

# 2014

Chris Danilson, District Wildlife Biologist  
Paul DeBruyn, Assistant District Wildlife Biologist



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## **DISTRICT 14 HUNTING PROSPECTS**

Skagit and Whatcom Counties

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## **DISTRICT 14 GENERAL OVERVIEW**

District 14 is comprised of Skagit and Whatcom Counties and lies in the far northwestern mainland part of Washington. The western extent of the district is associated with the marine waters of Puget Sound and features a vibrant agricultural land base. These lowlands support an abundance of wildlife in the “Skagit Flats” and western Whatcom Counties, including a diverse and abundant assemblage of resident and overwintering waterfowl species. The Skagit and Nooksack Rivers are the two main river systems in the district. Lower elevation forested uplands within the Skagit and Nooksack watersheds are owned and/or managed by private timber companies and the Washington Department of Natural Resources. At timber production areas, these lower elevation working forests provide good to excellent big game hunting opportunities. Higher elevation forest lands within the district are managed by the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest and North Cascades National Park (hunting is allowed in the Ross Lake National Recreation Area). These federal lands are associated with the North Cascades Mountains and support game species such as mountain goats, black bear, and black-tailed deer.

From north to south, the core Game Management Units (GMUs) that comprise District 14 are Nooksack and Diablo (i.e. GMUs 418 & 426), which are mostly in Whatcom County, and Sauk (i.e. GMU 437), which is almost entirely within Skagit County. Additionally, portions of North Sound, Stillaguamish, and Cascade (i.e. GMUs 407, 448 & 450) are also within the district.

Among the many hunting opportunities within this district, perhaps the most notable are:

- Saltwater and inland waterfowl hunting opportunities within the highest concentration of waterfowl in western Washington.
- Diversity of waterfowl hunting options including lesser snow geese, Pacific brant, harlequin ducks, long-tailed ducks, and scoters.
- Extensive non-vehicular access to public and private forest lands that do not currently charge an access fee for hunting big game and forest grouse.
- “Permit Only” quality bull elk hunts within the recovering North Cascades elk herd with trophy quality animals, liberal season dates, and high success rates.
- Once-in-a-lifetime mountain goat harvest opportunities for five permit holders within the Mount Baker Wilderness Area.

### **Current Species Status**

The primary big game species in District 14 are black-tailed deer, elk, black bear, cougar, and mountain goat. Each of these species remains open for hunting with restrictions as outlined in Washington’s 2014 Big Game Hunting Seasons and Regulations, which can be found at: <http://www.wdfw.wa.gov/publications/01589/wdfw01589.pdf>. Black-tailed deer, black bear, and cougar continue to provide over the counter tag opportunities. Elk, spring black bear, and mountain goats are managed as “draw only” hunts because of the sensitivity of each of these populations to hunting, either because they are below population objective (elk), more vulnerable to harvest (spring black bear), or have lower reproductive rates (goats).

Like most of Western Washington, District 14 does not have native upland game bird populations and is not managed for these species. The exception to this is that WDFW will

continue to implement a pen-raised pheasant release program in Skagit and Whatcom Counties in 2015. Other game birds that WDFW manages collectively as “forest grouse” include the ruffed grouse and dusky and sooty grouse. Ruffed and sooty grouse (formerly referred to as blue grouse) occur in District 14 and continue to have long seasons (Sept. 1 – Dec. 31) with a daily bag limit of four of any species.

Due to high overall population sizes and stable reproductive rates of waterfowl, the Pacific Flyway states continue to enjoy extremely liberal hunting seasons in terms of number of hunting days and bag limits. Like the remainder of the state, there has been no change in the status of any of the waterfowl species in District 14. Within District 14, lesser snow geese, Pacific brant, and sea ducks (e.g. harlequin, scoter, long-tailed, and goldeneye) require that hunters apply for and possess a special “migratory bird authorization” while hunting and submit a harvest report card at the end of the season.

## ELK

The North Cascades (Nooksack) elk herd continues to grow and expand into areas of formerly unoccupied habitat. This includes agricultural areas where they cause damage to crops and farming infrastructure. Until recently, data from post-hunt surveys (conducted in late March to early April) indicated that the population was expanding at a rate of 6-7 percent. However, over the past two years, lethal removal of elk in agricultural landscapes has slowed the overall growth of the population somewhat.

