

North Dakota outdoors: : The current status of bighorn sheep in North Dakota

By Doug Leier



Without fail, when I think about bighorn sheep in North Dakota, big game biologist Brett Weidmann pops into my head. For good reason. Brett is the Game and Fish Department’s bighorn guru and has forgotten more about bighorn sheep than I’ll ever know. Brett is one of those guys I like to say is “living and working,” actually doing what many young kids dream of. While he spends his share of time behind the screen and in the office, his work puts him into the old-fashioned role of a biologist. Monitoring, studying, researching and learning about one of North Dakota’s smallest populations but highest interest species.

Here’s what we do know about the 2025 status of bighorn sheep in North Dakota

The latest numbers of North Dakota Game and Fish Department’s 2024 bighorn sheep survey, completed by recounting lambs in March, revealed a minimum of 350 bighorn sheep in the grasslands of western North Dakota, down 4% from 2023 and 6% above the five-year average. Despite a slight decrease from the record count in 2023, the 2024 survey was still the second highest count on record.

Altogether, biologists counted 105 rams, 199 ewes and 46 lambs. Not included are approximately 40 bighorn sheep in the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park and bighorns introduced to the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in 2020.

Brett was pleased to see the population remained near record levels for the seventh consecutive year.



Currently, about 480 bighorns make up the populations managed by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, National Park Service and the Three Affiliated Tribes Fish and Wildlife Division. Photo by Ashley Peterson.

The northern badlands population declined by 4% from 2023 but was the second highest count on record. The southern badlands population increased slightly but remained near its lowest level since bighorns were reintroduced there in 1966.

“We were encouraged to see adult rams and adult ewes near record numbers,” Brett said. “The streak of four consecutive record counts was broken due to below-average lamb recruitment in 2024, as lambs recruited into the population declined 21% compared to 2023.”

Brett said the decline in lamb recruitment was likely not related to disease, but a combination of drought, predation and ewes recovering after several years of high lamb recruitment.

“Our state’s females have invested a lot of energy in rearing lambs the last four years, so sometimes they just need to take a break and concentrate on improving body condition,” he said.

Department biologists count and classify all bighorn sheep in late summer, and then recount lambs the following March, as they approach one year of age, to determine recruitment.

Currently, about 480 bighorns make up the populations managed by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, National Park Service and the Three Affiliated Tribes Fish and Wildlife Division, just shy of the benchmark of 500 bighorns in the state.

A bighorn sheep hunting season is tentatively scheduled for 2025. The status of the season will be determined Sept. 1, following the summer population survey.

Game and Fish issued seven

licenses in 2024, and all hunters were successful in harvesting a ram.

A brief history of bighorn sheep in North Dakota

Bighorn sheep were first recorded by the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1805 along the Yellowstone River in what is now North Dakota.

Later, John J. Audubon wrote about bighorn sheep and the frustrations of trying to hunt these rams in the 1840s. Theodore Roosevelt also hunted the badlands for bighorn sheep during his time spent in North Dakota.

From Roosevelt’s time in the 1880s, to the first decade of the 1900s, bighorn sheep in North Dakota did not fare so well. Nor did any of the other big game species that inhabited the state. Bison, moose, elk and bighorn sheep were extirpated from the North Dakota landscape. White-tailed deer, mule deer and pronghorn numbers declined to a point where they faced an unknown future.

Nearly a half century after their extirpation from the state, bighorn sheep were reintroduced to North Dakota’s badlands with stock from British Columbia. In 1905, the last reported bighorn sheep was killed near Grassy Butte. North Dakota did not have any wild sheep from that time until the mid-1950s, when state Game and Fish Department biologists transplanted bighorns from British Columbia to an area southwest of Grassy Butte.

It took another 20 years or so before the sheep population, through natural reproduction and further in-state and out-of-state transplants, expanded to the point where the Game and Fish Department could open a hunting season.

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Dakota Gardener: Fresh garden tomatoes

By Carrie Knutson, Horticulture agent, NDSU Extension

I think there is nothing better than a fresh tomato from the garden. This is one statement that I find most gardeners will not argue about. Generally, gardeners will go above and beyond to ensure they can harvest a plentiful tomato crop. So, how do we get the most out of our tomatoes?

You can use cages or a fence and a string trellis system to support the tomato plant and hold the vines off the ground. I use tomato cages, which I set up after I plant. However, tomato cages can have a bad reputation. They tend to fall over during storms or as tomatoes ripen later in the summer.

One trick to stop that from happening is to use two short fencing posts to support the cages. Simply place the tomato cage, then put the posts in the ground at an equal distance around the cage and zip-tie the cage to the posts. It takes a bit more work to set up, but the results are worth it—no more tipped-over tomatoes.

Remember to prune your tomatoes. Tomatoes will grow secondary stems or shoots between leaves and the main stem. Depending on your needs and the type of tomato you are growing, you can prune one or the secondary stems out or leave them all.

If you leave the secondary stems, you will have more vines for fruit production. Just make sure your support system can handle the additional weight. I tend to remove the first secondary stems on my determinate tomatoes and let the rest grow. Secondary stems can be removed when they are about the size of a pencil and the leaves are dry. A sharp pair of scissors or pruners should be used to remove them to avoid damaging the main stem.

As your tomatoes grow, you can remove a couple of the bottom leaves to promote air movement and help prevent the spread of disease. Mulch will also help reduce



To get the most out of your tomato plants, NDSU Extension shares some helpful gardening tips. NDSU photo

the spread of soil-borne diseases. Examples of mulch are clean straw, compost, grass clippings or leaves. Just make sure that anything you use is free of any herbicides.

Be sure to leave space around the stems of your plants when using mulch. You don’t want to put mulch up to the base of the plant, as this could cause mold issues in the stem.

The mulch also helps suppress weeds and keeps the moisture at a constant level. Blossom end rot can be a major issue on tomatoes early in the season. It is caused by a calcium deficiency in the plant. Often, we have enough calcium in the soil, but due to fluctuations in soil moisture, it cannot be taken up by the plant.

Try not to work with tomato plants when they are wet. This will help reduce the spread of certain diseases. When watering, water the roots and soil, not the leaves. If you use an overhead sprinkler, water early in the morning. Watering in the morning reduces the chances of disease development.

Last, make sure to look at your plants at least every few days. Check in with them and look for any potential problems so that you have time to troubleshoot before you lose tomatoes.

Happy gardening!

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