Pheasant Ecology: Part 2 - Nesting & Brood-Rearing Season by Travis Runia

In part 1 of this 6 part series, we learned what pheasants were up to during May and June. We discovered how pheasants can overcome low annual survival by exhibiting high reproductive potential through large clutch sizes and multiple re-nesting attempts if previous nests are destroyed.

May is the peak egg laying month while June is the peak of hatch for pheasant nests. Hens have invested vast amounts of energy into egg production and brood rearing responsibilities by the end of June. Their body weight and condition plummet during this time because food intake can not keep up with the energy demanding responsibilities of motherhood. Newly hatched chicks are targeting insects for most of their diet during June because a protein rich diet is needed to grow feathers and tissue. Roosters spent most of May and June displaying to attract hens, but this activity peaked in April and is nearly complete by early July.

Now the dog days of summer are here. Nearly all hens are done nesting and those who had successful nests continue to lead their broods to areas with succulent forbs where chicks can forage on insects. The roosters’ breeding responsibilities are nearly complete until next spring. One may think July and August should be a cake walk for pheasants with the most energy demanding time of the year behind them. This is true for roosters, but hens have their most challenging days ahead in July and August. Chicks are not out of the woods either. Many will be killed by predators or farm machinery and the remaining chicks need to gorge on insects and seeds to gain weight before fall. As we all know, chicken can come awfully early in South Dakota.

So why can roosters lazily coast through July and August without a care in the world, while hens struggle to survive? Summer responsibilities for roosters are quite simple. Finish the molt that was started in late June and start preparing for winter by gaining weight. Roosters have been losing weight for 5 months and may weigh 15% less than they did during mid-winter. Since courtship and breeding responsibilities dwindle by July, roosters can take advantage of abundant food resources and replace all their feathers and gain modest weight in July. Rate of weight gain increases in August as energy is no longer needed to grow replacement feathers. July and August are quite relaxing for rooster pheasants in South Dakota.

As roosters are taking advantage of rich food resources to molt and gain weight, most hens are attending to broods and beginning their molt in July. Hens molt after egg laying and incubation because completing all three at the same time would be too energy demanding. While roosters can focus all efforts on molting and gaining weight, hens have energy demanding brood rearing duties.

Hens must lead broods to habitats rich with insects and keep them out of harms way by keeping an eye out for predators. She has already lost 20% of her body weight since April and brood rearing and molting activities in July could cost her another 10% of her body weight. She can not take in enough energy to cover these highly energy demanding tasks.

Hen pheasants are in their poorest physical condition in August during most years and could weigh 30% less than before egg laying began. Only during years of extreme winter weather would a hen pheasant be lighter in March than in August. They must reverse the trend of losing weight as death occurs when 40% of her body weight is lost. August is a critical time for hens as their stressed bodies are more vulnerable to disease and parasites. Hen survival during August can be lower than during winter.

There are several factors that affect just how stressed (loss of body weight and body fat) hens become in August, and not all factors are obvious. This is important since survival is highly dependant on how stressed hens become during late summer. First, when the hen was hatched the previous year influences her condition going into winter and ultimately the next spring and summer. If a hen was raised from a late hatching nest due to weather or predation of early nests, she will be lighter going into winter than early hatched hens. She will be lighter and in poorer condition than early hatched hens during the following August.
South Dakota has been fortunate this year in receiving moisture for good habitat. Although, in some areas, way too much moisture. Hopefully it will dry a little and allow the farmers to get into the field and plant some seed. It is so green and there are pheasants running in the road ditches, north of Pierre where I live. I am looking forward to the end of August to see the results of the GF&P’s Annual Pheasant Brood Survey.

As I am writing this column, there are over 100 young adults and many volunteers getting ready to go to Camp Bob Marshall enjoying the camps 55th year. I cannot say thank you enough to all the volunteers that give their time to teach conservation to our young adults and the never ending clubs, organizations and individuals that help send these young adults to camp. SDWF will be sending out the 2019 Pheasant Hunt and Buffalo Shoot raffle tickets very soon. PLEASE support SDWF and purchase tickets when you receive the offer in the mail.