Based on post-hunt surveys conducted in March and April of 2014, the total population size of the North Cascades herd is approximately 1,400 to 1,500 animals (including juvenile recruitment from this spring. Bull:cow and calf:cow ratios from 2014 surveys this spring were both slightly over 30:100, indicating that winter survival was similar to previous years. Roughly 30 percent of all bulls (including spikes) observed during spring flights were mature bulls (i.e. 5X5 or better).



Although the North Cascades elk herd continues to recover, the desired population of 1,950 elk, which was established in 2002, has not been met. Since the resumption of very limited hunting of

this elk population in 2007, opportunities have been limited to bull-only hunts. This provides some recreational harvest, while allowing the population to continue to grow. A major downside to the current harvest management framework for this population is that antlerless elk harvest to address agricultural damage is constraining population recovery. Additionally, this harvest opportunity is limited to a select few (e.g. landowners and master hunters) and, being within a more populated agricultural areas, is not the desirable harvest situation that most hunters would prefer.

Despite this, the North Cascades elk herd offers one of the premier bull elk hunting opportunities in Western Washington. Archery, Muzzleloader, and modern firearm hunters each have the chance to harvest bull elk with “any bull” or “spike only” tags. The harvest success rate is high for all three firearm types due to limited hunting pressure and lengthy seasons. Since this hunt began in 2007, hunter success has ranged from 61 to 93 percent. In 2013, the harvest success rate was 91 percent, with 20 of 22 hunters who participated harvesting a bull elk. Of the eleven bulls harvested with the “any bull” tags, the average bull was a 5X5 or 6X6, with a few larger than this.



In 2013, 20 antlerless tags were provided to archery and muzzleloader hunters, but confined to the Elk Area 4941 within the Skagit River Valley, where elk related agricultural damage complaints are on the rise. Despite the high density of elk within this area, the harvest success

rate for these tag holders was only 50 percent. Most of the tag holders that didn't punch their tag attributed this to short season length and the challenge of obtaining permission from multiple landowners.

Elk hunting prospects for 2014 will again be restricted to limited entry bull hunts in GMU 418 and Elk Area 4941 (which is within GMU 437). A total of 23 “any bull” and “spike only” tags have been allocated. The antlerless tags offered in 2013 will not be offered in 2014. Instead, two pools of master hunters have been drawn up for “Skagit River” and “Region 4 North” to address elk related issues on specific properties.

General season elk harvest opportunities in GMU 407 (North Sound) and that portion of GMU 448 (Stillaguamish) in Skagit County exist on both private and state lands. However, elk densities in these two units are low and hunting pressure quickly pushes those animals into adjacent GMUs that remain closed to general harvest. GMU 407 tends to have greater numbers of elk, but access to private property is the key to getting a real opportunity here.

Changes to the 2014 hunting regulations specific to the North Cascades elk herd are:

- Elimination of the 20 archery and muzzleloader tags offered in 2013 for antlerless elk in Elk Area 4941
- Elimination of antler restrictions for modern firearm hunters in GMU 407 (North Sound)
- Return of the “Skagit River” master hunt pool in Elk Area 4941

Annual harvest reports and harvest statistics based on hunter reporting can be found at

[Game Harvest Reports.](#)

## **DEER**

WDFW does not currently conduct black-tailed deer surveys in Region 4. Biologist's observations and other anecdotal reports support the general notion that black-tail population numbers and densities are down in GMUs 418 (Nooksack), 426 (Diablo), 437 (Sauk) and 450 (Cascade). Conversely, in portions of GMU 407 (North Sound), the most urbanized GMU in the District, local deer densities can be quite high and can be a nuisance for some property owners and agricultural operations.

From a hunting perspective, GMU 407 provides the best opportunity for successfully harvesting a deer in District 14. In 2014, 659 deer were harvested in GMU 407 during the general season over-the-counter tag hunts. This was a 20 percent increase over the 2012 harvest for this GMU. The combined general season deer harvest within the other GMUs in the district (i.e. 418, 426, and 437) amounts to less than half of the harvest in GMU 407, with only 290 deer harvested.

The drastic difference in harvest rates between GMU 407 and other GMUs within the district is related to the number of hunting days available, deer densities, and ease of access. Simply put, GMU 407 provides hunting opportunities that the other GMUs do not and today's hunters have learned to adapt to this and take advantage of it. The key to a successful harvest in this GMU is

securing the appropriate permission to hunt on private land and scouting the area prior to the hunting season. Hunters who intend to target deer in developed areas would be well advised to check with local jurisdictions regarding firearm restrictions. Also see page 81 of the [2014 Big Game Hunting Seasons and Regulations Pamphlet](#).

