

Lake Wanahoo

P.A.T.H. Program Analysis

Passing Along The Heritage



2024-2025

Prepared by Scott Luedtke

Introduction

This is a review and analysis of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's (NGPC), Passing Along The Heritage (PATH) program. This review and analysis are specific to the Lake Wanahoo PATH sites located within the NGPC's Southeast District.

Goal

The goal of the PATH program is to introduce and encourage youth to participate in traditional outdoor sports by offering quality hunting and fishing opportunities in a safe and controlled atmosphere. The PATH program contributes directly to the national R3 (Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation) goal of hunter recruitment.

Program Description

The program is web-based and operates on a first-come-first-served basis. The "mentor" can make online reservations for specific PATH sites on specific dates. Online reservations allow mentors to see which days are available on desired PATH sites, and which days may have already been reserved by other mentors without requiring NGPC staff coordination.

Program Rules

The PATH program requires adherence to both state and federal hunting and fishing regulations and has programmatic rules. These programmatic rules are primarily for mentors and help ensure positive experiences for the youth and mentor alike. There may be site restrictions, based on annual management activities. These are posted annually under individual unit descriptions.

PATH allows individual youth hunters a maximum of five reservation days per year. The mentor can't carry a firearm or bow while on the site. The number of youth hunters the mentor can accompany at Lake Wanahoo is 2 youth per outing. Additionally, a non-hunting mentor or observer is allowed.

Lake Wanahoo

The "flagship" PATH site in the Southeast District is the seven-unit Lake Wanahoo area. These units contain 1,067 acres for hunting. Lake Wanahoo is one mile north of Wahoo, Nebraska, and is a 30–45-minute drive from Lincoln and Omaha, Nebraska. It is a Lower Platte North Natural Resources District property developed for flood control, fish and wildlife habitats, and recreation, specifically including an emphasis on youth hunting. The first Lake Wanahoo PATH unit was established in 2006 before the creation of the lake in 2011.

The Lake Wanahoo complex includes properties in four sections of land. The southernmost section is a Recreation Area managed by the NRD and open to use by the public. It is not included in PATH. North of the Recreation Area are 5 upland habitat areas and a portion of the lake that is split into 2 units, designated for waterfowl only (Photo 1.). Units 1 thru 5 are restricted from other public recreation uses during the September 1 thru February 28 PATH, youth-hunting only season. Spring turkey season still requires website registration but does not restrict public access for other recreational uses. Units 6 & 7 allow public use for fishing or boating while mentors and youth are present, including bank fishing. No known conflicts have arisen.

