2025 MINNESOTA PRAIRIE-CHICKEN HARVEST SURVEY

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Minnesota DNR conducts a postcard survey of greater prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus*) hunters each year to estimate hunter numbers and harvest and to evaluate hunter success and satisfaction. In 2025, 102 hunters were estimated to have gone afield and harvested 56 prairie-chickens and 33 sharp-tailed grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*) during prairie-chicken hunts. This is the lowest estimated harvest of prairie-chickens since the season re-opened in 2003 despite a similar number of hunters afield. Hunter success (0.36) and satisfaction (3.3 on a scale of 1–5) were lower than most years, although within the range of observed values in previous surveys. Comments submitted by 72 of 82 respondents to the survey had several common themes including very hot weather during the season (26 comments), low numbers of prairie-chickens observed (24 comments), and a lot of pheasants (8 comments). In 2025, 403 people applied for the prairie-chicken lottery, with 82 applying for the first time, and 4 hunting prairie-chickens for the first time.

INTRODUCTION

Greater prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus*) hunting in Minnesota was closed in 1943 because of population declines resulting from habitat loss. However, hunting was

reopened in 2003 because prairie-chicken populations had recovered to some degree and were considered robust enough to allow a limited season. During 2003-2005, a limited-entry 5-day hunting season was opened in 7 permit areas in western Minnesota. Permits were awarded through a lottery system, with a bag and season limit of 2 prairie-chickens. In 2006, 4 new permit areas were added, and the number of permits was increased in some areas. Surplus licenses were offered for sale after the lottery for the first time in 2011, and in 2013, the permit areas were revised again. These most recent changes eliminated 801A and 802A, modified 803A to include portions of the former 802A and 803A and added 812A and 813A to expand hunting eastward (Figures 1 and 2). The number of available permits also was reduced in some permit areas to more closely reflect opportunities to harvest prairie-chickens in each permit area. The season was lengthened from 5 days to 9 days to provide hunting opportunity on >1 weekend and was moved from mid-October to open in late-September. The earlier season was an attempt to improve hunter success and satisfaction by providing hunting opportunities before pheasant season opened (to reduce hunter interference and flushing distance). These changes were based on hunter comments received by DNR Wildlife Managers during prior years and input received during a public input survey during March 2013. Responses of surveyed prairie-chicken hunters in 2015 provided additional evidence that the earlier season is preferred by most, although hunter preferences were clearly divided. In 2025, the prairie-chicken season opened 27 September and closed 5 October.

Prairie-chicken hunting in Minnesota is a privilege that is only available to residents. Landowners or tenants of ≥40 acres of grassland within a permit area are eligible to apply for a landowner lottery that awards up to 20% of the available permits in a permit area. Remaining permits are then included with the regular lottery. Any landowner not receiving a permit through the landowner lottery can participate in the regular lottery with other residents who apply. The lottery gives preference to persons that have applied for a permit unsuccessfully for the most years. Upon selection, lottery winners must purchase a prairie-chicken hunting permit before

hunting. Although sharp-tailed grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*) hunting is closed south of U.S. Highway 2 in the western part of the state (i.e., in prairie-chicken permit areas 804A–813A, but open in 803A), licensed prairie-chicken hunters may also take sharp-tailed grouse while hunting prairie-chickens. Harvests of both bird species are documented each year in this report.

METHODS

Lottery applicants, winners, and permit purchasers were recorded by the Electronic Licensing System (ELS). Registration of harvested birds has not been mandatory, except during 2003-2007, so I determined harvest through a postcard survey. I sent a postcard to each lottery winner the week before hunting season. Six weeks later I sent another postcard to people who had not yet responded. Postcards contained 6 questions: did you purchase a permit; did you hunt, and if so, for how many days; how many prairie-chickens did you harvest; how many sharp-tailed grouse did you harvest during prairie-chicken hunts; and how satisfied were you (on a scale of 1-5)? Respondents also had the option to share a brief comment.

Only responses from lottery winners who purchased a hunting permit or reported hunting were considered in the analysis. I compared responses from the first mailing to responses from the second mailing to examine possible nonresponse bias and adjusted as necessary. I calculated the number of birds harvested, birds per harvester, and hunter success (i.e., proportion of estimated hunters harvesting ≥1 prairie-chicken) for each permit area. Each of these metrics was calculated by permit area and for all areas combined.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The combined quota for the 11 permit areas during 2025 was 125 permits; 403 individuals applied in the lottery (Table 1), with 82 applicants applying for the first time. The average age of new prairie-chicken hunters (n = 4) was 33.8 (24–40 years), which is younger than the average age of returning hunters 51.6 (15–85 years). Of the 125 lottery winners, 100—including 3 landowners—later purchased a permit, and 3 winners reported hunting but did not purchase a

permit. Only permit area 813A had fewer applicants than permits available, so surplus permits were not available for any permit area.

