

# Heat and drought impact upland bird forecast

Kansas upland bird hunters enjoyed a banner season in 2010, but this summer's heat and drought in parts of the state have hurt upland bird prospects for 2011. The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism has released its 2011 Kansas Upland Bird Forecast, and although good numbers of pheasants and quail will be found in some areas, severe drought and record high temperatures throughout much of the birds' range resulted in fewer birds overall.

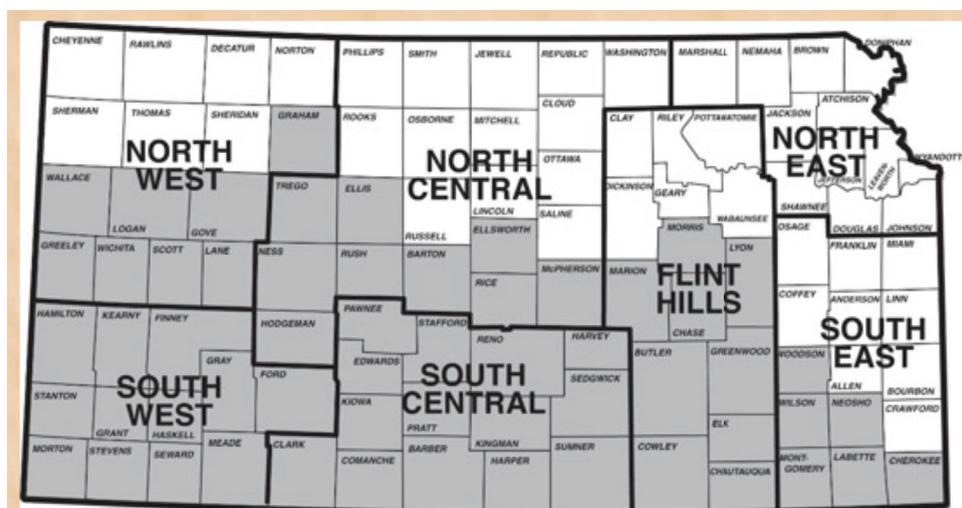
Generally, the best pheasant hunting in 2011 will be north of I-70 in western Kansas, the best quail hunting will be in the central part of the state, and the best greater prairie chicken hunting should be in native grasslands from the northern Flint Hills westward throughout the Smoky Hills.

Central and western Kansas had a relatively mild 2010-2011 winter, and over-winter survival was very high for upland game throughout most of the state. Breeding populations in central and western areas neared all time highs, especially for pheasant. However, drought that began in the summer of 2010 and persisted through the 2011 nesting season (May through July) and the summer hampered growth of wheat — primary nesting habitat for pheasants — especially in western Kansas. Areas in northwest and northcentral parts of the state received rain in May, which improved nesting conditions in those areas but likely hurt nest success where rainfall was excessive. In July and August, some severe hailstorms hit these areas, possibly decreasing chick survival in localized areas.

The southern half of the state endured prolonged drought through the rest of the summer. Southwest and southcentral Kansas had particularly bad reproductive conditions for pheasants, quail and prairie chickens.

So what does this mean for Kansas upland bird hunters this fall? Here's the statewide breakdown by species.

**PHEASANTS** - Unfortunately, drought through much of the state hampered pheasant reproduction this year. A substantial number of hens nest in winter wheat in the primary pheasant range (western Kansas). This year, much of western Kansas, especially southwest, had much-reduced wheat production. Nest success was likely much lower in these areas due to poor vegetative structure. Additionally, earlier wheat harvest dates due to poor growing conditions



Small game regions for Kansas; grayed counties were open to emergency haying or grazing of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Note: normally even during emergency conditions the majority of CRP fields in a given county are left unharmed or ungrazed.

likely caused losses to nests or young broods. Thus, like many other pheasant states, Kansas will experience a substantial decline in the pheasant population this year.