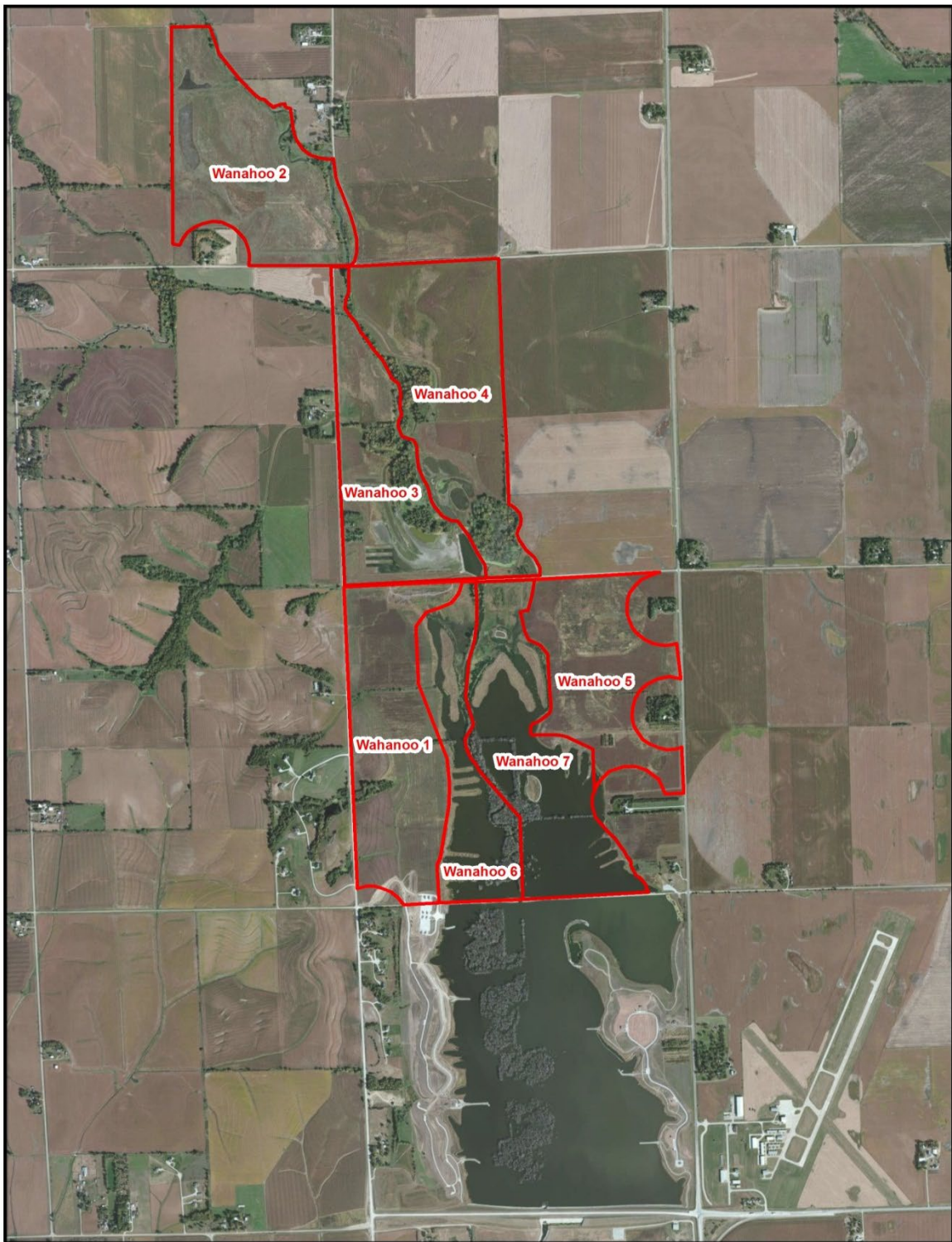


Photo 1. Wanahoo PATH units and the Recreation Area portion of the lake to the south.

In 2013, the Big Game Conservation Association built a permanent tower blind in Wanahoo 4 (Blue dot. Photo 2). In 2014, the Wahoo Chapter of Ducks Unlimited, Inc. built two waterfowl blinds, one in Wanahoo 3 and one in Wanahoo 7 (Yellow dots. Photo 2). In 2018 they added another blind near the SW corner of Unit 6, along the bank. It was agreed that these organizations would take responsibility for maintaining these structures. In 2017,

a bird-watching platform, sponsored by the Wahoo Chapter of the Audubon Society, was built in the far northeast portion of Unit 1, adjacent to the lake. Another deer blind was placed in 2022 by the Big Game Conservation Association in Unit 1. In 2024, the Big Game Conservation Association placed another deer blind in Unit 2, east of Sand Creek. No issues with any of these structures have been reported.



Photo 2. On-site structures.

Site Descriptions and Use

Wanahoo 1 (Photo 3): This unit (~176A) is mostly upland with planted warm season, native grasses. Lower portions of this unit were planted later to a high-diversity native grass/forb mix and still have considerable forbs present. In 2011, trees were planted using a mast seeding technique in the most northern reaches of the unit

floodplain, as required tree replacement mitigation for the project. Bur oak and other mast-producing trees have been established. In 2022 invasive trees were removed within the oak stand, and other portions of this unit. However, rough-leaved dogwood is still problematic. Significant plum thickets are present along previous, interior fence lines. Pheasants, quail, and rabbits are the primary species currently found on this unit.

