

Week Six: Scouting Strategy for Wildlife



The North Dakota Environmental Project encompasses a variety of topics from traditional environmental topics such as global warming to camping, hiking, and shooting sports. Under the scope of shooting sports is our 4-H Hunting Skills Program which youth can learn and compete in the skills necessary to become a successful hunter. The program is in its infancy stage so we would welcome recruits to get the program started.

This activity will address the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully harvest or photograph an animal. While the main focus will be on hunting, it can be just as fun to photograph animals.



Getting to Know the Neighborhood

With the intended animal in mind, whether it is a bird, deer, bear, insect, or fish, the first strategy is to learn about them. What does it like to eat? What habitat does it prefer? What are the seasonal movements? How does it survive the seasons?

In the area that a person will be observing or hunting, the places that best meet the needs of the animal will see the most activity. The season in North Dakota is approaching midsummer. Usually, the farm fields are full of crops and water sources are plentiful. Animals can find many places to hide, forage, and raise their young. Naturally, animals spread out as a survival mechanism to decrease competition from others and to make it harder for predators to find them.

As summer progresses, crops mature and hay is cut. Normally, small ponds dry up and lakes, rivers, or stockponds become the source of water for some animals. Many of North Dakota's animals are adapted to semi-arid climate and can get the needed water from dew or plants. The hottest days of summer may occur now and animals seek relief by finding shade in trees, long grass, or a burrow. Activity may become limited to early morning, late evening, and night.

In early to mid-fall, many crops begin to leave the fields and the area of suitable habitat starts to shrink for animals living in agricultural lands. Crop harvest and field tillage forces animals into a small areas and increases competition for food and shelter cover. It also shrinks the area that predators need to hunt for success. It is during this time, species that need to migrate to survive winter start their journey southward. Generally, September finds Mourning doves, wood ducks, teal, and songbirds are among the first to leave. Snow geese, mallards, and eagles migrate together in early November. Some Canada geese remain all winter near Fargo and along the Missouri River.

Animals such as raccoon and skunk spend much of the winter semi-hibernating. They appear for brief periods of warm weather to hunt and mate during the late winter months. Pheasants and big game animals are left unprotected in our winter months face a challenge of survival to find shelter and food.

Winter can be a cruel and brutal environment for the animals that must remain active throughout the winter. The habitat that provides protection from the cold temperatures and wind is concentrated in Conservation Reserve acres, river bottoms, shelterbelts, or old farmsteads. Animals such as pheasants and deer group together to survive the winter. With more eyes to spot predators and bodies to make

trails, it provides some strategy to survive. Most wildlife can survive cold temperatures but large amounts of snowfall that covers food sources, blows shelter cover full, and makes movement more difficult is going to be the ultimate challenge they must endure. Without thermal cover, (cover that provides protection) they stand no chance to survive. This truly is “Only the strong survive!”.

Spring brings a new flush of life and the process begins again. The intensity of winter has a direct relationship to the number of animals that remain to reproduce. Weather is one factor that affects animal populations. Disease is also a contributor to limit animal populations. As the density of animals increases, the more easily disease is transmitted from one animal to another. This can happen in the fall and winter when animals group into smaller areas of habitat or to animals like raccoons that den for the winter.

Car accidents also account for some wildlife fatalities. According to yearly State Farm Surveys, North Dakota was ranked in the top twenty states for the worst places for animal-car collisions. There were nearly 2 million animal collisions this past year across the country in 2016. The survey shows that in North Dakota you have a 1 in 80 chance of crashing into an animal while driving. North Dakota and Minnesota rank in the top 10 states for deer collisions.

No discussion of animal populations would be complete without understanding the carrying capacity of an area of habitat. Habitat cannot support animals above its ability to provide for food, shelter, water, and a mate. The carrying capacity of a biological species in a particular habitat refers to the maximum number of individuals (of that species) that the environment can carry and sustain, considering its geography or physical features.

Nature must remove excess animals from a habitat through natural processes in order for the species to survive. Wildlife cannot be stockpiled long term. If any one of the needs of the animal are not present or in short supply, it will limit the carrying capacity of that habitat.



Scouting Strategy for Finding Wildlife

Become an Expert

To become an expert at finding an animal, it is a well-planned strategy is to understand as much about the animal as is available. Resources for study can range from scientific journals to arm-chair neighborhood experts. Sources that provide general information about the animal are usually abundant. However, resources that address animal behavior specific to where an individual species lives is best to use reliable and state specific sources. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department (<https://gf.nd.gov/publications/order>) offers excellent online or free paper resources. It also publishes North Dakota Outdoors magazine. North Dakota has other organizations that provide information unique to our state. The North Dakota Wildlife Legislative Fund, North Dakota Natural Resource Conservation Service, and North Dakota State University Extension Service have information that may be of interest.

Finally, the learning curve may be shortened by consulting with local experts or joining a club that share the same interests. Years of experience will reveal habits, strategies, and locations that may take a long time to discover by oneself. A person may find a mentor willing to share their knowledge and experience. A mentor may also have access to land, equipment and can provide appropriate supervision during the activity.

