Pheasant Ecology: Part 4 - November & December by Travis Runia

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, it’s 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 This is because temperatures are now dropping below a pheasant’s thermo 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 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, primarially 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 the 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 a 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.

In this issue we learned how pheasants easily adapt to the changing seasons in November and December. Pheasants were in excellent body condition and body fat provided stored energy they use to keep warm during early winter blizzards. But how will pheasants handle the extreme winter weather of January and February? With the threat of heavy snow and brutally cold temperatures, be sure to check out the next issue to learn how pheasants handle the most challenging weather conditions of the year.

Cattail sloths provide good winter cover for pheasants, especially before winter blizzards fill them with snow.

Quality woody cover such as shelterbelts with at least eight rows of low growing shrubs and conifer trees provide shelter to pheasants during winter storms. Pheasants using this shelterbelt will have a steady food source as this
**President's Column**  
*by Zachery T. Hunke*

Out of Doors 3 Sept/Oct/Nov 2019

The first sign of snow on a crisp morning tends to trigger feelings in all of us. I can’t help but feel excitement when I see these first signs. Those first breaths of the early morning air tend to bring me thoughts of adventure, exploration and at times anxiety about my preparation. Growing up in South Dakota much of my fall excitement came from knowing over several months’ family and friends would be gathering together and joining us to hunt and fish. I share this passion with my family and son who is just as “hooked” as I was at his age.

Exposing my wife and children to the Great Outdoors has provided a heightened level of understanding and enjoyment. Much of this enjoyment comes from the processing and cleaning of our game to provide food for our plate. Kids can be very picky eaters. I am astonished every time my son kills, cleans, cooks and consumes wild game. Sportsman use the process of preparation, the hunt, and the processing of game as tools for the life lessons of our youth. My wife and her friends love northern mallard cooked medium rare over a hot grill!

Governor Noem has focused a great deal of time and effort into habitat. Habitat is the key to all wildlife including many of the unforeseen who benefit including the people of South Dakota. There is a lot of good that can come from the momentum our Governor has built in her focus on habitat. South Dakota has seen vast parcels of habitat loss over the last decade and it is one of the single largest issues facing our great state.

The Recovering Americas Wildlife Act (RAWA) if passed will be essential in the recovery of habitat and at risk species. I ask you to take some time to research RAWA and share your thoughts with our United States Legislators. RAWA is a game changer when it comes to habitat with around 15 million in grant dollars currently set aside for the state of South Dakota. Public land and water opportunities to hunt, fish and enjoy the outdoors are of the greatest importance. Producers, stakeholders and sportsman all benefit from public opportunity and the habitats they provide. Opportunity and satisfaction are the greatest factors in the retention of outdoor enthusiasts. As sportsman we must continue to push for public land enhancements and greater land and water access. Public land and water opportunities are what I am passionate about and will continue to fight for.

Soon enough the hard water season will start and my son and I will be targeting walleyes. There are days I wonder where the time goes. Time spent outdoors has a unique way of slowing everything down and bringing life into perspective.

The South Dakota Wildlife Federation continues to be the voice of Sportsmen and Women at the Capital. The time is now more than ever to take someone hunting of any age or any gender, invite them over for wild game and help keep our wonderful lands and waters clean. I thank you for your support.

President,  
Zachery T. Hunke

**Executive Director**  
*by Chris Hesla*

I would like to wish everyone a Joyous and Safe Holiday Season and a Happy New Years!

Without each and every one of you, SDWF would not be what we are today; we can and do make a difference here in South Dakota. THANK YOU! For your support.

The Legislative Session opens Tuesday, January 7, 2020, I am sure we will have some tough issues again this year: Non-resident waterfowl, and possibly some type of habitat stamp that will raise funds for GFP. We will all need to be diligent and let our State Legislator’s know our opinions and beliefs in fighting or supporting Legislation in this year’s Legislature.

SDWF will also be asking you to get in touch with your Congressional delegation, and give them the message that we want Conservation practices left and kept strong in the next Farm Bill.

The 21-gun giveaway tickets and the 2020 Buffalo Shoot tickets will be mailed to all of our member’s, shortly after the New Year, please support us by purchasing chances on a new gun. SDWF gives away one gun for every one-hundred tickets sold. There is a sheet of tickets in this issue of your Out-of-Doors.

