



PRAIRIE GROUSE FORECAST

HUNTING REMINDERS

Hunters are encouraged to visit with landowners and public in their traditional hunting areas as local population levels and habitat conditions can vary. Hunters are again asked to hunt safely and ethically; respect private property and public hunting areas across the state and enjoy the South Dakota tradition of hunting all upland game with family and friends this fall. Hunters who harvest prairie grouse are encouraged to provide a wing from each bird which will be used to estimate reproductive success and refine future prairie grouse outlooks (gfp.sd.gov/prairie-grouse/).

The South Dakota Prairie Grouse Season begins September 21, 2024, and ends on January 31, 2025.

Greater prairie-chicken and sharp-tailed grouse, commonly referred to as prairie grouse, offer a unique and popular hunting opportunity in South Dakota (SD). Prairie grouse are most abundant in central and western SD where ample grassland habitat exists (Figure 1). In addition to large blocks of grassland, prairie grouse also frequent cropland and shrubs. These habitats are targeted by hunters who often harvest mixed bags of sharp-tailed grouse and greater prairie-chickens in the central portion of the state, where their ranges overlap.

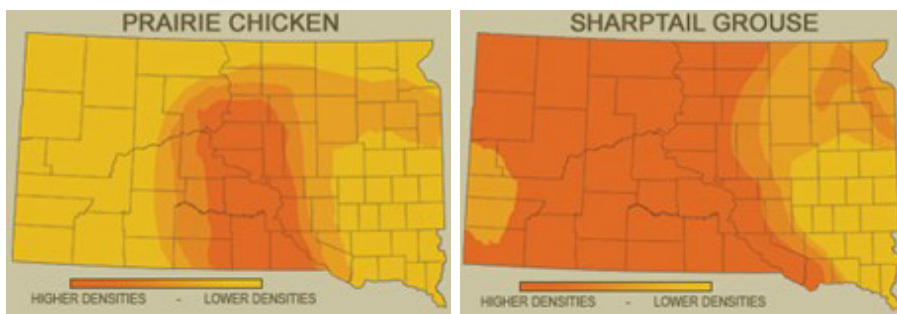


Figure 1. General distribution of prairie grouse in South Dakota.

Prairie grouse harvest increased in 2023 for the second consecutive year and was above the 10-year average. Overall, 17,184 hunters harvested an estimated 69,442 prairie grouse (Figure 2). Most of the prairie grouse harvest in 2023 occurred in central and western portions of the state (Figure 3).

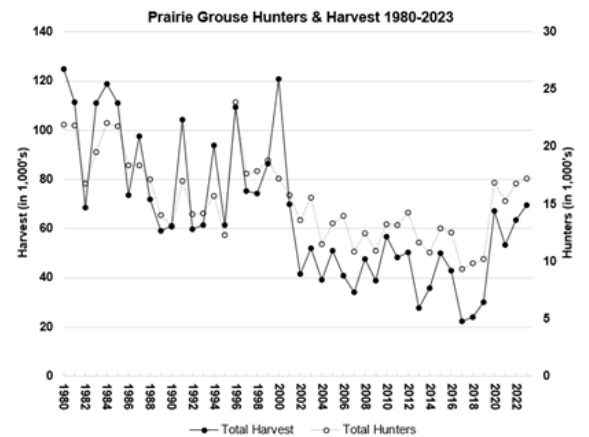


Figure 2. Prairie grouse hunters and harvest in South Dakota, 1980-2023.

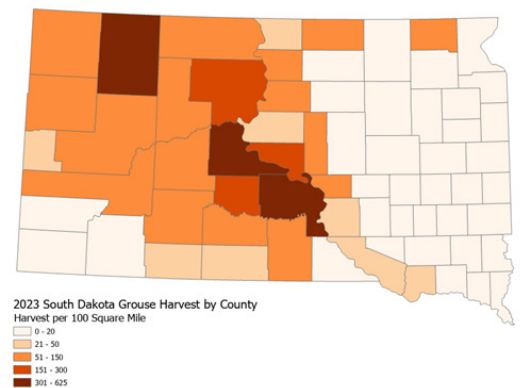


Figure 3. Distribution of 2023 prairie grouse harvest (harvest/100 mi²) in South Dakota.



Spring prairie grouse populations are monitored annually by counting males on leks, often referred to as dancing or booming grounds. Surveys occur in portions of central SD that overlap areas of high hunter effort. Counts of males on these traditional breeding season display areas provide a local population index of the adult population. Like other upland game birds such as pheasants, prairie grouse are generally short lived (50% annual survival) with high reproductive potential. Young of the year birds typically outnumber adult birds in the fall population. For this reason, spring lek counts are not necessarily a good predictor of fall population levels or hunter success. Spring lek counts are a good indicator of long-term trend data for the adult population. Lek surveys conducted in central SD by department staff and U.S. Forest Service staff indicated record high numbers of greater prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse in 2024.