The 21-gun winners where listed on the front page of this issue, thank you to all who won and those that bought a chance to win a new gun.

21 Gun Giveaway Winners

After the Spring Board Meeting held in Pierre. SDWF’s Executive Director drew the winning names of those who had purchased 21 Gun Giveaway tickets. There were 1092 tickets sold for this annual fundraising event. SDWF gave away 10-guns or cash settlements to the winners.

1. Roger Little, SD
2. James Buffardi, IL
3. Loyal Messerschmidt, SD
4. Doug Brage, SD
5. Shannon Ims, SD
6. Leamon Ferrell, ND
7. Matthew Novak, SD
8. Scottie Hojer, SD
9. Bruce Johnson, SD
10. Robert Van De Rostyne, WY

I want to thank everyone who purchased tickets for this raffle. Your generosity makes SDWF what it is today. THANK YOU!
President's Column  
by Mark Widman

So you’re still probably scratching your head from the last edition of the “Out of Doors” where I said that “I’ve included a close up photo of my hunting companion Charlie in this edition for your amusement. As you can see, he isn’t very happy, but what you can’t really see is the “Cone of Shame” he is wearing in this photo.” For some reason, the photo didn’t get included in the last edition, so let’s try this again.

If you have a hunting dog, I know you’ve experienced the joy they show when they have to wear this thing. My brother Rich and I were on a late season pheasant hunt near Montrose, SD. We were hitting some frozen sloughs in a harvested soybean field. Harvested soybean fields are tricky to walk, as they still have the hard stem sticking out of the ground. Charlie happened to step on a stem that pierced his right front paw. Rich was able to pull the 4 inch stem/stick out, but Charlie wasn’t ready to quit. We could see some blood on the snow, but Charlie didn’t seem to be in any pain. We concluded our hunt and took him to the Vet, where they cleaned out his wound and received antibiotics and pain meds. That’s where the “Cone of Shame” comes in and this hilarious photo. I also included a photo of Charlie overlooking the Missouri River back in October. We didn’t see very many birds, but got to see this incredible view. I thanked God for this view and for the opportunity to be outdoors.

Spring Turkey season is upon us. Rich and I were supposed to head to the Black Hills opening weekend, but due to a delightful Spring snowstorm that pounded most of the state... we postponed our trip to the first weekend in May. This is our 3rd year hunting in the Black Hills and we truly enjoy this trip. There is nothing better than hearing the sound of a gobbler nearby and then to see him come around a corner or over a hill to get your heart pounding. Best of luck to you and your Spring Turkey hunt this year!

The 2019 State Legislative Session with our new governor has ended. Governor Noem announced the Secondary Century Initiative to preserve and expand habitat to ensure that the second century of pheasant hunting will be as great as the first century. We are happy to see progress on this front and applaud Governor Noem for her efforts! However, public input is NEEDED to guide these efforts. You may have heard about the “Nest Bounty Program” that was put into play this Spring beginning April 1st and running through August 31st. It was promoted as “increasing participation in trapping from all ages while at the same time, reducing localized populations of nest predators as a way to enhance pheasant and duck nest success.” While we support the Governor’s efforts to get families to spend time together in the outdoors and enhance pheasant and duck nest success, we don’t support the way the program was pushed through without proper public input. The cost of the traps given away to the public is approximately $1,000,000. The cost of the bounty is maxed out at $500,000. That's a lot of sportsman's and woman's dollars being spent without any input from the very people that are affected. If this was taxpayer money.... would taxpayers be happy that they didn’t have a say as to how their money was spent?

The questions we have are:

- Is there a defined length to the program?
- Is this a one year program or will it continue for how many years?
- Is there a budget for administrative costs and services?
- Has a process been implemented to determine success of the program?
- How will the Pittman-Robertson matching dollars be affected?
- Federal Aid Funds are basically paid for by our Sportsmen and Women through the federal excise taxes we pay on firearms and related sports equipment. The PR Funds have been routinely used in a 3 to 1 match of our Wildlife Fund hard dollars for major habitat projects across our state.

- Why wasn’t this proposal brought before the SD G,F & P Commission to get public input?

