

El Dorado Wildlife Area News



Area News – Fall 2015

2015/2016 Hunting Outlook:

Hunters should be aware that abundant precipitation throughout the month of May caused significant lake flooding (5.8' above conservation elevation) that persisted into August. Some area habitats were impacted by this flood event that persisted for over 2 months. Nearly 10% of area crop fields were either lost to flooding or remained too wet to plant. However, resulting natural vegetation that became established in crop fields later in August as flood waters withdrew, was often desirable and still should provide some food and cover values to wildlife. Other area habitats including area woodlands adjacent to the lake have been impacted. Understory vegetation in many woodland environments was negatively impacted and will provide diminished habitat value. Portions of several area grassland tracts were also impacted by the flood, reducing cover values for quail and other wildlife.

Upland Birds: The fall hunting outlook for quail on the area is fair to good. Hunters should see quail numbers that are again increased as compared to last fall. Quail production in recent years (2007-2010) was believed to have been hampered by heavy rains, cool temperatures, and significant flooding during the critical reproductive months of May, June, and July. The 2011 and 2012 reproductive seasons however were notably different. Rather than too much moisture and associated cool temperatures, both years were marked with record breaking excessive heat and drought. Quail production during those years is believed to have suffered as well. More moderate weather conditions in 2013, 2014, and 2015 are believed to have resulted in improved production, as several coveys were observed or reported early this fall, often in areas where habitat work has recently been completed. Within most habitat areas, natural vegetation and area crops should provide good food and cover conditions for wildlife, including quail, and should help to sustain breeding populations into next spring. The wildlife area lies outside the primary range of ring-necked pheasant. Hunters occasionally encounter pheasants on the area, but numbers are low.



Bobwhite pair. Female (left) & male (right).

Waterfowl: The fall hunting outlook for waterfowl on the area is fair. Waterfowl populations are reported to remain strong following another good production year within breeding habitats to the north. Habitat conditions however here are not nearly as strong as those experienced in 2013. Abundant precipitation in May and flooding into August kept lake levels full for most of the summer. Food producing plants could not become established on lake fringes because of the flood and late dewatering. As such, few food resources will be available for waterfowl this season. Late summer and early fall weather has been mild and dry, contributing to declining lake levels which has begun to pull water away from cover edges. Currently hunters have adequate opportunity to conceal themselves for a hunt, but if mild and dry conditions prevail later into the fall, hunters may find it more challenging to hide later this season. Weather will undoubtedly play a part (as it always does) in determining the extent of waterfowl use this year as well. Hunters are encouraged to visit the area website to view weekly waterfowl population and habitat condition updates. Hunters are reminded that El Dorado Lake lies within the Southeast Duck Zone.



Drake gadwall.

Deer: The fall hunting outlook for deer on the area is fair. The 2012 EHD outbreak that struck many Midwestern states is believed to have had an impact in Kansas, but deer losses were not as extensive as other nearby states. Frequent and large reports of die-offs were lacking within the county and on the wildlife area in that year. Regardless, hunter reports from 2013 indicated that many hunters saw fewer deer and fewer older bucks. Reports from the 2014 season however were more optimistic as hunters reported seeing more deer including some quality bucks. Although lake flooding has impacted some woodland and cropland habitats on the wildlife area, deer remain relatively common on the wildlife area. Antlerless deer and fawns were a common sight again this summer, and reports of a few nice bucks have been received, suggesting that an area breeding population remains strong and will provide hunting opportunity into the future.



White-tailed buck and doe.

Turkey: The fall hunting outlook for turkey on the area is good. Area populations remain strong following good production dating back to at least 2012. Several broods were again observed this summer indicating a moderate level of production on the wildlife area. Hunters should find good turkey numbers early this season with numbers declining later in the year as some harvest occurs and remaining birds spend more time on nearby private property as a result of hunting pressure.



Wild turkeys.

Small Game: Opportunities to hunt fox squirrel and cottontail exist. Of the two, fox squirrel, typically provide greater opportunity. With much of the area wooded and with hunting interest in squirrels often low, the area can provide some attractive hunting. Cottontail populations are often not strong, but can provide some opportunity during most years.



Fox squirrel.