Eighty-two purchasers (82%, *n* = 100) responded to the survey; 63 (63%) responded to the first mailing and 19 (19%) to the second mailing. This response rate is the same as last year but lower than the average (mean: 87%; range: 78–95%). I did not detect a consistent response bias between respondents to the first and second mailings, although the number of respondents to the second mailing was small, which limited the ability to resolve statistical differences. Respondents to the first mailing were as likely to have hunted as those responding to the second mailing (98% vs. 100% of respondents). Respondents to the first mailing harvested prairie-chickens at a higher rate than respondents to the second mailing (43% vs. 26%) but harvested similar numbers of chickens (0.6 vs. 0.4 birds per hunter), spent a similar number of days afield (2.5 vs. 2.2, respectively), and harvested similar numbers of sharp-tailed grouse (0.5 vs. 0.2 birds per hunter, respectively). Respondents to the first mailing reported similar satisfaction (mean 3.3 vs. 3.4, median 3.0 vs. 3.5), with 72% and 78% of respondents reporting satisfaction scores $\geq$3, respectively. Thus, I combined responses from both mailings this year for the analysis.

Eighty-one respondents reported that they hunted prairie-chickens (Table 2). I estimated the total number of hunters to be 102 (i.e., purchasers who went afield) after accounting for hunting by non-respondents. Hunters reported harvesting 46 prairie-chickens, and total harvest after accounting for non-respondents was estimated as 56 prairie-chickens. This is the lowest estimated harvest since the prairie-chicken season re-opened in 2003. An estimated 37 hunters bagged $\geq$1 chicken. Prairie-chicken hunter success (0.36) during 2025 was lower than most other years of the survey, but comparably low years occurred in 2010, 2012, and 2019 (Table 3). Survey respondents also reported harvesting 33 sharp-tailed grouse while hunting prairie-chickens from permit areas 803A (7), 804A (7), 805A (15), 806A (1), 808A (1), 810A (2) (Figure

1). Successful hunters reported higher average satisfaction (4.1) than respondents that were not successful (2.9), and overall satisfaction of prairie-chicken hunters was 3.3.

Prairie-chicken hunter satisfaction was the lowest since 2010, prior to changes to the season framework in 2013 to accomplish this goal (Table 3). In comments received in the survey in 2025, two recurring themes were evident. First, prairie-chicken hunters (n = 26) reported that it was too hot to hunt during the 10-day hunting season with temperatures in the 80's or 90's. Several of these respondents mentioned the impact of the heat on their dogs and/or the birds. The other recurring comment (n = 24) focused on low chicken numbers and concern for the birds. These factors likely contributed to the lower hunter success and satisfaction this year, compared to other years.

Despite lower hunter satisfaction this year, only 7 hunters expressed a preference for a later season framework in their survey comments. A few additional isolated suggestions to modify the season framework were sent (i.e., closing the season due to low bird numbers, longer season, more options like turkey season, hunting alongside unlicensed non-hunters). Hunter survey responses in the 2013 Wildlife Public Input Survey and through this postcard survey in 2015 indicated that hunter preferences for season timing are split, but that the majority of hunters support the current season framework. Both the 2013 and 2015 surveys asked hunters about their preference for a season opening on the last Saturday in September or an opener on the Saturday nearest 20 October. The majority of respondents to the 2013 survey (64% of respondents who expressed an opinion) indicated a preference for the earlier season. Likewise, in the 2015 survey, 56% of respondents indicated a preference for the earlier season and 44% preferred a later season. Supporters of the early season indicated that the birds were less wary early in the season and pheasant hunting did not affect the hunt. Reasons provided in support of a later season included cooler weather for hunters and dogs, better plumage on birds, fewer standing crops, opportunity to harvest pheasants while hunting chickens, and no

conflict with the waterfowl opener. If temperatures in the 80's and 90's during the season become common, revisiting hunter preferences for the timing of the season seems prudent.

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Table 1. Prairie-chicken hunt lottery applicants, winners, and hunting permit purchasers in Minnesota during 2025.

