



PHIL WINEGARDNER Special to The Star

For a group of Kansas hunters, the pheasant opener is treated like a holiday. They have been hunting on the same farms near Smith Center, Kan., for 40 years.

FOR MANY HUNTERS, IT'S ALL ABOUT TRADITION

It's more than just pulling the trigger

It's all about the tradition for many hunters

KC-area men will celebrate 40th pheasant opener

BY BRENT FRAZEE
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The tradition started in 1976, when four college buddies decided they wanted to see what the excitement created by the Kansas pheasant opener was all about.

The friends, fresh out of KU, had been introduced to hunting by their dads. But they wanted to set out on their own, so they headed to Smith Center, Kan., to land owned by one of the young men's family.

Little did they know at the time that they were laying the groundwork for a tradition that has lasted 40 years.

"We were total rookies; we didn't really know what we were doing," said Dennis Hays, now 60, who lives in Kansas City, Kan. "I remember we used my dad's pointer, Tad, and he found birds.

"It was a cold, rainy day, and there was even a little sleet. But we stayed with it.

"We just loved it."

Much has changed in

the 39 years since that day. Hays and his good friend, Phil Winegardner of Overland Park, have watched the size of their hunting group grow to more than 20 in some years.

They have hunted alongside landowners who have become good friends, they have watched young boys grow into fathers and even grandfathers, and they have introduced many to the sport they love.

"We value our friends and just being outdoors in rural Kansas more than the bird count," said Winegardner, 63. "Taking a few roosters every years in just icing on the cake."

But they aren't the only ones who have time-honored hunting traditions. In Missouri, many look forward to setting up deer camp with old friends for the opener. Duck hunters carry on family tradition by hunting with several generations of their family. And quail hunters reminisce about days when they followed old bird dogs through frosty fields they hunted for



Submitted photo

A family selfie in the duck blind: Dan Guyer (left), gets together with his sons, Derek (foreground) and Damon, and his grandson, Gavin.

years.

Yes, hunting is more than just pulling the trigger. It's about tradition.

A LIFETIME OF PHEASANT OPENERS

Want to get an idea of how passionate Hays, Winegardner and the rest of their buddies are about the pheasant opener? They have even set up a website (pheasant-web.com) with a ticking timer at the top, counting down the days, minutes and even seconds left until the pheasant season

opens.

"For us, the pheasant opener is like Christmas," Winegardner said. "We have met so many great people up there who have become close friends.

"We have picked up a lot of new places to hunt just by meeting people. And we have hosted them to some fun times in the city, like going to Royals games, NASCAR races, Wyandotte County Lake and Kansas City barbecue.

"Unfortunately, we have also returned to Smith Center for the funerals of

some of our friends."

At first, it was the hunting that drew the Kansas City-area men to Smith Center. North-central Kansas has long been a mainstay for Kansas pheasants. The group has taken many limits over the years. But there have been lean years, too.

"We had one of our highest harvest totals in 2007, when we took 84 birds for the weekend," Winegardner said. "But just a few years later, after a drought hit, we shot a record low 4 pheasants.

So, you never know."

The group is proud of its safety record. Thirty-nine years and not a single gun-related injury.

"We have a lot of great memories," Winegardner said. "And we plan to add a lot more."

A FAMILY OF DUCK HUNTERS

Duck hunting runs in the Dan Guyer's blood.

"Our family bleeds mallard green," he joked.

When he takes his nine-year-old grandson Gavin duck hunting this fall, the boy will represent the fifth generation of the family that has waded into Missouri's marshes.

That's a source of pride for Guyer, 58, who runs the Iron Duck Guide Service. He has been duck

hunting most of his life and he learned from the best.

His grandfathers, Clarence Guyer and Ted Triggs, were both avid waterfowlers. And his dad, David Guyer, was widely known for his calling ability. Dan remembers sitting in a blind with his dad and getting a music lesson.

"My dad would say, 'Let's do a little 'duck-toven' let's do some mallard magic,'" Dan said.

When David died, Guyer and other family members scattered his ashes on one his favorite hunting spots, the mouth of the Platte River. Today, Guyer often honors his dad's memory by hunting out of a pontoon boat at the same exact spot.

Dan also takes customers to private marshes near the Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge and field hunting in Kansas.

He is carrying on the family tradition, and he is proud to do it.

"I've always had a passion for duck hunting," he said. "Just watching the ducks respond to your calling, seeing the dogs work, seeing that smile on a kid who shot his first duck — those are priceless memories."

SEE TRADITION, 13B

Yost follows tradition when he hunts

BY BRENT FRAZEE
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There are two traditions that matter to Ned Yost at this time of the year.