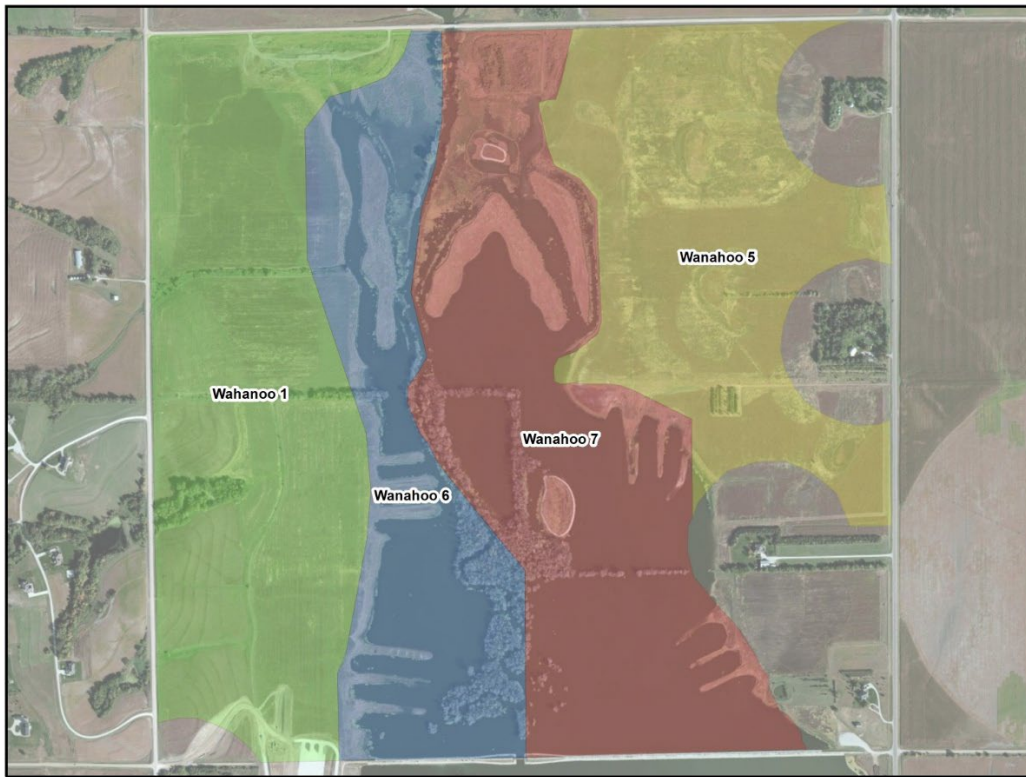


Photo 3. Wanhoo units 1, 6, 7, and 5 with home exclusions

Wanhoo 2 (Photo 4): This unit (~177A) is a large grassland block located mostly in the Sand Creek floodplain. Vegetation is dominated by dense, native, warm season grasses on uplands and cool season grasses with annual and perennial forbs on the floodplain. Floodplain areas are increasingly dominated by non-native, invasive grasses (i.e., reed canarygrass, smooth brome grass). The three floodplain wetlands add habitat diversity. These provide early successional, wetland vegetation when disked but are increasingly dominated by perennial emergent vegetation. Plum thickets are present along the west boundary. Sand Creek is near the eastern boundary and has stands of willow and plum. Invasive trees were cut down and stacked in 2022. Pheasants, deer, and rabbits are the primary species found on this unit. The creek is used by waterfowl, but floodplain wetlands are ephemeral and not reliable for fall waterfowl hunting.