We have had conversations with the G,F & P staff since the launch of this program to get a better understanding of the program, but still have reservations about the program. As I understand it, bounty programs have been tried numerous times in the past and have failed. The science, however, does show that habitat is KEY to successful populations of wildlife. I will refer you to the “Governor’s Pheasant Habitat Work Group Report” from 2014. The “Work Group” fully addressed “predator control” on page 18, by stating “... when suitable habitat is available and weather conditions warrant, pheasant populations flourish without direct predator control”. They also note “a bounty or reward system to encourage predator control would probably not have a measurable effect on pheasant populations” and add “… bounty systems in other states have been ineffective because the origin of the predators cannot be verified.”

Again, we applaud Governor Noem for her Second Century Initiative to preserve and expand habitat, but let’s use science and let’s use the research that has already been done to accomplish these goals. Let’s also get the tourism/lodging/restaurant industry to have a stake in this initiative as well. They benefit greatly from the outdoor sports industry and should put money up as well. A $0.01 cent sales tax or a bed and booze tax specifically for habitat would have a huge impact on helping to meet the Governor’s goals. I’m sure habitat isn’t that important, if we raising taxes is a good option (tongue in cheek).

In this edition of the “Out of Doors”, the “Board of Director Spotlight” is on Larry Lewis. He lives in the Northeastern part of the state. Larry is a veteran of the Air Force and a graduate from SDSU with a degree in Wildlife Biology. Larry worked for the US Fish & Wildlife Service for most of his career with an emphasis on wetland protection and drainage issues. Not a bad person to have on the SDWF Board of Directors, if I do say so myself.

The 2019 SDWF Youth Conservation Camp will be held June 2nd through June 8th at Camp Bob Marshall in the Black Hills. This year will be the 56th camp. A big thank you to the volunteers that have on the SDWF Board of Directors, if I do say so myself.

As always, we need to continue building our membership and raising money to pay for our lobbying effort in Pierre! We need you to impress upon your hunting and fishing buddies to JOIN the SDWF (which costs less than $2.00/month), donate money to our cause, purchase raffle tickets, sign up to receive “Camo Alerts” and be ready to contact your legislators when the time comes. We need your continued support to fight for your hunting/fishing/outdoor rights. Please, Please, Please consider donating $500, $250 or $100 to the SDWF Camo Coalition.

Outdoors is finally upon us. Be safe, enjoy your time outdoors, PICK UP THE LITTER and make some memories!
Steel shot for pheasant hunting and other non-toxic options in an advanced world of modern shotgun ballistics Written by; Matt Breuer

Thirty years ago, the thought of being forced to use anything other than lead shot for bird hunting caused people to go crazy. Utterings of missing birds because lead shot wasn’t used were common. It could’ve been real, or just a little crutch to lean on when a hunter was having an off-day. Regardless, nobody liked it when steel shot was introduced and became mandatory in many areas. Ammo has come a long ways over the past 30 years, and people can’t use the fact that they weren’t shooting lead as an excuse anymore.

Why Non-Toxic Ammunition for Pheasant?
It’s no secret that lead is harmful. Lead shot can be picked up by birds, dissolved in birds that are non-mortally hit with it, eaten by scavengers like foxes, coyotes, and raptors from the carcasses of non-recovered game. The list goes on, and like anything in the animal kingdom, the circle of life makes everything go in a loop. Non-toxic shot is a great alternative for those looking to leave the smallest footprint possible. It’s the eco-friendly choice. In some areas, it’s also mandatory.

Where is Non-Toxic Shot Essential for Pheasant?
The United States banned lead shot for hunting waterfowl in 1991 and at least 26 states have instituted lead shot restrictions beyond those mandated for waterfowl hunting. Non-toxic ammunition is required on most state land in South Dakota, and is required to hunt many Waterfowl Production Areas and Management Areas in Minnesota. There’s even a proposal to ban lead shot in the farmland region of southwestern Minnesota.

Anywhere there’s water present, non-toxic shot should be considered. This includes fields that may have small pockets of standing water or drainage, and any areas where ducks or other migratory birds may be present. If you’re hunting an area with lead only, and a big, fat northern mallard jumps up next to you, you cannot legally pull the trigger. Why not carry legal, non-toxic shot in areas where you can shoot a mixed bag?

