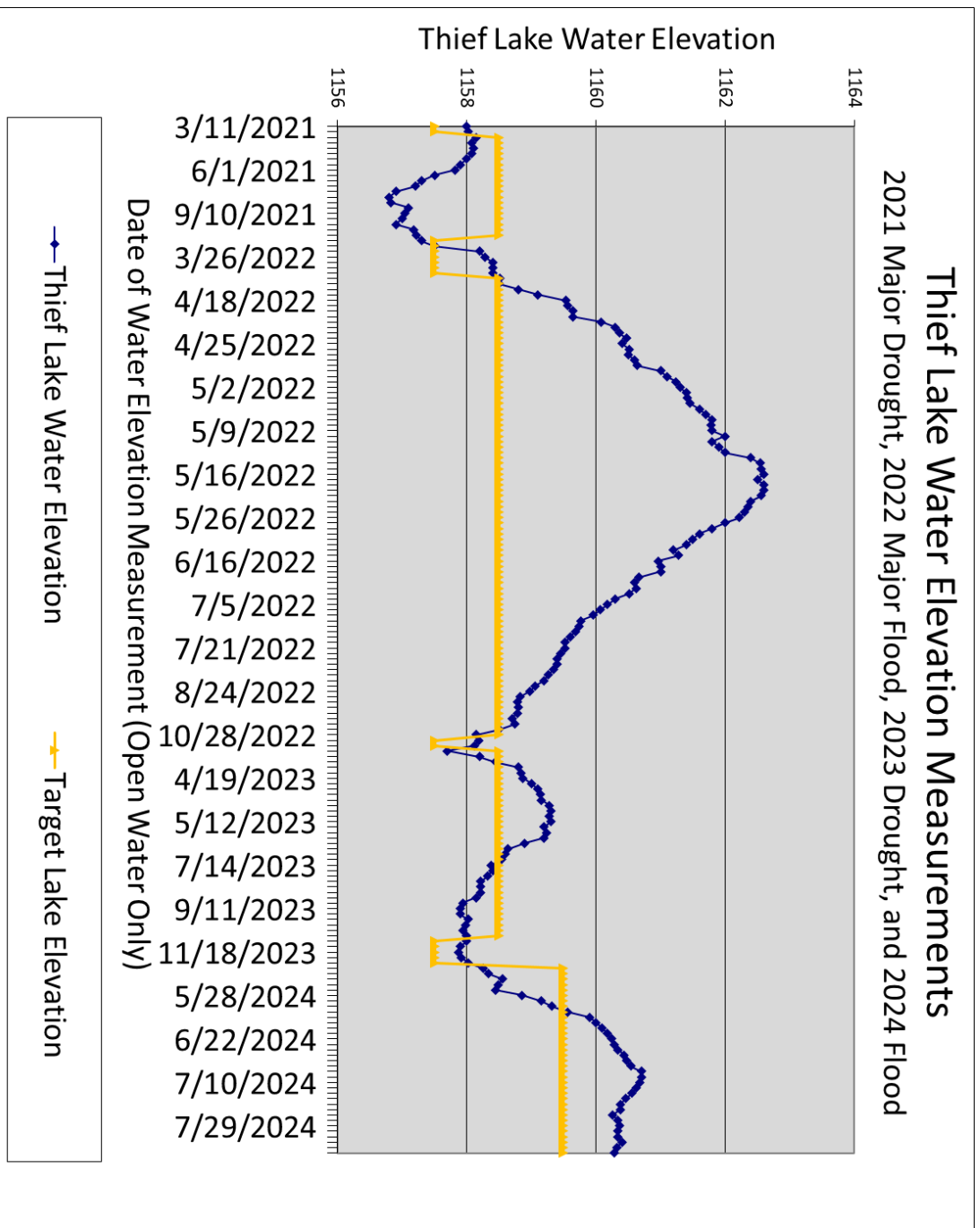
AIMS TO RESTORE MUSKRATS, REDUCE BULLRUSH (WEATHER DEPENDING!)

Thief Lake recently updated its 2010 Lake Management Plan. The old plan was designed so that winter drawdowns would reduce water levels enough to kill off most small fish in the lake. This, in theory, would reduce fish predation on scuds, which are also known as amphipods. Scuds look like tiny shrimp and are the favorite food of bluebills (lesser scaup ducks) that used to frequent Thief Lake on their spring and fall migrations because of the scud buffet. Scud numbers and bluebill harvest have plummeted on Thief Lake in the past 15 years. Both of these trends have been observed across North America, and nobody is sure exactly why. Since the old management plan was not accomplishing its intended goals, it was updated. Generally, the plan now allows for greater flexibility in target water levels throughout the year. In recognition of the increase in bullrush density and extent on the lake in recent decades, the new plan allows for summer water levels to be held up to 18 inches higher than before. Higher water levels should reduce the bullrush stands that have been negatively impacting the amount of open water on the lake. Timing of winter drawdowns will take impacts to frogs, turtles, and muskrats into account. Muskrats are another species that has declined on Thief Lake and across the continent, largely for unknown reasons. Our winter drawdowns in recent years may have negatively impacted muskrat survival. Increasing the muskrat population should reduce bullrush and give fur harvesters more opportunities. That said, **weather is the biggest driver of Thief Lake water levels!** The last several years have alternated drought and flooding, as shown below. Our target water level for the regular duck season opener this year is 1158.5 feet, which is the same as recent years. We were 6 inches below that level for duck season last year due to drought. As of mid-August, we are 18 inches above the duck opener target, but have come down 8" since early July.