Photo 4. Wanahoo 2 unit with home exclusion

Wanahoo 3 (Photo 5): This unit (~137A) lies on the west side of Sand Creek. Riparian vegetation and wetlands associated with the Lake Wanahoo sediment structure are the most significant components of the unit. Open wetland habitats have largely been silted in with the exception of residual wetlands within the “cats’ paw” structures and floodplain rivulets. Some sediment removal occurred in 2024 within the cats’ paw structure, reclaiming functional wetland habitat. The lowest areas of this unit are transitioning into an early-succession floodplain woodland, currently dominated by cottonwood and willows. Riparian vegetation consists of mature hardwoods and primary succession woodland habitats. Reed canarygrass dominates lowland grasslands north of the ½ mile line. Uplands are mostly planted native grasses along with perennial and annual forbs. The old farmstead area was cleared and seeded in 2014. A new, active eagle nest was created in 2024 within the south-central floodplain woodland in this unit. Deer, turkeys, waterfowl, rabbits, squirrels, pheasants, and quail can all be found on unit 3.

Wanahoo 4 (Photo 5): This unit (~200A) consists of the Sand Creek riparian corridor, floodplain wetlands, and upland grasslands. The riparian corridor is a minimally disturbed travel corridor for big game with two stands of mature, mixed-hardwoods and restored, semi-permanent wetlands. The uplands are planted native grasses with perennial and annual forbs. Much of the planted grassland in the NW portion of this unit has transitioned into cattails due to groundwater saturation. A significant wetland enhancement (16 acres) was completed in 2024 within this cattail area. This wetland excavation currently provides a shallow, open water habitat. Limited plum thickets exist on the north and east boundaries. An eagle nest is present in the south hardwood stand, near the sediment control weir. This nest appears to be inactive now that the eagles have created a new nest in 2024, just northwest in Unit 3. Most of the low-lying cottonwoods in the south end of this unit have died. Green ash and reed canarygrass dominate slightly higher floodplain elevations. Deer, waterfowl, pheasants, turkeys, rabbits, squirrels, and quail can all be found on unit 4.



Photo 5. Wanahoo units 3 and 4 highlighted to show each boundary.

Wanahoo 5 (Photo 3): This upland unit (~150A) was seeded to a high-diversity, local-ecotype seed mixture following restoration of 6 Todd Valley wetlands in 2012. The Todd Valley wetlands add habitat diversity within this larger grassland unit. These ephemeral wetlands provide early successional wetland vegetation when disked but are increasingly dominated by perennial emergent vegetation. Pheasants are the primary species found on this site.

Wanahoo 6 and 7 (Photo 3): These units (~227A total) are considered the “upper” lake and designated for waterfowl hunting only. Units 6 and 7 are separated by the historic channel. The south half of unit 6 has the deepest water with flooded woodland and wetland vegetation established on in-lake wave attenuation structures. The north half is riparian wetland with flooded wetland vegetation. In-lake shoals were designed to affect sediment deposition in the north half of the unit and to retain open-water wetland pockets. These are used extensively by waterfowl. Habitat types are influenced by NRD management of lake levels.

Unit 7 consists of a larger portion of the lake and has shallower water in the northern reaches that is conducive to growing emergent wetland vegetation. Similar to unit 6, the upper portion of Lake Wanahoo was specifically

designed to create variable wetland vegetation zones for both fishes and migratory bird use and is highly dependent on lake-level management. Waterfowl are abundant.

Total Use

The Wanahoo PATH units were available for daily reservations from September 1 through May 31. In combination, the seven units were reserved for 157 use-days on 74 different calendar days during the 2024/25 hunting season. The individual day totals were compiled into Table 1. The 157 use-days were reserved by 51 different mentors (3.1 days/mentor).

Days of Use/Number of mentors each month for the 2024-2025 hunting seasons										
Site	September	October	November	December	January	February	March	April	May	Total
1	1:1	3:3	9:6	2:2	1:1	-	-	-	-	16:11
2	-	3:3	9:4	5:5	4:4	-	-	-	-	21:14
3	6:2	6:2	14:8	9:3	2:2	-	-	3:2	2:1	42:13
4	2:2	3:3	13:7	6:2	4:4	-	-	1:1	-	29:14
5	-	3:3	5:4	-	-	-	-	-	-	8:6
6	4:3	3:2	10:6	3:2	-	-	-	-	-	20:9
7	2:2	4:4	6:5	5:4	-	-	4:1	-	-	21:12
Total	15:7	25:18	66:29	30:13	11:9	-	4:1	4:3	2:1	157/51

Table 1. The number of days reserved and mentors that reserved the dates for each unit by month.

