Pheasant ecology part 4: November and December

In part 3 of this 6 part series, we examined pheasant ecology during September and October. These were lazy times as long days, comfortable temperatures, and abundant food made life easy for South Dakota ring-necks. As a result, pheasants gained weight during this time period which is necessary to prepare for a cold South Dakota winter.

As fall transitions to winter, the “vacation” pheasants took in September and October will inevitably come to an end. In South Dakota, its not if winter will return, its when and how severe! The length of daylight is 3 hours shorter in December than in September and the average low temperature is 35 degrees cooler than in October. These dramatic changes in weather mean pheasants will need to change their behavior if they expect to survive a South Dakota winter. Fortunately, although not native, pheasants are quite adapted to the changing conditions and survival can be high especially where prime habitat exists.

In South Dakota, we are fortunate to have good winter habitat well distributed across the landscape. As the first signs of winter arrive, pheasants begin seeking out heavy winter habitat which will provide insulating cover during cold winter days and nights. Pheasants may have to travel great distances if heavy winter cover is not located in close proximity. Movements to winter habitat of up to 10 miles have been documented for pheasants, but most pheasants in South Dakota likely only need to travel several miles or less to find high quality winter habitat such as cattail sloughs, shelterbelts or thick warm-season grass stands.

Even though pheasants seek out insulating winter habitat, they must still increase their energy intake if they hope to stay warm and store energy. This is because temperatures are now dropping below a pheasant’s neutral zone, or the temperature at which a pheasant does not need to use additional energy to stay warm. Unlike September and October when pheasants could simply fluff up their feathers to stay warm, additional energy is now needed to stay warm. In fact, pheasants require 1/3 more energy in December than in October just to stay warm. Pheasants need to consume enough food to continue to store energy as fat and gain weight before the coldest winter months of January and February while also using more energy to stay warm.

In addition to needing 1/3 more energy just to stay warm, pheasants have 3 fewer hours to forage in December than they did in September. This means pheasants are now consuming 20% more food in 25% less time and enduring colder nights that are 25% longer! Even through these struggles, pheasants still manage to gain weight by storing energy in the form of fat during both November and December. Of course, this would not be possible without a change in feeding behavior.

During fall, pheasants feed leisurely throughout the day as there was plenty of time to consume the required amount of food. By November and December, most pheasants are feeding before sunrise and many will even feed after sunset. This shift in behavior enables pheasants to eat more food during fewer hours of day light. Pheasants actually consume twice as much food now as they did during summer. This can be challenging especially when snow blankets the waste grain, primarily corn, which pheasants rely on during winter. It is not uncommon for pheasants to forage for most of the day when snow makes finding food difficult. Food plots such as standing corn or sorghum can ease these winter woes by providing abundant food above the blanket of snow. Pheasants utilizing food plots typically exhibit increased winter survival because exposure to predators is lower than birds feeding for longer periods of time in open fields.

By November and December, a pheasant’s diet has shifted primarily to corn in areas where it is available. Weed seeds are now less abundant, and much of the once available wheat seeds have been plowed under or sprouted during fall. Corn is packed with energy, which is what pheasants need to metabolize to stay warm during winter months. When pheasants are fortunate enough to gather more corn than they need to use to stay warm, the rest is quickly stored as fat reserves. In fact, hen pheasants increase their body weight by 25% during the two months of November and December with most of the weight increase in the form of fat. Fat represents the densest form in which energy can be stored by birds. These fat reserves are necessary as severe winter storms can prevent pheasants from foraging for days at a time. During harsh South Dakota blizzards, pheasants hunker down in thick cover and simply wait for the storm to pass. Pheasants rely on their fat reserves to generate body heat during days when they cannot forage. When pheasants emerge after a severe early winter storm, they are bit hungry, but they were in no danger of starving to death. Pheasants could easily endure 3 days without food during early winter.

Although food becomes more difficult to find after the first blanket of snow covers the once exposed waster grains, pheasants are rarely in danger of starving to death. Even during the most brutal winters, most pheasant mortality is due to predation and exposure to the elements. Predation increases sharply when pheasants must forage for long periods of time in open snow covered fields. We have all seen how visible pheasants are against a back drop of snow, and this increased visibility likely leaves pheasants more vulnerable to predators.
Jim R. Hawke (L) of Rapid City is shown receiving his 2012 Water Conservationists of the Year from SDWF President Bill Antonides.