Permit area	Permits available	No. of applicants	Lottery winners		Permit purchasers[a]		Surplus purchasers[c]
			No.[b]	Proportion	No.	Proportion	
803A	8	24	8	0.33	5	0.63	0
804A	10	21	10	0.48	9	0.90	0
805A	10	58	10	0.17	10	1.00	0
806A	12	24	12	0.50	6	0.50	0
807A	20	89	20	0.22	19	0.95	0
808A	20	80	20	0.25	13	0.65	0
809A	15	41	16	0.39	12	0.75	0
810A	15	37	15	0.41	15	1.00	0
811A	5	11	5	0.45	4	0.80	0
812A	5	14	5	0.36	5	1.00	0
813A	5	4	4	1.00	2	0.50	0
All	125	403	125	0.31	100	0.80	0

[a] Lottery winners who purchased a hunting permit.
[b] The number of permits may exceed the quota when the last applicant selected in the lottery belongs to a hunting party.
[c] Number of people purchasing a surplus permit after the lottery because the permit quota was not met during the lottery. Surplus permits were not available in 2025.

Table 2. Prairie-chicken harvest in Minnesota during 2025.

Permit area	No. of hunters[a]		Birds harvested		Birds per harvester[b]	Success rate[c]
	Self-reported	Estimated	Self-reported	Estimated		
803A	4	5	1	1	1.0	0.20
804A	6	9	0	0	NA	0.00
805A	8	10	9	11	1.4	0.80
806A	5	6	3	4	2.0	0.33
807A	14	19	13	18	1.6	0.58
808A	13	14	9	10	1.7	0.43
809A	11	12	7	8	1.1	0.58
810A	11	14	2	2	2.0	0.07
811A	1	4	0	0	NA	0.00
812A	4	5	2	2	2.0	0.20
813A	4	4	0	0	NA	0.00

All	81	102	46	56	1.5	0.36

[a] Permit purchasers who hunted.
[b] Estimated number of birds harvested per successful hunter.
[c] Proportion of estimated hunters harvesting ≥1 prairie-chicken.

Table 3. Summary of prairie-chicken hunting in Minnesota during 2003–2025.

Year	Permits available	Applicants	Hunters[a]	Birds harvested	Success rate[b]	Hunter satisfaction[c]
2003	100	853	92	130	0.75	4.4
2004	101	759	87	58	0.45	3.6
2005	110	500	86	94	0.63	4.0
2006	182	512	149	109	0.49	3.6
2007[d]	187	519		122	0.53	
2008	186	535	137	133	0.58	3.9
2009	186	512	143	118	0.52	3.4
2010	186	421	136	78[e]	0.32	3.0
2011	186	264	138	103	0.45	3.4
2012	186	298	158	86	0.39	3.4
2013	126	277	93[f]	96[f]	0.60[f]	3.7[f]
2014	126	305	102	95	0.54	3.7
2015	126	271	112	103	0.55	3.6
2016	126	304	111	102	0.58	3.8
2017	125	317	97	86[f]	0.55[f]	4.0[f]
2018	125	303	104	82[f]	0.51[f]	3.9[f]
2019	125	354	100	64[f]	0.37[f]	3.8[f]
2020	125	366	105	112[f]	0.62[f]	4.0[f]
2021	125	435	111	110[f]	0.49[f]	4.0
2022	125	436	109	111	0.60	3.9
2023	125	495	101	96	0.59	3.9
2024	125	463	98	89	0.55	3.6
2025	125	403	102	56	0.36	3.3

[a] Estimated number who went hunting, not permit purchasers.
[b] Proportion of hunters harvesting ≥1 prairie-chicken.
[c] Mean on a scale of 1–5.
[d] A hunter survey was not conducted during 2007; results are from the Electronic Licensing System, which documented 150 permit purchasers.
[e] One hunter reported harvesting 10 prairie-chickens in 2010.
[f] Assumed that non-respondents were represented by respondents in the second mailing in 2013, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021.