Months and Days of Use

Units were most frequently reserved in November. This reflects the expected higher usage during the rifle deer, pheasant, and waterfowl seasons. Species pursued will be discussed later in this report.

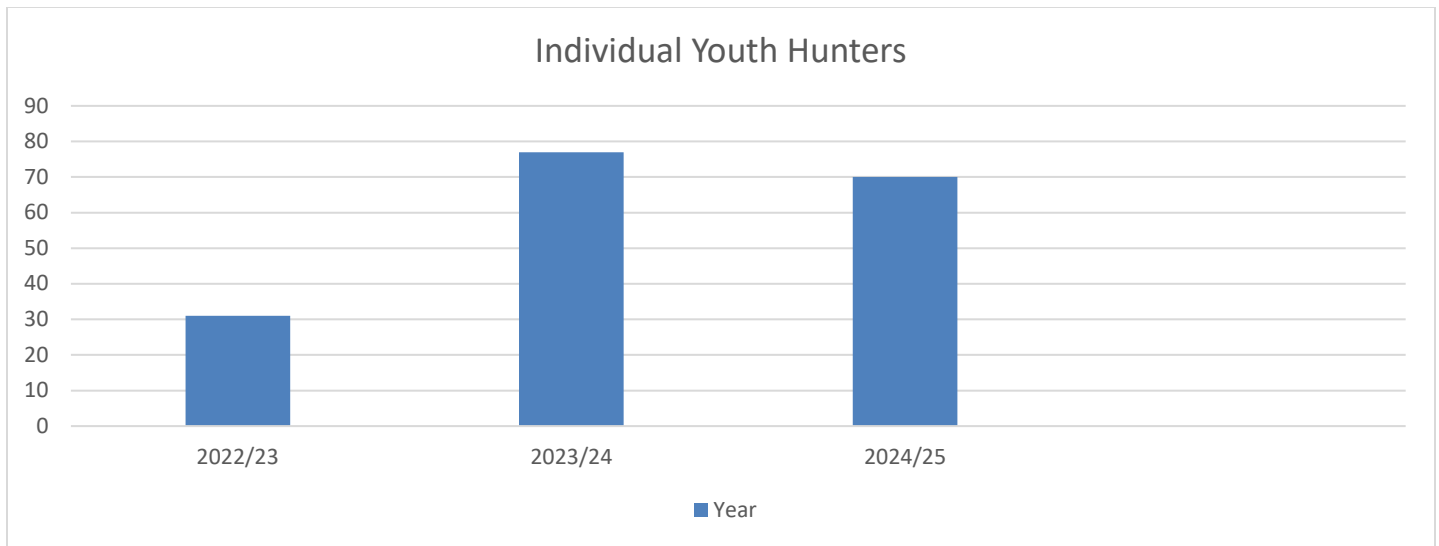
Reserved dates for the 2024/25 season reaffirm previous reported use on weekends and school holidays, when youth hunters would not have been in school. The primary exception is during the rifle deer season, where specific units may have all 9 days of the season reserved. There are ~100 weekend and holiday days available for youth hunting. Approximately 55 of these days are within primary waterfowl, deer, and pheasant/quail seasons. There was at least one reservation on 74 separate days during the 2024/25 season. Two more than the previous year. Of the 74 days reserved in the 2024/25 season the number of units reserved on any given day was 7 (0%), 6 (0%), 5 (8.1%), 4 (10.8%), 3 (10.8%), 2 (28.3%), and 1 (42.0%). Thirty of the 157 reservation days were on non-holiday, weekdays. Nineteen of these weekday reservation days were during the rifle deer season.