Elsewhere in District 14, private industrial timber lands and property managed by Washington Department of Natural Resources are largely gated due to timber theft, dumping, vandalism and other problems. However, many of these roads can be accessed on foot or with mountain bikes, allowing those willing to do the work access to deer that don't get as much hunting pressure. Be sure to check with the appropriate land owner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

Finally, for those seeking a high elevation trophy black-tail hunting experience, areas within GMUs 418 (Nooksack), 426 (Diablo), and 437 (Sauk) that can be accessed by Forest Service road and trail systems lead to high mountain hunting areas such as the Mount Baker Wilderness Area in Whatcom County and northern portions of the Glacier Peak Wilderness Area in extreme southeastern Skagit County. Both of these wilderness areas are open for the "high buck hunt" between September 15<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>).

Modern firearm hunters are currently offered a permit only buck hunt opportunity in GMUs 418, 426, and 437. These tags give hunters an opportunity to take to the field to attempt to harvest a quality buck during the rut (November 15<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup>). Recent success has been in the 40 to 60 percent range for hunters who end up participating. Last year, WDFW was able to negotiate behind the gate access for the 25 permit holders in GMU 418, and negotiations are underway to expand this opportunity more in 2014. Quality buck tags for modern firearm hunters currently provide the best opportunity in these GMUs. Of these 60 tags issued in 2012, harvest success rates among those that reported ranged from 45.5 percent (GMU 418) to 57.1 percent (GMU 426).

Annual harvest reports and harvest statistics based on hunter reporting can be found at [Game Harvest Reports](#).

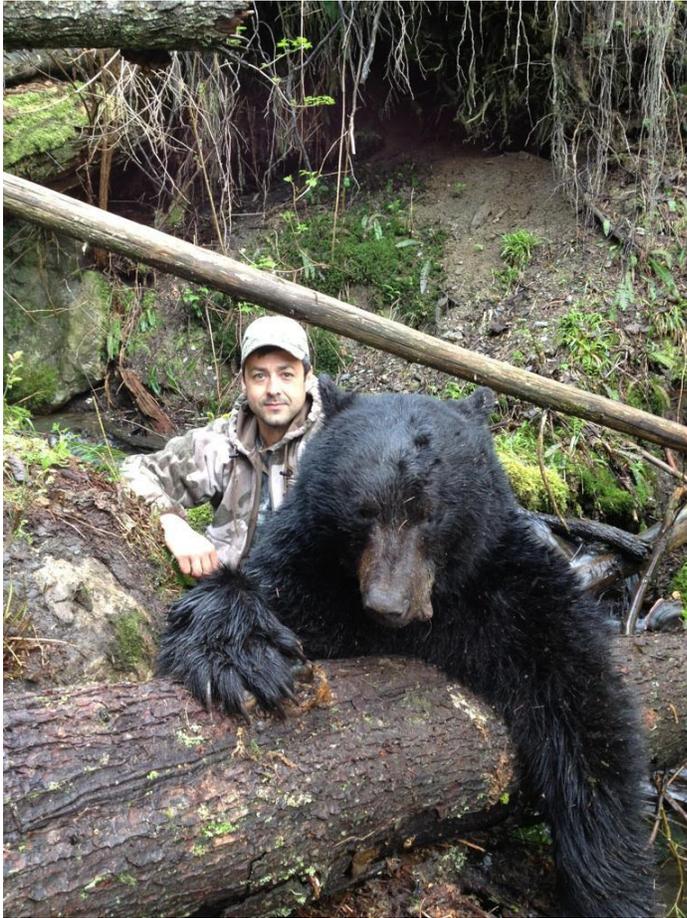
## **BEAR**

Black bear surveys are not conducted in District 14. Instead, hunter harvest reports and age data obtained from teeth submitted by successful hunters is used to monitor population trends. The total number of bears harvested during the fall of 2013 in GMUs 407, 418, and 437 decreased by nearly 50 percent from the previous year. Only 68 bears were harvested in these GMUs during the fall, despite a similar level of hunter effort. However, the fall of 2013 was noteworthy for the spottiness of mountain huckleberries, a mainstay for bears and a key habitat element fall hunters rely on for locating bears. This has likely adversely affected harvest rates.

