

## DNR Update

By Richard Kirchmeyer, WBH DNR Liaison

As of this writing, the Wisconsin DNR has been tipped sideways or maybe even upside down. Last March, at WBH's annual membership banquet, DNR Secretary Adam Payne addressed the members present at the banquet. Payne was the acting DNR Secretary at the time, pending confirmation. I thought, along with many others, that maybe we now had a person in the Secretary position that would understand the outdoor users of our natural resources better than the past few secretaries had. Secretary Payne arranged for quarterly meetings with other DNR employees to discuss issues regarding wildlife management, with an eye toward getting the perspective of Wisconsin's sportsmen. As you may have guessed, one topic that came forward every time we met was wolves. I am not 100% sure why Sec Payne resigned; he stated that "my family is in need of more of my time". This is admirable, and may have been part of the reason for the resignation of Sec. Payne, but I, and many others think it may have also been because of the stance the DNR and the Governor have taken on the Wolf Management Plan. As I write this article, the Governor has not yet appointed a new Secretary to the DNR. I pray the new secretary will be someone who will represent the interests of the people, especially the hunters, fishermen and trappers of the state. You know, the people who pay their salary.

There are 2 very controversial species here in Wisconsin for which WBH members, and others, have strong opinions when it comes to management plans. I will address both in this update, although space does not permit me to go into great depth regarding either species.

First on the list is wolves. How do I start with this controversial species? We have not had this much division in the state by its citizens since the dove and crane hunting seasons were proposed at the Wisconsin Conservation Congress spring hearings some years ago. The Wolf Management Plan was approved by the Natural Resources Board (NRB) last fall. The plan had many facets to it, but the main concern with the plan for many was the population goal for wolves in the state. The department wanted, and the NRB approved, a population goal of 1000 plus wolves. This is far higher than what was requested by most sportsmen groups, county boards and many other outdoor user groups, who supported a population goal of 350 wolves. The Wisconsin Wildlife Federation is filing a lawsuit against the DNR pertaining to the established population goal, which I pray will have some strength in our courts, at least to generate a more reasonable compromise. It appears that the battle over wolf population goals is far from over.

You might not have guessed this, but the other controversial species in Wisconsin is our whitetailed deer! Ouch! The deer herd here in Wisconsin generates more concern relative to its management than any other species. Everything from how many deer we have (or don't have), how they should be managed and how to handle the other species that prey upon them.

The northern deer herd has been decimated in many areas by a combination of clashes in management philosophies and an increase in predation by wolves, bears, coyotes and even bobcats. Add to that the stress of weather conditions, especially in the winter months, and you can see the challenge in getting not only accurate population counts, but also agreement on the best management plan. Several years ago, I attended a deer management meeting and a DNR wildlife manager stated that if a DMU had 10-12

deer per square mile it would be considered an un-huntable population. Many areas of certain counties in the north have had deer populations at these levels for quite some time now. Conversely, some areas of southern Wisconsin, depending on habitat, are thought to have too many deer, with estimates of 30-80 deer per square mile in some areas. Some of these areas are inaccessible to many hunters because they reside on private land, managed by the landowner. Many areas in southern Wisconsin also have less public land available for hunting, which causes problems with overcrowding and lessens the chances of a quality hunt. Looking at this from a management perspective, we don't have enough deer in parts of the north, and too many deer in parts of the south. What can we do to balance this out? I am not sure. I wish I had a magic wand and could fix the situation. But I don't have that magic wand and never will have one. I'm sure you can see why managing deer in Wisconsin is a controversial topic. Let's hope something can be done, especially in the north. If you are interested in helping to manage the herd in your county, consider applying to be on your local County Deer Advisory Council (CDAC). This is your chance to represent hunters and have your voice heard.

Anybody who knows me knows I love my bears. I've been directly involved in one form or another with the management of bears in Wisconsin since 1984. I've seen many changes as the bear populations have grown and expanded in the state. Each year brings new challenges regarding how to best manage our bear population, not just for biological reasons, but also for social reasons. Bears are now inhabiting areas of the state where in the past we would never have thought to see them. In some of these areas bears are being accepted and even considered a welcome addition. In other places, not so much.

We are also in an age where we are seeing increased predation of bear cubs by wolves, as that population expands. People who bear hunt consistently in the north will tell you that the number of wolves showing up at bear baits is increasing, with the number of cubs seen at baits greatly decreasing in the past few years. There is also documentation of wolves pulling hibernating bears from dens and killing them in the middle of winter. The effect of wolf predation on our bear population in the state should be studied further.

The 2023 bear harvest and success rates were much lower than predicted for this year's bear hunt. Whether wolf predation played a part in the decreased harvest is unknown. This and other factors need to be considered if the trend continues. Another management item that needs to be monitored is the average age and weight of the bears harvested. Currently, the largest percentage of bears harvested are 1 and a half years old, with the average weight at around 170 pounds. A lack of older and larger bears could prove detrimental to the health of the overall population over time.

In early December I attended the DNR's semi-annual Bear Advisory Committee meeting where we discussed the 2023 harvest. The committee began the process of setting harvest goals and harvest permit levels for the 2024 bear hunt. We are not sure why harvest figures were down for 2023 (3,000 plus bear harvested, with a harvest goal of over 4,000). Was it because of weather, abundant mast crops, or did we overestimate the number of bears out there? Some bear management zones required considerable discussion, while others were straightforward regarding proposed quotas and permit levels for 2024. Whether the factors I mentioned above are contributing to the decrease in the bear harvest remains to be seen and will need to be watched closely.

Elk, to me, is another success story that the DNR, along with the Rocky Mountain Elk Federation need to be recognized for. In 2023 there were 8 harvest permits awarded. Four were awarded to the Native Americans and the other 4 were awarded to applicants via a lottery system. As of this writing the Native

Americans had harvested 2 elk, neither of which were large herd bulls. All 4 elk hunters who received permits via the DNR's lottery system were successful in harvesting an elk. All 4 hunters have a unique story behind the filling of their elk harvest permit. Here is a short recap of their hunts. On opening day, one hunter didn't see any elk during the morning hunt, but that afternoon he was able to harvest a 5 x 5 bull with a sticker tine. Oh yes, did I mention he is a WBH member, and that he harvested the elk with a long bow at close range? The story of his hunt is included in this issue of *THE Bowhunter* magazine. NICE! Another harvest permit was originally awarded to a father who then transferred the harvest permit to his daughter. The young lady harvested her trophy elk either on her birthday or her birthday weekend. How cool is that? A third elk was harvested by a 70 plus year old gentleman. Wow! The last harvest permit holder's story is just as wonderful as the other 3. This permit was awarded to an armed forces veteran. Not only did this gentleman harvest a trophy elk, he did it on Veterans Day! These are some great success stories, thanks to the successful reintroduction of elk here in Wisconsin.

In the coming weeks I will be attending the turkey and elk advisory committee meetings. Watch for a recap of those meetings in the next issue of *THE Bowhunter*.