

District 4

Benton and Franklin Counties

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District 4 is located in the south central part of the state in Benton and Franklin Counties and administratively is part of WDFW's Region 3.

It lies within the Columbia Plateau Ecoregion with the primary native vegetation being shrub steppe. The District includes three major watersheds drained by the Yakima, Snake and ultimately the Columbia River. In Benton County, large west-east trending ridges, including the Horse Heaven Hills and Rattlesnake Hills, add to the topographic diversity of the district. The eastern Franklin County landscape includes Palouse Prairie with rolling hills and is the southernmost extent of the channeled scablands. Deep canyons associated with the Palouse River form the eastern boundary of the district.

This is the driest area of the state. Precipitation averages only 6 to 9 inches per year and is mostly received in the winter. The large rivers and irrigation projects counteract the lack of precipitation by providing cover and forage for breeding, migrating and wintering waterfowl.

The Hanford Reach of the Columbia River runs through the center of the District. Intensive irrigated agriculture is a major land use in the Yakima Valley, southern Benton County and western Franklin County. Eastern Franklin County is a major wintering area for mule deer that migrate south to the relatively mild winters near the Snake River, as compared to their breeding grounds further north.

Dryland wheat is a major land use in eastern Franklin County and southern Benton County. Many thousands of acres of this wheat country have been enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) providing important cover for mule deer and other wildlife. GMUs in the district include 372 (Rattlesnake Hills), 373 (Horse Heaven), 379 (Ringold) and 381 (Kahlotus) .

Pheasant: This year's growing season was preceded by a very mild and dry winter and early spring. Then we received above average rainfall in May and June. Additionally, temperatures have remained warm, so there should be adequate cover and insects. More roosters have been observed than in recent years indicating good survival over the winter.

Hunters should focus efforts in dense weedy and grassy areas adjacent to wetlands, streams and irrigation waterways. Best pheasant habitat in the District is in north Franklin County on and surrounding WDFW's Windmill Ranch Wildlife Area, Mesa Lake Wildlife Area and the Bailie Memorial Youth Ranch. Each of these hunting areas

has two parking areas. Hunters are required to park and register at one of the designated parking areas. All areas allow a maximum of 5 vehicles per lot. [Go here](#) for information and maps for Windmill and Bailie, information about Mesa can be found in [this](#) document).

New for 2013: There is now a 5 vehicle limit at the Mesa Lake Register to Hunt areas.

Other pheasant habitat areas include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Hanford Reach National Monument (Ringold and Wahluke Units) and [Umatilla National Wildlife Refuge](#) along the Columbia River near the town of Paterson

To supplement wild ring-necked pheasant numbers, 1200 pen-raised pheasants will be released in the District in fall 2013. Release sites include the Army Corp of Engineers Big Flat and Lost Island Habitat Management Units (HMUs) located in Franklin County along the Snake River. Information for these HMUs is available [here](#). Unfortunately a late-spring wildfire destroyed the habitat at the Toothacker pheasant release site in Benton County. It will be several years before birds will be released at Thoothacker again.

Reminder: As of 2012, WDFW is no longer releasing pheasants at the Ringold Unit of the Hanford Reach National Monument due to US Fish and Wildlife Service policy.

Quail: Numerous California quail have been observed in the District and given the ample cover and insects it should be another good season. Best quail habitat in District 4 is similar to those listed above for pheasant. In addition, anywhere along water bodies where riparian and herbaceous vegetation intersect will provide quail habitat. An ideal setting is where Russian olives or willows are adjacent to black greasewood or sagebrush.

Waterfowl: Pair counts for waterfowl in the irrigated portions of the Columbia Basin yielded an estimate of over 17,000 mallards. This is lower than previous years and is believed to be due to conditions that were dryer than usual. Nonetheless there should still be plenty of ducks for the youth season and opening weekend. Hunter success will likely taper off as the local ducks get "educated" and restrict their daytime movements to local reserves and sanctuaries. Then we'll have to wait for the migrants to arrive in the mid- to late-season. Weather patterns will determine when they will arrive and where they will congregate.