Begin Early

Scouting to find an animal will require effort to be involved in the search. One factor that must be taken in consideration is access to the land. The scouting effort will also be dependent on the personal goal. The goal should be one the youth desires. While it is personal choice, it much more fun for youth to hunt or photograph animals if the goal is to first, to know and understand them rather than to focus on a obtaining a trophy or award-winning picture.

Special youth season occurs for deer, pheasant, and waterfowl in September. The hunter should be sure to check the hunting regulations in early spring. Licenses for some big game animals must be applied for online and are not available over the counter. Applications occur months before the season starts. Small game licenses are available online and can be downloaded at the time of purchase. It is also important to understand that some hunting equipment is not legal to use though it may be advertised.

Start Big

The **first scouting strategy** is to scout a larger area to determine the best locations to investigate more thoroughly. Short cuts to discovering areas to continue scouting means checking travel ways that wildlife use includes field edges between crops, roads, and shorelines. Animals, much like ourselves, prefer easy walking from one place to another. Mud puddles on roads will reveal the animals using the road and surrounding area. A lake or river shoreline is a reliable place to locate tracks or other sign as most wildlife needs a water source and the shoreline is easy travel for them.



Temporary or small wetlands shores in the area also provide a good snap shot of the wildlife present. A stock pond, a flooded area in a field, a hidden spring in a coulee, and livestock watering tanks can provide information on local wildlife.

The **next scouting strategy** is to choose an area that one has found sign and should do a better investigation to determine what and how many live there. With permission from the landowner or operator, a walk through the area may reveal sign (spoor) in the form of tracks, diggings, feeding, or scat (droppings). A person may be able to observe the animal. A walk-through scout is the best way to learn the land and how all the animals use it. This is the time to think about where a trail camera or photography blind can be placed.

Confirm the Presence and Watch What They do



The presence of the wildlife and whether there is some that can be photographed or hunted is confirmed after the walk-through scout. Next, a person would use a strategy to see the animal without disturbing it. It is good for youth to sit on a high observation point and observe wildlife activity with a spotting scope or binoculars. These scouting trips should be made to be fun with packed lunch, treats, and trips to different locations. To keep youth interested, scouting sessions should be short and limited to approximately a half hour at a location and preferably at peak activity

times of sunset or day break at each spot. Weekend hiking trips can be made into early season scouting trips for hunting. Wildlife can be seen other times of the day especially if it is cloudy or foggy.

In modern times, there are short cuts to finding animals that didn't exist a short time ago. Possibly, the most influential device is the trail camera. The cameras allow people to find wildlife that they never or rarely seen before. The effort to actively scout large areas was a limiting factor in finding animals. Currently, some trail cameras allow one to view an animal on their cell phone while working or at home.

Trail cameras can help build the excitement when they capture pictures of animals like deer or raccoons that might not be seen. With landowner permission, the cameras should be placed in game trails in locations where tracks are present. Trail cameras should be placed facing away from the sun and any close vegetation that can move in the wind to trigger the sensor, should be cut. They should also be placed to pick up movement from a distance of 10 yards or more as some have a longer trigger time, fire a 3 shot burst, video, and have a one-minute delay between activations.

Most cameras have settings to be adjusted and include a time stamp so one will know when the animal passed the location. This will help the hunter or photographer know if the animal can be seen during daylight hours. One will be able to determine the location and method to photograph or harvest the animal with this information.

Fall, The Season of Transition

Vegetation has matured and water may be getting less available. Crops are being harvested. Life begins to shift toward the preparation for winter. Mourning doves, wood ducks, and blue-winged teal are flocked together and with the first cold snap will leave until spring. The deer have rubbed their antlers free of velvet and soon the groups of bucks will split up to prepare for the November rut. Ducks and geese flock together and begin to make flights into harvested fields. Raccoons and skunks eat everything they can find to put on a thick layer of fat to sleep the winter away.



The preparation for migration, winter dormancy, or survival will cause animals to behave in certain ways every year. The fall and early winter season will find wildlife begin to make consistent movement from their dens, roost or bedding areas to feeding areas each day. With the cover of the crops removed, wildlife is reluctant to stay in the fields during the day. This will cause them to move at daylight and just before sundown. As winter approaches, trails will begin to form from the best areas of cover to the cropland. Hunters and photographers should scout for the best feeding areas and set up the hunting situation to intercept the animals between the bedding or roosting areas and where they feed.

Resources and References

https://www.ndsu.edu/fileadmin/4h/Projects/ShootingSports_01.pdf
<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/HettingerREC/range-wildlife>
<https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/wildlifedamage/programs/nwrc>
<https://northdakotawildlifefederation.org/>
<https://gf.nd.gov/publications/order>

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4-H Activity Sheet



Project One: Wildlife Feeders

Please note that good wildlife management practices discourage feeding wildlife due to disease transmission and the developed dependency of the animal on the food source. However, supplemental feeding is fun activity to observe wildlife.