SDWF lost one of our longest conservation leaders who dedicated much of his life to our cause. Roger Pries passed away earlier this month, Roger was the first Executive Director of SDWF, he spent many years fighting for our rights and privileges to hunt and fish here in SD. My sympathies go out to his family and I want to Thank Roger for all he did and all that he taught and helped me with in my job, after I took over from him when he retired. Rest in peace Roger, keep your powder dry and shoot straight.

I hope all of you experienced some special moments this year in your outdoor pursuits and had a great and joyous holiday season.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all of you!

We can and do make a difference!
THE SCIENCE BEHIND LEAD SHOT AND THE EFFECTS ON UPLAND BIRDS

WRITTEN BY RYAN LISSON

Looking at both sides of the lead shot debate and its effects on the environment.

If the topic of climate change affects people's blood pressure, you can bet that the discussion of lead shot will do it, too. Nobody really likes it when their choices are taken away from them, and lead ammunition is no different. When the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service mandated that all hunters nationwide use non-lead shot on waterfowl in 1991, there was a lot of unrest from hunters. And while the alternative options have improved and prices have dropped in the decades since then, the socio-political lead debate still continues.

So What's Wrong with Lead?

If hunting is a part of your family, your grandparents and parents probably used lead shot exclusively, and there's a good chance you still use it, as well. Lead is a very common load for upland birds, turkeys, and small game. Why? Because it's very effective. The dense and heavy metal is great for its pattern uniformity at various distances, and it's relatively cheap because it's so abundant. But the problem is that lead is also toxic – to humans and wildlife alike. No matter where you fall on the lead debate, it's hard to argue on the toxicity issue.

Wild birds, for example, are primarily affected by lead due to ingestion. Waterfowl and loons consume the spent shot pellets and fishing sinkers on the bottom of wetlands and lakes (Daury et al. 1993). Upland birds (such as doves) eat the pellets mistaking it for seeds or grit. And scavenging birds may eat the gut piles or remains of other animals killed with lead fragments or shot still in the tissue. Once it enters a bird's bloodstream in sufficient quantities, it can cause nervous system damage (leading to erratic flight and movement), emaciation (i.e., loss of fat and muscle), or even reproductive system harm. More pressing, lead can then be transferred to humans who eat these birds.

Johansen et al. (2006) observed that hunters in Greenland eating waterfowl killed with lead shot had a significant increase in blood lead level versus those who did not eat them. In humans, lead poisoning can cause kidney damage, blood pressure increases, anemia, reduced fertility, and childhood neurological or neurochemical issues. Due to this concern, scientists from North America and Europe have issued consensus statements on the risks to the environment, wildlife, and human health from the use of lead ammunition (Arnemo et al. 2016).

The Actual Science Behind It All

The problem is that many people doubt the validity of claims from either direction, as they feel the reviewers are biased one way or another. The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) launched a review to tackle this potential issue. The purpose of the study was to identify high-quality peer-reviewed scientific research regarding lead and its effects on fish and wildlife populations. The working group consisted of individuals from hunting and environmental groups, agencies, industry, and independent scientists or researchers. In this report (AFWA), they noted that lead poisoning was observed in waterfowl as early as 1874, which led to the U.S. Department of the Interior (i.e., USFWS) ultimately introducing the ban on lead shot for waterfowl. But this review also indicated that the science isn’t clear about the scale of effects on other bird species.

It’s known that upland game birds can and do consume spent lead pellets (Kreager et al. 2008). However, the overall area and vegetation present likely play a large role in how much spent lead shot is really available. For example, a remote and densely-forested woodland area (e.g., grouse hunting) would represent a much lower chance of lead shot ingestion than a heavily hunted, sparsely vegetated field (e.g., dove hunting).

Another thing that’s clear is that lead shot bans can be very effective. For example, a study in Canada (Stevenson et al. 2005) revealed that blood lead levels in waterfowl decreased after the implementation of a lead shot ban. Meanwhile, blood lead levels in American woodcock (not affected by the non-toxic shot regulation) remained elevated in the study.