Due to the high number of use-days on weekends, there were concerns that some youths weren't getting a chance to hunt as a result of all units being full on weekends. This has not been the case. Lack of weekend site availability is not considered to be a limiting factor. However, there is a higher number of sites reserved per calendar day during specific season openers, the rifle deer season, and for preferred units.

User data does reflect a continued reduction in site availability by non-compliant mentors that reserve sites more than the 5 times allowed per youth hunter. In the 2024/25 season there were 24 non-compliant days. The standard for "non-compliant mentors" changed beginning in the 2022/23 hunting year when youth hunter data collection began. The change was designed to allow an individual mentor to take multiple youth hunters. However, the two non-compliant mentors this year reserved the most used unit (Unit 3) for half of the reserved days (21 of 42) including many weekends, excluding other users.

Youth Hunter Data

Beginning in the 2022/23 hunting season the PATH website included data fields for “Youth Names” and “Youth DOB.” The intent was to assess the actual number of youth hunters using the site, determine whether the PATH program contributes directly to recruitment of new hunters and R3 Plan objectives, and to provide flexibility to mentors willing to bring multiple youth hunters to the site. For the 157 use-days reserved at Lake Wanahoo in the 2024/25 season, 70 individual youth hunters can be identified (Graph 1.). Of the 157 reservations, all 157 included youth data. Fifty-five reservations noted 2 youth hunters, with 5 of these pairs (9%) having different last names.

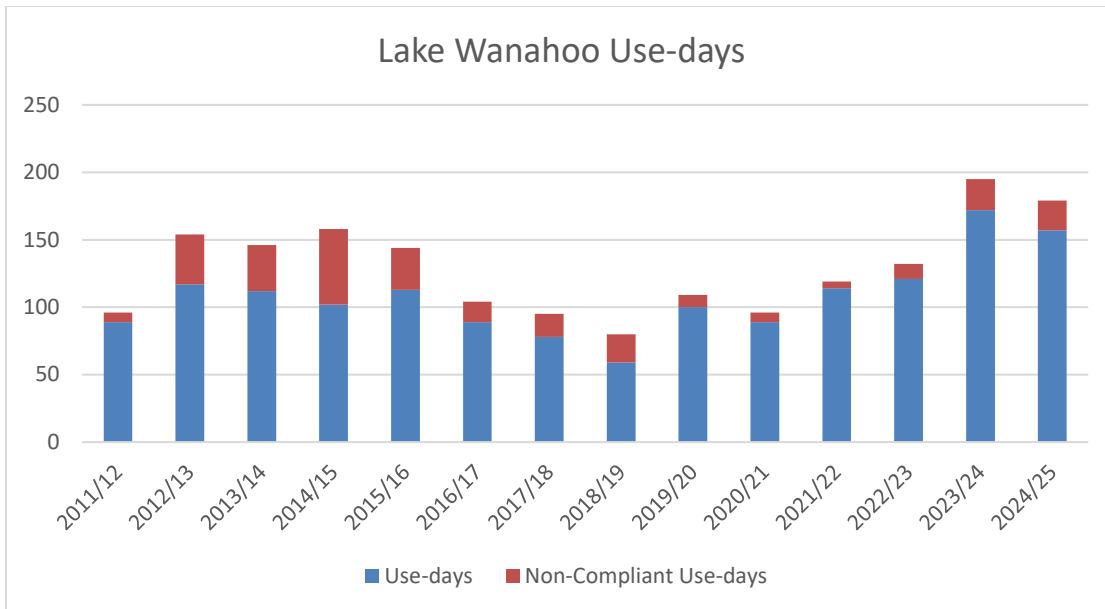


Graph 1. Individual Youth Hunters by Hunting Season

The updated PATH enrollment process was to require youth data input before a site could be reserved. It was also intended to limit individual youth to 5 uses of all PATH sites within the state in any given hunting season. This change would allow individual mentors the opportunity to mentor more youth hunters and would limit exclusionary practices. There were five youth hunters that hunted more than the 5 individual days allowed, with most related to the two non-compliant mentors. The age of youth hunters ranged from 8-18. There was one example of 22-year-old “youth” hunter, but age data appeared to be that of his older brother/mentor.

