

2013 Montana Upland Game Bird Hunting Forecast

Overview

Montana experienced extreme drought during the summer of 2012. The drought adversely affected brood survival. Conditions during the 2012-13 winter were “average” likely leading to average over-winter survival. Spring conditions were dry followed by above average precipitation June through July. Substantial flood events occurred in early June. In general, those wet conditions likely had some adverse effect on nests and broods but also produced exceptional cover and forage during summer. Nesting cover was sparse early in the season. Large acreages of cropland are coming out of CRP in some regions. These losses are expected to have a gradual, long-term impact to upland game bird populations in Montana.

Sage Grouse

Statewide, male attendance at leks averaged 14.9 males/lek which was 48% below long-term average, and down from 19.2 males/lek in 2012. The drop is likely a function of extreme drought conditions during 2012 which led to low brood survival. The drop in abundance was somewhat uniformly distributed across sage grouse range in Montana. Consequently, hunters can expect numbers to be near average to well below average in all regions. Excellent brood rearing conditions may mitigate the declines to some extent.

Sharp-tailed grouse

Region 3 reported average to below average numbers. Lek surveys and other observations in Region 6 indicate sharptail numbers will be average to slightly below average across the region. General observations from Region 5 similarly suggest below average numbers there.

Pheasants

Favorable weather in Region 1 resulted in above average numbers on the Ninepipe WMA. Region 3 reported average numbers. In Region 5, pheasant crow counts varied and were near average to well below long-term averages. Overall, Region 5 expects a slight improvement in pheasant numbers over last year. In east and central Region 6, pheasant crow counts indicated below average to average numbers. In the northeastern portion of Region 6, pheasant numbers continue to improve and are well above long term averages. In this area, spring crow counts were 15% above the long term average. Spring crow counts in Region 7 were 40% below the all time high counts last year, and 5 to 25% above the long term average.

Grey Partridge

There are no formal surveys conducted for huns in Montana. Various observations along with weather and habitat conditions suggest huns will be average to below average this season. Observations in Regions 3 and 6 suggest average numbers. Observations from Region 5 suggest numbers will be below average and lower than last year.

Mountain Grouse

There are no formal surveys conducted for mountain grouse. Observations in western Montana suggest average to somewhat below average numbers of all species.