Post-season baseball and deer hunting.

Yost has been preoccupied managing the Royals this October, as he was last fall. But once the season is over, he will be on his ranch in western Georgia, hunting with friend comedian Jeff Fox-

worthy and other major-league players such as Jon Lester, J.D. Drew and Kevin Millwood.



Yost

hunting every day of the season," Yost told The Star in 2014.

For them, fall is one big deer camp.

That's the way it has been for almost 10 years now.

"I am hunting every day of the season," Yost told The Star in 2014.

"From the time baseball season ends and I get back to the ranch, I'll be out every day until the bow season ends.

"The great thing is that we're not on stage. We can just be ourselves."

The hunters are so familiar with the big bucks they are pursuing, they name them. In past seasons, they hunted set up the pheasant opener? They have even set up a website (pheasant-web.com) with a ticking timer at the top, counting down the days, minutes and even seconds left until the pheasant season

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A shot of hope in 2015

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DEER

Missouri
● **DATES: Firearms:** Regular: Nov. 14-24. Youth: Oct. 31-Nov. 1 and Jan. 2-3. Antlerless: Nov. 25-Dec. 6. Alternative methods: Dec. 19-29. **Archery:** Sept. 15-Nov. 13 and Nov. 25-Jan. 15.
● **OUTLOOK:** Don't look for a recovery overnight.

Missouri deer hunting took a tumble in 2012 and 2013 when the effects of an outbreak of hemorrhagic disease, combined with years of liberal hunting regulations in northern Missouri, led to a sharp decline in the deer population.

That also led to several years of sub-par hunting in some parts of the state. The deer are making a comeback, albeit a slow one. And so is the hunting. Hunters took 256,753 deer last season, a two percent increase from the 2013-2014 season. But that was still the second lowest statewide harvest since 2000.

With tighter hunting regulations, the deer should continue their comeback, wildlife biologists say. But populations in northern, western and central parts of the state remain below desired levels.

There will be more deer in the woods this fall, but whether it will have much effect on harvest remains to be seen. Look for another increase in the number of deer taken, but don't expect anything dramatic.

Kansas
● **DATES:** Regular firearms: Dec. 2-13. Archery: Sept. 14-Dec. 31.
● **OUTLOOK:** The 2014-2015 Kansas deer season gave hunters hope that their fate is on the comeback trail.

Hunters shot 96,059 deer last season, a hefty increase from the 89,665 they took the year before. Much of that can be attributed to the rapid rise in popularity of bow hunting.

Bow hunters took 34.4 percent of the deer harvest in 2014-2015, and their success rate was one of the highest in the region.

Lloyd Fox, deer biologist for the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism, is confident there are still

plenty of deer — and some big ones too — out there. He already has seen reports of trophy bucks taken by archers.

But that confidence was shaken a bit by a recent spotlight survey he conducted in western Kansas. Whitetail populations were down sharply, something he wasn't expecting.

He has yet to conduct population surveys in other parts of the state, but he has received positive feedback from landowners in many regions.



PHEASANTS

Missouri
● **DATES:** Youth: Oct. 24-25. Regular season: Nov. 1-Jan. 15.

● **OUTLOOK:** The good news for Missouri pheasant hunters is that the Department of Conservation has opened the entire state to pheasant hunting, instead of restricting it to the northern and south-east parts of the state.

The bad news is that there might not be many birds to hunt.

After a period of healthy populations and good hunting in the 1980s and 1990s, pheasants have been on a steady spiral downward. It's a puzzle to even wildlife biologists. They think the declines are associated with habitat loss. But even in areas with good habitat, there are few pheasants. Hunter numbers and harvest are both at historic lows.

But enough of the bad news. There is one ray of hope. For the first time in recent years, summer roadside counts showed an increase.

Kansas
● **DATES:** Youth season: Nov. 7-8. Regular: Nov. 14-Jan. 31.

● **OUTLOOK:** This should be a better year for Kansas pheasant hunters.

But then again, things couldn't get much worse than they were in the last three years. In the midst of a crippling drought, pheasant populations plummeted.

Hunters took only 269,476 pheasants last season, but that was still better than the harvest totals of 233,981 in 2012 and 190,285 in 2013. That's a huge drop from the 1980s, when hunters shot more than 1 million pheasants annually.

The rain this year has brought renewed hope for hunters. With lush nesting cover and reinvigorated stands of vegetation in the



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Labrador retrievers will keep an eye on the sky when the big flights of ducks arrive.

Conservation Reserve Program (which compensates farmers for idling marginal land), the picture is much brighter.

