Forecast Factors

Two important factors impact upland game numbers during the fall hunting season: the number of breeding adults in the spring and the reproductive success of the breeding population. Reproductive success consists of the number of nests that successfully hatch and the number of chicks recruited into the fall population. Annual survival is relatively low for pheasants and quail, therefore, the fall population is more dependent on reproductive success than adult breeding population levels. While reproductive success is a major population regulator for prairie chicken, this species’ greater annual survival helps maintain hunting opportunities when nesting conditions are poor.

This forecast examines breeding populations and reproductive success of pheasants, quail, and prairie chickens. Breeding population data were gathered during surveys for pheasants (point counts), quail (whistle counts), and prairie chickens (lek counts). Data for reproductive success were collected during late-summer roadside surveys for pheasants and quail. Reproductive success of prairie chickens cannot be easily assessed using the same methods because they generally do not associate with roads like pheasants and quail.

This year, Kansas was very dry between October and April, resulting in poor habitat conditions entering the nesting season. Heavy rains in May in the western half of the state greatly improved cover, while eastern regions remained dry. Dry conditions limited burning in the Flint Hills, retaining better-than-average nesting cover and may have improved nesting success across all eastern regions. While moisture in the west is usually a good thing, there can be too much of a good thing. Heavy rainfall continued in the west during the nesting season, with some areas receiving more than 12 inches above normal rainfall. Storms resulted in several localized hail and flooding events, which likely caused additional mortality within the impacted areas. Overall, extreme conditions appear to have reduced production this year, as indicated by lower roadside counts. The resulting vegetation may challenge hunters as there is excessive winter habitat this fall. However, this winter habitat should also guard against losses from severe winter weather.

Kansas Upland Bird Forecast

2018 Kansas Hunting and Furharvesting Regulations Summary, the 2018 Hunting Atlas and other hunting information at ksoutdoors.com
Regional Forecasts

Northern High Plains/Northwest

Pheasant – Pheasant hunting opportunities should remain fair to good, but there will be fewer birds in the area than last year. The spring pheasant crow survey index was the highest regional index this year but remained below-average for the region. There was a significant decline in the regional pheasant index on the roadside survey this year compared to 2017. Production was assumed to be negatively impacted by heavy rainfall throughout the summer, which was confirmed by ongoing research in the region. The highest densities were found in the northern half of the region, particularly the northeastern counties.

Quail – Quail are limited in this region and most are taken opportunistically by pheasant hunters. The best areas are in the eastern counties of the region where adequate woody cover is present. This region is at the extreme northeastern edge of bobwhite range in Kansas and densities are relatively low compared to central and southern Kansas. Densities on the summer roadside survey decreased this year and remain the lowest in the state.

Prairie Chicken – Prairie chicken populations continue to expand in both numbers and range within the region. Lesser prairie-chickens occur in the southern and central portions of the region and remain closed to prairie chicken hunting this year (see map for unit boundaries). Within the area that is open, the best hunting will be found in the central portion of the Flint Hills, Prairie Chicken hunting opportunities should remain fair to good throughout the region this year. The spring whistle survey showed a slight decrease this year compared to 2017, but there were observed on roadside surveys as well. Given there has been very high densities for the past 3 years, the region retained the highest roadside index for quail in 2018, despite the observed losses. While quail in northern central Kansas has seemed ubiquitous across the landscape the past few years, they have historically been spotty in the region. The Smoky Hills will likely offer above-average densities; however, with declines this year, quail will return to more historic patterns. Densities were best in the central portion, extending eastward toward the central Flint Hills.

Osage Questas/Southeast

Osage Questas – This region is outside the primary pheasant range and very limited hunting opportunities are available. Prairie chickens are occasionally found in the northwestern portion of the region in very low densities.

Quail – While long-term trends have been declining, spring surveys have been steadily increasing over the last decade and remained stable this year. Roadside surveys indicated there was a slight increase in 2018, likely in response to dry weather in early summer. This was the only regional increase for quail observed this year. Hunters should expect densities similar to slightly above last year and remaining above average. Areas where birds were found last year should offer the best opportunities, with the best hunting in the northwestern counties in grasslands extending east off the Flint Hills.

Prairie Chicken – Greater prairie-chickens occur in the central and northeastern counties of the region bordering the Smoky Hills. Populations have consistently declined over the long term. Fire suppression and loss of native grassland has gradually reduced the amount of suitable habitat in the region. The best hunting opportunities will be in large blocks of native rangeland along the edge of the Flint Hills region.

Flint Hills

Pheasant – This region is on the eastern edge of the primary pheasant range and offers limited opportunity. Highest pheasant densities are typically found on the western edge of the Flint Hills. While the spring crow counts remained stable this year, the summer roadside survey indicated a decrease. The best opportunity for pheasants this year will be in the northwest portion of the region bordering the Smoky Hills.

Quail – Quail hunting in the Flint Hills should be fair to good. The region had a slight decrease in the index of whistling bobwhites this year, but the trend has been to record high densities on the western edge of the region. Roadside counts were lower than in 2017, regional reports indicate good bird numbers, very good cover, and weather that likely promot ed production – particularly in the northern half of the region where estimates largely improved. Additionally, carryover birds from high spring densities will help maintain opportunity. Quail densities were stable in the Flint Hills this year, likely in response to improved habitat conditions. The spring whistle survey indicated there was a slight increase, however, only two routes observed pheasants in 2018.

Prairie Chicken – Prairie chickens within the open unit in this region will occur in very low densities within the remaining large tracts of rangeland in the northeastern portion of the region. Prairie Chicken densities found in the northern tier of counties along the border of the Southern Smoky Hills region. The spring roadside survey showed a slight increase from last year. Based on roadside surveys, opportunities are expected to remain similar to last year with highest pheasant densities found in the northern tier of counties along the border of the Smoky Hills region.

Southcentral Prairies

Pheasant – Pheasant hunters should expect a fair to good season this year. The spring crow survey indicated a decline from 2017. However, the summer roadside survey showed a slight increase from last year. Based on roadside surveys, opportunities are expected to remain similar to last year with highest pheasant densities found in the northern tier of counties along the border of the Smoky Hills region.

Quail – Quail hunting should remain fair to good throughout the region. The spring whistle survey showed a significant decrease, followed by a decline on the summer roadside survey. Despite this decline, the region maintained near average densities, with the second highest regional index on the roadside survey. Like the Flint Hills, reports indicate quail numbers may be better than roadside surveys have indicated. The intermixing of quality cover provides more consistent opportunity throughout the region. Prairie chickens compared to other regions. Roadside counts were highest in the northcentral portion of the region, although relatively consistent with declines indicated on the spring roadside survey. Opportunities will be found in the core of the Flint Hills this year due to prolonged drought reducing large-scale burning and increasing available nesting habitat. The northern half of the region recorded the highest roadside indices this year.

Quail – Opportunities will remain fair to good. The quail population in this region is highly variable depending on weather. Whistle counts were significantly higher, with populations recovering from losses from a 2017 late-spring blizzard. This increase returned the spring surveys to well above the long-term average and was the highest regional density for the year. Above-average precipitation during spring and summer likely promoted production. Roadside surveys with the second highest regional index on the roadside survey. Significant decreases were observed on roadside surveys as well. This region is entirely occupied by lesser prairie chickens. Prairie chicken hunting is closed in this area this year.