



# 2026 UPLAND OUTLOOK

## SOUTH DAKOTA'S PHEASANT AND GROUSE SEASON PREVIEW

**HUNTERS AVERAGED 9.7  
BIRDS PER HUNTER IN  
2025, WHICH WAS THE  
HIGHEST SINCE 2011.**

**1.35 MILLION**

PHEASANTS HARVESTED IN 2025

**140,000**

PHEASANT HUNTERS IN 2025

**53,000**

GROUSE HARVESTED IN 2025

**17,000**

GROUSE HUNTERS IN 2025

### LICENSE TYPES

#### RESIDENT

|                                           |      |
|-------------------------------------------|------|
| Combination (small game + fishing) .....  | \$60 |
| Senior Combination (65+) .....            | \$43 |
| Small Game .....                          | \$36 |
| One-Day Small Game .....                  | \$15 |
| Youth Small Game (ages 12-17) .....       | \$5  |
| Mentored Small Game (youth under 16)..... | \$5  |
| Habitat Stamp .....                       | \$10 |

#### NONRESIDENT

|                                                              |       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Small Game (Two five-day periods).....                       | \$142 |
| Youth Small Game, ages 12-17<br>(two five-day periods) ..... | \$10  |
| Mentored Small Game (youth under 16)...                      | \$10  |
| Shooting Preserve (annual) .....                             | \$146 |
| Shooting Preserve (5-day) .....                              | \$96  |
| Shooting Preserve (1-day) .....                              | \$50  |
| Habitat Stamp .....                                          | \$25  |

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purchase a license today!

### SEASON DATES

#### PHEASANT

Youth and Mentored Only: September 26 - October 4

Resident Only: October 10 - 12

Traditional: October 17 - January 31

#### QUAIL

October 17 - January 31

#### PRAIRIE GROUSE

September 19 - January 31

#### PARTRIDGE

September 19 - January 31

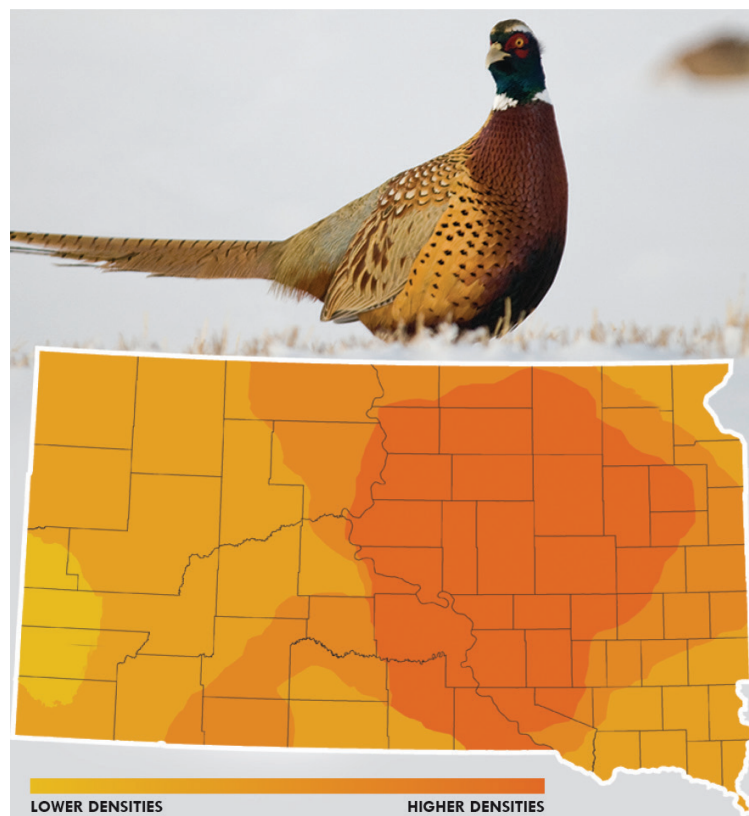


## PHEASANT DISTRIBUTION

South Dakota is home to picturesque rolling hills and endless prairies with abundant public land access to the best pheasant hunting in the world. Pheasants are most abundant in east-central South Dakota where a matrix of idle grassland, row crops, and winter-cover exists. These habitats are targeted by hunters who often harvest limits of roosters from October through January. Pheasants and pheasant hunting are iconic to South Dakota, bringing a tradition of enthusiasm and excitement of the “flush” to communities throughout the state.