There are many places to hunt ducks and geese in the District. Small ponds and lakes can be found on WDFW's Windmill Ranch, Mesa Lake and Bailie Memorial Youth Ranch (see link under pheasants for directions and maps). Scooteney Reservoir managed by the [Bureau of Reclamation](#) can provide good hunting. For an excellent introduction to waterfowl hunting, see ["Let's Go Waterfowling."](#)

The Snake and Columbia Rivers and associated water bodies will hold tens of thousands of ducks when the weather gets below freezing. Access can be gained at the McNary and

Umatilla National Wildlife Refuges and the Hanford Reach National Monument (*see link under pheasants for directions and maps*).

Numbers of Canada geese nests counted locally during April were up 10% over last year. In addition, thousands of migratory Canada geese will arrive in the District sometime in October or November. They can be pursued in the farm fields near the Snake and Columbia Rivers. *Most of the land is private so secure permission before hunting.*

We are currently contacting Benton and Franklin County farmers to determine their interest in delaying tillage of corn and wheat stubble and providing hunter access on those acres. We had 600 acres enrolled last year and hope for the same or more this year. Watch the WDFW website for updated maps and directions to these fields in the coming weeks <http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/>.

Dove: The number of doves counted locally during the annual spring call count survey was below the 10-year average. However, other observations point to 2013 being a very productive dove season. We are having good success at our trapping/banding station and many doves have been observed in Franklin County, even in dryer areas. Weather patterns play a critical role in determining how many doves are present during the season opener. Focus hunting efforts in or near wheat or corn stubble fields in the irrigated Yakima and Columbia Basins. The best combination of habitat includes a stubble field near water and large isolated trees or power lines where doves perch and attract other doves.

Deer: Most of the District is private, open country farmland. Highest concentrations of deer (mostly mule deer with a few white-tails) are in the Kahlotus Unit (GMU 381), with a large percentage migrating in from northern units starting in October, right around the opening of the modern firearm general season.

Hunter success rates (avg. = 33% for all hunters) tend to be high due to restricted access for hunters and a lack of cover for deer. There are some “Feel Free To Hunt” and “Hunt By Written Permission” acres where hunters can gain access to deer. Pre-season scouting is advisable in order to learn where to hunt and to obtain permission from private landowners.

The newly revamped [GoHunt](#) application on WDFW’s website is a good place to initially learn where the private lands access areas are located. *It is advised to double check that lands available for hunting previously are still open to the public.*

Classification surveys in December 2012 yielded an estimated 18 bucks to 100 does. This value is comparable to ratios observed over the last five years. There should be a good crop of 3 point or better bucks for hunters. Most of these will be harvested during the first few days of the modern firearm season. Later in November, a late muzzleloader general season opens and provides good opportunity for hunters to harvest a buck or antlerless deer.

Elk: Opportunity for elk hunting is limited in the District to lands surrounding the western and southern boundaries of the Hanford Reach National Monument (GMU 372). Hunts are geared toward addressing crop damage on surrounding wheat farms, vineyards and orchards. Elk hunters can pursue elk in Benton County on WDFW's Thorton and Rattlesnake Slope Units of the Sunnyside Wildlife Area north of Prosser and Benton City. Go [here](#) for directions and maps:

On private land, the best way to secure access is to apply for a special permit through the Landowner Hunt Program (LHP). If selected, permit holders are guaranteed a one day guided hunt. Most permits are limited to antlerless opportunity for youth hunters, but a few permits for any elk are issued each year. Surveys in January 2013 yielded a total herd estimate of 668-797 elk with 57 bulls and 23 calves per 100 cows. The high bull ratio is typical for this herd since they can seek refuge on the federal Hanford lands during hunting season.