Entries into the camping areas along the south shore of the lake are still soft from the high water all summer, so scout ahead of your camper on foot to ensure you do not get stuck!

Feel free to call the office at (218) 633-7670 to ask about current conditions prior to arrival.

Thief Lake Water Elevation Measurements 2021 Major Drought, 2022 Major Flood, 2023 Drought, and 2024 Flood



2023 Regular Duck Season at Thief Lake

After a fantastic duck opener, the season was mostly underwhelming at Thief Lake. **Opening day hunters averaged 3.61 ducks each, just short of the record high of 3.65 set in 2021, and more than double last year's 1.68 ducks per person!** However, average hunter success dropped markedly the second day of the season and remained low most days until freeze-up in late October, when the few hunters busting ice to get out averaged 4 ducks apiece, most of which were ringnecks. Pockets of open water were present on Thief Lake through the end of duck season, but very few ducks and geese were left on the lake by the start of November. The warm fall weather and lack of northwest winds until after most of the lake froze in late October brought only a trickle of migrants down to Thief Lake, and the stale birds who knew where the refuge boundary was made hunting slower than normal. **The season average ducks per hunter per day was 1.92, the lowest since the flood year of 2019. If opening day success had been worse, the season average would have been much lower.** Top birds in the bag were ringnecks (#1), blue-winged teal, green-winged teal, wigeon, pintails, redheads, mallards, and gadwall. Despite ringnecks comprising 25% of the harvest, 63% of ducks taken were puddle/dabbling ducks like teal, mallards, pintails, and wigeon. This was expected given the low water conditions going into the season due to the drought.

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 10; 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 a half-hour before sunrise to sunset for the entire season. Motorized spinning-wing decoys may be used statewide, including on WMAs. Please refer to [Minnesota Waterfowl Regulation 2024 \(state.mn.us\)](https://state.mn.us)

Teal Season 2023 Recap and 2024 Preview

Minnesota's third early teal season ran from September 2nd through 6th last fall. Sixty-six hunters were bag checked at Thief Lake during the 5-day season. They averaged 3.00 teal per hunter per day! Most (80%) of the teal taken were blue-wings. Only 4 geese were checked. These numbers are all very similar to 2022. **This year's teal season will begin on SUNDAY, September 1st** and run through the 5th. *Federal regulations do not allow regular hunting seasons to open in August.* The limit remains 6 teal per day. Other duck species cannot be shot, so please identify your birds before pulling the trigger! **Shooting hours for teal during teal season start at sunrise**, unlike regular duck season which starts a half-hour before sunrise. With water levels expected to be high and the potential for ponding in farm fields, this teal season could be more challenging than last year. Scouting may be more important to find concentrations of teal in shallow areas that they prefer.

Interesting Bag Check Statistics from the Past Three Seasons

Most waterfowl hunters at Thief Lake are relatively happy. However, the most common complaint we hear is that early seasons (early goose, teal, and the youth hunt) "ruin" the regular season duck opener. If that were the case, then our bag check data should pick up a decrease in regular duck opener hunter success since the early teal season began and the youth hunt jumped from 1 to 2 days three years ago. Our bag check data shows the opposite. ***In 2 of the 3 years with early teal seasons and 2-day youth hunts Thief Lake also had the 2 highest opening day success rates and the 2 highest season average success rates in its long history!*** The extreme drought year of 2021 saw an opening day record of 3.65 ducks bagged per hunter. Last year was droughty as well, and opening day success was the second best ever recorded at 3.61 ducks per hunter. Opening day success in 2022 was only 1.68, the second worst in the past 13 years (since we've had a 6-duck limit and could start shooting 30 minutes before sunrise). 2021 and 2022 rank first and second in lake history for season average ducks per hunter per day at 2.44 and 2.36, respectively. Last year's 1.92 ranks 8th in the past 13 years. The other rule changes that occurred 3 years ago have certainly had an impact on hunter success, but they are not the only factors. Local production, continental production, timing and severity of weather systems, local and continental water levels and drought conditions, and many other factors impact harvest here at Thief Lake and elsewhere. Some days and seasons will always be better than others. That's part of the reason we keep going out. But, **if you have had a string of poor hunts or poor seasons, especially on Thief Lake, I encourage you to try something different.** Try a new spot, change up your decoy placement, hunt a cross wind or quartering away wind instead of having the wind at your back, improve your blind, practice shooting in the off season, or spend part of a day scouting instead of hunting. **The hunting is not like it used to be on Thief or anywhere else.** But, on average, "The Good Old Days" have been the last few years here on Thief Lake.



