September Hunting
Antelope Outlook, Elk 116 and 117, Migratory Birds

Throughout the Casper Region, antelope herds are continuing to rebound after substantial winter losses six years ago and subsequent poor fawn production. Fortunately, fawn production and survival has been good to excellent since 2014 and led to three consecutive years of herd growth throughout most of the region. As a result, antelope populations have noticeably increased in most areas. However, antelope numbers remain below management goals in some areas that experienced more substantial losses between 2011 and 2013, particularly in Hunt Areas 30, 31, 71 and 72. Antelope are faring a little better in northeast Wyoming (Hunt Areas 4-9, 27 and 29) where strong fawn production and good over winter survival has fostered modest population growth, although even here antelope densities are still below desired levels. One exception is in Hunt Area 73, where antelope numbers have grown considerably and now significantly exceed the established population objective.

For 2017, antelope hunting seasons in the Casper Region are designed to modestly increase hunting opportunity while still permitting population growth in most hunt areas. The exception to this is Hunt Area 73, where a very liberal season was prescribed with high doe/fawn license issuance to decrease this herd down toward objective following significant population growth. Hunting seasons are remaining very conservative to allow for maximum population growth in Hunt Areas 31 and 70-72 where antelope numbers remain well below desired levels. Following drastic reductions in license issuance from 2011-2015, hunting success should continue to improve in 2017 as hunters will see noticeably increased antelope numbers compared to recent years.
Along with overall herd growth in most areas, buck numbers are also improving. Hunters should see a lot more pronghorn bucks throughout the Region compared to the past five years. The excellent moisture received this spring and summer has resulted in improved pronghorn habitat going into the 2017 hunting season, which has also translated into good horn growth and trophy quality. While climatic conditions were fairly harsh during the early 2016-17 winter, conditions became fairly mild from February on, which enabled pronghorn to devote more energy to horn growth as the energetic demands of winter survival were reduced. Given the majority of horn growth occurs during winter and early spring months for pronghorn, bucks were able to get a good head start, and received an additional boost throughout the summer.

Archery season for antelope opened in many areas across the region in August. In Thunder Basin, participation seems to have been a bit lower than anticipated and than that of past years, but some nice bucks have been harvested.

In the Black Hills, Elk Hunt Areas 116 and 117 opened for early season cow/calf hunting. The Type 7 and 8 licenses issued here are designed to address elk depredation on hay and grain fields while damage is taking place. This year success seems to be much better, in large part due to the initial efforts of a Hunter Management Program recently begun near Newcastle. Nate Holst, Black Hills Hunter Management Coordinator, was hired in mid August to help direct and assist hunters with antlerless elk harvest on a couple of ranches that have endured chronic damage. Game and Fish is hoping this early success will translate into increased opportunities in December and January when large winter herds of elk can cause significant damage.

With the start of September here, many migratory game bird seasons will be opening in the Casper Region. Seasons opening September 1 include mourning dove, sora and Virginia rail, snipe and sandhill crane. For those in pursuit of doves, look for any areas with large numbers of sunflowers, to get permission on private lands with small grain agriculture. For those lucky few who drew sandhill crane tags, cranes can also be found in private lands with small grain agriculture. Obtaining permission to access private lands is essential for sandhill crane hunting. Both rails and snipe can be found along the edges of wetlands and rivers. Walking along these areas are your best shot to encounter these species.
On the Ground

Pronghorn Antelope Classifications, Black Hills Wild Turkeys

Casper Region wildlife biologists and game wardens conducted pronghorn antelope classification surveys during late summer/early fall. The information collected during these surveys provides key information about antelope populations Game and Fish uses to develop hunting season structure and license numbers for the following year.

In Thunder Basin and the Black Hills, it appears the milder than average winter experienced last year and decent forage conditions will yield about an average fawn crop, one that will continue to allow these herds to increase. In addition, wardens and biologists report seeing some excellent horn growth on bucks this year. Newcastle wildlife biologist, Joe Sandrini, reported, “I have seen about as good of bucks as any year I can remember, classifying antelope over the last 25 years in this area.” Overall, herd numbers have rebounded fairly significantly in many areas, and hunters should expect a good season when things kick off for firearm season in a few weeks.

Near Casper, fawn production was highly variable, with very good fawn numbers in hunt areas to the north, and average to poor fawn production in hunt areas to the south. Overwinter survival from last year appeared to be average to very good - again with better winter survival numbers seen in areas north of Casper. Buck ratios and quality follow a similar trend, and buck ratios ranged from the 40’s to even 60’s for every hundred does in some areas. Trophy-sized buck antelope were spotted in virtually every hunt area, but hunters expecting to take one home will still need to be patient and do a good amount of glassing.

Game and Fish and volunteers in the Black Hills spent time during August counting wild turkey poult and classifying adult wild turkeys. We are still waiting to get data from all our volunteers, but so far it appears as though wild turkey reproduction and survival in the Black Hills this year is some of the best on record. Coming off of good to above average poult production and survival the past few years, wild turkey numbers have bounced back significantly from where they were just three years ago, and the tom to hen ratio is about as high as it gets in Wyoming’s premier wild turkey hunting area.
In the Water
North Platte River, Cardwell Reach

The trout population at Cardwell is still going strong with an estimated 1,400 trout per mile or 2,400 pounds of trout per mile. Rainbow trout are the most abundant species at 71% of the population. Brown trout make up the remaining 29%. Snake River cutthroat are occasionally caught, but numbers are very low. Rainbow trout averaged 16.6 inches and 1.82 pounds. The average size of brown trout was slightly smaller at 14.8 inches and 1.60 pounds. The largest fish captured, however, was a brown trout which was 23.3 inches and 6.73 pounds.

If you fished Cardwell during 2016, you might have filled out a creel survey card. We ran a remote creel survey there from March through November to get an idea what the average catch rates are and to gauge angler satisfaction with the fishery. The average catch rate was 1.37 trout per hour, which is very high (0.5 fish per hour on average is considered good). Anglers reported catching mostly rainbow trout (95% of fish caught).

Of Interest
Short-eared Owl

This short-eared owl was found out by an oil tank west of Casper. It was assumed it had inadvertently flown into the tank and had a head injury, or perhaps was suffering from a West Nile Virus infection. However, upon further inspection at the Wind River raptor rehab center, it was found to have had several cactus spines embedded deep inside its foot and leg. This must've been causing extreme pain, and rendered the owl in shock as it was unwilling to fly despite no injury to its wings. The owl appears to be doing well after the spines were removed, and hopefully will be able to be released back into the wild soon.
Of Interest

2017 Total Solar Eclipse