a similar number of birds in 2011 as they did in 2001, which was another year with a severe winter followed by a cold, wet spring," said Kurt Haroldson, a wildlife biologist for the DNR's Farmland Wildlife Population and Research Group in Madelia. Haroldson noted survey results indicated an unusually low ratio of hens to roosters.

This suggests hen mortality was high or hens were nesting or caring for young broods during the survey. If the late nesting effort was greater than normal, the 2011 pheasant population and the fall harvest may be higher than forecast. Pheasant populations can rebound quickly given good habitat, mild winter weather and favorable spring nesting conditions.

Minnesota is not the only state to see pheasant index declines. Wildlife officials in South Dakota reported a 46 percent population index decline. North Dakota's spring population survey showed a decline, too.

The pheasant population estimate is part of the DNR's annual roadside wildlife survey. The survey summarizes roadside counts of pheasants, gray (Hungarian) partridge, cottontail rabbits, white-tailed jackrabbits and other wildlife observed in the early morning hours during the first half of August throughout the farmland region of Minnesota.

The highest pheasant counts were in the east central region, where observers reported 51 birds per 100 miles of survey driven. Hunters will find fair harvest opportunities in pockets of south-central and southwest Minnesota, but harvest opportunities in most of Minnesota's pheasant range are rated poor to very poor.

This year's statewide pheasant index was 23 birds per 100 miles driven, the lowest index since 1986. The pheasant index in southwest Minnesota, typically the state's best pheasant range, fell 82 percent from last year to 19 birds per 100 miles driven.

Haroldson said the most important habitat for pheasants is grassland that remains undisturbed during the nesting season. Protected grasslands account for about 6 percent of the state's pheasant range. Farmland retirement programs such as CRP, Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, Reinvest in Minnesota and Wetlands Reserve Program make up the largest portion of protected grasslands in the state.

High land rental rates and competing uses for farmland diminish the economic attractiveness of farmland conservation programs. During the next three years, contracts for 550,000 acres of CRP lands are scheduled to expire. If not re-enrolled, this would reduce CRP acres in Minnesota by 36 percent.

To help offset continued habitat losses caused by reductions in conservation set-aside acreage, DNR has accelerated acquisition of wildlife management areas in the farmland region of Minnesota. DNR also supports habitat conservation on private lands by working with a variety of partners in the Farm Bill Assistance Partnership and Working Lands Initiative. Also, nearly 10,000 acres of private property will be open to public hunting through the state's new Walk-In Access program.

The August roadside survey, which began in the late 1940s, was standardized in 1955. DNR conservation officers and wildlife managers in the farmland region of Minnesota conduct the survey during the first half of August. This year's survey consisted of 166 routes, each 25 miles long, with 148 routes located in the ring-necked pheasant range.

Observers drive each route in early morning and record the number and species of wildlife they see. The data provide an index of relative abundance and are used to monitor annual changes and long-term trends in populations of ring-necked pheasants, gray partridge, eastern cottontail rabbits, white-tailed jackrabbits and other select wildlife species.

The gray partridge index was similar to last year but 75 percent below the 10-year average. The cottontail rabbit index was also below the 10-year and long-term average. The jackrabbit index was 96 percent below the long-term average. Finally, the mourning dove index was 26 percent below last year and 29 percent below the 10-year average.