**"AS SOMEONE WHO SPENDS A LOT OF TIME OUTDOORS, I'VE NOTICED AN INCREASE IN PHEASANT BROODS THIS YEAR BOTH ON MY PROPERTY AND WHILE TRAVELING THE ROADS AROUND MY HOME. THOSE DAILY SIGHTINGS ARE A POWERFUL REMINDER THAT QUALITY HABITAT AND MILD WINTERS LEAD TO MORE WILDLIFE ON THE LANDSCAPE."**

— Kevin W



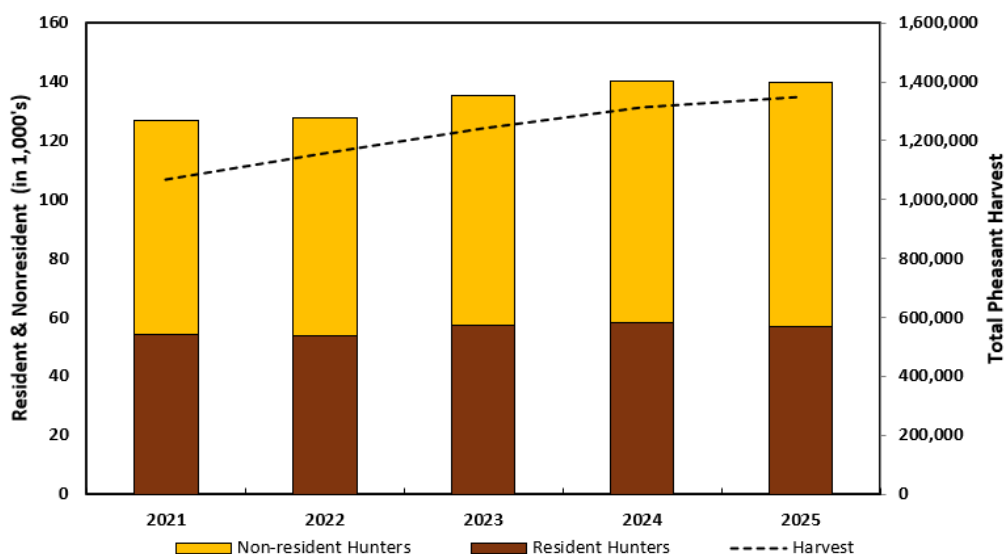
## PHEASANT HARVEST

Nearly 140,000 hunters from around the globe harvested over 1.35 million pheasants in 2025, beating out a phenomenal 2024 for the highest pheasant harvest in recent history. More roosters are harvested in two weeks of October than any other state during their entire season. In addition, hunters averaged 9.7 birds per hunter for the season, which was the highest since 2011. An additional 400,000 pheasants were harvested on preserves, and whether it's through a hunting lodge or do it yourself style there are a number of ways to enjoy a South Dakota pheasant hunt! For an in-depth look at last year's harvest estimates by county visit [gfp.sd.gov/maps/](https://gfp.sd.gov/maps/). The 2025 pheasant season was outstanding!

Like many other upland game birds, pheasants are a short-lived species with low annual survival, yet high reproductive potential. Young of the year birds make up most of the annual harvest when conditions are good for reproduction. For the coveted rooster pheasants, hunting is the leading cause of mortality. Males mate with multiple hens and very few roosters are needed for reproduction. The hunting season primarily removes the harvestable surplus.

**400,000**

ADDITIONAL PHEASANTS HARVESTED  
ON PRESERVES IN 2025.





