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Whether you're hunting deer, grouse or waterfowl, the Brainerd Lakes Area's habitat spells success for most hunters

BRAINERD, Minn. – There's a not-so-subtle transformation that takes place here after Labor Day weekend. The lakes are no longer playgrounds for tubers, water-skiers and those on personal watercraft. They become peaceful sanctuaries for anglers who don't mind wearing a stocking hat and fingerless gloves, as long as they have a crack at filling their live well.

In the woods, bike riding, berry picking and geocaching are replaced by hunting, trapping and various other sporting opportunities by outdoorsmen who recognize the Brainerd Lakes Area as one of the top hunting areas in the state.

A mix of deciduous and pine forests, small lakes and farm fields provide excellent habitat for deer, turkey, waterfowl, ruffed grouse, small game and even bear. In fact, the two counties that make up the Brainerd Lakes Area – Crow Wing and Cass – rank among the top counties for the average number of days that hunters hunt, according to the state Department of Natural Resources.

“Our studies consistently show that more people come to the Brainerd Lakes Area for our hunting and fishing opportunities than for tourism-related activities,” Tourism Director Gretchen Ennis said. “That speaks volumes to the great fishing and the excellent hunting opportunities here.”

Whitetail Deer

Deer hunting, especially, is popular because of the area's healthy deer populations, which can be attributed to hardwood forests, farm fields and a small wolf population. As a result, the harvest rate here is one of the highest in the state.

You can't really talk about deer hunting without mentioning the nationally renowned Camp Ripley Archery Hunt, which is in its 55th year. Two weekends a year, the 53,000-acre military base opens its gates to 2,500 archery hunters who were selected by lottery. Hunters come from more than 25 states for a chance at a trophy deer. Last year, for example, hunters harvested a record 516 deer, which was a 15 percent success rate for hunters. The largest buck was 234 pounds while the largest doe was 155 pounds. According to the DNR, Camp Ripley is home to Pope and Young trophy deer because of the habitat and the herd's excellent gene pool, which produces large racks and healthy, strong deer. There are 30 deer per square mile in the camp.

This year, the Camp Ripley hunt dates are Oct. 15-16 and Oct. 31-Nov. 1. Permits have already been issued but media are invited to attend and watch the weigh-ins. The archery season is Sept. 19-Dec. 31, the firearm opener is Nov. 7 (seasons vary by hunting zone) and muzzleloader season is Nov. 28-Dec. 19.

Ruffed Grouse

No other state harvests more ruffed grouse than Minnesota, and this year should offer some of the best grouse hunting in the last 40 years. Statewide, ruffed grouse populations are expected to be the highest

since 1971, according to spring drumming counts. That bodes well for grouse hunters in the Brainerd Lakes Area, which has some of the best grouse hunting in the state because of an abundance of state forests and other public land, including several Grouse Management Areas, that are open to hunting. Grouse season is Sept. 19-Jan. 3.

Waterfowl

The Brainerd Lakes Area offers exceptional waterfowl hunting. With hundreds of lakes, including small shallow ones, the best wild rice crop in the state, and dozens of wildlife management areas, waterfowl hunting here is very popular. The Mississippi River north of Brainerd attracts many duck and goose hunters. Mallards, teal, canvasbacks, wood ducks and Canada geese are among the most popular and most abundant species that are hunted here. Waterfowl season opener is Oct. 3.

Turkey

Wild turkeys have made a comeback in Minnesota, and the Brainerd Lakes Area has experienced a growing population as well. More than 30,000 wild turkeys are now in Minnesota, with hunters harvesting about 5,000 turkeys each spring. Brainerd has pockets of favorable habitat for its turkey populations. As a result, turkey hunting in this area is increasing in popularity. For the past 17 years, Camp Ripley has hosted a special turkey hunt for disabled veterans. The fall turkey seasons are Oct. 14-18 and Oct. 21-25. Licenses have been distributed by media can attend a guided hunt.

Fish

Some of the best fishing of the year is during the fall months. Game fish are fattening up for the winter and are aggressive toward forage and bait. Walleye is the most popular game fish in the state, and area lakes have healthy populations. It's not unusual to catch walleye in the 25-30 inch range. Northern pike, largemouth bass, smallmouth bass and musky can be fished throughout the fall and winter. Trout, including lake and stream trout, can be fished through September, with seasons for most species ending Sept. 30.

Join us to learn more about other outdoor opportunities

The Brainerd Lakes Area has a wealth of sporting and outdoor opportunities, and local guides who will help you enjoy the experience. Contact Gretchen Ennis at 1-800-450-2838 if you'd like to visit the area and experience it for yourself. We'll customize a Fam Tour for you, so you can get a taste of what we have to offer here. We can arrange for lodging and meals as well. More information on the Brainerd Lakes Area is available by visiting the Brainerd Lakes Chamber Web site at www.explorebrainerdlakes.com.

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For more information or photos, contact PR Coordinator Geoff Gorvin at 218-821-9513.