Stan Lieberman (L) of Rapid City is shown receiving his 2012 Educator Conservationists of the Year from SDWF President Bill Antonides.

“One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.”

From Round River by Aldo Leopold

“Man shapes himself through decisions that shape his environment.”

Rene Dubos
President’s Column
by Bill Antonides

“Guess what happened to me today?” I asked my wife on the phone as I drove home from the 67th Annual SDWF Convention in Pierre. (Thank you High Plains Sportsmen’s Club!) “Oh no;” she said. “I thought you were going to cut back on all your boards.” She had already guessed that I had been elected president of the SDWF.

Sure, there had been “talks” about the “possibility” of my taking over at some point, but I didn’t feel I had enough experience to run this great organization yet. I even gave the delegates some points on why not to elect me, but to no avail. Don’t get me wrong—I consider this a great honor and will do my very best to keep SDWF going strong—but I did tell everyone, “I’m no Bill Antonides!” They voted me in anyway.

Speaking of Bill, we all owe him a great debt of appreciation for all the time and hard work that he has contributed (donated!) to SDWF, and in turn to all the state’s sportsmen/sportswomen. There were some weeks that I know he put in 40 hours researching issues, driving to meetings, and emailing the executive board to make sure we knew what was happening in our great state. He kept us informed about what we should be doing to protect our rights and the South Dakota outdoors legacy that we all love. Thank you, Bill!

Now, we need him elected to the state legislature to help our voice be heard. If fact, send him some money because campaigns are expensive! Mail a check to Bill Antonides for House, 3516 Rolling Meadows Drive, Aberdeen, SD, 57401-8185.

But enough about Bill; let’s talk about me! I’m president of the Brookings Wildlife Federation, married for 20 years, with a 16-year-old daughter and a six-year-old hunting dog, Pokey. (Yes, my daughter got naming rights and didn’t like “Fang” or “Killer” like I suggested).

I have always loved the outdoors and was lucky enough to have a dad who took my brother and me hunting & fishing, plus a mom who needed some time alone without those boys running through the house breaking things. We were also lucky to have access to Uncle Bob’s land, where pheasants were abundant in the shelterbelts and the stock dam held bass nearly half as big as I was. Good times, indeed!

Unfortunately, today, parents tend to be too busy and kids spend too many hours in front of some electronic gadget. And even if they can find some time for outdoor activities, there are not many places they can go. With the grasslands being plowed, the wetlands drained, and the pay-to-hunt operations expanding, I sometimes wonder if our grandkids will ever get to enjoy our South Dakota outdoor and wildlife paradise.

Do you want to help protect our outdoor heritage? If so, I’d like to ask you to help in four ways:

1. All of the delegates and board members that you sent to the convention agreed to bring in one new member in September. Make sure they do that!

2. I challenge each of you to bring in JUST ONE new member this hunting season! It’s easy; just ask others to get involved! We shouldn’t be carrying your fellow sportsmen/sportswomen. They need to step up too. Call it the JUST ONE program. Do you realize we would double the strength of SDWF just like that? We have 3,300 members, but we should have at least 33,000 members! SDWF can get there in a few years if we all ask JUST ONE friend to join each year.

3. We need funds to pay for our lobbyists and attorneys to fight the battles that we know are coming every year. At the convention, I presented a check from the Brookings Wildlife Federation for $500 to start the legal fund, and issued a challenge to all the other affiliates to do the same! So please write a check to help start our SDWF Legal Fund. Thank you!

4. Do business with our sponsors and thank them for their contributions!

In summary, we all know what SDWF does to protect our hunting and fighting for our rights!

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SDWF Wishes to thank these additional supporters for donations for our auction held in Pierre.

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WASHINGTON — As the farm bill languishes in Congress, much of the blame is being placed on lawmakers from small or nonagricultural producing districts who have been unwilling to throw their support behind the half-trillion dollar legislation.

Those who follow the farm bill say lawmakers in urban areas who are not heavily dependent upon agriculture avoid significant pressure from their constituents to pass a new measure. Instead, these lawmakers are focused on a host of other issues such as the economy, jobs and rising gas prices ahead of the November election. They have little reason to spend their political capital on the farm bill.