While there was a lot of initial concern about the effectiveness and patterning ability of non-lead shot, the options have improved significantly since their introduction. Pierce et al. (2015) studied how lethal lead and steel options were on a dove hunt in Texas. They found that hunters were unable to distinguish the ammunition type being used and that there was no difference in the number of doves harvested or wounded. Essentially, the ammunition types performed the same.

Is the Jury Out on Upland Hunting and Lead?

For those who are unsure about the effect of lead on certain wildlife species and upland habitats, there are a few common criticisms. First, upland game habitat is generally more dispersed and not concentrated over a certain area (i.e., a wetland or dove field), so the argument is that lead doesn’t tend to accumulate as much. And when I think of the remote woodlands I hunt in northern Minnesota, this makes a lot of sense.

An inevitable issue with alternative loads is the price and availability. Steel shot is a couple dollars more expensive than lead per box, while plated, bismuth, or tungsten-alloy loads are even more expensive. For the average weekend warrior hunting grouse, this doesn’t really make a big difference, but it could add up for those who spend a lot of time hunting (or missing). Likewise, while it’s easy to find lead-free options for waterfowl hunting, most upland game loads are still dominated by lead shot. It takes a pretty conscious choice to choose non-lead ammunition for upland hunting scenarios.

Another concern for some upland hunters has to do with the shot loads themselves. Since steel is much lighter than lead, for example, some believe it tends to not pattern as evenly at longer distances or it loses its momentum. You could mitigate that by upsizing the pellet a bit, but then you are firing fewer pellets downrange, too. Whereas at closer distances, steel shot tends to pattern fairly tightly compared to lead. However, this is likely only an issue on one case-by-case basis as each load (lead or non-lead) will pattern differently depending on what shotgun choke you have and what distance you shoot at anyway.

Further Research Needs

Ultimately, there are still some questions to be answered on this topic. For example, several papers identified the need for better monitoring of lead levels in wild bird populations (particularly in states with lead restrictions) to see how or whether blood lead levels drop within species. Strom et al. (2005) found that young-of-the-year American woodcock in Wisconsin were accumulating extremely high levels of lead in their bones. While the ultimate source of lead exposure for these birds was unidentified, the researchers could not rule out human-caused sources. Likewise, Keel et al. (2002) analyzed Northern bobwhite quail at a site in Florida for lead ingestion and toxicity. The results of soil sampling and bobwhite gizzard analysis indicated there was a low potential for lead poisoning in upland hunting scenarios compared to lead deposition associated with waterfowl or dove hunting.

Regardless, it does seem that the overwhelming evidence concludes that lead is likely not a sustainable choice overall. And yet, I do still occasionally use it while hunting remote woodlands. As mentioned above, I think it would take significantly more hunting pressure to start to be a concern in the areas/habitats I hunt. That being said, I’ve also started buying more non-lead options and have liked their performance so far while hunting upland birds and small game. If more people work towards a similar goal of slowly phasing it out, there really shouldn’t be a debate at all.
Study links Asian carp with Mississippi River fish drop

By JOHN FLESHER
November 16, 2019

FILE - In this June 13, 2012, file photo, Asian carp, jolted by an electric current from a research boat, jump from the Illinois River near Havana, Ill. Sport fish have declined significantly in portions of the Upper Mississippi River infested with Asian carp, apparently confirming fears about the invaders’ threat to native species, according to a newly released study. Analysis of more than 20 years of population data suggests the carp are out-competing fish prized by anglers, such as yellow perch, bluegill, and black and white crappie, the report said. (AP Photo/John Flesher, File) TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. (AP) — Sport fish have declined significantly in portions of the Upper Mississippi River infested with Asian carp, adding evidence to fears about the invader’s threat to native species, according to a new study. Analysis of nearly 20 years of population data suggests the carp are out-competing fish prized by anglers, such as yellow perch, bluegill, and black and white crappie, the report said. Scientists have long suspected Asian carp of starving out other fish in the Mississippi and many of its tributaries. The peer-reviewed study this month in the journal Biological Invasions is among the first to establish a solid link, lead author John Chick said in an interview Friday. “The alarms have been out there for a long time now,” said Chick, a fisheries biologist who directs a University of Illinois field station in Alton, Illinois. “This adds further mustard to the argument that we need to be taking these things seriously. The trends that have been established here are not the trends we want to see in other places.” Four varieties of Asian carp were imported in the late 1960s and early 1970s to clear algae and weeds from sewage ponds and fish farms. They escaped into the Mississippi and have migrated northward. Bighead and silver carp are the most troublesome. They gorge on tiny animals and plants known as plankton, which virtually all fish eat as juveniles. For some filter-feeding species, it’s a lifelong staple. Federal and state agencies have spent heavily on research and technology to keep them out of key waterways. In their paper, Chick and colleagues there’s rarely enough data to document how invasive species harm natives.