What are the Alternatives to Lead Ammunition?
Twenty years ago, lead reigned supreme. Many would say that statement still holds true today. There’s no debating that lead shot is effective. It’s dense, carries energy over a long distance and it hits hard. However, non-toxic alternatives have come a long ways over the last 20 years. Steel, bismuth, tungsten, tungsten-alloy, and specialized mixed-metal ammunition are all great alternatives to lead.

I’ve shot a plethora of alternatives, and I keep coming back to a few select favorites when I’m hunting pheasants with non-toxic shot. A large-pellet steel shot was my go-to for many years, and still works well for me today. The rise of tungsten has really changed how I look at non-toxic shot, and may end up taking up a lot more space on my ammo shelf. While it may be more expensive than steel, tungsten hits like a hammer and maintains speed at extreme distances. For late-season roosters, tungsten is the ticket. Hybrids like Prairie Storm Steel and Hevi-Shot provide the shooter with a mixed payload of different metals. Bismuth is great if you’re using a classic shotgun as it’s soft and won’t be harmful to an older barrel. As I stated, there are a lot of alternatives to choose from.

I personally take to pheasant hunting with non-toxic shot much like I would take to hunting diver ducks. If I can cleanly harvest a fat, northern diver duck that’s skating up my diver lines at Mach 8 with non-toxic ammunition, I can surely take down a pointed pheasant.

Shot and Choke Sizes for Steel and More
If I’m using steel shot, I prefer a larger shot size. While I may use lead in No. 6 for early season roosters, I’ll utilize No. 2 or 3 steel shot if I’m using non-toxic load. Steel isn’t as dense, so I try to make up for that by using a larger pellet, which increases energy. The larger pellets knock birds down deep. If I connect with No. 2 steel, the odds of the rooster getting away aren’t good, especially inside of 30 yards. The new Speed Shok from Federal Premium Ammunition offers 12 gauge 3-inch 1 1/4 ounce No. 2 shot which cuts 1450 feet per second. Exceptional for steel, it also features a lead-free Catalyst primer. Another great option in steel is Prairie Storm FS Steel. We all know that speed kills, and No. 3 Prairie Storm FS Steel cuts out of the barrel at 1600 fps. This 3-inch shell has a 1 1/8 ounce shot charge, and works great for early and mid-season roosters alike. The FS stands for Flitetopper, as the payload is 50 percent standard steel and 50 percent Flitetopper steel which optimizes patterns and creates larger wound channels.

For late-season roosters and as an alternative to straight steel, check out Federal Black Cloud TSS. Touted as one of the best waterfowl loads available, I can promise that it’s absolutely deadly on pheasants as well. The 3-inch 1 1/4 oz mix of No. 3 Flitetopper steel and No. 9 tungsten is a great combination. Tungsten is 56 percent more dense than lead, and more than twice as dense as steel. It maintains velocity father, hits hard, and penetrates very well. It also features the Flitecontrol Flex wad that opens from the rear controlling the release of the payload causing consistent patterns. The biggest downfall of tungsten is the cost. The results are worth it if you can cleanly kill more birds using a completely lead-free shotshell.

Speaking of patterns, choke selection is a common question for non-toxic loads. Hunters who don’t pay attention to chokes or choke selection may not realize that certain chokes cannot be used with steel shot. If you’re not going to order a custom or specialized choke, you’ll be safe using a modified choke. Most of the modern loads on the market will pattern extremely well out of almost any modified choke.

Don’t let the fact that the WMA down the road doesn’t allow the use of lead shot deter you from hunting. The non-toxic ammunition of today is reliable and deadly. Plus, when you’re pulling the trigger you can take solace in the fact that you’re doing your part to be eco-friendly.

Report A Clarion Call to Action to Save Wildlife, Ourselves Aileo Weinmann

The unprecedented threats facing wildlife in North America and around the globe must be a clarion call to action, the National Wildlife Federation said today following the release of a new Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services report. The report estimates that up to one million animal and plant species are threatened with extinction in the coming decades — nearly 40 percent of all species — and require urgent conservation action.