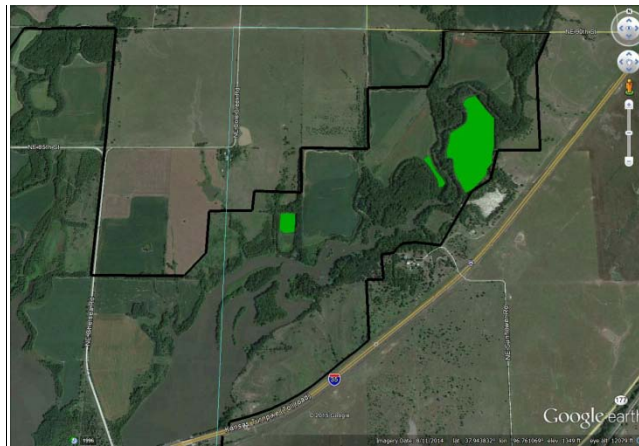
Furbearers & Coyotes: The area is open to the hunting and trapping of furbearers . In most years, good opportunity to harvest beaver and raccoon exists. Coyote and bobcat populations are generally fair, providing some opportunity.



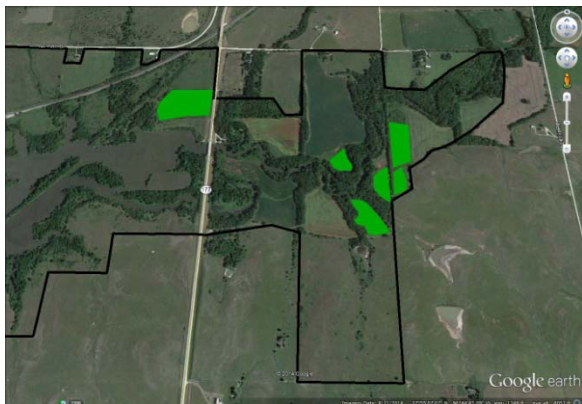
Coyote.

Year Three of Upland Habitat Planting Plan Completed:

A 5 year plan designed to provide multiple benefits, including those to enhance water quality, wildlife habitat, and associated recreation was initiated in 2013. Beginning that year, portions of agricultural lands along 5 lake tributaries will be idled and planted to native grasses and forbs. These annual planting projects are designed to enhance grassland cover availability in areas dominated by woodland and cropland habitats. As a result, plantings should enhance habitat diversity within the wildlife area, ultimately enhancing habitat for wildlife species such as quail, turkey, deer, and others, and enhance lake water quality by filtering some run-off from adjacent agricultural lands. In 2013, six former agricultural tracts were planted totaling approximately 30 acres along Durechen Creek. Similar efforts were completed in 2014, converting portions of 4 tracts totaling 10 acres along Cole Creek. In 2015, 3 tracts were converted totaling 34 acres along the Walnut River. Approximately 12 acres are planned to be converted within 4 tracts along Satchel Creek in spring 2016. Additional work will be conducted each spring along each of the primary drainages leading into El Dorado Lake. By improving habitat, we can enhance wildlife populations and outdoor recreation opportunities such as hunting.



Walnut River Area. 2015 habitat planting locations.



Durechen Creek Area. 2013 habitat planting locations.



Cole Creek Area. 2014 habitat planting locations.

Quail Habitat Protected with Completion of Area Project!

Have you ever heard of the word succession? If you like to hunt quail and have concern about declining quail populations, then it is a term you should be familiar with! Succession is a term used to describe a slow but gradual change or transition from one vegetation community to another. Succession is a natural process continually in motion often occurring at a faster rate as rainfall and soil productivity increase. It often describes the transition from vegetation communities dominated by annual plants (herb-like plants that complete their life cycle in one growing season), to perennial plants (those herb-like plants completing their life cycle in multiple years and coming back each year from roots), to brushy plants (woody plants such as plum and dogwood), to trees (woody plants such as cottonwood and ash). Quail are often described as an early succession species meaning that it requires a significant proportion of its habitat to be composed of annual plant communities. Because succession is always at work, quail habitats are slowly (although constantly) changing and those changes often reduce habitat values. Succession however can be slowed or reversed with management actions which in turn can enhance habitat for quail.



An example of succession.

This grassland habitat is slowly changing into a woodland habitat. Without management actions such as the tree shearing captured above, the grassland would gradually transition to a wooded habitat (similar to that shown at the fringe of the grassland) and most habitat values for quail would be lost.

