Everything has been affected by this year's drought conditions and high temperatures, including the wildlife species that call northeast Colorado home. Many of the species are able to deal with short periods of dry conditions and hot temperatures, but a summer like this past one is starting to take a toll.

Pheasant and quail populations have been extremely high the past two years in the northeastern part of the state. The area came into this spring with high numbers of pheasants due to the mild winter and it looked like hunters were setting up for another good year.

The lack of moisture and high temperatures appear to have negatively impacted the production of chicks this summer.

For pheasants, the peak of nesting occurs in early to mid-May. The hen will lay one to two eggs a day until she has a total of 12 and then will start to incubate the eggs so they all hatch at the same time. If the temperatures get above 92 degrees while she is still laying, the eggs will start to develop on their own. If the eggs start to develop before the hen is done laying and the temperature then drops below 60, the eggs will die.

The hen does not know that the eggs have died and will continue to lay the last couple of eggs and will begin incubating them for 23 days. Instead of hatching a full brood, she will only hatch a couple of chicks.

This has been the case for much of northeastern Colorado this year. Most of the broods that the Division of Wildlife has been seeing are three to four chicks instead of the seven to 12 they were seeing the last two years.

Pheasants get most of their water from the food they consume, so the lack of water doesn't have a big impact on them. The lack of moisture does, however, impact the availability of sufficient brood-rearing cover. Chick survival is also down due to the lack of green leafy vegetation that attracts insects, which make up over 90 percent of the diet.

The farther a pheasant brood has to travel to find insects to eat, the greater their mortality is. In normal years, the habitat quality increases going into the summer, but unfortunately that was not the case this year.

It was dry enough that many of the normal plants that the pheasant chicks depend upon for survival just didn't grow.

The lack of birds has been very apparent to many of the pheasant hunters as they have been out walking fields the last couple of weeks. Many of the hunters that the DOW has talked to are seeing low numbers of birds, and the birds that they are seeing get up wild and don't allow them to get close enough for a shot.

Typically, when the area sees a good hatch, over 75 percent of the birds harvested will be younger-of-the-hatch birds. This year most of the birds harvested have been older birds with less than 25 percent being birds that were hatched this year.

With the reduced amount of cover this year, the birds are starting to bunch up in the cover that is left. Some hunters are finding pockets with good numbers of birds, but most are struggling to harvest a bird.

As many of the ranchers are too well aware, the area is going to be going into fall with a lot less available forage. With the dry conditions, many of the wildlife species have to work a lot harder to get enough to eat.

Northeast Colorado will likely see a decreased body condition in many of the deer and pronghorn going into this winter. If the area has a winter or lack of winter, like the past couple of years, it will probably not be an issue.

But if there is a hard winter with lots of snow, the area will see increased winter mortality and a population decrease.

The little bit of moisture from this fall has helped, but a lot of the damage has already been done. If the area gets a relatively mild winter and a wet spring, populations will recover quickly and northeast Colorado will not see long-lasting impacts. If there is a hard winter or another year of drought conditions, it will take a number of years for populations to recover.

Holyoke Enterprise November 22, 2012