This goofy bird vs. the fossil fuel industry

The sage grouse looks funny. It’s also really important.

By Laura Bult and Danush Parvaneh

The sage grouse occupies a nearly mythical status in the American West. It is one of the few species whose diet consists of sage brush, a dense, desert shrub that blankets several Western states. Lewis and Clark observed this “fowl” on their Westward expedition, making note that they managed to eat the “bulb and buds of this pulpy, leafy thorn.”

Today, its bizarre male courtship dance is a spectacle that draws tourists to remote regions where they mate. The sage grouse has evolved to survive for tens of millions of years in some of the most brutal climates. But sage grouse numbers have been on the decline for the past century because of human impact. They once numbered in the millions, but now the habitat has shrunk in half; researchers estimate there are only about 500,000 birds left today. A fire-prone invasive grass species called cheatgrass is rapidly replacing sage brush. Plus, sage grouse don’t like to live around tall structures because they look like perching places for predators, so wind farms and other kinds of development threaten the bird. But their habitat intersects with oil and gas fields, particularly in resource-rich Wyoming, where close to half of the sage grouse population resides. This means the fossil fuel and mining industries have the most to gain from weak conservation policies for the sage grouse.

The sage grouse is considered an indicator species, seen as a proxy for the survival of the entire sage brush ecosystem — including the 350 plant and animal species that share it. That’s in part because of its reliance on the sage brush as food, but also because its mating dance makes the bird reliably easy to track.

For this reason, it has become a sort of poster child for conservation of the American West — countless land management policies have been passed in the sage grouse’s name. That includes a landmark conservation plan passed by the Obama administration’s Department of Interior in 2015, which was supported by both industry and conservationists. The plan included bans and restrictions on mining and oil and gas leasing on sage grouse habitat. But just two years later, President Trump’s Department of Interior isn’t honoring the plan. That shift in policy coincides with new leadership at the Department of Interior: DOI Secretary David Bernhardt once lobbied on behalf of the same mining and oil and gas companies that now stand to benefit from not enforcing the 2015 plan. This shift also gives new symbolism to the sage grouse: It’s not just an indicator for its ecosystem, but an indicator of the power that fossil fuel and mining companies have over our government.
SDWF Board Of Directors Spotlight: Jerry Soholt

The Great Outdoors has been a key factor in my life. Outdoor activities have shaped who I am, where I have lived and where we have spent our financial resources. Growing up in northern WI among the lakes, streams, hardwood forests and Jack Pines I was shaped by the ebb and flow of the outdoors seasons. I’m not referring to winter, spring, summer and fall but about deer season the week of Thanksgiving and the opener of fishing season. These events brought family and friends together much the same as the pheasant opener in South Dakota. Some of my favorite memories of the outdoors include deer hunting with my Dad and Grandpa in the woods and swamps near Minong Wi. Grandpa and I would hike down to a knoll that rose above a tamarack swamp start a fire in an old pine stump and spend the day tending the fire watching for deer and talking. Those days instilled a love of all things wild and free.

I am married to Deb, a registered nurse, and current state Senator from District 14. We have three grown married kids, Josh, Sam and Molly, along with two grandchildren, Jake and Maya. All have a deep appreciation for the public lands across our great country. Whether it is hunting, fishing or hiking Public Land in the west there is a chance that someone from my clan has been there.

My own interest in clean water, air and public land access led me to serve on the lake board where we have a cabin, East Dakota Board of Water and Natural Resources, and the South Dakota Board of Water and Natural Resources where I currently serve as chairman. These experiences have provided me a deeper understanding of water issues all across the state.