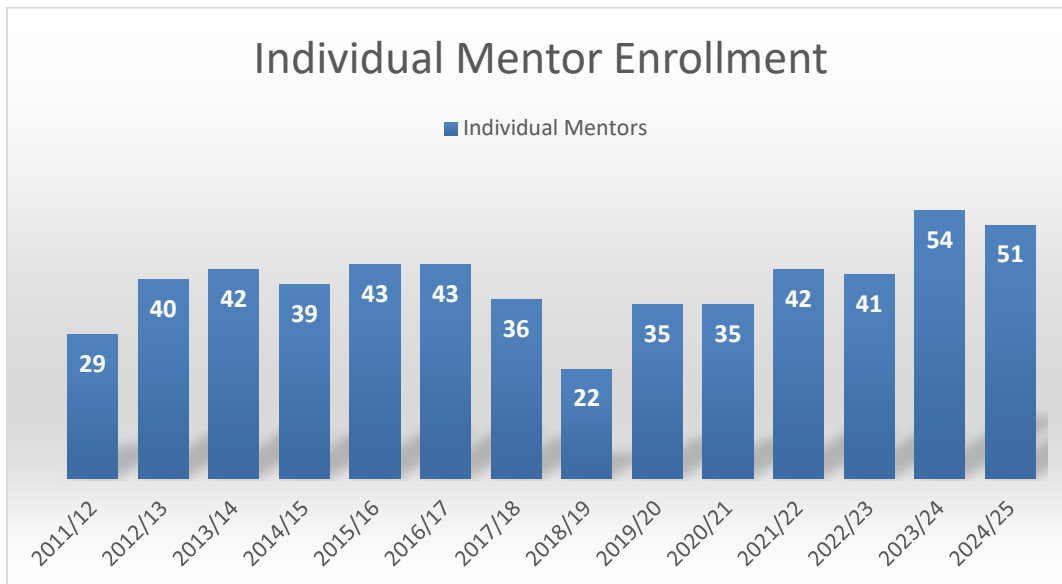
Summary

There is considerable use on the highly visible and strategically located Lake Wanahoo PATH complex. This year, there was an 8.7% decrease (172 > 157) in days reserved compared to last year. Use was higher than the long-term average of 118.8 use days. User day information is biased by mentors reserving sites more than allowed (Graph 2.). Two mentors accounted for 22 of this year’s 24 non-compliant use-days. Some non-compliance occurs each year and is driven by individual mentors and is not proportionally distributed. This behavior negatively impacts other mentors and youth hunters by limiting date and unit availability at optimal use times within seasons (i.e., rifle deer season). Both non-compliant mentors took their own children more than the 5 times allowed.



Graph 2. User-days by Hunting Season

Unique mentors may be a less biased way of identifying trends in use. Individual or “unique” mentors have ranged from 22 in the 2018/19 hunting year to 54 in the 2023/24 hunting years (Graph 3.). There were 51 unique mentors during the 2024/25 hunting year. This is well above the long-term average of 39.4 annual mentors.



Graph 3. Individual Mentors by Hunting Season

User satisfaction is supported by the 3.1 user-days/individual mentor ratio for return use, during the 2024/25 hunting season. Non-compliance of the maximum allowed days of use was noted in 3.9% of the mentors (2 of 51 total mentors), during the 2024/25 season. This is a low percentage of non-compliant mentors but is still undesirable. While non-compliant mentors artificially inflate this return use ratio, the figure is still a reflection of “mentor satisfaction”. Return use ratios have varied from 2.4 in the 2016/17 hunting year to 4.1 in the 2014/15 hunting year. Higher return use ratios generally imply higher levels of non-compliant user-days but are not proportional between years. Non-compliant mentor percentages range from 3.7% in the 2023/24 hunting year to 30.8% in the 2014/15 hunting year.