GMU 418 is one of the few western Washington areas where a spring bear hunt is promoted to address damage caused by bears peeling young trees (primarily Douglas fir) on managed forest lands. The extension of the season by 15 days to June 15<sup>th</sup>, which was adopted just prior to the 2013 season, appears to have helped increase and maintain high harvest rates. Additionally, the private lands hunter access managed by WDFW helps get this small pool of hunters behind gates

where bears are otherwise not disturbed by hunters.

In the spring of 2013, 10 of 30 permit holders successfully harvested a bear within this small damage area. Although harvest information is not totally finalized, it appears the 30 permit holders in 2014 also had roughly 30 percent success rate in harvesting bears during this spring hunt.



Hunter prospects for harvesting a black bear in District 14 has more to do with access and berry production than it does the previous years' harvest. With exceptionally warm spring and early summer temperatures, berry production has been early and bountiful. While patchy in places, the mountain huckleberry crop should be abundant.

Access behind gated roads is largely available to those willing to walk or mountain bike and there are ample numbers of clear cuts with younger age class regeneration units that will attract bears. At higher elevations, those willing to hike in-pack out can pursue bears in classic alpine environments where spot-and-stalk opportunities await.

## **MOUNTAIN GOAT**

The Mount Baker area continues to have one of the largest concentrations of mountain goats in Washington State. Mountain goat hunting in Washington is a once-in-a-lifetime harvest opportunity and is a limited-entry tag that only a few lucky individuals draw in any year. Aerial surveys in late July of 2013 were a welcome contrast to 2011, when it appeared that winter kill hit this population and adversely affected juvenile recruitment for that year. In contrast, the 2012 and 2013 surveys (just completed) are more closely aligned with population estimates and age composition observed since 2005. During this period, the overall population has averaged roughly 300 goats within the Mount Baker survey blocks.

For 2014, one additional mountain goat tag was issued for this area for a total of five. A single tag holder will have sole access to the Lincoln Peak hunt unit on the eastern side of Mount Baker. The remaining four permit holders (two each in the Chowder Ridge and Avalanche Gorge hunt units) may be sharing these units with the winners of the state wide auction and raffle permits. With a lot of country and a lot of goats in these units, this small handful of hunters should have no problems working around each other.

Statewide harvest success rates for mountain goats are generally 75% or greater in any year and Mount Baker has produced some mature goats of exceptional quality. The opportunity to harvest record book mountain goats exists in all units and is only limited by hunter ability, dedication and commitment. The new Washington state record for archery harvested mountain goat came from Mount Baker in 2012.

## **UPLAND BIRD**

As mentioned above, District 14, like much of western Washington, has virtually no native upland game species. Both mourning dove and (California) quail harvest is reported for Skagit and Whatcom Counties; however, the total harvest for either is generally fewer than 100 birds per year for either county. The few turkeys reported to WDFW in the region each year are invariably a result of accidental escape or intentional release by private parties. With such small and scattered populations of upland game birds, population dynamics such as winter survival and production cannot be estimated. For similar reasons, it is impractical to relate habitat conditions to population size and hunting opportunity.

The two upland game hunting opportunities that do exist in the District are game-farmed produced pheasants and an ever growing population of Eurasian collared doves.

## **PHEASANT**

Game-farm produced pheasants will be released this fall on sites which are mapped on the [Go Hunt](#) website and in the [Western Washington pheasant program booklet](#). In Skagit County, WDFW will continue to release pheasants at the Bow Hill pheasant release site on Washington

Department of Natural Resources lands for the 2014 season. Additionally, WDFW intends to move forward with pheasant release at the Samish Unit this year for the youth and senior hunts only. The three pheasant release sites in Whatcom County are WDFW's Lake Terrell Wildlife Area, Intalco, and British Petroleum release sites. Depending on the site and availability of pheasants, somewhere between 30 and 65 birds are released on a two- or three-day/week schedule. Non-toxic shot is required on all pheasant release sites.

## **FOREST GROUSE**

Ruffed and sooty (formerly called blue) grouse are present throughout the public and private forest lands in District 14. Exceptionally warm and dry spring weather should have a positive effect on grouse brood production and survival this season. While neither species are especially abundant in Skagit and Whatcom Counties, higher elevation subalpine habitats support decent numbers of sooty grouse. Ruffed grouse tend to occupy deciduous dominant forest types associated with riparian areas as well as low elevation conifer forests.