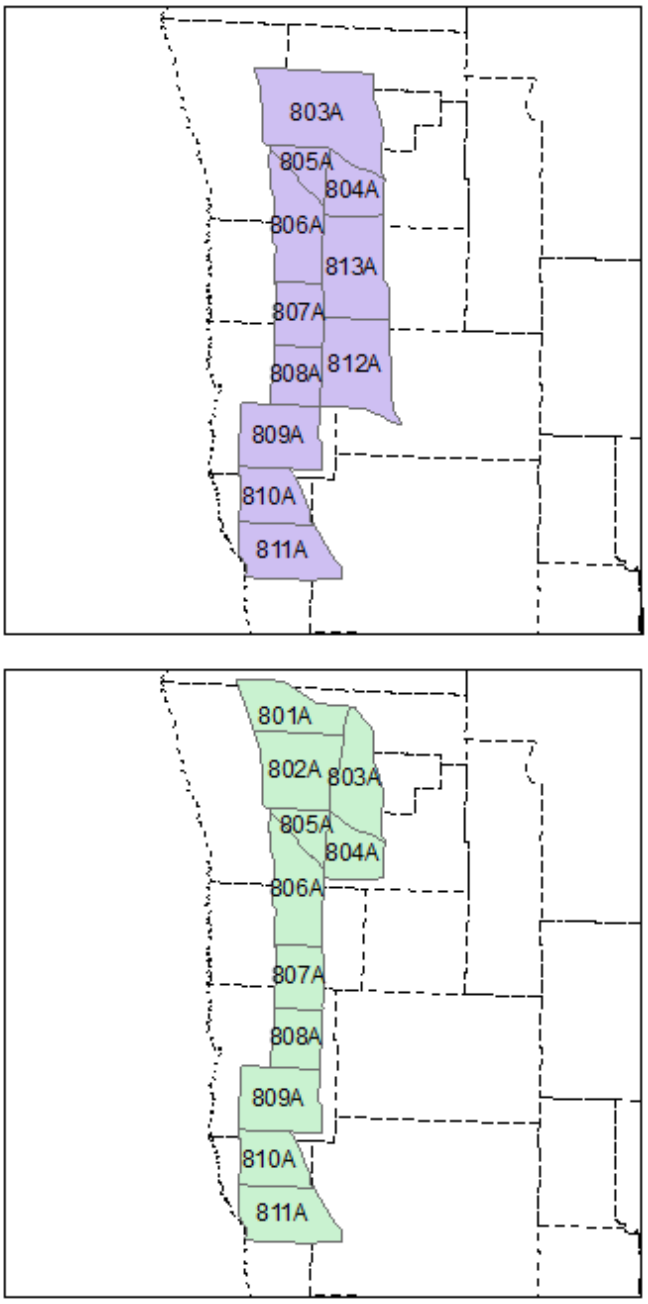

Figure 1. Prairie-chicken hunting permit area boundaries in northwestern Minnesota since 2013 (top) compared to during 2006–2012 (bottom). County boundaries are indicated by dashed lines. Permit areas 812A and 813A were added, 801A was eliminated, and 802A and portions of 803A were combined into a revised permit area 803A.

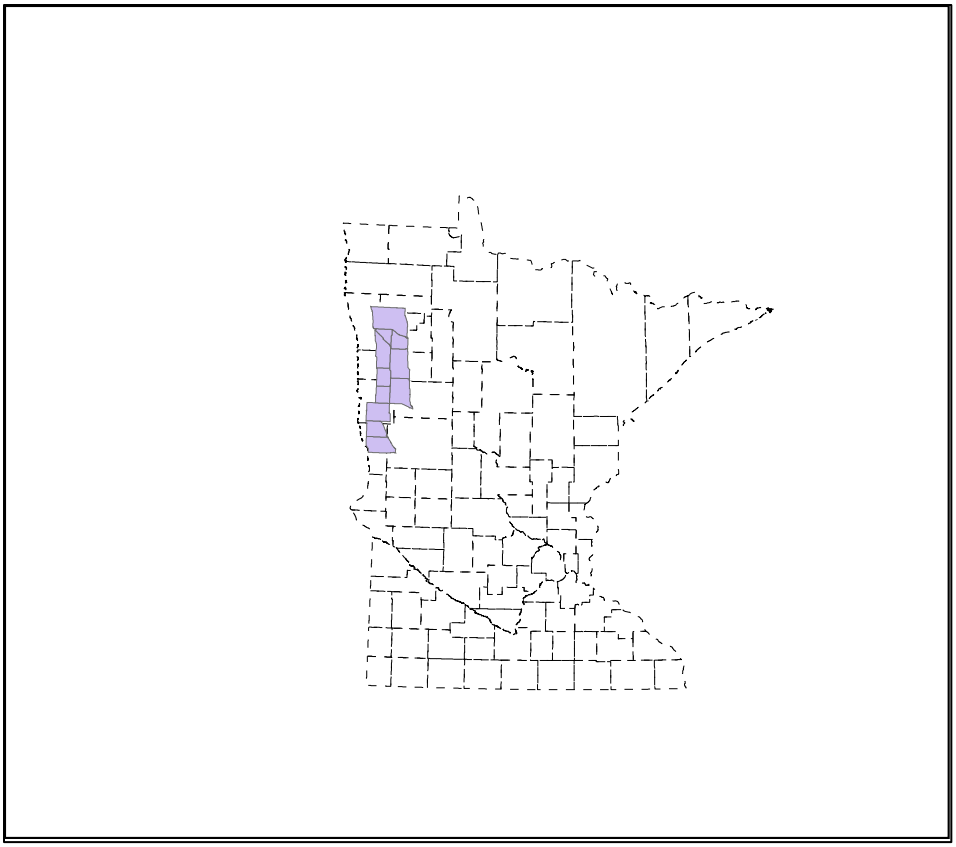

Figure 2. Northwestern location of prairie-chicken hunting permit areas within the state relative to county boundaries (dashed lines).