## WEATHER CONDITIONS FOR PHEASANTS

Historical data provides insight on how weather conditions determine pheasant reproduction from one year to the next. Three weather variables affect the majority of annual production: 1) snowfall, 2) spring temperature, and 3) spring rainfall prior to the nesting season. Snow accumulation reduces overwinter survival, while temperature and moisture influence nest initiation timing, the condition of available nesting cover, and brood habitat after hatching. Below average snowfall and mild spring conditions prior to nest initiation yield the best response in pheasant production.

The extraordinary 2025 pheasant hunting season was a direct result of another mild winter followed by favorable spring and summer weather within the primary pheasant range. Reduced snowfall last year should again result in high overwinter survival and an abundance of hen pheasants available for nesting in 2026. Near normal spring precipitation and temperatures, followed by timely summer rainfall has made grassland habitat conditions favorable for production once again. Although some areas of the pheasant range are experiencing drought conditions, they are isolated to the southern portion of pheasant range.



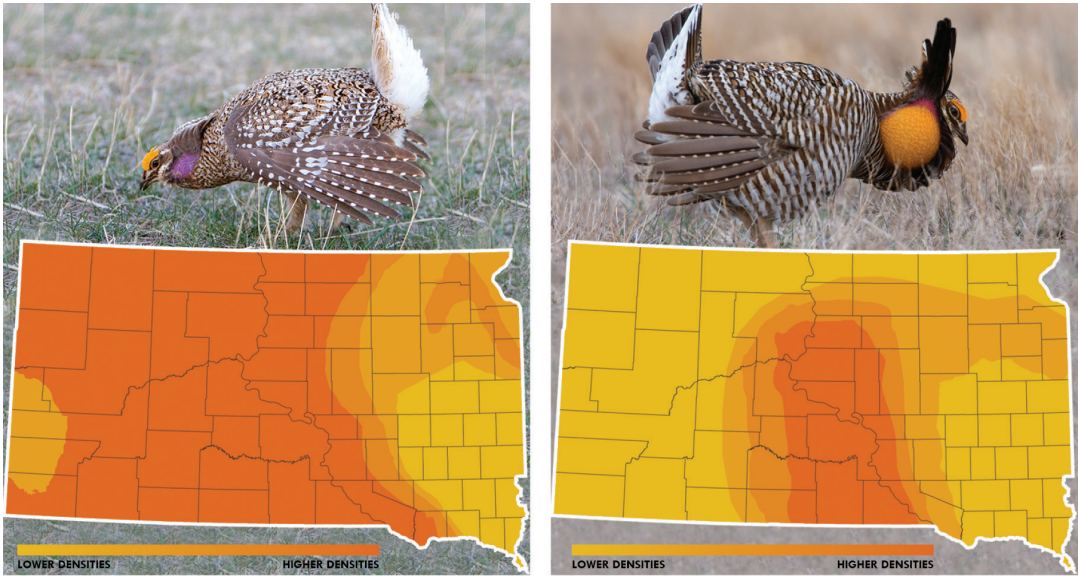
## PHEASANT SEASON OUTLOOK

The 2026 pheasant hunting outlook is expected to be much like last year with good production and favorable habitat conditions. Some areas of the pheasant range may be open to emergency haying and grazing, so hunters should anticipate some reduced

hunting cover in these areas. As always, it is best to contact landowners or wildlife professionals to learn about local habitat conditions and pheasant numbers before heading out to hunt.

