# Missouri River Fish & Wildlife Conservation Office

Bismarck, North Dakota September 2020

**Interior Region 5**
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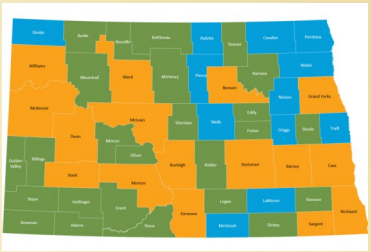
## Ecological Services

This year our biological technicians have had additional opportunities to conduct field work with the Bismarck Ecological Services office. Kelsey, Kat, and Melissa worked with ES Biologist, Lauren Toivonen for three weeks utilizing day trips to map prairie dog colony boundaries on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation, in partnership with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. Long days were spent in UTV's on remnant prairie mapping boundaries with the Collector program on an iPad. In all, the crew successfully mapped 77 prairie dog colonies! This information will be used to update Standing Rock's prairie dog colony map.

## Role of Covid19

September proved to be a difficult month for our FWCO team. Since the beginning of the pandemic, North Dakota has provided direction to residents and businesses through a color-coded health guidance system. The system includes five levels of risk, with each level following red becoming progressively less restrictive and more economically engaged. Each level is guided by a measurement system based on criteria including, but not limited to, number of reported cases, positivity rates and testing capacity. Until September, risk level was determined col-

lectively for the state which had been Green/Low Risk since field work began. However, rising Covid19 cases prompted the governor to respond by modifying the statewide risk level to a county level assessment. As a result, three of the four primary North Dakota counties where staff conduct weekly fieldwork activities were moved from the Green/Low Risk level to the Yellow/ Moderate Risk level. This change prompted a pause to certain field work activities, and increased restrictions for activities allowed to continue. With the added layer of complexity due to covid19 this month, staff were still able to accomplish a few significant field activities. **Learn More:** ND Smart Restart Protocols



Grand Forks Air Force Base

Minot Air Force Base 5th Bomb Wing

Minot Air Force Base 91st Missile Wing

Naval Radio Transmission Facility LaMoure

# Partnerships

### Sikes Act

Enacted in 1960, the Sikes Act enhances cooperation between the Department of Defense, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state wildlife agencies to promote fish and wildlife conservation on military lands while continuing to support the military mission. **Learn More:** Sikes Act

### Minot AFB

The final week of vane trapping bees occurred earlier this month just before the first frost! Fortunately, the simple design and protocol we developed for this inventory allowed for it to be one of the few projects implemented safely amidst the covid19 restrictions in its entirety with the exception of spring emergence trapping.

Contents of a vane trap

A few days of favorable weather and reduced covid19 travel restrictions allowed staff members to make a couple $4^{1/2}$ hour round trip excursions to the base to implement targeted noxious weed control. Canada thistle was the primary species targeted during this effort. Staff were able to treat approximately 15 acres in priority management areas!

Matt Gardner spraying Canada thistle on Minot AFB

### Grand Forks AFB

Nearly all of the Sikes Act field activities took place on Grand Forks AFB this year. Crews either made significant progress, or successfully completed several priority projects on base. Earlier this month the crew was able to complete mussel surveys along 5 transects on the Turtle River using viewing buckets. There were four species of live specimens identified and returned to their capture location. In addition to the completion of the mussel transects, the crews also completed the final week of bee vane trapping on base.

Mussels captured along a survey transect on the Turtle River

### NRTF LaMoure

Communication between the Service, ND Game & Fish Dept. and the U.S. Navy continued with regard to the development of the new INRMP.

Bobby Weiland spraying weeds on Minot AFB.

# Where we work

The Sikes Act crew is not unique amongst the various FWS offices located in Bismarck with regard to primarily conducting field work in other areas of the state. However our work *is* unique in that for 5 months during the main field season, (spring through fall) the crew reports to the Bismarck duty station Monday morning and enters travel status for the week to complete activities on either Grand Forks or Minot AFB. For perspective, MAFB is 123 miles from the Bismarck office, and GFAFB is 236 miles. With this arrangement being our "normal" covid19 added a significant logistical challenge in the absence of the much needed overnight travel. Day trips consisted of either $4^{1/2}$ hours or $7^{3/4}$ hours round trip driving in addition to the time spent in the field. While the burdens of covid19 made our work arrangements cumbersome, it also forced us to get creative and consider new ways to do our work more efficiently.

*When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it.*

*-Henry Ford*

# Fisheries

### Fish Passage

Flowing southeast across the southern Canadian Border, the Pembina River meanders 319 miles to its confluence with the Red River near Pembina, North Dakota. Historically, the Pembina River was a prime spawning area for lake sturgeon, with records of commercial fisherman taking hundreds of lake sturgeon from the river. In the early 1900's, however, lake sturgeon were extirpated from the Red River.