“Wildlife are in crisis around the globe — including one third of species here at home — with nearly a million species at risk of extinction unless we act collaboratively to restore and reconnect essential habitat, reduce escalating threats, and confront climate change,” said Collin O’Mara, president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation. “This sobering report is a clarion call for why we must take immediate action to prevent devastating costs for wildlife and human communities alike.

“When we save wildlife, we save ourselves. When wildlife have clean water, so do we; wetlands and natural systems make our cities and towns more resilient to extreme storms; healthy forests are less prone to uncontrolled megafires; and keeping nature within reach helps our children — and future stewards of our planet — thrive in school and at home.” The National Wildlife Federation is a leading voice for proactive and urgent investments in species conservation. To help recover the more than 12,000 species of greatest conservation need in the U.S., the Federation has championed the passage of the Recovering America’s Wildlife Act and worked to support common-sense solutions to threats facing wildlife, including habitat loss and fragmentation, invasive species, disease, climate change, and toxic pollution.
Imagine sitting in your duck blind for hours on end, day after day for almost a month, in conditions ranging from cold rain and wind to hot and humid weather. That is what a nesting female duck does while she is incubating her eggs. Depending on her nesting strategy, the hen will incubate her clutch in upland habitat, over water, or in a tree cavity. Most dabbling ducks are considered upland-nesting birds and commonly nest in grassland habitat near small wetlands where their mates have established territories. Some diving ducks, such as lesser scaup and white-winged scoters, also nest in upland habitat. The hens’ drab coloring, combined with the cryptic construction and placement of their nests, helps conceal their nests from predators. Upland-nesting ducks benefit from large expanses of grass. Research has shown that predation of duck nests is higher in small patches of grassland than in larger blocks of upland cover.

Where ducks choose to nest in the uplands varies by species. Blue-winged teal, which have much smaller home ranges than other dabbling ducks, typically nest close to the edge of wetlands. In contrast, mallards have much larger home ranges and often nest farther away from water—sometimes up to a mile from the nearest wetland. Diving ducks that may nest in the uplands, such as lesser scaup, have limited mobility on land. Consequently, if they do choose to nest in the uplands, it is typically not far from a wetland.

Cavity-nesting ducks, like wood ducks, lay large clutches of eggs. The three different nesting strategies seen among ducks developed over time through the process of natural selection. While upland-nesting waterfowl have lower rates of nest success than overwater or cavity nesters, they are also more likely to renest repeatedly throughout the breeding season. In contrast, overwater nesters don’t renest as frequently and tend to avoid breeding altogether during dry years, when their natural protection from land-based predators isn’t available. Finally, cavity nesters lay larger clutches (a typical wood duck clutch consists of 12 eggs) than both upland and overwater nesters. Cavity-nesting species are also persistent renesters, presumably to maximize their reproductive potential when limited nesting sites are available. Although less studied, the behavior of female ducks while nesting has also almost certainly evolved through natural selection and is an integral part of the success of their overall nesting strategies. To conceal the location of their nests from potential predators, hens rarely leave the nest during incubation, and when they do, it is only for relatively short periods of time. Research conducted by Ducks Unlimited in partnership with the University of North Dakota has found that female blue-winged teal leave the nest only about twice a day, with each nesting break lasting an hour and a half on average. This same research revealed that mallards leave the nest less often, only twice a day, with each nesting break lasting an hour and a half on average. Diving ducks, such as lesser scaup, have limited mobility on land. Consequently, if they do choose to nest in the uplands, it is typically not far from a wetland.

Whether it’s an upland-nesting mallard in central North Dakota, an overwater-nesting canvasback in southern Saskatchewan, or a cavity-nesting bufflehead in northern Alberta, female ducks require important food resources for clutch formation, incubation, and brood rearing. Most of these resources are found in wetlands. That’s why conserving wetlands and other crucial nesting habitat on the prairies and in other important waterfowl breeding areas is among Ducks Unlimited’s highest priorities. To accomplish this objective, DU works with a variety of conservation partners—including farmers and ranchers—to conserve, enhance, and restore these vital habitats on diverse landscapes across the continent.