# PRAIRIE GROUSE DISTRIBUTION

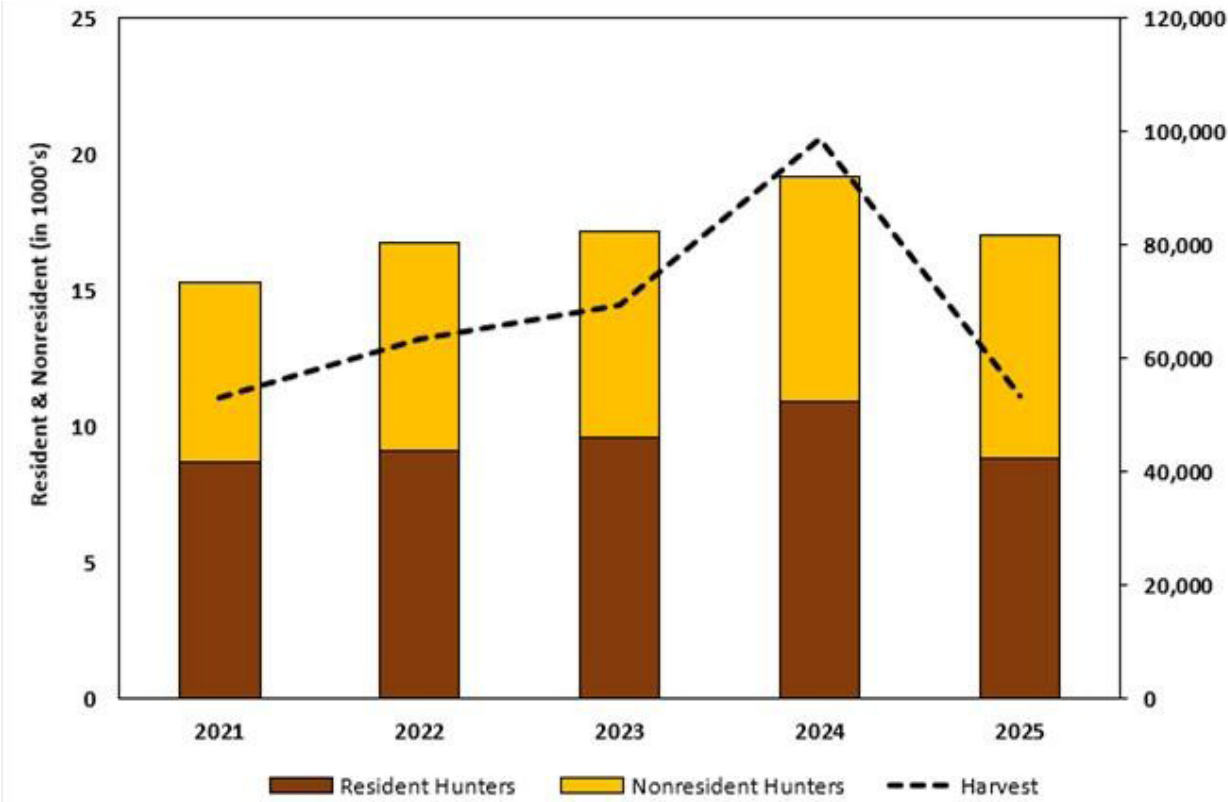
Greater prairie-chicken and sharp-tailed grouse, collectively referred to as prairie grouse, offer a unique and popular hunting opportunity in South Dakota. Prairie grouse are most abundant in central and western South Dakota where there is ample grassland habitat. In addition to large blocks of grassland, 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.



# PRAIRIE GROUSE HARVEST

Prairie grouse harvest in 2025 was substantially down from 2024; however, hunter satisfaction remained relatively unchanged (resident: 5.22 compared to 5.25 in 2024; non-resident: 5.81 compared to 5.85 in 2024) indicating a successful season. Over 17,000 hunters harvested an estimated 53,422 prairie grouse. Most of the prairie grouse harvest in 2025

occurred in central and western portions of the state. The on-set of drought conditions paired with above average temperature for most of the early portion of the season resulted in less-than-ideal hunting conditions. This was evident with reduced hunter effort compared to 2024 (4.99 days compared to 5.80 days in 2024).



