Statewide Summary

Pheasant

Pheasant densities improved this year thanks to above-average rainfall that maintained good habitat across much of the primary range. The central regions saw the strongest gains as the area continued recovering from drought. The High Plains region in the western third of the state maintained solid but slightly lower densities.

Chick survival likely declined due to cold, wet conditions during peak hatch, but improved habitat supported more broods overall, largely offsetting the smaller brood sizes. Summer surveys were well above the 10-year average. CRP acres were again available for emergency forage use across most of the state, but so far, it doesn't appear to have been used as heavily as in past years. But still, it has the potential to impact hunter success where it was used. Hunting is expected to be much improved this season, and harvest should increase.

The best hunting will be in the High Plains of northwest and southwest Kansas, though pheasant numbers are strong across much of the western half of the state.

Quail

Statewide quail populations improved significantly this summer after above-average rainfall helped rangelands and other habitats recover in western Kansas. While brood sizes were smaller – likely due to frequent heavy storms – nest success was much better, resulting in more broods overall.

Densities remain highest in the southern half of the state, especially in the Southcentral Prairies and Southern High Plains. After several poor years in the Smoky Hills, brood surveys rebounded. Kansas continues to support one of the strongest quail populations in the nation, and with abundant access, harvest is expected to be among the highest in the country. The best opportunities will be across the southern half of the state, extending up through northcentral Kansas, with quality hunting opportunities scattered in the remaining regions

Greater Prairie Chicken

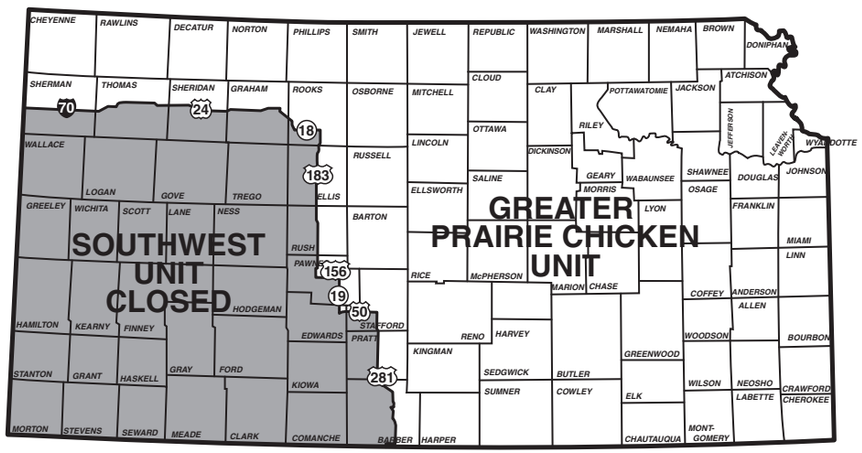
Kansas is home to both greater and lesser prairie-chickens. Both species require a landscape of predominantly native grass and benefit from a few interspersed grain fields. Greater prairie-chickens are found primarily in the tallgrass and mixed-grass prairies in the eastern third and northern half of the state. Their numbers have expanded in northwest Kansas but declined in the east.

While prairie chickens are less prone to sharp population swings than other upland bird species, recent drought lowered spring densities. Improved rainfall this year likely boosted production, but the best remaining populations did not recover as strongly as other areas.

The Smoky Hills offer the best hunting opportunities this fall thanks to more stable populations and good public access.

The Southwest Prairie Chicken Unit, where lesser prairie-chickens are found, remains closed to hunting. Greater prairie chickens may be harvested in the Greater Prairie Chicken Unit with a daily bag limit of two birds. **All prairie chicken hunters are required to have a Prairie Chicken Permit**, which allows KDWP to better track hunter activity and harvest to inform management.

Greater Prairie Chicken Unit



The Southwest Unit is closed to all prairie chicken hunting.

How The Outlook is Formed

Two key factors influence the number of upland game birds during the fall hunting season: the number of breeding adults in the spring and the reproductive success of the breeding population. Reproductive success includes both the number of nests that hatch and chick survival.

For pheasants and quail, annual survival is relatively low, so fall populations rely more on summer reproduction than spring adult numbers. For prairie chickens, reproductive success is still the main population driver, but higher adult survival helps maintain hunting opportunities even when nesting conditions are poor.

In this forecast, breeding populations and reproductive success of pheasants, quail, and prairie chickens are discussed. Breeding population data were collected through spring calling surveys for all upland game birds. Late summer roadside surveys provided information on reproductive success for pheasants and quail by counting both adults and chicks observed. Prairie chicken reproductive success cannot be measured the same way because they don't gather along roads like pheasants and quail do.

Kansas has a dramatic rainfall gradient, with more than 50 inches of average rainfall in the far east and less than 16 inches in the far west. The amount and timing of rainfall plays a major role in upland game bird reproduction.