Hunters targeting ruffed grouse should focus on elevations below 2,500', particularly in riparian

forest habitats, early seral forests (e.g. 5-25 years old), and deciduous-conifer mixed forest types. Abandoned logging roads provide good habitat for grouse and opportunities for hunting.

Season overlaps make grouse hunting a good diversion when big game is slow. Relaxed firearm restrictions (you can use a rifle or pistol) put the onus on the hunter to “make sure of your target and backstop”. The prospects for harvesting sooty grouse go up with increasing elevation. Hunters can expect the greatest success along trails and ridgelines above 2,000-3,000 feet and within Pacific silver fir and noble fir forest stands with huckleberry, grouse whortleberry and other species. Because both species utilize gravel, grouse vulnerability, and consequently hunting success, is often highest along abandoned or low traffic forest roads, particularly in the early morning hours.

### EURASIAN COLLARED DOVE

While not a managed game species, Eurasian collared doves (an exotic species) are increasingly common throughout District 14. Locally, this species appears to be growing in size and expanding distribution, which includes both agricultural areas and, increasingly, within urban area neighborhoods. This species can be hunted year-round. The best situation for hunting this species is to seek landowner permission in lowland agricultural areas that have a “barnyard” setting, where birds roost in trees, but go to the ground to feed. Hunters should be sure that they are hunting in an area that does not have firearm restrictions and in a manner that is compatible with existing infrastructure (e.g. buildings, farm equipment, powerlines).

### BAND-TAILED PIGEON

The general trend of decreasing band-tailed pigeon harvest is most likely associated with a decrease in hunter interest. Single day surveys from July 2014 at historic mineral sites in Skagit County suggest the normal abundance of these pigeons are present. The late September season provides an 8-10 day hunting opportunity that coincides with the migration. A migratory bird authorization card is required and the daily limit is two birds. One solid strategy is to target managed forest lands with mixed stand age classes that provide feeding areas with adjacent roosting areas. Band-tailed pigeons have strong affinities for the same areas, so scouting before your hunt is important.

### WATERFOWL

**Dabbling Ducks:** More waterfowl are harvested in Region 4 than any other region in the state, with District 14 providing some of the best waterfowl hunting opportunities in the region. In 2013, Skagit County was again the state’s second best duck producing county (following Grant County). Total harvest in 2013 was down about 20% from the two previous years due to an unusually dry fall. Minimal late fall precipitation quickly froze up and dissipated during the thaw.

Harvest in Whatcom County was also down but only by 7%. Reports from breeding areas important to our area indicate a good year for brood production, and duck hunting should rebound if good rainfall is present early in the hunting season.



Early season hunting opportunities in District 14 are generally much more favorable on the saltwater marshes. Boat access greatly improves hunting options and prospects. Both private and public uplands in Skagit and Whatcom Counties with good food resources (e.g. corn, barley) provide good hunting prospects for dabbling ducks when harsh winter conditions ultimately arrive.

**Brant and Sea Ducks:** The minimum threshold of 6,000 brant in Skagit County bays must be met for the brant season to occur. This standard was set by the Pacific Flyway management plan for Pacific brant. The season has occurred in almost every year since this threshold was adopted; however dedicated brant hunters wait on pins and needles every year to hear whether they will have the opportunity to participate in this unique hunt.



In 2013, low productivity appeared to have reduced the number of western high arctic brant present to just above this threshold. The 6,000 brant threshold was exceeded and a season was held, however with a smaller proportion of juveniles present, harvest was lower.

The season for this specialized hunt is on some weekends and Wednesdays in January and will be announced when finalized. Brant hunters also have opportunities to harvest sea ducks including harlequin and long-tailed ducks, as well as scoters (as pictured below). A special migratory bird authorization card is required to hunt either brant or sea ducks.



**Lesser Snow Geese:** One of the mainstays of Skagit waterfowling, snow goose hunting provides yet another alternative to dabblers in District 14. Harvest of snow geese from the Washington state component of this population has declined over the past two years. While 11,000 geese were harvested in 2011 (primarily from Skagit and Snohomish Counties), only 5,800 birds were harvested in each of the past two hunting seasons. This is despite the fact that similar numbers of geese have overwintered here during the past three winters.



