



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Iowa DNR News

Conservation and Recreation

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Pheasant hunting on Thanksgiving as traditional as pumpkin pie

For many Iowans, a Thanksgiving Day pheasant hunt is as much a part of the holiday tradition as football, battling over the last turkey leg and an afternoon nap, and this year's outing may be one of the best.

"North of Interstate 80, things are shaping up for the Thanksgiving holiday to have good pheasant hunting – our bird numbers are stable and the crop harvest was late - hopefully Mother Nature will cooperate," said Todd Bogenschutz, upland wildlife research biologist for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. "Now is the time to get into the field."

Iowa's pheasant hunting outlook is similar to 2018 when hunters harvested an estimated 320,000 roosters – the highest in a decade. Bogenschutz said for those who've drifted away from pheasant hunting, this year would be a good time to restart the tradition.

"Everyone has time off and we're all together so it's a great opportunity to get outside, enjoy the fresh air," he said. "Having spent many Thanksgivings hunting with my family, it's just being together that makes the outing special. Bagging birds is usually a bonus."

Iowa's pheasant season closes Jan. 10, 2020.

For Iowa's deer hunters, the wait is nearly over, shotgun deer seasons begin Dec. 7

Heading into Iowa's busiest outdoor 'opening day,' shotgun deer season hunters should expect to see about the same number of deer in the timber as last year – with the possible exception for hunters in southcentral Iowa, where local deer populations were impacted by an outbreak of hemorrhagic disease.

“Our deer herd is trending slightly higher statewide but remains well within our population goals and based on our survey data, I’m expecting another good year for our deer hunters,” said Tyler Harms, with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Bureau. “We are watching certain areas in southcentral Iowa closely and could adjust our future management strategy based on the harvest and population data.”

More than 110,000 blaze orange clad hunters and landowners will be pushing and posting the timber in pursuit of Iowa’s legendary whitetails. The first of Iowa’s shotgun deer seasons is December 7-11 followed by the second from December 14-22. Hunters need to pick one of the seasons – only landowners can hunt both.

“The shotgun seasons are a pretty awesome tradition we have in Iowa,” Harms said. “The two seasons have the highest participation of hunters which yields the highest deer harvest.”

Of the nearly 108,000 deer harvested in Iowa last year, more than 59,000 came from the shotgun seasons. Weather played a factor last year as thousands of hunters switched their licenses from first season to second to avoid a winter storm.

Increased opportunities

Iowa hunters have more opportunity to pursue deer this year as the DNR has increased the number of county specific antlerless deer licenses available in 20 counties. The DNR also expanded the January antlerless season beyond Allamakee, Clayton, Wayne and Appanoose counties to include Winneshiek County. Each of the five participating counties still have antlerless licenses available: Allamakee 2,900 licenses; Clayton 1,700 licenses; Wayne 1,800 licenses; Appanoose 1,600 licenses; and Winneshiek 1,700 licenses. The January antlerless season includes the option of using a centerfire rifle .24 caliber and larger as a legal method of take.

Chronic wasting disease

“We’re encouraging our hunters that if they harvest a deer, to provide a tissue sample that can be tested for chronic wasting disease,” Harms said. “Hunters are key to us reaching our sample goals – which gives us the data to monitor for this disease.”

The DNR has a goal of collecting more than 6,500 samples from across the state with the majority coming from counties along the Upper Mississippi River, the Missouri River and in central Iowa along the Missouri border.

There are also four special deer management zones each with a quota of antlerless deer tags available to hunters interested in helping collect tissue samples in the area around where a deer tested positive for the always fatal disease. These licenses come with a few additional requirements – hunters must provide a tissue sample and they must hunt within the specified area. Maps are available in the hunting regulations or online at <https://www.iowadnr.gov/Hunting/Deer-Hunting/Deer-Disease-Information>.

Help Us Stop Hunger

Hunters who want to harvest more deer but don't have the freezer space are encouraged to consider donating the deer to the HUSH (Help Us Stop Hunger) program, Harms said.

"HUSH is a great program supported by the DNR and the Food Bank of Iowa that provides high quality lean protein to our neighbors in need," Harms said.

Last year, hunters donated around 4,000 deer which resulted in an estimated 600,000 meals. Any legally harvested deer may be taken to participating locker who will process the deer into two-pound packages of ground deer. There is no fee to the hunter, but Harms suggested they contact the locker before they harvest the deer to see if there are any additional instructions. A list of participating lockers is available at www.iowahush.com

Criteria for allowable straight-walled cartridges

Hunters may use rifles firing straight walled cartridges during both shotgun deer seasons, and the late muzzleloader and January antlerless seasons. The DNR uses the specifications as published by the manufacturer to determine if the caliber meets the following parameters:

- Center-fired straight-walled rimless cartridges with bullets from 0.357" to 0.500" diameter as published by the manufacturer and a case length from 0.850" to 1.800."
- Center-fired straight-walled rimmed cartridges with bullets from 0.357" to 0.500" diameter as published by the manufacturer with a case length from 1.285" to 1.800."

Based on the specifications published by its manufacturer, the 350 Legend is an allowable straight-walled cartridge for deer hunting.

The following cartridges do not meet the above criteria, but were grandfathered in and are allowed: .444 Marlin, .375 Winchester and .45-70 Govt.