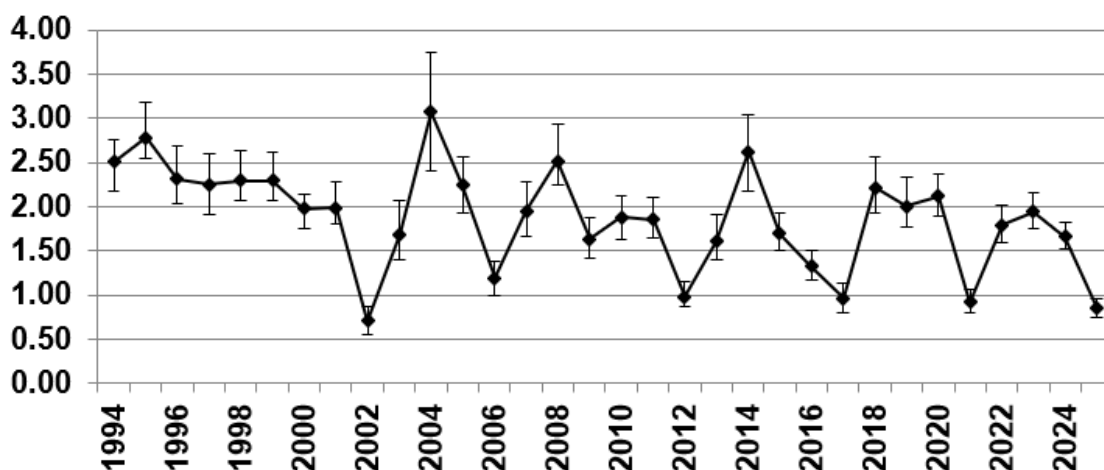
## PRAIRIE GROUSE REPRODUCTION

Prairie grouse reproductive success is not easily determined before the hunting season. However, wings from harvested prairie grouse are collected each year to determine what proportion of the harvest consisted of young of the year birds. On average, two young of the year birds are harvested for every one 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 weather can impact reproductive success in upland game birds from year to year. Last year, the ratio of young to adult birds was 0.70, lower than 2024 and below the statewide 10-year average 1.58. Although nesting conditions for much of the prairie grouse range were phenomenal, brood survival was lower than anticipated due to unknown causes.

Spring prairie grouse populations are monitored annually by counting males on leks, often referred to as dancing or booming

grounds. Each year, lek 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. Male counts are used because their attendance at leks is more predictable and consistent during the breeding season. Like other upland game birds, such as pheasants, prairie grouse are generally short lived with low annual survival yet high reproductive potential. For this reason, spring lek counts are not necessarily a good predictor of fall population levels or hunter success because much of the fall population is contingent of production after the lekking season. Spring lek counts are a good indicator of long-term trends of the adult population. Lek surveys conducted in central South Dakota by Department staff and U.S. Forest Service staff indicated strong numbers of prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse, above the long-term average, however they were down from record numbers observed in 2025.