"Certainly, in a state like Iowa, where something like 30 percent of the economy is ag-related, people are very aware of the farm bill," said Dennis Goldford, a professor of politics at Drake University in Des Moines. "You don’t find the farm bill up there in those reaches of concern once you get outside of agriculture producing regions, he said. "I don’t know what New Jersey representative would be terribly interested in the farm bill."

But pressure to pass a new farm bill or extend the current five-year bill that expires Sept. 30 could intensify when Congress returns from its summer recess next month. The drought, the worst to hit the United States since 1956, has attracted more nationwide attention to the difficulties facing farmers and ranchers in rural America.

"I think (the farm bill) is mostly ho-hum outside of farm country," said Ed Schafer, a former agriculture secretary in the George W. Bush administration and one-time governor of North Dakota. "It comes to the forefront more now this time around because of the drought," he said.

During a campaign stop earlier this month in Council Bluffs, Iowa, President Obama wasted little time criticizing Rep. Paul Ryan, Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney’s running mate, as an example of the failure of House Republicans to pass a farm bill. But until recently, the farm bill has not garnered much attention by the either presidential candidate on the campaign trail.

"Unfortunately, right now, too many members of Congress are blocking the farm bill from becoming law," Obama told supporters. "(Ryan) is one of the leaders of Congress standing in the way." 

Scorching heat and scant rainfall this summer in the Midwest have left crops withering in fields. Ranchers have been especially hard hit. They have seen costs for corn, soybeans and hay to feed their livestock soar, leaving many producers facing a financial loss. More than 60 percent of the U.S. and more than 82 percent of South Dakota are mired in drought. According to a recent report from the U.S. Agriculture Department, 87 percent of the U.S. corn crop, 85 percent of soybeans, 63 percent of hay, and 72 percent of cattle areas were experiencing drought.

Rep. Kristi Noem, R-S.D., a member of the House Agriculture Committee, said she thinks momentum is building to pass a farm bill, but it remains a difficult battle to educate those unfamiliar with the importance of agriculture.

"I think we need a lot more people to get engaged. We need more leadership engagement, president engagement, all hands on deck to get this farm bill done and passed into place before it expires," Noem said. "It’s a bigger challenge to make sure we’ve educated the importance (to urban lawmakers) of ag policy and what it does to benefit every family with lower food prices, she said.

While the $500 billion farm bill covers everything from subsidy payments for farmers to trade and conservation, nutrition programs have garnered the attention of lawmakers whose districts are not major players in agriculture. In the past, food stamps and other nutrition programs, which command almost 80 percent of farm bill funding, were used to win the backing of otherwise reluctant supporters.

That’s part of the problem. Republican House leaders are reluctant to call for a vote because they don’t think they have the 218 votes to pass it. House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, and Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., are worried that not enough Democrats will support the farm bill because it cuts too deeply into nutrition programs.

At the same time, some Republicans who do not represent agriculture districts oppose farm subsidies and many do not understand the value of agricultural programs, according to Noem and other farm bill supporters, siphoning off even more support for the legislation.

Analysts and lawmakers fear if a farm bill is delayed until after the November election or until 2013, programs could be subjected to even deeper spending cuts.

"At this point the election will have more of an impact on the fate of the farm bill than the farm bill will have on the fate of the election," Goldfarb said.

"Certainly, in a state like Iowa, where something like 30 percent of the economy is ag-related, people are very aware of the farm bill,"
### SD Wildlife Federation Donors

At the 2003 Winter Board Meeting, the SDWF Board created the SDWF Wildlife Legacy Council. The Council was created to allow recognition of the people who support SDWF above and beyond their membership and raffle donations.

The Legacy Council consists of five different donation levels. These donation levels were revised October 2011 to Level V Eagle $1,000 & above; Level IV Buffalo $501 - $999; Level III Elk $301 - $500; Level II Deer $201 - $300; and Level I Pheasant $100 - $199.