Report your harvest

Hunters who are successful are reminded of the harvest reporting requirement. Hunters must report their harvest to the DNR by midnight on the day after it is tagged or before taking it to a locker, taxidermist or processing it for consumption. Reporting takes only a few minutes and can be done online at www.iowadnr.gov, through the Go Outdoors IA app, by calling the toll-free number listed on the deer tag or at any of the 700 license sales agents across the state. The final step is to write the confirmation number on the harvest report tag.

Media Contact: Tyler Harms, Biometrician, Wildlife Bureau, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 515-777-5378.

Donated deer hides benefit disabled veterans

Hunters donated more than 4,300 deer hides to Elks Lodges across Iowa last year, which was an increase of over 1,000 hides from 2017. The deer hides are used by the Veterans Leather Program to make professionally-crafted leather gloves for veterans in wheelchairs and also turned in to leather used for therapy programs for recovering veterans.

The Veterans Leather Program relies on the charity of hunters to donate their deer hides. Hunters willing to donate their hides are encouraged to contact the local Elks Lodge for drop off locations or visit www.elks.org/lodges to find the nearest lodge. The therapeutic kits and gloves are distributed at no cost to the veterans. Contact Lisa Widick at 208-360-6294 or ozzywidick@gmail.com for more information.

Basic firearm rules are important for a safe hunt

The first of Iowa's two shotgun deer seasons opens on Dec. 7, and while optimism for a successful hunt is the primary focus, hunters are encouraged to brush up on safe hunting practices.

Basic firearm rules are pretty straight forward: treat every firearm as though it were loaded; always point the muzzle in a safe direction; be sure of your target and what's beyond it; keep your finger off the trigger until ready to shoot.

"Our deer hunting tradition is shared with our friends and our family," said Megan Wisecup, hunter education administrator for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. "Practicing safe hunting techniques is important to make sure we all get home at the end of the day."

An estimated 110,000 hunters are expected to take to the timber during Iowa's two shotgun deer seasons and Wisecup said self inflicted injuries and property damage continue to be prominent.

"Those incidents could be avoided by simply following the basic rules of firearm safety and ensuring there is a safe backdrop prior to taking a shot," she said.

"Hunters tend to get fixated on their target and when a deer is running, they forget about their surroundings. Look beyond your target and clearly identify the target before taking the shot," Wisecup said. "You must be certain you have a clear, safe shot. Never point your firearm at anything you do not want to shoot."

That advice can help to prevent self inflicted wounds as well.

Wisecup encouraged hunters to wear plenty of blaze orange and to discuss the hunting plan with everyone in the group.

“You want to be seen from all sides in the woods,” she said. “It is also important to discuss the hunting plan that will outline the role for each person and where they will be during the hunt. Plan your hunt and hunt your plan. It is critical to communicate with your hunting partners to ensure everyone knows where each other is at all times.”

In 2018, there were 12 deer hunting related incidents in Iowa: three personal injuries, eight property damage and one fatality.

Hunting safety tips

- Treat every firearm as if it were loaded
- Always keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction
- Be sure of the target and what is beyond it
- Keep finger off the trigger until ready to fire
- Keep the barrel clear and choose the proper ammunition.

Winter weather factors

- Unload the firearm and open the action when crossing obstacles – if snow and ice is on the ground, the risk of slipping or falling dramatically increases
- Visibility – put the hunt on hold if visibility is poor due to fog and/or snowy conditions
- Bundled up – keeping your finger off the trigger and muzzle control are both extremely important as bulky coats and gloves increases chances of an accidental discharge

Hunter visibility

- Wear plenty of solid blaze orange. Hunters want to be seen from all sides in the woods and fields
- Discuss the hunting plan with everyone in the group. Outline the role for each person and where they will be throughout the hunt. Plan your hunt and hunt your plan. Communication is critical to ensure everyone knows where each other is at all times.

Ultimate goal

- Everyone gets home safely

Media Contact: Megan Wisecup, Hunter Education Administrator, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 515-238-4968.

Stay safe as Iowa lakes freeze over

The recent blast of arctic air is growing ice on lakes and ponds over much of Iowa. Anglers are starting to get out for the popular early ice fishing season.

“Many of us can’t wait to get out on the ice each winter,” said Joe Larscheid, chief of fisheries for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR). “Ice fishing is a fun, inexpensive activity for anglers of all ages to get outdoors and avoid cabin fever.”

The DNR recommends a minimum of four inches of clear ice for fishing and at least five inches for snowmobiles and ATVs.

“Check ice thickness as you make your way to your favorite fishing spot,” Larscheid said. “Ice conditions change constantly and its thickness can vary across the lake. Trust your instincts – if the ice does not look right, don’t go out.”

Early ice offers an excellent chance for success. If fish are finicky, cut a series of holes and spend 15 minutes at each hole. Use small baits and light line.

Safety tips on the ice

- No ice is 100 percent safe.
- New ice is usually stronger than old ice.
- Don’t go out alone - if the worst should happen, someone will be there to call for help or to help rescue.
- Let someone know where you are going and when you will return.
- Check ice thickness as you go out - there could be pockets of thin ice or places where ice recently formed.
- Avoid off-colored snow or ice. It is usually a sign of weakness.
- The insulating effect of snow slows down the freezing process.
- Bring along these basic items to help keep you safe: hand warmers, ice cleats to help prevent falls, ice picks (wear around your neck) to help you crawl out of the water if you fall in, a life jacket, a floating safety rope, a whistle to call for help, a basic first aid kit and extra dry clothes including a pair of gloves.

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