For country life, my choice for a feeder is always to repurpose something, use a design simple to build, and from a material that will last along time. It is fun to make something and see wildlife use it. The design can sometimes limit use by certain wildlife but often a variety of wildlife will find a way to get the feed. Squirrels and raccoons are especially inventive at obtaining a meal from a feeder.

Materials and design of feeder should allow use by the intended bird or animal. The feeder should also keep the contents dry so mold or rotting does not occur. Food must flow freely so it is resupplied without constant attention and that a reasonable amount is not wasted.

A small deer feeder can be made from PVC. It is best used if you have a small herd of a half dozen. One should not use feeders if any contagious disease is present in the area that could spread to the herd or flock. While it is very simple to make and will last along time, it will cost if you have to buy all the parts.

Deer Feeder



1. A section of PVC pipe 4 or more inches in diameter from 3 to 6 feet long is cut. A short pipe allows a person to fill it from the ground. Deer do not eat until they are filled. They will take a few bites and move on.
2. A Y joint is glued to the bottom end of the tube and a screw-in cap that can be removed is used to cap the bottom end with the third opening facing up. A couple small holes are drilled into the bottom cap so moisture can drain. A removeable cap can be put on top to protect the grain from precipitation.
3. The feeder can be fastened to a tree or fence post by ratchet straps. The pipe 4 inches in diameter feeder 6 feet long holds approximately a 5 gallon bucket of corn. Deer prefer whole kernel corn.



Pheasant Feeder

1. Pheasants are very entertaining to watch. The cautious hens and the perky roosters who strut their stuff keep a consistent schedule. You can fashion a pheasant feeder out of wood or PVC pipe. I like to build something that does not cause a snowdrift and will still be working after a stretch of cold and snowy weather. The 6 PVC pipe 4 or more inches in diameter and six feet long will hold enough feed week to week for a small number of birds
2. A cap for the top is placed but not glued on.
3. The bottom does not have to be capped.
4. This should allow the feed to spill out, pile up but not continue to empty the feeder. If feeding bare ground, the pipe is attached to a steel fence post with ratchet straps or other method

about 2 inches above the ground. This should allow the feed to spread out on the ground as it flows but not empty the feeder.

5. In wintertime, a couple straw small square bales are recommended to keep the feeder and food above the snow cover. Pheasants prefer cracked corn and beans.

Mega Bird Feeder

1. A plastic five gallon pail with cover is needed for this project. The pail should be clean and not have been used for anything that might cause harm to wildlife. First, drill a few small holes in the bottom of the pail so any moisture can drain out.
2. Next, a small square of plywood or similar wood that is as wide as the pail is needed. The board is going to be placed inside the pail and slanted about 30 degrees. The board must be trimmed to fit a minimum of two inches from the bottom and the top it is slanted to fit so the cover can be used. It must be slanted enough to prevent the feed from covering the entire bottom. (The birds will sit in the bottom to feed.)
3. Once the board is trimmed and fitted, two screws 1 ½ inches are going to be screwed in each side of the pail into the board. It is necessary to predrill the holes with a smaller bit to prevent cracking the wood or pail. A person must take care not to suck in the sides of the pail with the screws or the cover will not fit. If it can be accomplished it, a light inside the pail makes it easier to see where to drill the screw holes. One screw goes in the bottom side of the board and one in the top side. The board must fit inside the rim of the pail so the top can be used.
4. The feeding window is cut under the slant of the board. A ½ inch drill bit is used to drill the four corners of the feeding window. Space them far enough apart for birds to land in the window. Depending on the size of the birds, the slot can be three inches high and eight inches long. A small hand saw is used to cut the window.
5. For decoration, the pail can be painted any color and design.
6. The pail can be hung by the handles but it must be wired or fastened on or it will blow off in a wind.



Casting Animal Tracks

Casting animal tracks is a fun activity for anyone. At times, I will cast the track of a certain animal so that I might identify it when I see it again. This will be fun to do on the scouting trips in this activity. Or, it is just fun to have a collection.

1. First, a trip to the store to get Plaster of Paris. One five pound carton will do about 8-12 tracks depending on how large they are and how much plaster is wasted. Gallon zip lock bags prefilled with plaster are nice for mixing the plaster in the field. Twelve ounce water bottles with water are needed. To save on plaster or to give the track a nice frame, cartons from cottage cheese, whip cream, or a tub from butter with the bottoms cut out work well. And, a spatula to lift the cast carefully is helpful. I carry a tote or backpack with all the things I need.
2. Once a track has been found, the frame is pressed carefully around it. Not every track needs a frame, but it helps when lifting out the cast.
3. Next, the plaster is mixed in the baggy until it has a thick soupy texture. It should pour easy but not be too thin or have lumps. The track is filled completely and the level of the plaster is approximately ½ inch above the track. Gently, the top is smoothed but do not work it much.



4. The plaster will take about 20 minutes to harden enough to remove and a day to cure.
5. The cast is carefully removed from the ground by slowly working the frame lose (do not attempt to remove from the cast), placing the spatula under the track, and gently working out the frame and track cast together.
6. In a couple hours, a soft brush or air can be used to remove some debris from the track. In a day, the track can be washed and scrubbed with a soft brush.

