

2004 Hunting Conditions at Medicine Lake NWR

August 10, 2004

The Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge and the Northeast Montana Wetland Management District open to upland game bird hunting on Sept. 1. The youth waterfowl season is expected to be September 24-25,** and waterfowl hunting tentatively opens on October 2.** Ring-necked pheasant season opens on Oct. 9 and continues through January 1, 2005 for both residents and non-residents. Big game archery season runs September 4 - October 17 and rifle season runs October 24 – November 28. See Refuge Hunting Map (<http://medicinelake.fws.gov/hunting/>) for areas open to hunting. Nontoxic shot is required for all bird hunting on U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lands, including the Medicine Lake Refuge and all Waterfowl Production Areas. All hunting follows State of Montana seasons and regulations. (<http://fwp.state.mt.us/>) No additional special permits or licenses are required. Refuge Hunting Areas #1 and #3 open for upland game bird and deer hunting beginning November 15 and will remain open for the remainder of the appropriate hunting season. See Refuge Hunting Map and Regulations (<http://medicinelake.fws.gov/hunting/>) for further information.

Regional Conditions

The winter of 2003-2004 was one of the worst on record in northeast Montana and upland bird numbers were impacted throughout the area. MDFWP reports a 30% decline in pheasants and a 40% decline in sharp-tail grouse within region 6. However, MDFWP reports record numbers of pheasants in the Chinook/Havre area so not all places in the Montana were adversely impacted. Whitetail deer fared well in Region 6 with only localized decreases.

Refuge Conditions

Pheasants: On the Refuge pheasants numbers appear to be somewhat higher than in areas to the north and west, but they are down from 2003. Breeding season conditions were fair to good. Hunters should not expect to do as well as last year, but hunting opportunities will probably still be good.

Sharp-tailed grouse: Lek counts were down somewhat this year but sightings of broods are being reported. Long term population numbers are slightly below the ten year average.

Partridge: Numbers are on the increase but are still 20-30% below the long term average.

Waterfowl: The heavy winter snowfall followed by a wet spring and summer helped replenish wetland basins in the area. Refuge water units were all filled and as a result of good wetland conditions, duck production in northeast Montana was good this year. The USFWS North American fall flight forecast of 32 million birds is 11% below last year's Estimate and 3 % below the 1955-2003 long term average, but hunting should still be quite good on the Refuge and Waterfowl Production Areas. For more waterfowl information check out the following sites: (<http://www.fws.gov> & <http://www.ducks.org>)

Big game: Whitetail deer numbers have recovered from the late 90s and despite last year's tough winter, doe/fawn counts were slightly above the fifteen year average. Mule deer and pronghorn numbers remain low because the Refuge is not in the preferred habitat for these two species.

Sandhill Crane permits for the Central Flyway of Montana are available at no charge at the Refuge headquarters on a first-come/first-served basis. The permit is also available at Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge (<http://bowdoin.fws.gov/>), Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks regional offices in Glasgow, Billings, Miles City, and the state office in Helena(<http://fwp.state.mt.us/>).

Swan permits are only available from MDFWP. Please contact them at (406)228-3700 for more information.

*** Waterfowl dates are still tentative at the time of this listing. Please check with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (<http://fwp.state.mt.us/>) for exact dates and regulations.*