To a large extent, the harvest rate of snow geese is tied to the proportion of juvenile birds that arrive from their Siberian breeding grounds. Another important contributing factor is the fact that the distribution of snow geese in the Skagit has been undergoing changes as these white geese adapt to changing land use and crop conditions. Lastly, some landowners are no longer participating in WDFW's waterfowl quality hunt program, which has reduced hunting access to some extent.

Hunters interested in harvesting snow geese will also have to adapt and work to stay ahead of the game. It is critical to gain access before the season (be prepared for landowners to say no). Early season is the best time to lure geese (particularly juveniles) with decoys. Corn has become the early season favorite. As the season progresses, the diet appears to diversify with everything from winter wheat to hay/silage fields to potatoes and even berries. Public and private land on Fir Island remains the center of abundance for snows in District 14. However, geese continue to spend time in areas on either side of Interstate 5 north of Burlington and also the Edison area. Be sure to have permission before hunting private lands and be aware of special snow goose hunting rules in Skagit County.

For a thorough discussion on how and where to hunt waterfowl, see [“Let’s Go Waterfowling!”](#)

## **HUNTER ACCESS**

Access on private lands for big game hunting opportunities remains limited. Because of past experience with theft, vandalism, dumping, and other problems, private industrial timber companies generally do not allow vehicular access. Many limit access to walk-in only, while

some do not allow access of any kind. With less hunting pressure, this can result in good hunting opportunities for those willing to use bicycles or hike behind locked gates.

One exception to this is Sierra Pacific Industries, which owns significant private industrial timber lands in Skagit and Whatcom Counties. A landowner access agreement between Sierra Pacific and WDFW continues to facilitate hunter access for limited-entry bull elk and spring bear permit holders. For 2014, WDFW staff will also facilitate access on Sierra Pacific's lands for spring bear, elk, and the modern firearm black-tailed deer quality buck permit holders.

Weyerhaeuser has recently acquired lands formerly owned by Longview Timber throughout western Washington. This includes inholdings in Skagit and Whatcom Counties. Weyerhaeuser has also indicated that it is their intent to convert all of the lands to a "fee access" management system, wherein hunters would have to apply for and purchase a permit to access their lands. At this time, the situation in District 14 remains unclear.

The Private Lands Access Program working out of the La Conner Field Office has once again negotiated access for hunters on dozens of private properties throughout Whatcom and Skagit Counties. The program currently has 55 sites lined up on private lands for the upcoming waterfowl season (25 in Skagit County and 20 in Whatcom). Many of these are sites that landowners have again enrolled in this program, while others are new. These sites offer either "open field" or "blind only" hunting primarily targeting dabbling ducks. While most of these sites are first-come first-served, several will be "reservation only". Private Lands personnel have worked with landowners to implement food plots at some sites to provide additional forage for ducks. For those lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time, this can generate some excellent hunting.



More information about individual sites, including maps and access rules, as well as the program in general, may be found at: [http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/hunting\\_access/private\\_lands/](http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/hunting_access/private_lands/). Waterfowl hunt units on private lands will open as crop harvests are completed and other conditions are met, so not every unit will be available on opening day.

In addition, WDFW’s Private Lands staff has developed and enhanced hunting opportunities on WDFW lands. This includes five sites on the Bay View and Edison parcels managed by Skagit Wildlife Area.

**PUBLIC LANDS**

For big game, hunter access to Washington Department of Natural Resource lands decreases slightly in Whatcom County. Access to the Van Zandt dike has been restricted by the DNR to manage vehicle access during times of active logging. At the time that this report was prepared, DNR officials indicated that this will be the case for at least a portion of time this winter.

US Forest Service lands offer some vehicular access throughout Whatcom and Skagit Counties. Many road systems have been closed due to flood related damage, and some roads are subject to seasonal road closures. The Forest Service is currently in a planning process to decommission or abandon a significant portion of its managed road network on the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie

National Forest. Ultimately, this will further restrict vehicular access to upper elevation habitats for big game and forest grouse hunting.

Among the WDFW owned and managed lands in District 14, waterfowl hunters should look to the Skagit Headquarters Unit, Samish Unit (also known as the Welts property), Debay Reserve, Tenant Lake, and Lake Terrell Wildlife Areas. All of these sites are managed for waterfowl and provide walk-in and/or boat access. Some blinds are also available.