As a current board member of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation Board, I am excited to provide a different perspective. I am not a landowner, so I view all the public land and waters as mine. Just as everyone should. The vast majority of sportsmen and women are just like me in that regard. Working together with the South Dakota Game Fish and Parks (GF&P) and the Departments of Environment & Natural Resources (DENR) to improve access and the quality of habitat on our public land will improve the hunting and fishing experience for all. Those concepts that are brought forward by the GF&P that have a positive impact on the majority of our hunters, fishermen and women. We need to be supportive of those efforts and communicate our support. When concepts are brought forward that we believe are not in the best interest of the majority, we must work closely to understand the reasoning and if appropriate seek to change the direction of the concept.

Today there are many voices trying to be heard: Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, Rocky Mountain Elk, Mule Deer Foundation, Whitetails Unlimited, Back Country Hunters and Anglers just to name a few. All are worthy organizations that do good work in support of their specific area of interest, but what we do not have is a united voice when it comes to issues that impact all. I believe that with effective communication we can begin to bring these many voices together with leadership from the South Dakota Wildlife Federation. We have legislators in both the house and senate that claim to be sportsmen but in many cases their votes on key issues do not reflect what they have said or benefit the majority of hunters, fishermen and women of our state. The SDWF can be the voice that reminds all who their constituents are.

It is my desire that while on the Board, to assist in creating a positive dialog where our voices with concern can be shared in the most effective manner. The future of quality hunting and fishing is directly tied to access and quality habitat on our Public Land. I invite you to join and add your voice.

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.

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 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 - $200.

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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!
In Memoriam: John H. Davidson

It is with great sadness that we share that John Davidson passed away last week. We will remember John as an unshakeable conservationist and humble teacher with a deep understanding of the political and social architecture we need in the US to sustain healthy land and water. As a leader at NPLT and in close partnership with Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, he worked to achieve real, on-the-ground results to restore and conserve grasslands and woodlands in Nebraska and South Dakota.

ENVIRONMENTAL CATASTROPHE IN OUR NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

At Northern Prairies we visit each of our conservation projects at least annually. For the most part, this is a delightful exercise. We renew friendships with private landowners who are dedicated to protecting the conservation values of their land. During these visits we are enriched by hours spent walking on healthy and productive grasslands.

John Davidson (left) and Bob Warrick (right) walk through a prairie easement in Pierce County, Nebraska.

Recently I, John Davidson, walked on a section (640 acres) of native grassland which is protected by a conservation easement held by Northern Prairies. The land supports healthy cattle grazing and native wildlife of all kinds, including Prairie Chicken. The owners of this land view protection of the native grasslands as an inter-generational family legacy.

Not too many years ago I could stand on a high point and observe that the surrounding land included ample amounts of native grasslands, stocked with healthy livestock. This year, when I stood on that same place, I saw that our protected native habitat was surrounded on all sides by corn. Our conservation grassland had become a remote island in a sea of corn.

This is not an isolated incident, but is repeated time and again. Fields Editor’s note: John will be missed by many, he helped SDWF in defending road hunting at the SD Supreme Court level, he also help us fight wetland protections for wetlands, and to protect them in perpetuity.


Of the no less than eight cases of poaching Montana wildlife officials are currently investigating, some of the game animals were killed and left to rot where they fell. Others were found decapitated, but otherwise untouched. One Montana educator has spent years researching poachers and has found they’re motivated by many different factors.

Montana State University-Billings sociology professor Steve Eliason has interviewed plenty of game wardens about poaching.

“As for the poachers themselves, what I’ve found is that most of them don’t want to talk about it,” he says.

According to Eliason, that’s because, “In the hunting community, the worst thing you can be is a poacher, and so a lot of people, even if they admit they’ve done something wrong, they don’t want to be referred to as a poacher, and it has a stigma in the hunting community.”

Eliason, who also serves as chair of MSU-Billings’ Social Sciences and Cultural Studies Department, says he’s always been interested in hunting and fishing issues. His grad school dissertation focused on poaching.

Since then he’s written extensively on the subject, including an article that appeared in the peer-reviewed Journal of Deviant Behavior.

