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Section: Great Outdoors**Edition:** St. Paul**Page:** G4**Column:**OUTDOORS NOTEBOOK**PUBLIC HUNTING PLANNED FOR VERMILLION HIGHLANDS
IN DAKOTA COUNTY***CHRIS NISKANEN, Outdoors Editor*

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources will open 1,200 acres of the UMore Park property in Dakota County to public hunting this fall.

The land is part of 2,840 acres the University of Minnesota traded last year to the state to build an on-campus football stadium. In August, about 2,100 acres will be designated as the **Vermillion Highlands** Wildlife Management Area and opened to the public, though only 1,200 acres will be open to hunting in the first stage of state development.

The DNR is crafting deer, pheasant and wild turkey hunting regulations for the property, said Tim Bremicker, DNR regional wildlife manager. The first season to open will be archery deer hunting in mid-September, but it also will be open to firearms and muzzleloader deer hunting, Bremicker said. Late-season pheasant and goose seasons are also proposed for this year, and spring turkey season is planned for 2008.

Hunter access will be restricted, with licenses offered on a lottery basis, similar to how archery licenses are allocated for the Camp Ripley military base near Little Falls, Bremicker said. Hunters who draw a license may have to attend a rules workshop. The DNR hasn't determined how many hunting licenses will be allocated.

Demand for licenses will be high, Bremicker predicted, because the land has never been opened to public hunting. He said conservation officers have seen mature, large-antlered bucks on the property.

The property is on the north side of 190th Street, south of 170th Street and west of County 81 in Dakota County.

Signs and parking lots will be installed this summer. Eventually, hunting will be allowed on most of the 2,100 acres.

Because university research will continue on the property and a network of hiking, horseback and snowmobile trails is planned, the property will be formally called **Vermillion Highlands**: A Research, Recreation and Wildlife Management Area.

Venison donation gains ground

The Minnesota Legislature will soon consider two competing proposals for funding a program that would donate hunter-killed deer to the needy.

Rep. Rick Hansen, DFL-South St. Paul, has introduced a bill requiring resident and nonresident deer hunters to pay a \$1 surcharge on their deer licenses. The money would be used to pay for the processing of hunter-killed deer that would be donated to food shelves, such as Second Harvest.

A second bill, supported by the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association, would request \$250,000 from the state's general fund for the venison program and augment that money with voluntary contributions from hunters. The program would allow hunters to donate any

amount of money to the venison program at the time they purchase a DNR-issued deer license.

"The donations would be tax deductible," said Mark Johnson, MDHA executive director. "You could have companies or individuals contribute to the program."

MDHA members oppose a mandatory license surcharge, believing deer hunters should not be forced to fund a venison donation program, Johnson said.

However, both ideas are gaining support at the Legislature. Several private organizations, including the MDHA, operate venison-donation programs that are funded by hunters. Fewer than 1,000 deer are donated annually.

But \$250,000 could pay for the processing of 5,000 deer in a statewide, state-funded program, Johnson said, adding that officials with the food shelf group Second Harvest "are excited about the potential 250,000 to a half-million pounds of venison from the program."

Severe drought

Northern and central Minnesota are in the grips of a severe drought. If snow amounts remain low the rest of the winter, the state's fire season could begin as early as March because of exposed grasses and other fuels, according to the Department of Natural Resources.

Drought conditions began in May and are being compounded by below-average precipitation, according to a Jan. 24 DNR report. Even if normal or above-normal snowfalls occur this winter, much of the northern half of the state will be facing drought. A lack of runoff could leave many of the state's boat ramps dry and impede spawning runs of fish. It could also stress northern forests, making them susceptible to insect infestations.

Shows end today

-- The Minnesota Boat and Marine Show ends its run today at St. Paul RiverCentre. Show hours are 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

-- The RV, Vacation and Camping Show ends at the Minneapolis Convention Center. Show hours today are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Blood stains lead to spearer

Minnesota conservation officer Mike Shelden recently apprehended a man who confessed to illegally spearing a muskie on Lake Miliona. The man initially denied seeing or spearing any northern pike, but Shelden noticed a large amount of blood outside the man's fish house.

A couple of days after the contact, the man admitted he speared a large muskie.

Conservation officer honored

An Annandale conservation officer has won the DNR's top award. Brian Mies was named Conservation Officer of the Year. Mies has been with the DNR for 16 years. Officer Tyler Quandt of Red Wing earned the Boat and Water Safety Achievement Award, and Tom Henker of Winona earned the Waterfowl Enforcement Achievement Award. Officer Brad Schultz of Center City received the DNR Enforcement Education Achievement Award.

Did you know?

-- Beginning this spring, Gander Mountain's 105 retail stores will sell Tracker Marine boats, which include Fisher and Tracker fishing boats, Sun Craft and Fisher pontoons and Nitro and ProCraft fishing boats.

-- Minnesota's spring goose season begins March 1.

-- Aitkin County recently approved a grant agreement with the Minnesota DNR to create a continuous 70-mile trail for all-terrain vehicles and off-highway motorcycles. The trail is still months away from completion while additional planning work is completed.

-- Wisconsin begins over-the-counter sales of 43,800 spring turkey permits on March 23. The permits will be sold on a first-come, first-serve basis.

-- Ducks Unlimited celebrates its 70th anniversary this year. Since 1937, DU's membership has grown from 6,720 members to 750,000 throughout North America. The group held 4,600 DU events last year.

-- Walleye fishing on Minnesota's Leech Lake is expected to be the best in years, but the DNR still plans to stock 5 million walleye fry this spring as a yardstick to determine if the lake is producing wild fish. Preliminary plans also call for killing 500 additional pairs of cormorants. In the past two years, sharpshooters have killed 6,296 cormorants on the lake.

Chris Niskanen can be reached at cniskanen@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5524.