Prairie grouse reproductive success is not easily determined before the hunting season. However, wings from hunter harvested prairie grouse are collected each year to determine what proportion of the harvest consisted of young of the year birds. On average, 2 young of the year birds are harvested for every 1 adult, but the ratio of young to adult birds has been as high as 3.05 in 2004 and as low as 0.61 in 2002. This data provides biologists with valuable information about reproductive success each year. It is well known that environmental variables can impact reproductive success in upland game birds. Last year, the ratio of young to adult birds was 1.93, slightly higher than 2022 and comparable to the 10-year average (Figure 4).

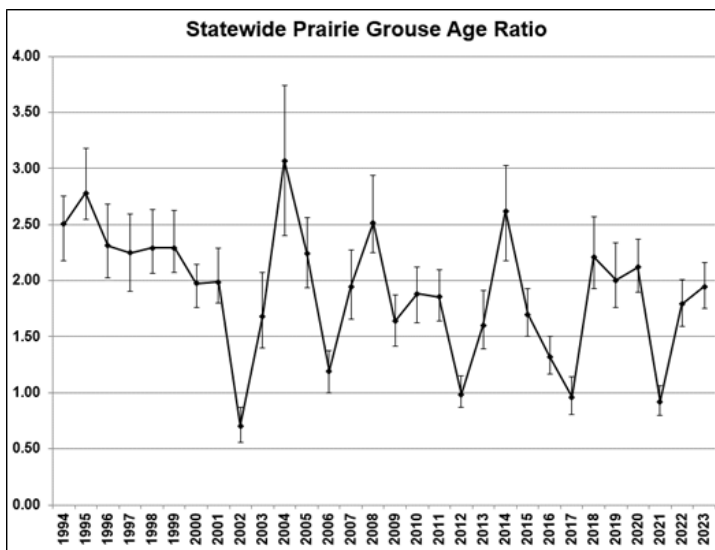


Figure 4. Prairie grouse age ratio for South Dakota, 1994 – 2023.

Last year, portions of the primary prairie grouse range were in varying levels of drought early in the summer, but grass and growing conditions improved with timely rain which ultimately led to great grouse production. Major rain events in June 2024 in the southcentral and southeast portion of grouse range could negatively affect nest success or lower recruitment for those local grouse populations. Besides a small region of flooding in fringe prairie grouse range, a vast majority of the primary prairie grouse range is drought free for 2024 (Figure 5). Because drought and prairie grouse production are negatively correlated with one another, lack of drought and current habitat conditions are expected to yield excellent nesting/brood success.

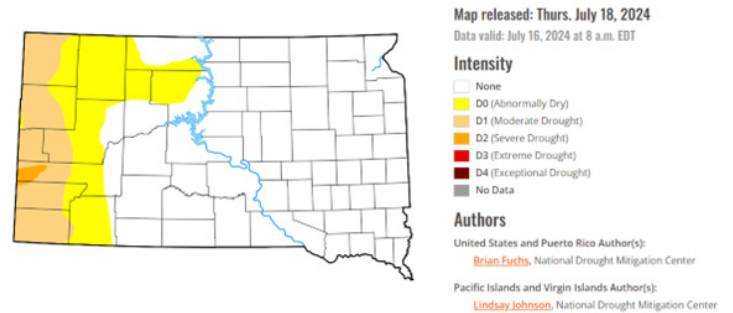


Figure 5. South Dakota drought status for July 18, 2024.

The 2024 prairie grouse hunting outlook is expected to be better than 2023. An easy winter with high survival, partnered with good weather during spring and summer has created excellent grassland and subsequent nesting and brood rearing conditions in a majority of central and western South Dakota. We expect the current favorable range conditions to contribute to good prairie grouse production once again, resulting in increased hunter success. The latest U.S. drought monitor map can be viewed at: droughtmonitor.unl.edu/.

LICENSE TYPES

RESIDENT

- Combination (small game + fishing)..... \$55
- Senior Combination (65+) \$40
- Small Game \$33
- One-Day Small Game \$12
- Youth Small Game (ages 12-17)..... \$5
- Habitat Stamp..... \$10

NONRESIDENT

- Small Game (Two five-day periods)..... \$121
- Youth Small Game, ages 12-17
(two five-day periods) \$10
- Shooting Preserve (annual)..... \$121
- Shooting Preserve (5-day)..... \$76
- Shooting Preserve (1-day)..... \$46
- Habitat Stamp..... \$25