- In western Kansas, wet years typically improve cover and increase insect availability for chicks.
- In eastern Kansas, drier years are often better because heavy rains can reduce nest and chick survival.

Above-average summer rainfall across much of western Kansas in 2024 greatly improved nesting cover going into spring 2025. Adequate rainfall continued into mid-summer, providing good nesting and brooding cover. As a result, production was significantly better than it has been in recent years.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

Under the 2018 Farm Bill, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acreage cap has gradually increased each year. Kansas currently has 2.04 million acres of CRP. However, over 560,000 acres are in grassland CRP, while traditional CRP acres that provide more wildlife benefit continues to decline.

Habitat quality has also been reduced due to increased emergency use. Even with improved rainfall, 83 counties in Kansas were eligible for emergency CRP haying and grazing this year. Many properties in the Walk-In Hunting Access (WIHA) program include CRP. Haying and contract expirations can reduce habitat quality or make some properties ineligible for enrollment.

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2025 Kansas Upland Bird Forecast

Pheasant/Quail Seasons

Youth .....Nov. 1-2, 2025
Regular.....Nov. 8, 2025 – Jan. 31, 2026

Greater Prairie Chicken Seasons

Regular .....Sept. 15, 2025 – Jan. 31, 2026

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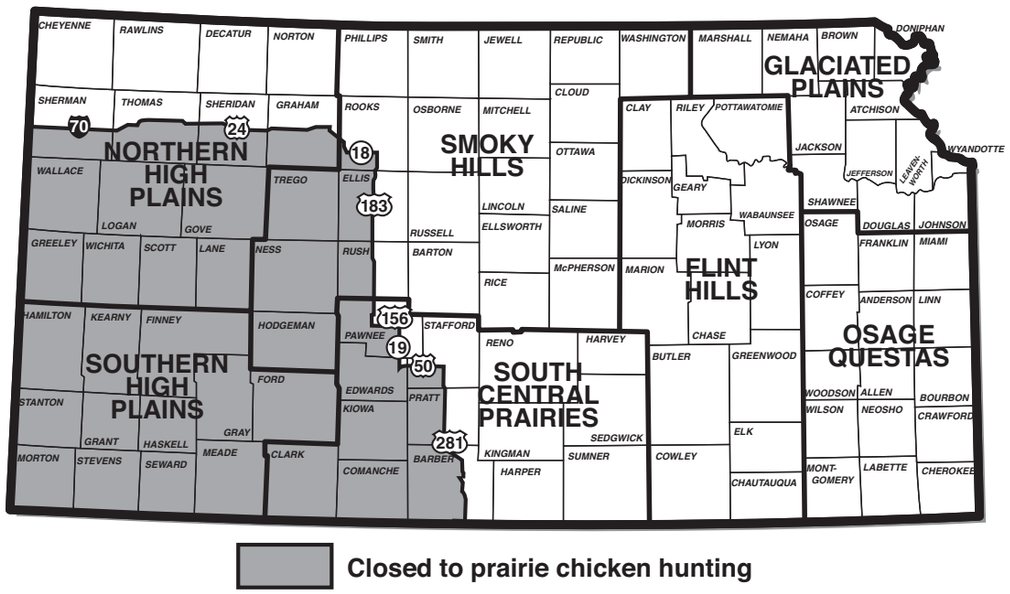

Northern High Plains (Northwest)

Pheasants – This region saw slight declines on brood surveys but largely held onto the improvements from last year. While most of the state experienced heavy summer rains, the Northern High Plains received below-average rainfall going into summer. This was felt most in the shortgrass prairies along the Smoky Hill River. Other parts of the region maintained better densities, and some areas that lagged in recovery last year improved this summer. Milo is less common in this region, so hunters should focus on good cover, such as waste ground or quality CRP fields near food sources.

Quail – Quail numbers are limited and typically provide an opportunistic harvest for pheasant hunters. Favorable weather has allowed populations to expand where suitable habitat exists, providing hunters with a welcomed additional opportunity in recent years. Densities on the summer roadside survey increased this year, especially in the northeastern counties along the Smoky Hills, where hunting opportunities should be best.

Prairie Chickens – Prairie chicken populations have expanded in recent years in both numbers and range, but spring densities did decline during drought. Only parts of this region are open to prairie chicken hunting. Production was likely good this year, improving opportunity. The best hunting will be in counties along the Nebraska border where native prairies and adjacent CRP grasslands provide quality habitat.

Smoky Hills (Northcentral)

Pheasants – This region showed the greatest improvement on roadside surveys after only minimal improvements last year. A drier late spring, combined with good soil moisture and early summer rains, supported habitat conditions, resulting in the highest regional chick and brood numbers statewide. The western half of the Smoky Hills has the strongest densities, but eastern counties also saw much better numbers than observed in several years. Quality hunting pheasant hunting should be found across much of the region.