The regular duck season opener in 2023 was very dreary with some wind at Thief Lake. These conditions helped hunters average 3.6 ducks apiece, the second-best opening day hunter success rate in lake history! The tiny patch of native phragmites (cane) on the left side of the photo was enough cover to hide one person from the ducks and produced a limit of 1 pintail, 1 wigeon, and 4 green-winged teal in under an hour. If you're struggling to kill ducks on Thief Lake, try hunting more open areas where the birds can see your decoys from farther away, and try more of a cross or quartering away wind instead of the traditional wind at your back.

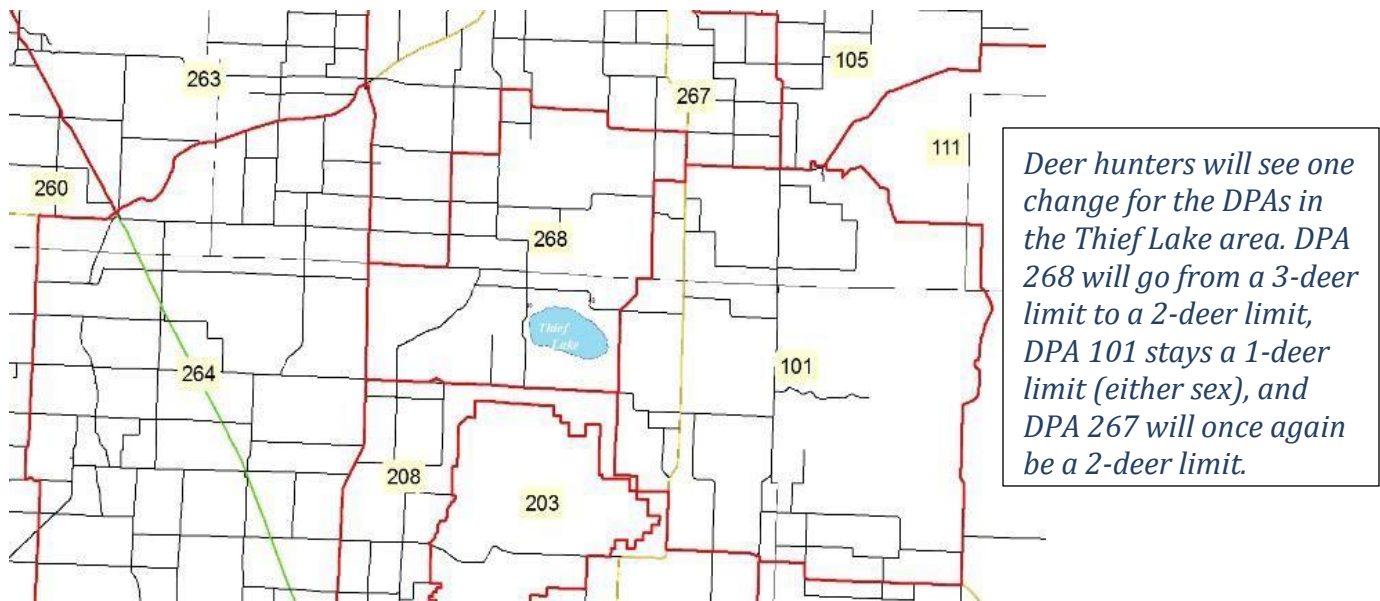
Deer in Northwest Minnesota



A doe and fawn utilize a recent brush mowing area. There is an abundance of fawns this year after the mild winter.

The deer in the Thief Lake area got a break in the winter of 2023/24. 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 17 points, down from 105 points in 2022/23. 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.

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 routes around Thief Lake and the Randen Ridge were down from 2023. We started out dry, but the rains started in early May and didn't let up. This will likely result in fewer grouse encountered by hunters 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 okay this year.
- The mid-winter aerial survey of elk in the Grygla herd was not conducted in 2024 due to us not having deep enough snow cover on the ground (a minimum of 8" of snow is required). For more info on elk in Minnesota please see: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/elk/index.html>

Editor's Request to Our Readers

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:

Minnesota DNR/Thief Lake WMA

42280 240th Ave NE

Middle River, MN 56737

Phone: (218) 633-7670

Email us at: kyle.arola@state.mn.us

Kyle Arola Area Wildlife Manager

kyle.point@state.mn.us

Kyle Point Assistant Area Wildlife Manager