Pheasant densities are improved from last year; surveys showed a 50 percent increase from 2014. In fact, all six of the Kansas pheasant regions showed increases.

The northwest region and the Smoky Hills should provide the best hunting. But hunters across the state's pheasant range should notice improvement.



QUAIL

Missouri
● **DATES:** Youth season: Oct. 24-25. Regular: Nov. 1-Jan. 15.

● **OUTLOOK:** Finally, there is good news for Missouri quail hunters.

After a string of years in which hunter numbers, bird populations and harvests all steadily dropped, there are signs that this year will bring better things.

Wet conditions hampered nesting in the spring and early summer, but populations were boosted when the quail had a strong re-nesting season in the new cover. Because some farmers were unable to get crops in this year, fields grew up in weeds, which provided add nesting cover and insects for the chicks.

Roadside counts were up from last year, when only two birds per 30-mile route were found. Surveyors found three birds per route this year. That might not sound like a lot, but it's been since 2007 that count totals were that high.

Last year, 12,335 hunters took 109,904 quail in Missouri. That was an increase from the 2012-2013 season, when 15,078

hunters shot 100,894 quail. Look for those numbers to climb this year.

Kansas
● **DATES:** Youth season: Nov. 7-8. Regular: Nov. 14-Jan. 31.

● **OUTLOOK:** Bird dogs will like the smell of the 2015-2016 Kansas quail season.

There's little doubt that bird numbers are up substantially. Roadside counts were up by 48 percent compared to last year, and landowners report seeing and hearing many more birds than in recent years.

Why the increase? The drought was finally broken. Mild conditions in the winter led to an increase in the breeding population, then timely rains produced good nesting conditions. Where the rain was too heavy to promote spring nesting, the quail re-nested with success later in the summer once the precipitation dropped off.

Hunters shot 253,869 quail last year, a bit low by Kansas standards. As recently as 2000, hunters shot more than 1 million birds. But the 2014 harvest totals still represented a rise from 2013, when 174,970 quail were taken, and 2012, when 189,661 birds were harvested. Look for an accelerated comeback in 2015.



DUCKS

Missouri
● **DATES: North Zone:** Youth: Oct. 24-25. Regular: Oct. 31-Dec. 29. **Middle Zone:** Youth: Oct. 31-Nov. 1. Regular: Nov. 7-Jan. 5. **South Zone:** Youth: Nov. 21-22. Regular: Nov. 26-Jan. 24.

● **OUTLOOK:** With a near-record number of ducks projected to fly south this fall and plenty of water in Missouri managed marshes to greet

them, you would think waterfowl biologists would be gushing with enthusiasm over the prospects for the 2015 Missouri duck season.

But they're taking a cautious approach. Yes, there is great potential. But there is no guarantee of an outstanding season.

"Hunters should be cautioned there are three factors equally or more important than overall population numbers (for Missouri)," said Andy Raedeke, waterfowl biologist fore the Department of Conservation. "These include local habitat conditions, weather and the timing of migration events. Two of these factors — habitat and weather — are less than ideal."

Spring and summer flooding affected moist-soil food and row crops at some of the managed waterfowl areas. And long-range weather forecasts predict an El Nino effect, producing milder-than-normal conditions.

But some of Missouri's best-known waterfowl rest stops, including the Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge and the Grand Pass and Bob Brown conservation areas, have good water, food and habitat conditions. If timely fronts move through, look for those areas to attract big numbers of migrating waterfowl.

Kansas
● **DATES: High Plains Zone:** Youth: Oct. 3-4. Regular: Oct. 10-Jan. 4 and Jan. 23-31. **Low Plains Early:** Youth: Oct. 3-4. Regular: Oct. 10-Dec. 6 and Dec. 19-Jan. 3. **Low Plains Late:** Youth: Oct. 24-25. Regular: Oct. 31-Jan. 3 and Jan. 23-31. **Southeast:** Youth: Nov. 7-8. Regular: Nov. 14-Jan. 3 and Jan. 9-31.

● **OUTLOOK:** Just add water and a few timely fronts.

Those are the only missing ingredients in the outlook for the Kansas duck season.

Waterfowl biologists know that there will be plenty of ducks and geese winging south this fall. They would just like to see the Sunflower State look a little more inviting to those migrants.

"The ample spring and summer rains are now a distant memory," said Tom Bidrowski of the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism. "Many of Kansas marshes are in need of water."

Marais des Cygnes, Neosho, Perry, Cheyenne Bottoms and the McPherson Valley are among the managed areas that are in need of moisture. But even in less-than-ideal conditions, some of the

wetlands already are producing good early-season hunting.



