

DNR Report

Richard Kirchmeyer WBH DNR liaison

The first 2 weeks of December, 2024, were busy in terms of DNR meetings. They included a 2-day bear meeting as well as a turkey meeting. Then came the elk meeting. At all 3 meetings we review the 2024 season's harvest, success rates and hunter satisfaction data. From this data the committees will formulate proposed quota permit levels and harvest permit levels for all 3 species.

Earlier this fall I had a DNR deer meeting, where the committee addressed possible changes to the Northern Forest DMU's, along with some proposed changes to the Central Forest DMU's. Over the past few years, because of the many complaints from hunters in northern Wisconsin, the Natural Resources Board (NRB) at their June meeting instructed the DNR to facilitate some type of restructuring of the Northern Forest DMU's. It was to consider biology, along with input from many of the outdoor user groups and local CDAC's. The DNR was instructed to have the recommendations finalized and ready to be presented to the NRB for their approval at their January, 2025 meeting. Maintaining this timeline, and assuming the NRB's approval, the recommendations should be in place for the 2025 whitetailed deer seasons. There were some pretty good discussions on where each DMU line should be drawn. I think the committee did it's best to take into consideration all contributing factors when coming up with proposed boundary lines. Each proposed DMU has similar deer numbers, habitat and hunter densities, which was the charge given to us as a committee. I am guessing I will not have another deer meeting until after the 2024 -2025 deer harvest seasons have closed.

In the bear world there are a couple of house cleaning items the DNR is proposing. The first is to make it legal to shoot a bear if it is in the process of harming domestic animals on private lands. The second is to allow a person to bring a harvested bear out of the woods in more than 5 parts, leaving inedible parts in the woods. We also discussed the possibility of dividing BMZ A into 2 independent zones. After much discussion it was decided to not sub-divide BMZ A at this time.

Another discussion item was that all bear baits should have the baiter's DNR Customer ID attached to a tree/shrub near the bait site so law enforcement can spend less time figuring out who is maintaining a particular bait. The Wisconsin Conservation Congress bear committee may put this question on the Spring Hearing schedule in 2025. The main concern brought forward was that this change could make some people violators on a technicality. I did not take a position on this change, as I wanted guidance from the WBH board of directors and WBH members.

Another item that the committee discussed was the possibility of an emergency closure of the bear harvest season if the bear harvest was trending toward greatly exceeding harvest goals. My biggest concern with this provision is that it may lead to hunters being less selective, due to the risk of the season shutting down early. After all, hunters wait many years to receive a harvest tag. This may negatively affect overall management goals and lessen hunting opportunities. I was not at all in favor of this proposal.

The Hair Snare study that was conducted in 2019 did not produce any results that could be used in estimating the bear population in the state. The bear den study did have 97 bear dens identified in the state, 67 were assessed and data was taken from each. Twenty-one sows received collars, of

which one was harvested and another decided to become a Viking and moved to Minnesota. Not too sure about that! The Bear Management Plan, which was adopted in May of 2018, is a living document, meaning minor tweaking can be done if when needed.

The 2024 harvest season was a successful one according to harvest figures. A total of 4,301 bears were harvested, with a 2024 average success rate of 37.7%, which is a little higher than the historical success rate. On opening day, close to 1,000 bears were harvested. That's a lot of bears harvested in one day. Most hunters who answered the hunter survey said they had a very good, or were highly satisfied with their hunt. There were some crowding complaints in BMZ's B and C. Native Americans harvested 46 bears, compared to 36 bears in 2023.

Discussion on bear harvest quotas and harvest permit levels for 2025 took up a good amount of time for the committee. I cannot share numbers at this time, as they need review by the DNR Policy Team and the NRB before they can be published. I can tell you that BMZ A is proposed to have a reduced harvest quota and harvest permits, as the 3-year harvest success rate and the number of bears harvested has increased, coupled with a goal to maintain the bear population at present levels. BMZ B had its proposed harvest goals and permit levels raised slightly. BMZ C proposed harvest quotas and permit level were increased by a pretty good amount. BMZ D also had its harvest quotas and permit levels raised some from 2024 levels. BMZ E also saw a slight raise in harvest goals and permit levels. BMZ F harvest goals and permit levels are unchanged.

The first part of the turkey meeting dealt with reviewing some of the data received and tabulated from the 2024 turkey hunters survey. The following are some of the interesting facts that were provided to the committee:

- 30% of the spring harvest permits in each zone go to landowners, which was supported by most respondents.
- 97% of respondents use a firearm when hunting turkeys.
- 80% of respondents said they had a good hunt.
- 83% of respondents want the state to stay with the 6, 7-day time period hunts.
- 89% of respondents said they got the time period they wanted.
- 91% of respondents said they had a quality hunt in 2024.
- Respondents were split 50/50 on having an earlier harvest season opener.

The committee discussed a possible future increase in the turkey stamp cost. The amount for a turkey stamp has been at \$5.25 since 1997.

Hen and poult surveys taken in August showed that reproduction was slightly up from 2023.

The 2025 spring proposed harvest quotas and harvest permit levels were approved, and all are equal to the numbers that were approved for the spring 2024 hunts.

The 2024 Elk hunt did not have an elk harvested by archery equipment like it did in the past 2 years. From what I have been informed, no one tried to harvest an elk using archery equipment. In the Central EMZ, all 4 harvest permits were filled. As of this writing, 2 of the 4 Northern EMZ harvest permits have been filled. There is still a chance to fill these last 2 permits during the later December

hunt. I have not heard of any unique hunter stories except one elk was possibly harvested by a 10-year-old boy.

This year did bring about some very expensive land leasing, and some pretty good prices being paid to hire a personal guide. I guess I really didn't expect to hear that happening here in Wisconsin, but if there is a market someone is going to fill it. The yearly elk meeting that will set quotas for 2025 had not yet occurred at the time of this writing. I had a good conversation with the Northern EMZ elk manager and he said some trapping and collaring will take place again this winter when possible. The collaring, mainly of cow elk and calves, helps greatly in keeping track of elk movement, reproduction and for estimating our elk populations. I am sure trapping and collaring of elk will also occur in the Central EMZ. I am pretty sure, barring major issues this winter, elk harvest permits are probably going to be similar to 2024 numbers in both management zones.

This is a unique opportunity for Wisconsin to be able to provide an elk hunt in our own state. The application dates for a chance in the drawing for a harvest permit start in late spring and end on the last day of May each year.