#### Level I Pheasant
- Adam, Mel - TN
- Ayler, John - KS
- Casler, David - MO
- Christopherson, M.E. - SC

#### Level II Deer
- Anderson, Roger - TN
- Bealke, Robert - WI
- Brakerush, Carl - WI
- Dennis, Jack - NV
- Geibart, Ronald - AK
- Griffin, John - OH
- Heffron, George H. - CO
- Huber, Daniel - SC

#### Level III Elk
- Anderson, Roger - TN
- Bealke, Robert - WI
- Brakerush, Carl - WI
- Dennis, Jack - NV
- Geibart, Ronald - AK
- Griffin, John - OH
- Heffron, George H. - CO
- Huber, Daniel - SC

#### Level IV Buffalo
- Anderson, Roger - TN
- Bealke, Robert - WI
- Brakerush, Carl - WI
- Dennis, Jack - NV
- Geibart, Ronald - AK
- Griffin, John - OH
- Heffron, George H. - CO
- Huber, Daniel - SC

#### Level V Eagle
- Simons, Darrel - SD
- Swords, L.F. - MS
- Tschetschulin, Robert - CA
- Voss, Roy - SD
- Worsham, Jerry - WA
- Wilde, Frank - SD
- Wiswall, F. Herbert - SD

#### WHEREAS, South Dakotans have seen an alarming increase in the number of non-resident archery deer tags being issued each year, and

#### WHEREAS, implementing the 8% rule for allocating non-resident archery deer licenses has resulted in an increase in the leasing of private property exclusively for archery deer hunting by these non-residents, and

#### WHEREAS, these areas then become magnet refuges for deer in these local areas preventing the sportmen from helping the Department of Game, Fish & Parks in their deer management goals, and

#### WHEREAS, implementing this rule for non-resident archery deer tags would put it in line with other big game license allocations, and

#### WHEREAS, the Department of Game, Fish & Parks should have the ability to withhold non-resident archery deer tags if the population drops to a level where all deer licenses are impacted, and

#### NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish & Parks Commission to establish rules and regulations which will put non-resident any deer and antlerless archery deer tags at the 8% rule in a manner similar to the West River rifle deer tag distribution.

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**“Just One” New Member Program**

The SDWF has approximately 3,000 members. We are constantly fighting to keep our outdoor heritage and to conserve our natural resources. We can’t continue without our members and we can’t keep fighting unless we grow our membership. Encourage your friends and associates to join the South Dakota Wildlife Federation, either directly or through a local affiliate club. "Just One" new member can make a world of difference!
Photos by: Les Heiserman. Taken April 21, 2012, Red Shirt Earth Day Hike

“...there are very few places left in the U.S. where someone can truly be distant from a road or motorized trail. And those places that are left ... are the places written about in Field & Stream and other hunting and fishing magazines on a weekly or daily basis.

The Bob Marshall Wilderness, the Maine North Woods, the Yellowstone, Bridger-Teton and Wind Rivers in Wyoming, the Bitterroot-Selway, the Adirondacks, southern Arizona’s Coyote Mountains, southern Nevada, southern Utah, and so on. The places that we read about, or have read about, or that we dream about for a trophy mule deer or elk hunt. Those are the spaces, and make no mistake about it -- they are the last spaces of their kind -- that we talk about changing forever with bills like HR 1581.”

Quote by Hal Herring

LANDOWNERS AND HUNTERS ASKED TO REPORT DEAD DEER

PIERRE, S.D. - The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department is asking landowners and hunters to be on the lookout for dead deer.

This is the time of the year when deer tend to succumb to hemorrhagic disease, also known as epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD), or blue tongue.

The disease is common in white-tailed deer and is typically detected in late summer or early fall. The virus is spread by a biting midge and causes extensive internal hemorrhaging. Many deer exhibit no clinical signs and appear perfectly healthy; other deer may have symptoms such as respiratory distress, fever, and swelling of the tongue.

With highly virulent strains of the virus, deer can die in three days or less. Affected deer are often found in low-lying areas or near rivers or ponds, where they go to combat the high fever.

People who see sick deer or find several dead deer in one locale are asked to contact their local conservation officers or call the Pierre GFP office at 605-773-5913.

EHD outbreaks can be locally severe but rarely affect more than 25 percent of a local deer population. In rare cases, the disease will affect more than 50 percent. Deer may continue dying from hemorrhagic disease until a hard freeze reduces the midge populations that carry the disease.