A common failure of quail enthusiasts is the belief that habitat stays the same forever. Quality habitat areas that held good quail populations years ago may no longer provide birds with what they need. Subtle changes in the types of plants that exist on an area do occur and can begin to slowly decrease the value of the area to quail. These changes often go undetected to the casual observer, but can slowly decrease habitat quantity and quality unless active management is employed to maintain a productive condition. Quail have often been considered an edge and disturbance species. This means that they prefer to inhabit areas that have a lot of different plant communities close to one another. They must have nesting, brood rearing, loafing, and food cover available within a short distance. These different plant communities are maintained by instituting management practices (disturbances) such as burning, disking, grazing, tree shearing, shrub planting, and converting brome and fescue to native grass and forbs. Without management, quail habitat (grass, weeds, brush areas) eventually becomes habitat dominated by brush and trees and more suited for species such as deer and turkeys. In many eastern Kansas areas this subtle change in habitat has taken place and continues. More deer and turkey habitat is slowly being created enhancing populations of these species, while quail habitat slowly dwindles, thus causing quail numbers to decline.



Tree shearing is a valuable management tool used to protect early succession habitats important to quail and other wildlife species. Since 2004, nearly 600 hours of mechanical tree shearing have been completed to protect such habitats.

Because quail may be considered as a potential prey species for many types of predators, the habitat manager must provide cover to allow birds to rest safely and avoid predators when needed. This type of cover is called loafing and escape cover, and is typically provided by native shrubs or “thickets” such as plum, chokecherry, and dogwood. These thickets must be within or adjacent to other quality habitats which provide food and cover. Loafing and escape cover must provide concealment and protection from above and the side, and also allow mobility beneath. This type of cover must be well dispersed and comprise approximately 10 to 20 percent of the area throughout the habitat to always provide birds with a nearby safe haven. Thickets provide fewer benefits to quail if they are allowed to grow into trees or become too plentiful and exclude important annual and perennial plants.



Quality quail cover often includes shrub habitats (like this one) that provide concealment and protection from the elements and predators. Loafing and escape cover is especially attractive to quail in transitional areas such as this one where different food and cover habitat types intersect.

Vegetation communities and thus quail habitat are not immune to succession on the wildlife area. To remain productive, area habitats must be managed. Recently, area staff reviewed quail habitats throughout the area and enhanced the long term viability of such habitats by completing management work and reversing succession. In some locations, brush or shrubs were becoming too abundant. Other types of important habitat components for quail such as annual and perennial plants were gradually being replaced as succession advanced and shrubs increased. In those areas where shrubs were too abundant, staff simply brought in equipment and mowed some of the shrubs to reduce their abundance. In doing so, the stature and abundance of the shrubs was reduced and mowing also encouraged more sunlight to reach the ground. That encouraged annual plants to grow, enhancing food and cover values and improving habitat for quail and other wildlife species. Without this work, succession would advance and slowly but surely shrubs would become dominant, and important habitat for quail and other game species would decline.



Succession was advancing in many area habitats. Shrub invasion threatened the ability of some area lands to produce adequate annual and perennial plant communities necessary for quail and other wildlife. This aerial image shows recent management efforts to reverse succession and manage shrubs by mowing.

Area Sunflower Fields Provide More Hunting Opportunity:

Area dove hunters are well aware of KDWPT's efforts to provide early hunting opportunities by producing and managing sunflower fields each year. Dove hunting on these fields can be very good early in the season, but most hunters quickly lose interest as dove use wanes following harvest and migration. These fields can still provide good hunting opportunities later in the hunting season, even through the fall and winter. How is that you ask? Several game species continue to utilize these fields long after the September 1 dove opener has passed.

Dove hunters that visit fields later in the season after the crowds have gone, and birds have worked back into the fields again, are often rewarded with decent opportunities. Dove season extends into late October, followed again with a week or more of opportunity in November. Although most doves have migrated through Kansas by this time, pockets of good bird numbers can remain when fall conditions have been mild and food resources are abundant. Sometimes area sunflower fields fit that bill.