Dr. Susan N. Ellis-Felege is an associate professor of wildlife ecology and management at the University of North Dakota. Kaylan Carillon is manager of conservation planning and Tanner Gue is a biologist in DU’s Great Plains Region.
Greetings, my name is Larry Lewis. My South Dakota roots developed on a farm just two miles from the North Dakota border near Hecla. Born in 1946 I was fortunate to be raised during the soil bank years. Hunting, fishing and trapping were primary activities for most kids during that era. My favorite memories are the pheasant hunts with family and friends opening weekends of the late 50’s and early 60’s. During this time I also ordered my first predator call when fox became abundant and I developed a predator hunting addiction that still bothers me! I recall pheasant opener being the most important day of the year. Nearly all friends and relatives participated and were swept up in the excitement of opening weekend. Sand Lake refuge just west of town maintained an impressive snow goose migration that significantly added to local influences and tradition. Hecla was a typical busy small town community with 6 school buses that hauled kids in to school everyday. Now the school is gone, farm size has increased and you would be lucky to fill ½ a bus in the same area. Things change!

Upon high school graduation in 1964 I immediately enlisted in the Air Force. It was that or be drafted as Viet Nam was heating up. After my military obligation I attended SDSU and earned a BS degree in Wildlife Biology. I gained work experience at Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, Devils Lake Wetland Management District (WMD) and NDSU Ag Research before moving to Minnesota in 1977 for a permanent position. There I completed my US Fish & Wildlife Service career working at Detroit Lakes WMD, Tamarak NWR, Agassiz NWR and Morris WMD. I spent much of my 33 year career working on wetland protection and drainage issues.

In 2005 a few years after retirement I moved back to the home farm in South Dakota. About this time I learned of SDWF’s mission of representing the average sportsperson in the legislative process and I joined. I also maintain membership in the IKE’s, DJ, Pheasants Forever and the American Legion. In 2016 I was asked to join the SDWF Board of Directors and I accepted because I felt with my previous experience I could contribute to a group of very committed individuals their best protecting the interests of all South Dakota citizens. I loved the unlimited hunting and fishing opportunities I enjoyed growing up and want to insure these remain available for my kids, grandkids and future generations.

I have learned that the desire for money is the primary force that impacts all activities that occur in our society and this has tremendous impacts on our landscape. Government bounties on hides eliminated buffalo 170 years ago and made way for settlement with small farms, domestic livestock and crops. Now big operations with corn and beans have replaced the crop diversity of very committed individuals doing their best protecting the interests of all South Dakota citizens. I loved the unlimited hunting and fishing opportunities I enjoyed growing up and want to insure these remain available for my kids, grandkids and future generations.

The key issues facing the SDWF are the ever present efforts to privatize and market our publicly owned resources of fish, wildlife and water. These are my biggest concerns:

- Our public road right-of-ways are a land base already publicly owned in fee title or by easement that is very poorly protected and managed by those responsible. From major highways to state, county and township roads I rarely see action to properly post and protect this public property with ROW boundary markers so we can maintain the benefits intended. Permanent vegetation inside this public ownership should be our minimum expectation and I really have no idea of how many thousands of acres the public could regain if this obvious action were given serious attention!
- I fear HB1001 in time will result in significant loss of public recreation opportunities.
- I feel the CWD game farm industry needs more accountability to the sportmen and women whom they impact so strongly when it’s introduced in a new area.

I appreciate the opportunity to serve and only hope I can make a positive contribution for our citizens……Larry E. Lewis

SDWF Board Of Directors Spotlight: Larry Lewis

LARRY LEWIS  HECLA

Sportsmen/women- Want to help fund SDWF and the Youth Conservation Camp plus reduce your taxes this year? Donate stocks and land to the SDWF You not only won’t have to pay taxes on those assets, you will pay less tax because of your generosity!

Outdoors 6 April / May 2019

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.

Thank you to the following donors for their contributions to the SDWF. Please consider becoming a member of the Wildlife Legacy Council. SDWF is a 501(c)3 (non-profit), all donations are tax deductible. These tax-deductible contributions will speak volumes for the future of the SDWF’s Wildlife Legacy Council! Please consider your donation today. Donations can be sent to: SDWF, PO Box 7075, Pierre, SD 57501.