For the past 20 years a lake sturgeon recovery effort has been taking place between the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR) and USFWS within the Red River Watershed through a reintroduction effort. Additionally, the MNDNR, North Dakota Game and Fish, and USFWS have been working on reconnecting Red River segments through the means of dam removal or by utilizing a fish passage modification. Plans are in the works to remove Pembina Dam, the

first dam upstream of the Pembina River's mouth, which will reconnect fish passage from the Red River to the Pembina River. These recovery efforts have created the perfect segue for an in-depth look at the Pembina River Watershed's fish passage connectivity.

Pembina River Watershed fish passage survey planning began in September. A pre-survey analysis identified 150 potential fish passage barriers within the Pembina River watershed along public rights-of-way. Due to COVID-19 concerns of meeting with landowners, potential barrier surveys on private land will be postponed until 2021. Fish passage surveys along public right-of-ways are anticipated to be completed during October for the Pembina River watershed. Results from our fish passage surveys will help guide projects to reconnect fish habitat for lake sturgeon and other aquatic species.

**Learn More:** [National Fish Passage Program]

### Native Species

Fall reproduction surveys of Lake Ilo were completed this past month. Survey results yielded a promising outlook for walleye with many young of year fish captured. Additionally, a few adult walleye and northern pike were captured in frame nets (pictured). Lake Ilo continues to be an important fishery of western North Dakota with a promising future.

**Below: Bobby Weiland with a northern pike caught at Lake Ilo**

# Prairie Restoration Update

In 2017 the Bismarck field office staff initiated a project to convert 0.2 acres of bluegrass lawn with native pollinator habitat at the field office. This effort augmented some of the work that had already been started by Karen Kreil (retired USFWS employee). The ND Wildlife Society provided matching input for the seed mix used for the restoration and the labor was completed entirely in-house.

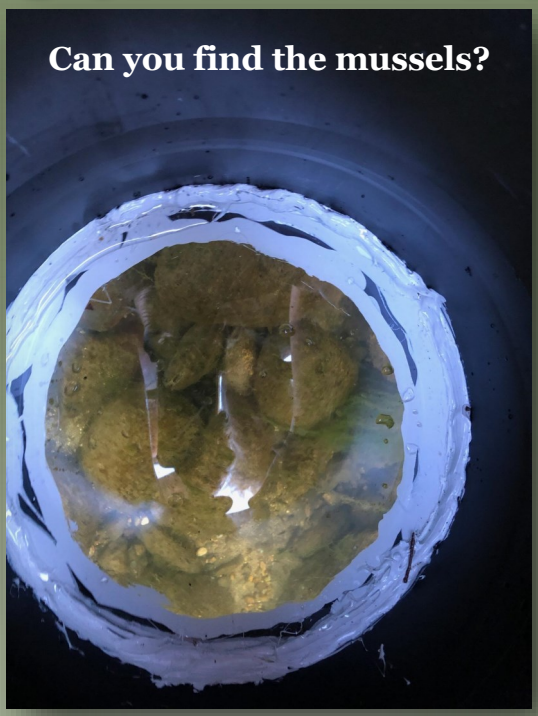
Instead of a lawn that requires maintenance, both staff and wildlife reap the benefits of native prairie habitat!

**Above: Lawn removal. Right: Noreen Walsh seeding site**

**Restoration in 2020**

# Our Team in Action

Amanda and Kelsey with captured mussels on the Turtle River



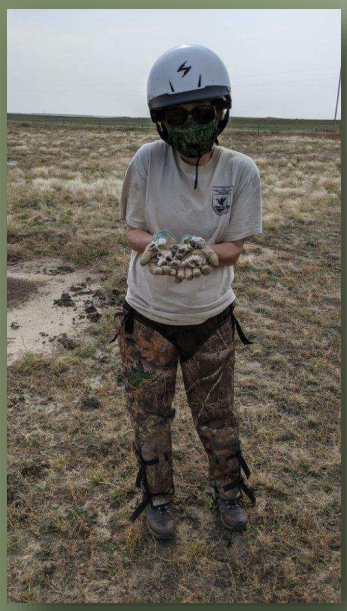

Looking through a viewing bucket at mussels

Matt Gardner working on Fish passage surveys

Rattlesnake at a prairie dog burrow

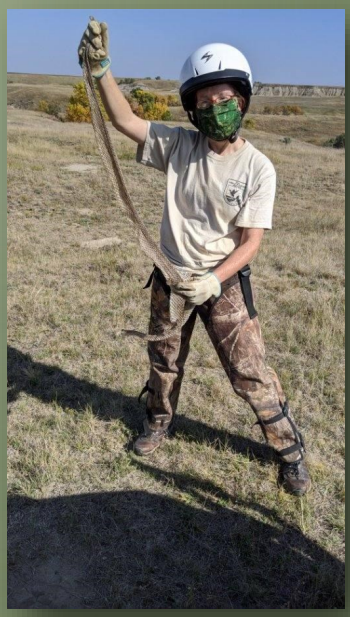
Bobby and Matt with Walleye

Bobby Weiland working on fish passage surveys



Melissa Martin with prairie dog skulls

Scenery on the Standing Rock Reservation where the crew mapped prairie dog colonies



Melissa Martin with a snake skin she found