The Lake Wanahoo PATH units continue to be managed by the Lower Platte North NRD, with support from Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and Pheasants Forever, Inc. A management plan is in place to help maintain habitat types and quality for the primary game species being pursued by youth hunters. There have been transitions in grassland habitat quality and quantity related to an increased water table elevation in Units 3 and 4. Additionally, the lack of disturbance and resultant early successional habitats in other grassland units is limiting pheasant production potentials. However, annual rotational use of prescribed fire and other land management techniques to exclude trees from grassland habitats has retained functional habitat for pheasants and other ground nesting birds. The PATH site revision for the 2022/23 hunting year was also to include a “species pursued” data entry option, but this has not occurred.

There is no data that specifically identifies what species are being pursued, but dates of use define some uses. Rifle deer season accounted for 22.3% (35 of 157 days) of use-days, since no other type of hunting is allowed during this period; waterfowl for 26.7% (42 of 157 days), since these are waterfowl only lake units 6 & 7. There was six spring turkey use-days 3.8% (6 of 157 days) since no other seasons are open. The remaining 47.2% (74 of 157 days) can be broken down into 45 days of upland hunting (28.7%), based on use of Units 1, 2, & 5 and 29 days (18.5%) where both upland and waterfowl pursuits were possible. Pheasant hunting likely accounts for most upland hunting and the majority of undetermined days, based on multiple pheasant sighting reports and ice up in Units 3 & 4 later in the season. Overall, there was an increase in days used for rifle deer, a slight decrease in waterfowl pursuits, more turkey hunting efforts, and a small total reduction in use during the 2024/25 season.

Conclusions

As expected for a youth hunting program, use was mostly limited to weekends and when schools were not in session. This “intermittent” pressure, by less experienced hunters likely helps to maintain opportunity as compared to a Wildlife Management Area open to the general public. There have not been any mentor surveys or bird surveys to determine wildlife population trend data and response to both the “maturing” of habitat at Lake Wanahoo and the effectiveness of ongoing land management. However, anecdotal information and use data indicates retention of primary game species and maintenance of harvest opportunities for youth hunters.

The number of use-days was 8.7% lower than the previous year, but still the second highest year for reported use. There was increased competition for preferred units. There are still additional opportunities for youth hunting at Lake Wanahoo and the area should still be promoted. Eligible youth hunters “age out” and so there is an expected turn-over in users and mentors. Ongoing outreach is warranted. An additional news release ahead of the Thanksgiving holiday break was implemented in the 2019/20 season to increase awareness and potential use. Anecdotal feedback notes Lake Wanahoo provides significant opportunities for pheasants, waterfowl, and deer hunting. This explains the high return use ratio of 3.1 trips/mentor. Over 95% of users have addresses within 50 miles of Lake Wanahoo.

The revised PATH website software developed for the 2022/23 hunting season and designed to identify youth hunters appears to be gaining traction with mentors. All reservations included youth data in the 2024/25 hunting season. There were 70 individual youth hunters identified in 2024/25. The addition of youth hunter data allows PATH program assessment of R3 Plan objectives, if reservation data is retained annually to a PATH repository. There is still no “quarry pursued” data.

Examples of non-compliance for the web-based PATH program were present again for the 2024/25 hunting year. This exclusionary behavior by specific mentors interferes with maximizing use opportunities and R3 objectives for this area. Compliance letters are sent annually to non-compliant mentors. Repeat offenders are referred to Law Enforcement for their awareness and follow-up contact. Law Enforcement also needs real-time, field access to the PATH website registration data for use during field checks. Site checks are the only method to ensure mentor compliance with youth-only hunting rules.

Finally, the compliant reservation days were the second highest and non-compliant mentors the second lowest ever reported. The number of individual mentors was second highest too. There were 55 reservations that noted 2 youth in those hunting parties. Lake Wanahoo continues to be an important and well-used youth hunting destination. Habitat features and management support adequate wildlife populations that retain a high return rate by users. Continued and increased outreach to user groups is warranted.