Quail hunters shouldn't overlook sunflower fields either. Because fall and winter sunflower fields don't provide much cover for quail, hunters should focus on sunflower field edges, particularly when they are adjacent to quality quail cover that include grasses, broad-leaved weeds, and brush. When you can find that mix of food and cover, you will often find a covey.



Crow hunting provides yet another wing-shooting opportunity. Seasons are lengthy (4 months), bag limits are not in effect, and like quail hunting, only a hunting license is required. Bird use is often significant on these fields during the fall and winter and hunting can be enhanced with the use of decoys and calls. Hunting interest for this species is often low, providing ample opportunity to enjoy a hunt in the absence of crowds unlike what may have been experienced earlier during the dove season.



Although wet conditions this past spring limited the size and number of sunflower fields on some public lands in the region, some opportunity still exists at El Dorado and Council Grove Wildlife Areas. At El Dorado Wildlife Area, two sunflower tracts (5 & 16 acres) exist. The 5 acre sunflower field can be accessed from the north by walking 0.1 mile southwest of the parking area south of the junction of NE Ellis Road and NE 20th Street. The same field can be accessed from the south by walking 0.25 mile north of the parking area north of the junction of NE Ellis Road and NE 10th Street. The 16 acre sunflower field can be found by walking 0.35 mile southwest of the parking area that lies west of the Walnut River on NE 90th Street. At Council Grove Wildlife Area, a 13 acre tract can be found near Munkers Creek. The field can be accessed from the west by walking approximately 0.25 mile east of the parking area at the south end of 850 Road. The field can be accessed from the south by walking approximately 0.25 mile north of the eastern most parking area along the north side of Munkers Creek.

Commission Approves Proposed Hunting and Fishing License Fees:

The Kansas Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT) Commission approved a proposal to raise fees for fishing and hunting licenses at their public meeting in Burlington on October 22, 2015. The new fees will be effective January 1, 2016. KDWPT staff have been discussing fee increases since early last spring and presented a draft proposal before the Commission at their public meeting in August.

Fee increases were deemed necessary to ensure pivotal programs important to hunters and anglers can be maintained and enhanced. Basic hunting and fishing license fees haven't increased since 2002, and the price of resident deer and turkey permits haven't increased since 1984. Inflation has increased the cost of doing business by almost 30 percent since 2002, and the uncommitted balance of the Wildlife Fee Fund was beginning to decline. License and permit revenues go into the Wildlife Fee Fund to pay for wildlife and fisheries programs, which receive no State General Fund money.

By unanimously approving the proposed increases, the Commission ensured that programs such as Walk-in Hunting Access (WIHA), Community Fisheries Assistance (CFAP), Pass It On, Fishing Impoundment and Stream Access (FISH), and Wildlife Habitat Improvement (WHIP) will continue to provide hunters and anglers with high-quality outdoor opportunities. Increased revenues will also help fund day-to-day business such as operation of four fish hatcheries, law enforcement, public lands management and private land programs.



License fees provide essential funding for land management and hunting access programs.

Beginning January 1, 2016 a resident annual hunting or fishing license will cost \$25. The current fee is \$18. However, value-added options are built into the new fee structure, including a discount for purchasing a combination hunt/fish annual license (\$45) and an early-buy combination discount (\$40) if purchased before February 1. Also included are multi-year hunting and fishing licenses that will provide savings. A five-year fishing or hunting license is priced at \$100, and a five-year combination hunting/fishing license is \$180, a savings of \$70 if those licenses were purchased individually each year.

Nonresidents will pay \$95 for an annual hunting license and \$50 for an annual fishing license.

Resident deer permits will go from \$30 to \$40; nonresidents will pay \$415 for the combination (one antlered deer/one antlerless whitetail) permit. Resident turkey permits are set at \$25 and nonresidents will pay \$50 for a fall turkey permit and \$60 for a spring turkey permit.

Lifetime hunting and fishing licenses will go from \$440 to \$500 and \$880 to \$960 for a combination.

Youth license and permit fees were not changed, and the senior lifetime hunt/fish combination license (\$40) will not change. Vendor and convenience fees of \$2.50 are added at the point of purchase.





Native grass and forb plantings, like this one along Cole Creek, are enhancing habitat quantity and quality on the wildlife area. In turn, hunting opportunities for species such as deer, turkey, and quail are improved.

Would you like more information about the El Dorado Wildlife Area?

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