The timing and quantity of early summer precipitation also plays a direct role in game bird productivity. Success of nests and survival of young is generally best when rain comes slowly and in near average amounts during May and June. Most of the areas in Kansas' primary pheasant range did not meet that prescription this year and had little or no precipitation. Additionally, a few areas where there was reproductive success (northwest and northcentral Kansas) received heavy rainfall and/or hail during the peak reproductive period. Although these storms were often localized, in some counties they occurred multiple times. Counties affected by hail include portions of Norton, Graham, and Rooks.

Compared to 2010, pheasant numbers will be considerably lower throughout their range. This will especially be true in northeastern, southwestern, and southcentral Kansas. In those parts of northwestern and northcentral Kansas not affected by severe summer storms, pheasant numbers will be relatively good compared to other areas of the state but still down from last year.

**QUAIL** - The bobwhite breeding population in 2011 was generally stable compared to 2010, except for southwestern Kansas, where there

were severe declines. However, 2011 summer brood surveys indices were down throughout much of the state for quail, indicating a general decline. There were some indications of higher reproductive success in the northcentral, southcentral, and southeast parts of Kansas although good areas may be spotty.

Because quail breed later than pheasants and prairie chickens, early summer moisture may have provided better conditions for nesting and brood-rearing in central and eastern Kansas. In past years, heavy precipitation and flooding associated with summer storms has negatively impacted bobwhite productivity in many parts of central and eastern Kansas. Fortunately, these conditions were absent this year. Counties that reported higher quail reproductive success are Pratt, Reno, Woodson, Phillips, and Rooks.

The best quail hunting will be found throughout the central part of the state. However, extreme southcentral Kansas experienced prolonged drought, likely hampering reproduction. Quail numbers declined considerably in southwestern and northeastern Kansas, and opportunities will likely be limited in those areas. Bobwhite numbers in far northwestern Kansas continue to improve, but that portion of the state is at the fringe of the bird's range, and densities will still be low compared to central Kansas. Although southeast Kansas may see an improvement in reproduction this

year, numbers remain far below historic levels in that region.

**PRAIRIE CHICKEN** - Kansas is home to greater and lesser prairie chickens. Both species require a landscape of predominately native grass. Lesser prairie chickens are found in westcentral and southwestern Kansas in native prairie and nearby stands of native grass within the Conservation Reserve Program. Greater prairie chickens are found primarily in the tallgrass and mixed grass prairies in the eastern one-third and northern half of the state.

The spring prairie chicken lek survey indicated that the lesser prairie chicken breeding population was similar to last year, except at the northern extent of their range in westcentral Kansas, where there were increases. This area is occupied by both greater and lesser prairie chickens. Nesting and brood-rearing conditions for lesser prairie chickens were generally not good this summer throughout most of their range due to drought in southcentral and southwestern Kansas. It is likely that populations will be down from last year, and the best hunting will be in the central and northern portions of the lesser prairie chicken range.

Greater prairie chicken breeding populations were generally down in the eastern parts of the state (Flint Hills), but up considerably in the northcentral (Smoky Hills) and northwest (grasslands in the northern High Plains) parts of Kansas. In the core of the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas, the majority of occupied habitat was burned again this spring, leaving little nesting cover. While periodic burning is essential to prevent woody encroachment into the prairie, burning the same acreage annually in early spring greatly reduces the potential for successful nesting, even when weather is favorable.

Conditions were comparatively better for production throughout the northern Flint Hills due to less spring burning and more rainfall. Conditions were good for production throughout most of the Smoky Hills region that spans across northcentral and northwest Kansas. The best greater prairie chicken hunting should again be found in native grasslands from the northern Flint Hills westward throughout the Smoky Hills.

A detailed 2011 Kansas Upland Bird Hunting Forecast is available online at the department website, [www.kdwpt.state.ks.us](http://www.kdwpt.state.ks.us). Click "Hunting/Upland Birds/Upland Bird Regional Forecast" for the complete report.

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