EHD is not infectious to humans. For more information on the EHD virus visit http://www.vet.uga.edu/scwds/pdfs/HD.pdf

“We have always had reluctance to see a tract of land which is empty of men as anything but a void. The ‘waste howling wilderness’ of Deuteronomy is typical. The Oxford Dictionary defines wilderness as wild or uncultivated land which is occupied ‘only’ by wild animals. Places not used by us are ‘wastes.’ Areas not occupied by us are ‘desolate.’ Could the desolation be in the soul of man?”

John A. Livingston, in Borden Spears, ed., Wilderness Canada, 1970

Managing water can be a real mess.

That continues to be the case for Codington County’s Board of Commissioners as they wrestle with satisfying farmers who want to drain land for crop production while protecting the county from legal action should that water cause damage downstream.

In recent months Highway Superintendent Rick Small has received requests from farmers who want to drain water from some of their land using tiling under county roadbeds, moving the water from one side of the road to the other.

Small has denied those requests citing concerns the county could be held liable if the boring and tiling led to conflict with another landowner.

A group of farmers approached the board a few months ago asking that something be done to help them drain water from crop land. Commissioner Brenda Hanten agreed to head a committee of landowners, township officials, planning specialists and others to look into how to accomplish that while still protecting the county.

A week ago, Hanten brought a proposal to the commissioners designed by the committee that laid out terms for a “limited license agreement” for use of a county road right of way for water drainage. The proposal was sent on to State’s Attorney Dawn Elshere for review and Tuesday, Elshere gave the commissioners her opinion.

After talking with other lawyers and county officials in the area, Elshere said she still has concerns the county could be liable under the terms of the proposal, saying it doesn’t go far enough, particularly in notification requirements.

“It (drainage regulation) is something that’s coming up and is happening and we’re kind of at the forefront,” Elshere told the board. “My concern is that you’re putting yourselves in the position of being a drainage board.” She said while state statute allows for county boards to act as drainage boards, Codington County does not have a drainage ordinance which also needs to be in place.

“It (the proposal) does not provide for notice to downstream landowners and give them the chance to come in,” and voice their opinions, Elshere said. “With a drainage ordinance you have the due process, but you don’t have the answer to the issue of where does the water go.

“I think that’s why a lot of counties have chosen to have no drainage board,” Elshere said one option she found in another county is granting an easement for using the right of way, but then requiring the person draining the water to contact landowners downstream to the next viable tributary.

“I think it puts the burden on the landowner to find out where that water goes,” she said. “If they want to do the project, then the burden should be on them to find out where that water will go.

“There’s no easy solution to it. You want to have a solution because you have landowners coming in… But there’s also the concern of liability.”

Commissioner George Heller asked Elshere if the county would still be liable if a landowner tilted beneath a county road or in the right of way without county permission.

“If they do that without (county) permission, they can be told they need to stop,” and a citation issued, Elshere said. “I don’t think it puts the county in the same position as issuing a permit. It’s not the same liability.”

Commissioner Myron Johnson indicated he feels the concerns of liability will get in the way of helping farmers who need the land for their business.

“Sometimes I think we worry too much and go backward,” Johnson said. “We’re too cautious.”

Zoning Officer Luke Muller said a task force has been put together to review drainage and water management in the state and could provide some legislative relief for counties dealing with drainage issues, but that could be quite a ways off.

Elshere agreed to work with Hanten to look at possibly developing an easement agreement that includes necessary landowner notification and other protections for the county.

Following the meeting Tuesday, Hanten said while she would like something addressing the drainage issue, she appreciates Elshere’s input.

“She’s giving us the advice she’s comfortable with,” Hanten said. “And she gave us this avenue we can explore.

“I like the idea that me and her can work together and go forward on this. She did what she had to in representing the county. Now it’s just a matter of looking at a different avenue and seeing what we can do.”

Commission Chairman Elmer Brinkman agreed Elshere’s proposal to look at other options is a good idea, but the solution may lie at a higher level.

“I really think the Legislature needs to act,” Brinkman said. “With all the debate over drainage — I don’t think the counties have a dog in that fight.

“But how the county gets involved and what happens if the train jumps the tracks, that’s what we’re looking for.”

Although Johnson pressed Hanten and Elshere for a two-week deadline on the next step, Hanten said that is unlikely.

“It’s not going to go on indefinitely, but we have to be realistic,” Hanten said. “I don’t think we can rush through it and two weeks might not be enough time.”