Quail – Quail numbers rebounded sharply after several years of poor production, nearly doubling in brood surveys. After several consecutive years of poor production, this improvement was not enough for this region to reclaim the highest regional density; however, densities are still good, and the Smoky Hills is a large region with ample access providing hunting opportunity throughout. Densities appear best in the center and southern portions of the region, with lower numbers along the high plains and Flint Hills.

Prairie Chickens – Hunting opportunities should remain fair. Precipitation likely improved production, though rainfall totals were lower here than in other regions. The Smoky Hills region has maintained relatively stable densities paired with the greatest access in the state to appropriate habitat. Greater prairie-chickens occur throughout the Smoky Hills where large areas of native rangeland are intermixed with cropland. The best hunting will be in the central portion of the region, though birds can be found throughout. The southwestern portion falls in the closed zone.

Glaciated Plains (Northeast)

Pheasants – Habitat declines continue in this region as farming practices shift away from features that benefit pheasants, such as grass waterways and small grain crops. No pheasants were recorded on routes this year for the second consecutive season. Hunting opportunities remain poor, with birds found only in scattered pockets of habitat, primarily in the northwest portion of the region or areas specifically managed for upland birds.

Quail – Regional densities remained above average, with slight increases in some low-density counties. Last year, densities were highest in the areas adjacent to a large block of rangeland in the western portion of the region, and while some of these western counties declined, the eastern portions of the region in mixed cropland/woodland habitats saw increases, offsetting the losses. Densities are still highest in the western portion of the region along the Flint Hills. Hunters should focus on areas with native grass or managed upland bird habitat for the best results.

Prairie Chickens – Prairie chicken range is minimal here, with the best (though limited) opportunities along the western edge near the Flint Hills.

Southern High Plains (Southwest)

Pheasants – Like the Northern High Plains, this region saw slight declines in brood surveys but remained stable overall. Improved rainfall over the last two years has created favorable conditions for pheasants. CRP is a major component of this landscape, though many counties were released for emergency use again this year, which may impact the amount of huntable cover. Good opportunities should exist across most of this region, particularly in areas with good CRP cover remaining.

Quail – Quail populations in this region fluctuate widely with the weather. Continued good rainfall produced strong roadside survey results this year. While the highest densities are typically found along riparian corridors, hunters should also find success in shrub or other surrogate cover away from those areas. Scaled quail can also be found in this region within the sand sage prairies, but remain at low densities.

Prairie Chickens – Prairie chicken hunting is closed in this area.

South Central Prairies

Pheasants – Roadside survey estimates improved significantly, largely driven by strong improvements on western routes. Eastern routes saw declines, likely due to heavy rainfall during nesting. However, the heavy rainfall has resulted in high-quality habitat heading into the fall. The best opportunity will be in the western portion of the region, where densities were greatly improved.

Quail – Quail densities here saw the greatest increase of any region in 2025, with strong numbers across nearly all survey routes. The mix of quality cover types provides consistent hunting opportunities. Public access is more limited than in the other major quail regions. The highest densities were found in riparian areas in the center of the region and into the Red Hills.

Prairie Chickens – The large rangeland areas in this region are almost entirely closed to prairie chicken hunting. Very low densities exist elsewhere, mostly in the northeast portion of the region.

Flint Hills

Pheasants – Located on the eastern edge of the pheasant range, his region offers limited hunting opportunities. Pheasant numbers remain low but increased slightly this year, with more routes reporting birds. The best hunting will be in the northwest portion, near the Smoky Hills.

Quail – The Flint Hills maintained good regional densities this year. Roadside surveys showed stable to slightly higher densities overall, with the best numbers in the southern Flint Hills. After consecutive years of reduced burning, fire activity returned to average levels, which may limit huntable cover in core areas. Outside the core, intermixed cover should provide good opportunities. Walk-in Hunting Access (WIHA) areas can be limited, but there are several reservoirs that offer decent public access.

Prairie Chickens – The Flint Hills is the largest remaining intact tallgrass prairie in North America and a core area for greater prairie chickens. Years of variable fire regimes have degraded habitat and reduced numbers. Good moisture and average burning in recent years should lead to stable or slightly improved hunting opportunities.

Osage Questas (Southeast)

Pheasants – This region lies outside the primary pheasant range and offers very limited hunting. Pheasants occur in low densities in the northwest portion of the region.

Quail – Quality hunting opportunities may exist in the northwest portion of the region. Roadside estimates were down this year, as above-average rainfall in the region typically reduces production. Hunters should target grasslands that can support quail or those areas specifically managed for upland birds.

Prairie Chickens – Greater prairie chicken populations have steadily declined due to fire suppression and loss of native grassland. Hunting opportunities are limited but possible in large blocks of native rangeland along the Flint Hills.