### Statewide Prairie Grouse Age Ratio



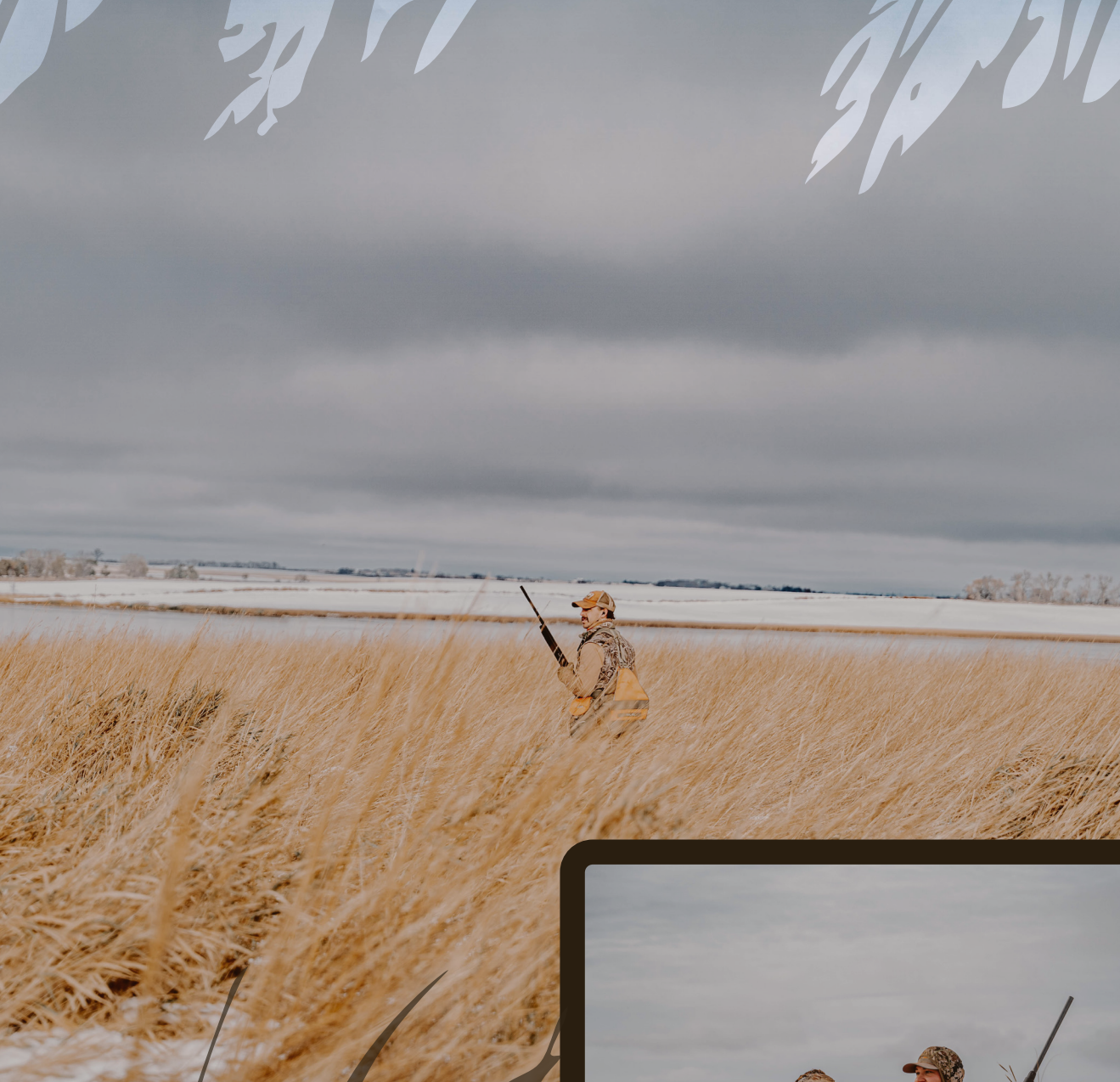
## PRAIRIE GROUSE HABITAT CONDITIONS

Although last year resulted in minimal production with fewer young birds available for harvest, much of South Dakota experienced another relatively mild winter. Ultimately, this mild winter with reduced snowfall should have contributed to high overwinter survival, producing a strong carry-over of adult birds into this year's nesting and brood rearing season. With the present drought conditions, we expect variable prairie grouse production throughout their range in addition to reduced re-nesting attempts. A vast majority of the primary prairie grouse range is currently in a moderate drought to abnormally dry. Conversely, areas of severe and extreme drought are limited in prairie grouse range. The latest U.S. drought monitor map can be viewed at: [droughtmonitor.unl.edu/](https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/).

## PRAIRIE GROUSE OUTLOOK

Because drought reduces prairie grouse production, the current habitat conditions are expected to yield reduced nesting/brood success in areas where drought persists. There are areas in prairie grouse range where production and brood survival are expected to remain strong. However, habitat conditions are often variable depending on local conditions and grazing management. This variability may require hunters to venture into new areas, rather than their traditional hotspots. Hunters are encouraged to speak to landowners and public in areas of interest to gauge what prairie grouse numbers might look like there. 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/](https://gfp.sd.gov/prairie-grouse/)).





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