CANADA GEESE

Missouri
● **DATES:** Oct. 3-11 and Nov. 26-Jan. 31.

● **OUTLOOK:** These are good times for Missouri goose hunters.

The seasons are as long as they have ever been, and geese are migrating in large numbers and staying here when conditions are right.

Last year wasn't the greatest of seasons, due to the early freeze up on marshes and even some reservoirs. Hunters shot 67,584 geese, down more than 2,000 from the previous year. But the 2014-2015 harvest still exceeded the totals in 2012 and 2011. And there is hope that hunters can see a repeat of the 2010 season, when hunters took 92,236 geese.

One thing is certain: There will be plenty of birds heading south.

Missouri hunters depend on nesting geese from Manitoba, Minnesota and Iowa, and that flock of Canadas had a good nesting season. Biologists also estimated that 69,445 geese nested in the Show-Me State, one of the highest totals since the survey began in 1993.

Kansas
● **DATES:** Oct. 31-Nov. 1 and Nov. 4-Feb. 14.
● **OUTLOOK:** Kansas hunters would love to see a repeat of the 2014-2015 season.

Canada geese flocked to the state like seldom before, and the hunting was fantastic. Aided by a cold December that brought geese in and sent ducks out, hunters shot 166,812 Canadas, the highest harvest total in at least 15 years.

Consider that the long-term average for harvest of Canada geese in Kansas is 86,628. Also consider that the statewide take was 108,657 in 2013 and 72,204 in 2012. Then you see how impressive the 2014-2015 season was.

Can that happen again this year? Much of it is up to the weather.

Impressive numbers of Canadas should again fly into Kansas this fall after a good nesting season. Expect central Kansas, with Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira, to attract large flocks of Canadas this fall.

FROM PAGE 12B

TRADITION

BUILDING MEMORIES AT DEER CAMP

When Jason Brown was a Missouri state legislator from 2002 to 2010, his office always was decorated with deer mounts.

There's a story behind that.

"My wife told me she didn't want them in the house," Brown said with a laugh. "She said, 'Either hang them in the garage or down at your office.'"

"In fairness, they take up a lot of wall space and I had four deer mounts, a pheasant mount and a

black-bear rug. So, they became a conversation piece at the office."

Those mounts moved to a new office when Brown served as presiding commissioner in Platte County from 2011 to 2014. Now that he's out of office, the mounts still reside in that office for whomever wants to take credit for shooting them.

For Brown, 45, who lives in Platte City, they are a reminder of a lifetime of deer hunting. He got started when he was in junior high school and he

hasn't stopped.

"When I was in college, we ate deer steaks at the fraternity house and the guys loved it," he said.

Today, Brown follows tradition when he joins 12 friends and often times his children — his son Caleb, 14, and his daughter Alayna, 17 — at deer camp.

They have been getting together for 12 years at land they leased in northern Missouri, staying in campers and tents. They plan elaborate meals, sit around campfires and celebrate the arrival of another deer season.

Brown and others often arrive early, getting in a few days of bow hunting, then partake in the firearms opener.

After years of hunting,

Brown is selective in what he will shoot. It has to be a buck with big antlers. But even if he doesn't shoot one, he has a good time.

"A lot of it is getting together with family and friends at deer camp, reminiscing about past seasons, planning the meals," he said. "Deer opener is something we won't miss."

REMEMBERING QUAIL HUNTING'S GOOD OLD DAYS

For decades, Bill Bryan had a simple keepsake that he cherished as a reminder of the days when he became a quail hunter.

"I think I harvested my first quail when I was 11," said Bryan, 50, who is director of Missouri State

Parks. "I had the old yellow .20-gauge shell I used (to shoot that bird) for decades."

Bryan lost that shell in the process of a move. But he hasn't lost the memories of the golden days of Missouri quail hunting.

His family established a tradition of hunting quail along both sides of the Missouri-Kansas line south of Kansas City before Bryan was born, and he fit in nicely when he was old enough to handle a gun. He hunted with his dad, uncles, cousins and close family friends — and at least three bird dogs each time out.

Quail and points were plentiful, and so were limits of birds.

"I feel very privileged to

have hunted with three Brittanies that I raised and trained and will never forget," he said.

They hunted to same land for decades, and established a long-standing tradition. But that tradition started to die off in the 1990s, when the quail population dropped and many of the hunters died or become too old to hunt.

"When my dad quit hunting, he explained it was because my Uncle Barney had passed away and it wasn't as much fun anymore," Bryan said. "I didn't understand at the time, but I do now."

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