The Legacy Council consists of five different donation levels. These donation levels were revised October 2011 to:

- Level I Pheasant: $999
- Level II Deer: $599
- Level III Elk: $1,000
- Level IV Buffalo: $1,500
- Level V Eagle: $2,000

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Reforming 1872 Mining Law Will Help Protect Public Lands, Waters, Wildlife for Future Generations

Mary Jo Brooks

Washington, DC — The National Wildlife Federation joined with House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Raul Grijalva (D-Ariz.) and Senator Tom Udall (D-N.M.) today to support their efforts to modernize the General Mining Act of 1872. Overhauling this 19th century law will help clean up our nation’s waterways and public lands contaminated by abandoned hardrock mines and reduce impacts from current and future mining activities — while ensuring that taxpayers receive a fair return from these public resources. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 40 percent of the watersheds in the western United States are contaminated by pollution from hardrock mines. With nearly a half million abandoned mines scattered across the country, the cost of cleaning them up could exceed $70 billion.

“Thanks to Chairman Grijalva for standing up to address this nearly one-and-a-half-century-old problem. It’s imperative that the hardrock mining companies foot the bill for their mistakes and operate by rules suited for modern mining instead of our prospector past,” said Scott Deubel, executive director of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation. “It’s critical to the future of New Mexico and the West that Congress act now to reform this outdated and fundamentally unfair law,” said Jesse Garlid, conservation director for the Arizona Wildlife Federation. “Senator Udall and Rep. Grijalva’s leadership on this issue will help protect wildlife habitat while making sure the public receives fair value for public resources. After nearly 150 years, it’s time the taxpayers and the environment got a fair shake.”

The General Mining Act of 1872 was created in an era when the federal government wanted to encourage people to move to and settle the West. The law was intended to regulate prospectors swinging pickaxes, not international corporations that blast and excavate thousands of acres of land at a time. These companies also use huge quantities of toxic chemicals to extract gold, silver and copper, which pollute adjacent streams and lakes. And because the antiquated mining law doesn’t charge royalties for the minerals that the companies extract from public lands, American taxpayers have lost hundreds of billions of dollars to the mining industry’s coffers.
As parts of the state continue to deal with snow and cold, memories of this year’s winter continue to come back. Along with these memories is the concern about winterkill in our lakes. Our fisheries crews have been out sampling many of the lakes across the state and we have been able to create this list of lakes we have found to have suffered some degree of winterkill.

If you see your favorite lake on the list there is no need to fear, depending on the water and availability of fish, many of these waters will be restocked. Some of the lakes on the list have already received walleye fry and adults of other species.

South Dakota Fish Winter Kill

To make your job easier, we have this handy chart to help you select what species and size of fish to harvest from the lake you’re fishing. If the fish you catch is above the recommended lengths and you’re unsure about if you would like to harvest it, snap a picture to show your friends and put it back for the next angler to enjoy!

South Dakota Fish Consumption Advisory

There have been a lot of concerns regarding fish consumption advisories across the state. GFP has been working with the Department of Health and Environment and Natural Resources for several years to test almost 150 lakes across the state. Of the 150 lakes tested, roughly two dozen across the state have had some sort of advisory issued. This list hasn’t drastically changed in the past few years. Lakes that make this list are often examples of rapidly expanding waters due to increased precipitation across the past 4 decades. Generally, these advisories apply to larger fish as the larger fish have spent more time in the water and therefore have had more time to accumulate mercury at levels above the recommended range.

These advisories are not to discourage individuals from eating fish, but rather help you select sizes and species of fish low in mercury. For example, if a mercury advisory is put on walleye greater than 18 inches, selecting those 14-18 inch fish to harvest from this lake is a terrific course of action. If you catch a perch from the same lake, this species is a safe harvest regardless of size or amount of fish. On lakes such as Bitter Lake where all walleye sizes are under advisory, this does not mean no anglers should harvest fish. Walleye from Bitter Lake still make an excellent shore lunch, anglers are just cautioned to limit their meals based on guidelines provided in the South Dakota Fishing Handbook on page 37.