“Well, deviancy refers to the violation of a norm, a social norm, and so poaching behavior is certainly a type of deviant behavior,” Eliason says.

And it’s a huge problem in Montana. According to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, nearly 4,000 citations were written in the state for big game poaching between 2000 and 2009. FWP also says poaching is on the rise.

Eliason says there are only about 80 game wardens who are sworn to protect the wildlife in this sparsely populated, yet fourth-largest, state in the union. And poaching has changed a lot over the past three decades.

“Game wardens, some of ’em who had been there for over 15 or 20 years, would say that when they first started they would get to the site of the poaching incident and all that would be left is a gut pile.”

Now, according to Eliason, investigating game wardens are more likely to find a headless carcass, or one that’s only missing its antlers.

“And so a lot of people are doing it now for trophy reasons, as opposed to getting the meat, and for food and for consumption purposes,” he says.

Eliason suggested the same mainstream hunting culture which despises and stigmatizes poachers simultaneously places a lot of emphasis on trophy animals.

“That makes it so that some individuals are willing to bend the rules, break the law and to do basically anything they need to do to get a huge animal, or an animal with huge antlers, to impress other people. It becomes a status type of thing.”

So, is there such a thing as a ‘typical’ poacher? Not really. Professor Eliason said they cut across all social and economic classes. Some love to brag about their illegal kills, while others are reclusive and never make a peep. That said, poachers do tend to share a few commonalities.

“By far, most of them are men; teenagers, in their 20s,” he says.

“And then, as people start to get older — in criminology, it’s what we call the ‘aging out’ phenomenon. Most crimes are committed by younger people. As people get older and as they become more mature and as they get married and have families and jobs and other responsibilities, then people tend to age out of crime.”

Some never age out of their desire to illegally kill game. Eliason recounts a conversation with a game warden who was preparing to present a rack of antlers as evidence in court.

“The individual who poached them was a 72-year-old-man. He had poached a nice mule deer buck on private property after the hunting season ended. He [the warden] said that that individual felt he would never get a trophy deer in his lifetime, and so he poached it. Yeah, even older individuals can be poachers too.”

The best way to push back against Montana poachers? According to Eliason, if you know something or see something that looks suspicious, immediately report it to authorities.

Statistics back up these observations. Between 2006 and 2011 about 1,400,000 acres of grass were plowed for corn and soybean production. Currently, the rate of grassland conversion in the northern plains is more than 5% annually. These are conversion rates not seen since the 1920s, and are comparable to the deforestation rates in Brazil, Malaysia and Indonesia.

On a parallel course, we are losing wetlands at a rate that easily exceeds 15,000 acres a year, resulting in degraded water quality, reduced wildlife habitat, and the inevitable increase in the severity and frequency of flood events downstream.

At a time when nations are struggling to reduce carbon emissions, the plowing of native grasses releases vast amounts of carbon which would otherwise be safely sequestered in the ground.

The National Audubon Society has estimated that conversion of native grasses are responsible for 5% of the nation’s climate change.

Proponents of this wastage cite the short-term financial rewards. They also claim that they are “feeding the world,” which is an asinine red herring, unless the poor of the world are to be fed hamburgers and barbecue. The long-term costs to society will be borne by future generations, and the poor of the world will remain unfed.

This is an environmental catastrophe that will not be brought under control until citizens speak out in large enough number to be heard.

John Davidson road hunting at the SD Supreme Court level, he also help us fight wetland protections for wetlands, and to protect them in perpetuity.

By EDWARD O’BRIEN • NOV 7, 2019
Giant Squids

Point to each object and then page through inside the magazine. Look for these things, too!

Cover photo: Michael Krabs / Imagebroker / FLPA

SDWF reserves the right to offer a cash settlement or substitute a gun of equal or greater value.

One gun will be awarded for each 100 tickets sold.

21 guns will be awarded if 2,100 or more tickets are sold.

SDWF reserves the right to offer a cash settlement or substitute a gun of equal or greater value.

*Drawing to be held at Spring Board Meeting, May 2020.

2020 South Dakota Wildlife Federation’s
21 Gun Giveaway

2020 South Dakota Wildlife Federation’s Custer State Park Buffalo Shoot

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Out of Doors 8 Sept/Oct/Nov 2019